

INTRODUCING BANGKOK



The mesmerising spires of Wat Pho (p69)

GREG ELMS

Same same, but different. It's Thai T-shirt philosophy that neatly sums up Bangkok, a city where the tastes of many places are mixed into an exotic, often-spicy dish that is never, ever boring.

It's the contradictions that give the City of Angels its rich, multifaceted personality. Scratch the surface and you'll find a city of climate-controlled megamalls and international brand names just minutes from 200-year-old village homes; of gold-spined Buddhist temples sharing space with neon-lit strips of sleaze; of slow-moving rivers of traffic bypassed by longtail boats plying the royal river; and of streets lined with food carts selling Thai classics for next to nothing, overlooked by restaurants on top of skyscrapers serving exotic cocktails.

If all this sounds dizzying, rest assured that despite its international flavour Bangkok remains resolutely Thai. The capital's cultural underpinnings are evident in virtually all facets of everyday life, and most enjoyably through the Thai sense of *sà-nùk*, loosely translated as 'fun'. In Thailand anything worth doing – even work – should have an element of *sà-nùk*. Whether you're ordering food, changing money or haggling at the vast Chatuchak Weekend Market, it will usually involve a sense of playfulness – a dash of flirtation, perhaps, and a smile.

With so much of life conducted on the street, there are few cities in the world that reward exploration as well as Bangkok. By day, a stroll off the beaten track, led by the flavours of lunch, can wind up in conversation with a monk. And after dark, the local bar and music scene reveals a city much more sophisticated and dynamic than you might expect. Come check it out for yourself.

BANGKOK LIFE

With almost half of Thailand's urban population squeezed into the capital, it's no surprise that city life in Bangkok is a fast-changing affair. Yes, there are old neighbourhoods where you can feel like you're in the 1950s. But even these areas are usually juxtaposed with some icon of Bangkok's dynamic alter-ego – a glass tower or condo rising beside a *klorng* (canal), a raised freeway or Skytrain looming noisily over ageing wooden houses, or a counter-culture bar spilling young hipsters into neighbourhoods that have been virtually unchanged for decades.

Despite all this manic energy, Thai society remains deeply conservative. Ironically, in a city with a worldwide reputation for sleaze, politicians and media are never far from a 'social order' campaign that sees bars closed at midnight and calls for the drinking age to be raised to 25.

Such contrasts have rarely been as evident as in recent years, when the capital has been divided along colour lines and passions have boiled over into violence. In one corner are the so-called yellow shirts, representing Bangkok's old establishment and marketing themselves as protectors of the monarchy. In the other corner are the red shirts, a group originally made up largely of supporters of ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's side of politics but which has gained broader popularity among those disenchanted with the established status quo.

Red-yellow issues are the basis of much conversation in Bangkok, but even during the most dramatic, violent moments of recent years most Bangkokians just go about their daily routines as if nothing untoward is happening. Few Thais have much faith in politics anymore, and the only institution still widely respected is their beloved king. It is his waning health – and the uncertainty around what will happen when he's gone – that inspires most interest.

Earthbound traffic remains a time-consuming hassle for most Bangkokians. The city has too many cars for the available roads and during peak hours the Thai idea of *jai yen* (cool heart) – remaining unperturbed even in the most trying situations – is tested to the full. Mercifully there are ambitious plans to expand the Metro and Skytrain systems and finally turn Bangkok into the 'world city' its promoters so desperately want it to be. Funding, however, has not only been affected by the global financial crisis but also locked up by the ongoing political instability, so Bangkokians are not holding their breath waiting for free-flowing traffic.



Wander down the neon-lit melting pot that is Khao San Rd (p86)

GREG ELMS

THE AUTHORS

Andrew Burke



Andrew has been coming to Bangkok for long enough that he can remember Th Khao San with barely any neon and Sukhumvit traffic before the Skytrain (not a good memory). Since then he's spent more than 15 years travelling through, photographing and writing about Asia, the Middle East and Africa, and the last 10 living in Hong Kong, Phnom Penh and the manic megalopolis that is Bangkok. Andrew has written or contributed to more than 20 books for Lonely Planet, and writes and shoots photographs for newspapers and magazines including the *Australian Financial Review*, *Travel + Leisure Southeast Asia* and *National Geographic Traveller*, and does occasional TV reporting for Channel 4 UK and CNN.

