

Understand Thailand

THAILAND TODAY 704

Tourists are still flocking to Thailand despite a military government takeover and ongoing political tensions.

HISTORY & POLITICS 707

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

PEOPLE & CULTURE 721

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

FOOD & DRINK 733

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

FOOD & DRINK SPOTTERS GUIDE 738

Our shortlist of must-eat Thai dishes will help make your trip a delicious one.

ARTS & ARCHITECTURE 740

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

ENVIRONMENT & WILDLIFE 752

The ads don't lie: Thailand is indeed a realm of idyllic islands, dramatic peaks and lush jungles with weird and wonderful critters.

Thailand Today

These are troubled times for Thailand. With the military in charge again and no real prospect of elections before 2017, the country remains divided politically between the rural poor at one end and the traditional elite and urban middle classes at the other. A slowing economy and a poor human rights record have also helped tarnish Thailand's image as an oasis of relative stability in Southeast Asia. Tourism, however, hasn't taken much of a hit, with visitors – especially from China – still arriving in droves.

Best in Non-fiction Books

Very Thai (Philip Cornwel-Smith)

Photos and essays on Thailand's quirks.

A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century (Andrew MacGregor Marshall)

Banned in Thailand, so read it before you go.

Bangkok Days (Lawrence Osborne) A witty and insightful account of living in Bangkok.

Best in Thai Literature

Pisat, Evil Spirits (Seni Saowaphong)

Deals with conflicts between the old and new generations.

Lai Chiwit (Many Lives) (Kukrit

Pramoj) A collection of short stories.

Monsoon Country (Pira Sudham)

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

The Judgment (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

Daoruang) Adaptation of the *Ramayana* into modern Bangkok.

Another Day, Another Coup

On 22 May 2014, the Thai military under General Prayuth Chan-o-cha overthrew the elected Puea Thai government led by Yingluck Shinawatra. It was the 13th coup in Thailand since 1932 and brought to an end months of political crisis that saw parts of central Bangkok occupied by anti-government protesters. Prayuth said the coup was necessary to restore stability and to end the risk of violence between the supporters of Yingluck and her exiled brother and former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and their opponents who regard Thaksin as the Lord Voldemort of Thailand. But while the coup was hailed by the urban middle classes and traditional elite, who accuse the Shinawatras of massive corruption, they are far outnumbered by the legions of rural poor who regard Thaksin as the only politician to have ever done anything for them.

Prayuth, who speaks to the country weekly on his Friday evening TV show *Returning Happiness to the People*, is now the civilian head of the Orwellian-sounding National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the name the junta have given to their government. Since taking power, the NCPO has muzzled the media, detained and imprisoned political opponents, and repealed the 2007 constitution and ordered a new one – Thailand's 20th since 1932 – to be drafted.

Despite assurances that the NCPO would only run the country temporarily, at the time of research there has been no announcement of when elections are likely to be held. What is certain is that they will not be staged until the new constitution is finalised. The first draft version was rejected by the committee set up to approve it, in part because of provisions that appeared designed to dilute Thailand's already shaky version of democracy. They included allowing an unelected prime minister to