

INTRODUCING BANGKOK



The mesmerising spires of Wat Pho (p57)

Same same, but different. It's Thai-style philosophy that neatly sums up Bangkok, a city combining the tastes of many places into a unique and often-spicy dish that is never, ever boring.

Such contradictions give the City of Angels its rich, multi-faceted personality. Delve just a little deeper and you'll find a city of climate-controlled mega-malls and international brand names just minutes from 200-year-old village homes; of gold-spired Buddhist temples sharing space with neon-lit strips of sleaze; of slow-moving rivers of cars bypassed by long-tail 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 international cuisine.

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 *sànuék*, loosely translated as 'fun'. In Thailand anything worth doing – even work – should have an element of *sànuék*. Whether you're ordering food, changing money or haggling at the vast Chatuchak Market, it will usually involve a sense of playfulness – a dash of flirtation, perhaps, and a smile.

In fairness, there are times in Bangkok that are more fun than others. The city's three seasons (cool, hot and wet) are all pretty warm, but November to February is the most enjoyable – not that the rest of the year is impossible – and the tropical storms of the wet season bring a dramatic relief.

BANGKOK LIFE

With almost half of Thailand's urban population squeezed into the capital, it's understandable that most change in the land of smiles begins here. Change doesn't come much more sweeping than a *coup d'état*. Bangkokians, who have a tendency towards great swings between political apathy and extraordinary groundswells of activism, were integral in creating the conditions for the coup that ousted former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Yet after everybody went home, the City of Angels settled into an uncharacteristic slump.

Ironically, after 15 months where few major decisions were made and investment, major public works and a whole lot of political careers were on hold, the rest of the country voted the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party into power. Talk about a slap in the face. The election result underlined yet again the huge gulf that exists between the people of Bangkok and the rest of the country, even though most Bangkokians are originally from somewhere else.

Whether its citizens like it or not, new prime minister, Samak Sundaravej, has resurrected a range of Thaksin-era policies that don't appeal to the more free-spirited souls. A second 'war on drugs' has been declared, to the outrage of organisations such as Human Rights Watch that fears another round of extrajudicial killings. Meanwhile a renewed effort to impose 'social order' means the 1am curfew on bars is again being vigorously enforced.

The future for Thaksin's drive to promote Thai arts is uncertain, but that hasn't stopped hundreds of galleries opening in recent years. The movie business is booming and Thai and foreign critics alike speak of a Thai 'new wave', which is almost entirely focused on Bangkok. On the small screen the controversial *War of Angels* – about short-skirted flight attendants battling each other for hunky pilots – has become a major topic of conversation around the water cooler.

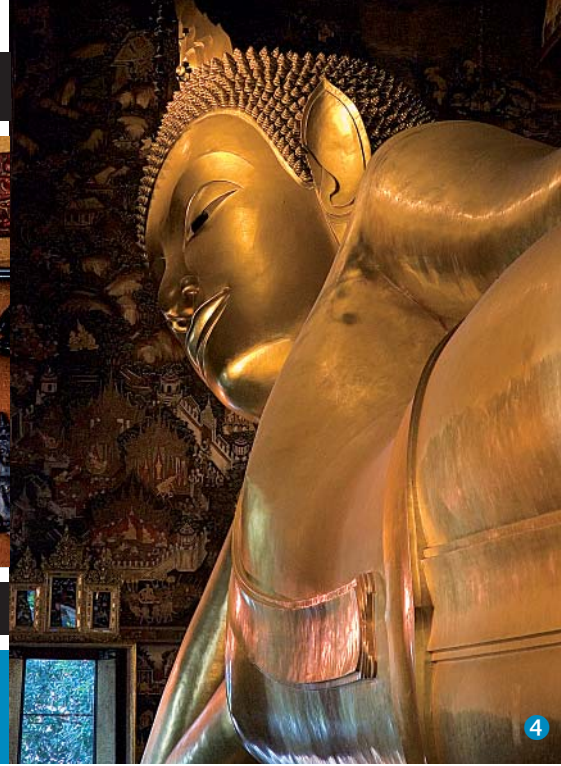
Earthbound traffic remains a time-consuming hassle for most Bangkokians. The city has too many cars for the available roads and during peak hours the Thai idea of *jai yen* (cool heart) – remaining unperturbed even in the most trying of situations – is tested to the full.

