

# Bangkok



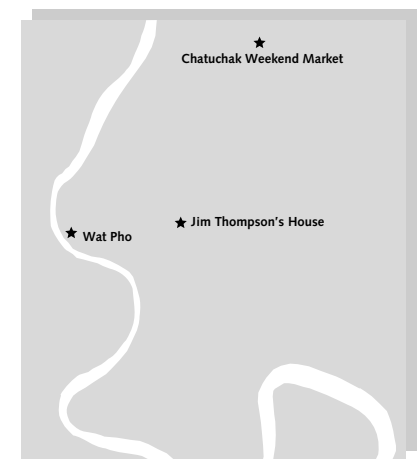
Unlike Thailand's famously chilled islands and beaches, there's something about Bangkok that never fails to get the blood pumping. This big, crowded, polluted and seemingly chaotic Asian mega-city is many things to many people, but you wouldn't call it boring.

For the visitor, the impact is immediate. Your first move is likely to be joining the cacophonous arteries of metal that pump – just barely – almost eight million people around the region's biggest city. Everywhere you look the streets and waterways are alive with commuters. Schoolkids run without sweating, smiling vendors create mouth-watering food in push-away kitchens, monks rub bare shoulders with fashionistas in air-conditioned malls... Whether it's in one of Bangkok's famous golden temples, riding in the back of its roguish tük-tük or just walking down the street, something odd and inexplicable will happen at the most unexpected time. Hey, was that an elephant with a tail light?

If all you want to do is kick back on a peaceful beach, at first glance Bangkok will seem like a transit burden full of concrete towers instead of palm trees. But once you tire of sea breezes, you'll better appreciate Bangkok's conveniences and breakneck pace. With its mix of the historic and contemporary, and some of the most delicious and best-value eating on earth, the City of Angels is surely one of the most invigorating in Asia.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Getting lost in quirky **Wat Pho** (p83), with its serene reclining Buddha, then finding yourself a massage
- Touring **Jim Thompson's House** (p87), one of the best-preserved examples of traditional Thai art and architecture
- Stocking up on exotic souvenirs at the vast **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (p108)
- Taking the lift to one of Bangkok's unique rooftop bars for a **sky-high sundowner** (p102) and unbeatable sunset views.
- Eating delicious **Thai cuisine** (p98) in what is one of Asia's best food cities.



■ DRY SEASON: NOVEMBER-APRIL

■ WET SEASON: MAY-OCTOBER

## HISTORY

As capital cities go, Bangkok is a fairly recent invention. Following the sacking of Ayuthaya by the Burmese (p24), King Taksin established the Thai capital at Thonburi, on the west bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River). But in 1782 King Rama I founded the Chakri dynasty (p24) and promptly moved his capital across the river to the modest village of Bang Makok (current-day Bangkok).

Buddhist relics from Ayuthaya, Thonburi and Sukhothai were re-enshrined in towering new temples and the city expanded rapidly around the royal compound at Ko Ratanakosin. Under Rama IV (King Mongkut) and his son Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), Bangkok and the country began to modernise, adopting and integrating Western customs, styles and architecture. Europeans flocked to the city to negotiate trade contracts and increase their influence in the region.

In 1932 Bangkok saw the end of absolute monarchy and the beginnings of a turbulent political era. From 1932 to the present day, Bangkok has witnessed 19 coup attempts, half of which half have resulted in a change of government. The latest, in September 2006, saw Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra ousted without a shot being fired following months of protests in the capital. However, previous political ructions were not so peaceful and on several occasions mass demonstrations have ended in the military massacring student protesters.

During the 1970s, Bangkok became an R&R base for American troops fighting in Vietnam and its reputation as 'sin city' was born. During the 1980s and '90s Thailand's economy and Bangkok's skyline grew rapidly. But when the Bangkok stock market collapsed

### WHAT'S YOUR NAME AGAIN?

The name Bangkok is derived from Bang Makok, meaning 'Place of Olive Plums', the name of a village that pre-dates the arrival of the capital in 1782. The full official title of the capital is 'Krungthep mahanakhon amon rattanakosin mahintara ayuthaya mahadilok popnopparat ratchathani burirom udomratchaniwet mahasathan amonpiman avatansathit sakkathattiya visunukamprasit'. Not surprisingly, most Thais abbreviate it to Krung Thep (City of Angels).

in 1997 the city, the country and indeed most of the region ground to an economic halt.

After some rocky years, Bangkok has bounced back and is now every bit the modern Asian metropolis, if not quite the 'world city' it so wants to be. Despite the uncertainty following the 2006 coup d'état and economic sluggishness, construction is progressing apace and cranes are prominent on the skyline. Large infrastructure projects, such as the Skytrain and Metro urban railways and the Suvarnabhumi International Airport, have all made the city a less-congested and more enjoyable place.

## ORIENTATION

Bangkok is a vast sprawling mess of a city and the urban chaos can be pretty intimidating at first. Concrete towers as far as the eye can see make it difficult to discern any real centre. But the capital does have several distinctly different districts. For the sake of simplicity, however, it makes sense to divide the city into two areas: 'old Bangkok', which has most of the royal palaces and historic temples, and 'new Bangkok', which is dominated by towering skyscrapers, shopping malls and a growing number of luxury hotels.

