

Bangkok:

An exuberant metropolis in Thailand

> Bangkok- Johannes Bardong

Bangkok – the Thais call it “Krung Thep”- City of Angels - one of the most highly-populated cities in the world – the exotic Grand Palace, residence of the King until the 1950s – temples - the busy comings and goings in the network of canals – all attract visitors. Asian hospitality, deeply religious feelings and loyalty to the state on the one hand and the chaotic traffic situation, noise and air and water pollution on the other combine to define life in this Asian metropolis.



A view from the Chao Phraya River

منظر من نهر تشاو فرايا

The humidity is extreme, the temperature seems to be about 40 degrees C, and a layer of smog covers the city. Some of the mass of couriers on motorcycles, Tuk Tuk drivers and traffic policeman wear masks to protect themselves from the polluted air. You won't find fresh-smelling air all over. In the muddy Phraya River, flotsam is everywhere and an indescribable chaos reigns there as well as all over the city. In the afternoon it rains. Nonetheless, one cannot escape the exotic charm of the political, economic and cultural centre of the Kingdom.

Venice of the East

Bangkok lies approximately 20 meters above sea level. The Chao Phraya River, with its many canals, the so-called “Khlongs”, is the real lifeline of the ever-growing metropolis. Once named the “Venice of the East”, endless canals lead from the 400 meter wide river which, since 1850, has been filled in and replaced by paved streets one at a time. In spite of this, a good part of everyday life still takes place in the remaining Khlongs on the waterway. The colourful hustle and bustle of the sellers in their boats and their customers on the floating markets provide an unforgettable picture and are one of the main attractions of this important port city. ▶



A shrine by the road

معبد على الطريق

Sights You Won't Want to Miss

If you only have two days at your disposal, don't miss the Grand Palace and the Wat Phra Kaeo temple. The Wat Pho temple area is nearby. Another "must" is a meal in a local restaurant – leave your hotel for a real taste of Bangkok. If time allows, make the trip to Wat Pho by boat and enjoy the National Museum's displays in what was once the seat of the king. The museum is the largest of its kind in Southeast Asia. And don't neglect the opportunity to do some shopping!

The Grand Palace on the banks of the Chao Phraya is the main attraction of Bangkok. It is located on an extensive site where more than 100 historical buildings of varying architectural styles are to be found surrounded by a crenellated wall of 1.9 kilometers. Even today it is the official residence of the Monarch of Thailand and the birthplace of the city. When King Rama I moved his headquarters here at the end of the sixteenth century, the speedy development of today's Bangkok Metropolitan Area of 10,000,000 people began. The founder of the Chakri Dynasty, the dynasty still reigning today, had the Chinese village of "Bang Kok" or Wild Plums erected here and made it the new capital. "Krung Thep" are only the first two words to designate the new capital. In the full version there is a label containing 22 words, giving it the world's longest city name. No wonder that the term "Bangkok" derived from the name of the original village has become the internationally accepted name of the city.

Within the area of the Grand Palace is the Wat Phra Kaeo, the temple of the Emerald Buddha. It is a national shrine and contains the most revered Buddha statue in Thailand. Entrance is free for Thais and rather pricey for foreigners, but this should not deter you from visiting this beautiful temple with its gorgeous statues. Religion plays an important part in the lives of the citizens. Ninety-four percent of the population is Buddhist. Over 400 Buddhist temples and monasteries bear witness to this fact. Practically on every corner you will find smaller Buddhas and shrines which are honoured even by those passing by in a bus or a boat.

From the Grand Palace it is not far to the enchanting temple area Wat Pho where the oldest and largest temple of Bangkok is located. Inside, the largest reclining Buddha ▶



Wat Phra Kaeo Temple

معبد وات فار كايو



Inside the Wat Pho

داخل وات فو



A boat passing the Temple of Dawn

قارب يجتاز بالقرب من معبد الفجر

of the world is honoured. The gold-plated statue measures 46 meters x 15 meters. The soles of the feet of the Buddha are decorated in ivory. Touching them is believed to bring luck. The temple grounds cover a large parcel of land and invitingly encourage a leisurely walk. In addition to the Grand Palace, this should be in second place on every tourist's list of "musts". On the west bank opposite the Grand Palace is Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn. For only 20 baht you can cross over to the 75 meter long Pagoda made of porcelain tiles which shine from a distance through the sun's reflection.