What these movements towards the city's future, whether in art, mass transport or urban planning, signal is that the turbulent politics and relative economic slowdown have done little to blunt Bangkok's almost urgent rush forward. Jump on.



Wander down the neon-lit melting pot that is Khao San Rd (p72)

HIGHLIGHTS



- 1 Jim Thompson's House**
Walk through the legendary silk merchant's jungle-clad teak home (p97).
- 2 Amulet Market**
Buy yourself some holy protection (p129).
- 3 Wat Arun**
Cross the river to this landmark stupa with its mosaic decorations (p65).
- 4 Wat Pho**
Gaze at the 46m-long Reclining Buddha (p57), then get rubbed in the massage school (p57).
- 5 Lumpini Park**
Escape the urban jungle in this oasis of relaxation (p106).
- 6 Chatuchak Weekend Market**
Get lost in the mother of all outdoor markets (p140).
- 7 Dusit Park**
Witness the Victorian sense and Thai sensibilities merge in this royal enclave (p80).

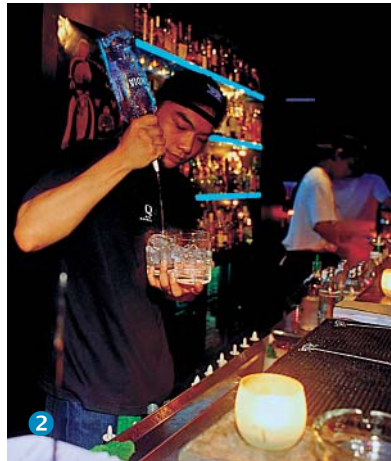
BANGKOK BY DAY

Bangkok by day is about gold-topped temples, unfeasibly large Buddha images, royal palaces and, ahm, traffic. Less touristy but just as memorable are the heaving markets, the vibrantly green parks and the serene chaos of the river.



BANGKOK BY NIGHT

The City of Angels is possibly most famous (or infamous) for its after hours action, but there's more than just skin shows. Think sunset cocktails atop skyscrapers, romantic dinners in fine restaurants, rocking alternative bars and...muay thai fight nights.



1 Banglamphu Bars
Follow your ears around Bangkok's hip alternative music scene (p176).

2 Soi 11 Clubs
Dance down Bangkok's premier clubbing *soi* to Bed Supperclub (p183) and Q Bar (p182).

3 Spring
Eat modern Asian seafood while relaxing on a beanbag in the garden (p167).

4 Food
Taste delicious food from a swish restaurant or roadside stall (p153).

5 Lumpini Stadium
Soak up the action and atmosphere in this Bangkok institution (p199).

6 Moon Bar at Vertigo
Drink in the sunset from the roof of a skyscraper (p177).

7 Face
Eat sumptuous Thai food amid teak, jungle and ponds (p166).



THIS IMAGE
NOT AVAILABLE
IN PICK & MIX



1 Songkran

Celebrate New Year, or perhaps it's really just the world's biggest water fight (p13).

2 Ayuthaya

Cycle around the monumental remains of the old Siamese kingdom (p226).

3 Loi Krathong

Float your bad luck down the river with the rest of Bangkok (p14).

4 Kanchanaburi

Take the train across the bridge over the River Kwai (p242).

FESTIVALS & EXCURSIONS

Most of Bangkok's festivals combine a spiritual or serious element with an unashamed pursuit of sanuk, aka 'fun' – where else can you have a bucket of water thrown over you by laughing locals to celebrate the new year? Excursions are also fun, be it to an old royal capital, forested national park, beaches or sleepy riverside towns.



THIS IMAGE
NOT AVAILABLE
IN PICK & MIX

3



4

GETTING STARTED

The legendary traffic notwithstanding, Bangkok is an easy place to travel and 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 (p202) and restaurants (p144) 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.