Old Bangkok straddles the Mae Nam Chao Phraya, with the original royal centre of Ko Ratanakosin occupying a man-made island on the east bank and the former capital of Thonburi now serving as a suburb on the west bank. To the north of the royal district, still on Ko Ratanakosin, is Banglamphu. This is one of Bangkok's oldest neighbourhoods and was once a home to officials and members of the royal court. Today it's the main budget travellers' centre in Bangkok with an increasing local art and bar scene. Northeast of Ko Ratanakosin is Dusit, the new royal district. The riverside district south of Ko Ratanakosin is home to the Indian neighbourhood of Phahurat and Bangkok's Chinatown, near the main train station of Hualamphong.

Surrounding the old city and stretching for at least 20km in every direction, 'new Bangkok' is a modern creation and quite unfathomable amounts of concrete, divided by massive congested highways and soaring flyovers. It's best to think of this part of the City of Angels in terms of its main streets. Th Charoen Krung runs south from Chinatown along the eastern edge of Mae Nam Chao Phraya. Running east from this road are Th

## BANGKOK IN ...

### Two Days

In two days you can explore Bangkok's famous sights: the **Grand Palace & Wat Phra Kaew** (p83); **Wat Pho** (p83), home to the largest reclining Buddha in Thailand; and missile-shaped **Wat Arun** (p84). If you are jet lagged on day two, get up early and head to **Lumphini Park** (p87) to see the locals practising t'ai chi. Then chase away the heatstroke with a visit to the shopping centres on Th Phra Ram I and Th Ploenchit. Don't forget to follow the Thai crowds to the busy **Erawan Shrine** (p86). In the afternoon, visit **Jim Thompson's House** (p87) for an introduction to traditional Thai architecture. Take in the sunset from one of the **sky-high bars** (p102), before finding somewhere with better food for a lot less money for dinner.

### Four Days

With more time, factor in a visit to the **National Museum** (p84) then the **amulet market** (p86), and take the **Chinatown Walking Tour** (p88). Take a detour up to Dusit to see **Vimanmek Mansion Museum** (p85), built entirely from golden teak, and get out on the river in a long-tail or the ferry. After dark, head to Th Sukhumvit to experience modern Bangkok at one of the fashionable restaurants or clubs, such as **Bed Supperclub** (p103). If you're here on the weekend juggle this plan to fit in the **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (p108)

Surawong (Surwongse) and Th Silom, which are lined with hotels, restaurants, shopping centres and an eye-popping dose of sleaze, and then Th Sathon, which adds embassies and consulates to the hotel mix.

Head north of the Silom neighbourhood along Th Phayathai or Th Ratchadamri and you'll reach Th Phra Ram I and the Siam Square and Th Ploenchit shopping districts. East of here Th Sukhumvit hosts hotels, restaurants and a rather seedy reputation at its start, before becoming more sophisticated and expensive east of Soi 21 (Soi Asoke).

Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport is about 30km east of the centre, while the old Don Muang airport is about 25km north and has a lot of (but not all) domestic flights to island and beach destinations.

### Maps

From the moment you enter Thailand – literally right after you've passed immigration – you'll see your first free maps. Get used to it – Thailand is full of them. Quality varies between useful and utter rubbish, but unless you're planning to explore off the beaten track they should be good enough.

There are also several maps for sale that are worth your money. One that is often imitated but never equalled is *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok* (www.nancychandler.net; 250B), a colourful hand-drawn map with useful inset panels for Chinatown, Th Sukhumvit and Chatuchak Weekend Market. To master

the city's bus system, purchase Roadway's *Bangkok Bus Map* (150B). For visitors who consider eating to be sightseeing, check out Ideal Map's *Good Eats* series, which has mapped mom-and-pop restaurants in three of Bangkok's noshing neighbourhoods.

If travelling to districts outside central Bangkok, Thinknet's *Bangkok City Atlas* is a wise investment for 250B.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

Bangkok is well-stocked with bookshops selling new titles in English and, less often, other languages. Virtually every major mall has branches of **Asia Books** (www.asiabook.com), **Kinokuniya** (www.kinokuniya.com), **Bookazine** (www.bookazine.co.th) and/or **B2S** (www.b2s.co.th). Tourist areas also have second-hand bookstores, and those on Th Khao San have the most diverse range of titles in the country (though they're not all that cheap). Recommended bookshops include:

**Asia Books** (www.asiabook.com) Soi 15 (Map p82; 221 Th Sukhumvit, Soi 15); Siam Discovery Center (Map pp80-1; 4th fl, Th Phra Ram I)

**Dasa Book Café** (Map p82; ☎ 0 2661 2993; btwn Soi 26 & 28, Th Sukhumvit).

**Kinokuniya** (☎ 0 2255 9834) Emporium (Map p82; 3rd fl, 622 Th Sukhumvit); Siam Paragon (Map pp80-1; 4th fl, Siam Paragon, Th Phra Rama I)

**Shaman Bookstore** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 0418; D&D Plaza, 68-70 Th Khao San & 127 Th Tanao, Banglamphu) Used books galore.