

Understand Thailand

THAILAND TODAY688

Thailand's economy has continued to boom despite the devastating floods of 2011 and ongoing political tensions.

HISTORY & POLITICS 691

Great ancient kingdoms, religions and dynasties have left their mark on how this nation has evolved.

PEOPLE & CULTURE705

Despite Thailand's outward homogeneity, many subtle regional differences exist in the country, often influenced by its neighbours.

THE SEX INDUSTRY IN THAILAND 719

Since the Vietnam War, Thailand has gained a reputation as an international sex-tourism destination.

FOOD & DRINK 721

For many visitors, the amazing food is one of the main reasons for choosing Thailand as a destination.

ARTS & ARCHITECTURE730

The kingdom has a keen eye for beauty and a rich culture that supports it.

ENVIRONMENT & WILDLIFE742

Thailand contains lush rainforests, weathered peaks, inviting fish-filled seas and those glorious islands and white-sand beaches.

Thailand Today

Thailand continues to ride a wave of prosperity. The standard and cost of living has increased, the coming ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) promises expanded business opportunities and tourism has discovered a new supply of visitors from China. Relations with its neighbours, especially once cloistered Myanmar, have never been better, enabling more open borders and trade. And the cities continue to modernise, replacing soot-stained shophouses with fashionable shopping centres filled with cafes and boutiques.

Best Non-Fiction Books

Very Thai (Philip Cornwell-Smith)

Colourful photos and essays on Thailand's quirks.

Chronicle of Thailand (William Warren)

History of the last 50 years.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej: A Life's Work (Nicholas Grossman et al.) The official biography of the king.

Best Thai Literature

Pisat, Evil Spirits (Seni Saowaphong)

Deals with conflicts between the old and new generations.

Lai Chiwit (Many Lives; by Kukrit Pramoj) A collection of short stories.

Monsoon Country (Pira Sudham)

Brilliantly captures the northeast's struggles against nature and nurture.

The Judgement (Chart Korbjitti)

A drama about a young village man wrongly accused of a crime.

Jasmine Nights (SP Sontow)

An upbeat coming-of-age novel that fuses traditional ideas with modern Thai pop culture.

Married to the Demon King (Sri

Doruang) Adapts the *Ramayana* into modern Bangkok.

The Post Coup Years

Though Thaksin Shinawatra was removed from the prime minister's position by a military coup in 2006 and later self-exiled from the country, he still exerts a sun-like gravitational pull on Thailand's political process. His politically allied party, Puea Thai, won a clear majority of parliamentary seats in 2011, and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra was elected prime minister. She is Thailand's first female prime minister and this is the fifth straight electoral win for a Thaksin-backed political party. She is often viewed as a proxy for her brother and Thais refer to the brother and sister as one and the same, rarely distinguishing between the two. Despite the unusual balance of power, Yingluck's administration has brought about a degree of political unity with the military and could finish its term without the interference of a coup, a meaningful milestone in Thai politics.

Meanwhile, the legislature has spent two years debating the details of the so-called amnesty bill that would allow Thaksin to return to the country by absolving him of criminal charges, which he is now evading through self-imposed exile. The bill, which would also pardon government officials who ordered the 2010 military crackdown on civilian (Red Shirt) demonstrators, passed the lower house. The Senate ultimately rejected the bill but it is unclear if amnesty is dead or just resting. There was also a related political manoeuvre to ensure a more supportive legislature for Thaksin and his allies by changing the make-up of the Senate to a fully elected body, but the charter amendment was rejected by the constitutional court. Pro- and anti-government groups (sporting bells and whistles, respectively) have once again flooded the streets of Bangkok.

As a concession to the anti-government protestors, prime minister Yingluck called for new elections in February 2014 but this gesture did little to solve the political