

BANGKOK

ENCOUNTER

AUSTIN BUSH

Bangkok Encounter

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Shaded yellow areas on the maps denote areas of interest – for their historical significance, their attractive architecture or their great bars and restaurants. We encourage you to head to these areas and just start exploring!

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AUSTIN BUSH

Austin came to Thailand in 1998 on a language scholarship to Chiang Mai University. The lure of city life, employment and spicy food eventually led Austin to Bangkok. City life, employment and spicy food have managed to keep him there since. Austin is a native of Oregon and a freelance writer and photographer who often focuses on food; samples of his work can be seen at www.austinbushphotography.com.



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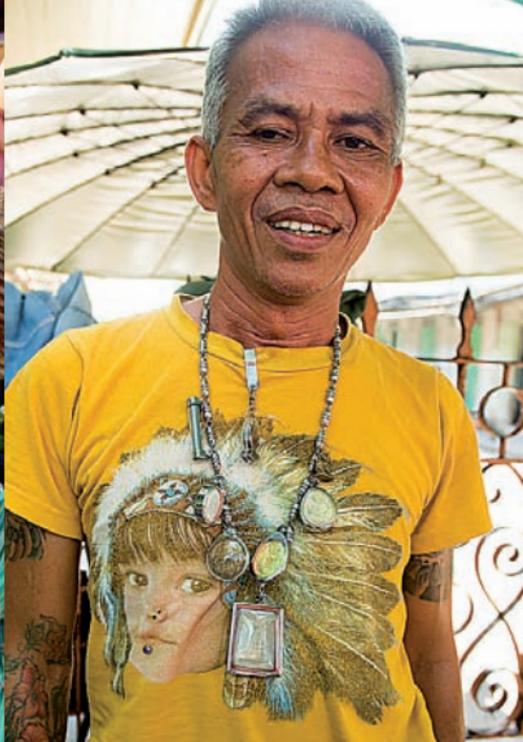


A meditative stroll through the streets of bustling Ko Ratanakosin (p40)

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THIS IS BANGKOK

Bangkok is excess in all of its unrestrained glory. Bigger, better, more: the city is insatiable, a monster that feeds on concrete, shopping malls and diesel exhaust.

The city demands that you be in the present and in the moment, not necessarily for a religious epiphany, but because the city is self-absorbed and superficial, blissfully free of wrinkle-inducing self-reflection. Smiles and *sà-nùk* (the Thai word for 'fun') are the key passports into Bangkok society. A compliment here, a joke there – the demands of social lubrication in this megalopolis are more akin to a small village than an anonymous city, and are a necessity for survival.

As Bangkok forcefully kneads out of you all demands for order and predictability, you'll understand the famous Thai smile. It is the metaphorical brakes on the urban overdrive. Packed into these concrete corridors are religious spectacle, unapologetic consumerism and multi-flavoured hedonism – corrupting and purifying souls within footsteps of each other. A tragicomic confluence of human desires and aspirations best viewed through a detached smile.

Of the famous and infamous attractions, Bangkok's best feature is its intermingling of opposites. A modern world of affluence orbits around a serene traditional core. Step outside the four-star hotels into a typical Siamese village where taxi drivers knock back energy drinks and upcountry transplants grill chicken on a streetside barbecue. Hop a BTS train to the glitzy shopping malls where trust-fund babies examine luxury brands as carefully as the housewives inspect produce at the open-air markets. Or appreciate the attempts at enlightenment at the city's famous temples and doorstep shrines, or simple acts of kindness amid the urban bustle.

You can jump between all of these worlds – wining and hobnobbing at a chic club, eating at a streetside market, getting plucked and pummelled into something more beautiful, or sweating profusely on a long unplanned march. Bangkok is an urban connoisseur's dream come true.

Top left Take your pick at Pak Khlong Market (p74) **Top right** Funky protection ware: amulets for all Thais **Bottom** Fearsome demons guard the gilded *chedi* (stupa) at Wat Phra Kaew (p42)