ANDREW'S TOP BANGKOK DAY

My ideal day in the City of Angels would start early. Packing my camera, I'd wander up to the Skytrain (p266) for a treetop view of the city waking as I'm whooshed down to the river. I love the Mae Nam Chao Phraya at any time,

but this artery of Bangkok life is at its most seductive at this hour, with barges, ferries and longtails criss-crossing the river as the city's dull thud grows into a roar.

My destination is Chinatown (p97). I'll take the Chao Phraya Express ferry (p263) up to Tha Saphan Phut and start wandering (p101). Chinatown's warren of lanes are an explorer's dream, and reward the 'I-wonder-what's-around-that-corner' attitude. After squeezing through Trok Itsaranuphap (Talat Mai), I'll eat breakfast at whichever street stall takes my fancy, and continue south towards Talat Noi.

I'll enjoy a refreshing river-ferry ride up to Wang Lang, then take the cross-river ferry to Tha Hua Chang, where I'll eat lunch with the navy wives in Rachanawi Samosorn (p160) before getting the camera out and delving into the amulet market (p136). I'll wander south along Th Maharat to Wat Pho and a massage (any ideal day in Bangkok must have a massage; p205). It's late afternoon by now so must be time for a drink at The Deck (p160), where the sunset views over Wat Arun are sublime. Friends will join me for dinner here before we head up to Banglamphu (p160) for a couple more drinks along Th Phra Athit and Th Samsen (p186). A top day indeed.

Austin Bush



After graduating from the University of Oregon with a degree in linguistics, Austin received a scholarship to study Thai at Chiang Mai University and has remained in Thailand ever since. After working several years at a stable

job, he made the questionable decision to pursue a career as a freelance photographer/writer. This choice has since taken him as far as northern Pakistan and as near as Bangkok's Or Tor Kor Market. He enjoys writing and taking photos about food most of all because it's delicious. His work can be seen at www.austimbushphotography.com.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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GETTING STARTED

The legendary traffic notwithstanding, Bangkok is an easy place to travel and – assuming you avoid protests by people in coloured shirts – one of the safest cities in Asia. Transport is cheap and fairly efficient, enough people speak English to help you out and there are hundreds of hotels (p212) and restaurants (p152) catering to any budget. Bangkok is well wired so it's easy to research most lodgings and events online.

WHEN TO GO

The 'City of Angels' has three distinct seasons: the hot season runs from March to May or June, followed by the rainy season until November, and the cool season from November until the end of February. With its low humidity, relatively low temperatures and clear skies, the cool season is the best time to visit, though regular days of high 20s and low 30s might leave you wondering just who came up with the term 'cool'. The hot season vivifies the famous Noel Coward verse: 'In Bangkok at twelve o'clock they foam at the mouth and run, But mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun.' The fresh winds from February to April are a relief, but May is deadly. The monsoon season brings rain almost daily, but it's rare that it will rain all day and it's often limited to a short, refreshing afternoon downpour. For more on Bangkok's climate, see p269.

Not surprisingly, Bangkok's peak tourist season is during the cool season, with a secondary peak during July and August. If your main objective is to avoid crowds and to take advantage of discounted rooms and low-season rates, come during April to June and September and October.

FESTIVALS

Thais love little more than a festival full of *sà-nìk* (fun) and Bangkok is host to an eclectic mix, from Buddhist celebrations to jazz events and festivals of food. Dates and venues often vary from year to year because the festival adheres to the lunar calendar, organisers aren't organised enough or local authorities change festival days. Which means you'll often have to wait until the festival is only months or even weeks away before exact dates and locations are available. That said, wherever dates have been available we have included them here. The [Tourism Authority of Thailand](http://www.tourismthailand.org) (www.tourismthailand.org) features major festivals and events.

On Buddhist holidays it's illegal to sell alcohol so bars stay closed. For a list of public holidays, see p273. For a lunar calendar, see <http://kalender-365.de/lunar-calendar.php>.

January & February

CHINESE NEW YEAR

3–5 Feb 2011,
23–25 Jan 2012

Some time from late January to late February, Bangkok's large Thai-Chinese population celebrate their lunar new year, called *drùt jeen* in Thai, with a week full of house cleaning, lion dances and fireworks. The most impressive festivities, unsurprisingly, take place in Chinatown.

MAKHA BUCHA

Makha Bucha is held on the full moon of the third lunar month (late February to early March) to commemorate the Buddha preaching to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him 'without prior summons'. The festival culminates with a candlelit walk around the main chapel at every wát.

March

BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL FASHION WEEK

www.thaicatwalk.com

Thai designers show their work in this trade fair that is busy with catwalk shows and parties, usually in mid-March. If you want a seat but don't have a ticket, be sure to look the part.