Finding your Feet in Bangkok

Do not let yourself be tempted to enter a public bus with your suitcases for the trip from airport to your hotel. Take the train or taxi. Your hotel will have a connection to the Skytrain. The modern elevated train transports you quickly and in air-conditioned comfort to the river, the real main traffic axis of the city. By way of the

river you can reach all the main sights of the city. Boats leave every few minutes. Especially for tourists, there is a line of boats that stop at the most important sites alternately on the right and the left bank. On the river itself, confusion is rife. From all directions boats, barges and ships cross each other's paths. For those who can decipher the Thai accent, a guide describes the basics of what Bangkok has to offer in English. "If you want to leave here, please stand at the back." If no one stands up, the boat continues on its way – but no worries – you will return to the same spots when the boat has reversed directions at the end of the route. Some of the seats and standing areas are reserved for the many monks. They can be recognized by their orange-coloured robes and are transported free of charge. Since they have neither possessions nor income, they are dependent upon donations from the people. Women should neither touch them nor talk to them.

Cultural Idiosyncracies

In spite of all those smiling faces, tourists have little opportunity to understand the society and culture of the country. Occasionally situations arise which offer insights. Thais are helpful over and beyond what one could expect from strangers, but English is not always understood. Every question will be answered, but politeness requires the avoidance of "no", as the word is unknown in the Thai language. If you want a dependable answer, avoid using closed questions which can be answered with either yes or no. The King has a central role in the lives of Thais. If one should have the stupendous luck of coming upon the King, the police will see to it that everyone – foreigners included – pay him honour by standing up. Should one remain seated, it would be construed as an insult, even if the Head of State is merely passing by in a convoy. At 18.00 every day, the national anthem is played – to be heard in train stations, etc. The hustle and bustle of daily life is suspended for a few minutes and many Thais remain standing and reflect until the end of the anthem. Anthem over – life resumes at the normal pace. ▶

Hotels and Restaurants

If you want to experience luxury, you will find a dozen first-class hotels on the banks of the river. If, on the other hand, you are on a budget, Hotel Asia – despite criticism in blogs on the internet – is a good address for those looking for an economical place to stay. It has a direct connection to the Skytrain and there are not many other hotels that are so convenient to book from abroad. As for food, if you are willing to venture into the loud and exuberant streets of Bangkok you will discover a many-faceted variety that is often cheaper and better than what hotels offer. The greatest concentration of restaurants is to be found in the Sukhumvit Road – a street overrun by tourists. Additionally you will find street vendors all over – definitely not for everyone and possibly not very hygienic. Back to the restaurants: here the dishes are often very hot and often contain either coconut or ginger. I ordered Thai Curry and was served what looked like a soup which was so hot that it was more than a challenge to eat. Nevertheless, whether it was due to a mistranslation on the menu or not, the waitress was more than friendly and the dish will remain in my memory for a long time. ■

Travel Tips

- 100 Thai Baht are approximately 2 Euros.
- Traveller beware! Tourists pay many times over for taxis, Tuk-Tuks and boats than locals. Drivers often take long detours to pump up the bill. Taxi stands at hotels are more expensive than other taxis.
- A day-ticket for a tourist boat costs 100 Baht; Skytrain 30 Baht per trip.
- Early birds have the advantage. Most tourist sights are closed in the afternoons.
- There are many large shopping areas in the city with all kinds of brand name articles. There is a form which will get you back the value-added tax upon leaving the country.
- Despite the hot climate when visiting religious places, arms and legs must be covered. For a fee you can rent a covering at most places.
- Because of hygiene problems, you might consider vaccinations before travelling to Thailand.
- The rainy season is from May through October. The coolest weather is in December and January. It's hottest in April – average temperature 35 degrees C.



A road near Pantip Plaza
شارع بالقرب من ساحة بانتب



A group of tourists visiting the Grand Palace

مجموعة من السياح في زيارة للقصر الكبير