KITE FLYING SEASON

During the windy season from the middle of February to early April colourful kites battle it out over the skies of Sanam Luang and Lumpini Park. The Thailand International Kite Festival is held at this time every second year; next in 2012.

WORLD THAI MARTIAL ARTS FESTIVAL

Ayuthaya (p236)

Week-long *moo-ay tai* (also spelt *muay thai*) festival in mid-March with a spiritual aspect, the ancient Waikru Muay Thai ceremony.

April

SONGKRAN

13–15 Apr

Songkran is the celebration of the Thai New Year. Those Bangkokians who don't head home for the holiday observe traditional rites such as Buddha images being 'bathed' and monks and elders receiving the respect of younger Thais through the sprinkling of water over their hands. Travellers tend to become thoroughly immersed in one mega-waterfight or another. The biggest are organised shows at Th Khao San and Patpong, where you can arm yourself with a high-calibre water gun and go beserk. Don't carry anything you don't want to get wet.

May & June

ROYAL PLOUGHING CEREMONY

Sanam Luang (Map p68)

To kick off the official rice-planting season in early May, either the king or the crown prince presides over this ancient Brahman ritual that culminates in sacred white oxen ploughing the earth and priests declaring it a good or bad year for farmers. Thousands of farmers from across Thailand gather to watch.

VISAKHA BUCHA

17 May 2011, 4 Jun 2012

Visakha Bucha, on the full moon of the 6th lunar month, is considered the date of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away). Activities are centred on the local wát, with candlelit processions, chanting and sermonising; a larger festival is held at Sanam Luang.

July & August

ASANHA BUCHA & KHAO PHANSA

15 & 16 Jul 2011, 2 & 3 Aug 2012

This Buddhist festival, on the full moon of the 8th lunar month, commemorates the day the Buddha preached his first sermon after attaining enlightenment and is marked at Theravada Buddhist

temples with a candlelit procession at night. The following day is *kôw pan-sâh*, the beginning of the Buddhist rains retreat when young men traditionally enter the monkhood for the rainy season, and all monks sequest themselves in a monastery for three months. It's a good time to observe a Buddhist ordination.

BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

www.bangkokfilm.org

Dates and venues are notoriously fickle for Bangkok's two film festivals, but this one usually runs for 10 days and was most recently held in late August. Screenings were primarily at Paragon Cineplex (p199). About 150 films are shown, with an emphasis on Asian cinema. Events end with the awarding of the festival's Golden Kinnaree. For popular films, book ahead.

September

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF DANCE & MUSIC

www.bangkokfestivals.com

Usually held at the Thailand Cultural Centre (p197), this month-long festival presents international and local orchestral music, jazz, ballet, opera and world music.

THAILAND INTERNATIONAL SWAN BOAT RACES

www.thailandgrandfestival.com

More than 20 international teams race traditional Thai-style long boats in various classes (the largest has 55 paddlers) along Mae Nam Chao Phraya in Ayuthaya.

October

WORLD GOURMET FESTIVAL

www.fourseasons.com/bangkok

The Four Seasons Hotel (p219) hosts Bangkok's premier food event, bringing together international chefs for a 10-day feast.

NAVARATRI HINDU FESTIVAL

Starts 8 Oct 2010, 28 Sep 2011, 16 Oct 2012

Centred on the Sri Mariamman Temple (p119) on Th Silom, this nine-day Hindu festival sees Th Silom pedestrianised as men worship shrines and pierce themselves before smashing coconuts on the sidewalks. Attendees should wear white.

VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL

During the first nine days of the ninth lunar month, this Chinese-Buddhist festival, *têt-sà-gahn gin jair*, sees streetside vendors serving meatless meals to help cleanse the body, all announced with yellow banners and white clothes. Most of the action is in Chinatown.

BANGKOK DESIGN FESTIVAL

www.bangkokdesignfestival.com

Ten days of events, exhibitions, lectures and workshops are held at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (p199) and other 'hip places'. Each year has a theme; 2009's was 'Balancing the Future: Innovation, Creativity and Sustainability'.

KING CHULALONGKORN DAY 23 Oct

Rama V is honoured on the anniversary of his death at his revered Royal Plaza statue. Crowds of devotees come to make merit with incense and flower garlands.

WORLD FILM FESTIVAL

www.worldfilmbkk.com

Bangkok's other, less commercial film festival, usually held from late October to early November.

November

LOI KRATHONG 21 Nov 2010, 10 Nov 2011, 28 Nov 2012

www.bangkoktourist.com

On the night of the full moon of the 12th lunar month, small lotus-shaped *grà-tong* (baskets or boats made of a section of banana trunk for flotation, banana leaves, flowers, incense, candles and a coin – don't use the styrofoam versions) are floated on Mae Nam Chao Phraya and other rivers, lakes and canals across Thailand. The ceremony, which originated in Sukhothai, is both an offering to the water spirits and a symbolic cleansing of bad luck.

WAT SAKET FAIR

The grandest of Bangkok's temple fairs (*ngahn wát*) is held at Wat Saket and the Golden Mount (p80) around Loi Krathong. The temple grounds turn into a colourful, noisy fair selling flowers, incense, bells and saffron cloth and tonnes of Thai food. The highlight is a candlelit circumambulation on the mount.

BANGKOK PRIDE WEEK

www.bangkokpride.org

Usually in mid-November, this week-long festival of parades, parties, awards, sequins and feather boas is organised by city businesses and organisations for Bangkok's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. Don't miss the opening 'Pink in the Park' fair in Lumpini Park (p120).

FAT FESTIVAL

www.fatdegree.com

Sponsored by FAT 104.5FM radio, Bangkok's premier indie music festival has grown to include everything from pop to thrash via hip-hop, plus nonmusic alternative arts. It's usually on the first or second weekend in November, at Muang Thong Thani.

December

KING'S BIRTHDAY

5 Dec

Celebrating King Bhumibol's birthday, the city is festooned with lights and large portraits of the king (especially on Th Ratchadamnoen). In the afternoon, Sanam Luang is packed for a fireworks display that segues appropriately into a noisy concert with popular Thai musicians.

BANGKOK JAZZ FESTIVAL

www.bangkokjazzfestival.com

Started in 2003, this jazz fest kicks off at Sanam Suea Pa at Dusit in commemoration of His Majesty the King's love of jazz. The line-up usually includes internationally known artists and focuses on the lighter side of jazz, per Thai public taste.

HOW MUCH?

Skytrain ride 15–40B

Chao Phraya Express boat ride 10–34B

3km taxi ride 50–100B, depending on traffic

640ml Singha beer from bar 60–120B

1L petrol 34B

500ml/1.5L bottle water 7/15B

Pàt tai 25–40B

Cup of coffee 40–80B

One-hour traditional Thai massage 300–3000B

Souvenir T-shirt 100–250B

CONCERT IN THE PARK

www.bangkoksymphony.org/concertinpark

Free concerts from the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra are performed Sunday evenings (from 5.30pm to 7.30pm) between mid-December and mid-February at Lumpini Park (p120).

PHRA NAKHON SI AYUTHAYA WORLD HERITAGE FAIR

Ayuthaya (p236)

A series of cultural performances and evening sound-and-light shows among the ruins of the World Heritage site in the former Thai capital.

COSTS & MONEY

Bangkok is inexpensive by Western standards but you can still burn through a lot of baht if you choose. On the tightest of budgets you could scrape by on about 700B a day, staying in the simplest guesthouse accommodation, eating mainly street food, seeing a sight or two, taking local transport and drinking horrible Chang beer from 7-Elevens. With closer to 2500B you can creep into the comforts of the midrange and afford a decent meal, and with 3500B you can enjoy a dash of style, a decent restaurant meal and perhaps a rooftop cocktail or two. If you plan on frequenting the city's best hotels, restaurants and clubs you're look-

ing at more than 5000B a day. These numbers are for solo travellers, and per person costs fall if you're travelling as a couple.

Getting your hands on Thai baht is easy enough through the city's thousands of ATMs. Credit cards are widely accepted; see p277.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Take a look at these websites to help plan your trip. For a list of blogs on Bangkok, see p58.

Bangkok Recorder (www.bangkokrecorder.com) For what's on, mainly in bars and clubs.

Bangkok Scams (www.bangkokscams.com) Don't be greedy, don't get scammed.

Bangkok Tourist (www.bangkoktourist.com) City-run site with enough Bangkok sights for a lifetime of sightseeing.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Country-specific information as well as reader information-exchange on the Thorn Tree forum.

Real Thai Recipes (www.realthairecipes.com) Get a taste of what you'll find in Bangkok.

Thailand Daily (www.thailanddaily.com) Part of World News Network, offering a thorough digest of Thailand-related news in English.

Top 100 Thai Websites (www.click2thailand.com) What it says on the box – links to all sorts of interesting Thai websites.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (www.tourismthailand.org) Handy planning hints and events guide.

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