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

Bangkok hosts an ever-more-eclectic mix of festivals, from Buddhist celebrations to celebrations of hefty women. Dates and venues often vary from year to year, either because the festival adheres to the lunar calendar or local authorities change festival days. Either way, pinning down exact dates is difficult. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (www.tourismthailand.org) features some festivals, but many others have no or long out-of-date websites. Good luck. On Buddhist holidays it's illegal to sell alcohol so bars stay closed. For a list of public holidays, see p260. For a lunar calendar, see <http://kalender-365.de/lunar-calendar.php>.

January & February

CHINESE NEW YEAR

From late January to late February, Bangkok's large Thai-Chinese population celebrate their lunar new year, called *trùt jiin* 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 candle-lit walk around the main chapel at every *wat*.

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. In 2008 the rival *Elle Bangkok Fashion Week* (try www.thailandfashion.net) held its spring/summer show at the same time.

KITE-FLYING SEASON

During the windy season from mid-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 2010.

WORLD THAI MARTIAL ARTS FESTIVAL

Ayuthaya World Heritage Site

Week-long Muay Thai festival in mid-March with a spiritual aspect, the ancient Waikru Muay Thai ceremony.

April

SONGKRAN FESTIVAL

Songkran is the celebration of the Thai New Year on 13 to 15 April. 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 (p130) and Patpong (p137), 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.

MISS JUMBO QUEEN CONTEST

With fat trends creeping across the globe, Thailand hosts a beauty pageant for extra-large (over 80kg) women who display the grace of an elephant at Nakhon Pathom's Samphan Elephant Park.

May

ROYAL PLOUGHING CEREMONY

Sanam Luang (Map p56)

To kick off the official rice-planting season in early May, either the king or the crown prince participates in this ancient Brahman ritual that culminates in sacred white oxen ploughing the earth. Thousands gather to watch, including farmers from across Thailand.

VISAKHA BUCHA

Full moon of 6th lunar month

Visakha Bucha is considered the date of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away). Activities are centred on the local *wat*, with candle-lit processions, chanting and sermonising, while a larger festival is held at Sanam Luang.

July

ASANHA BUCHA & KHAO PHANSA

Full moon of 8th lunar month

This Buddhist festival commemorates the day the Buddha preached his first sermon after attaining enlightenment and is marked at Theravada Buddhist temples with a candle-lit procession at night. The following day is *khao phansa*, the

beginning of the Buddhist rains retreat when young men traditionally enter the monkhood for the rainy season, and all monks sequester 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 most recently was held at SF Cinema (p191) in late July. About 150 films are shown, with an emphasis on Asian cinema. Events end with the awarding of the festival's Golden Kinnaree in a range of categories. For popular films, book ahead.

September

WORLD GOURMET FESTIVAL

The Four Seasons hotel (p209) hosts Bangkok's premier food event, bringing together international chefs for a 10-day feast.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF MUSIC & DANCE

www.bangkokfestivals.com

Usually held at the Thailand Cultural Centre (p189), 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

NAVARATREE HINDU FESTIVAL

Centred around the Sri Mariamman Temple (p111) on Th Silom, this Hindu temple festival sees Th Silom pedestrianised as men worship shrines and pierce themselves before smashing coconuts on the sidewalks. Attendees should wear white.

VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL

A 10-day Chinese-Buddhist festival, *thêtsàkaan kin jeh* wheels out streetside

vendors serving meatless meals to help cleanse the body, all announced with yellow banners. Most of the action is in Chinatown.

KING CHULALONGKORN DAY

Rama V is honoured on the anniversary of his death (23 October) 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 late October to early November. In 2007 it combined with the EU Film Festival.

November

LOI KRATHONG

www.bangkoktourist.com
On the night of the full moon of the 12th lunar month, small lotus-shaped *krathong* (baskets or boats made of a section of banana trunk for flotation – don't use the Styrofoam versions – banana leaves containing flowers, incense, candles and a coin) are floated on the 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 (*ngan wat*) is held at Wat Saket and the Golden Mount 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.pridefestival.org
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. Usually in early November. Don't miss the opening 'Pink in the Park' fair in Lumpini Park (p106).

FAT FESTIVAL

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; venues alternate.

December

KING'S BIRTHDAY

Celebrating King Bhumibol's birthday on 5 December, 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, the three-night 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 such as Larry Carlton, Earl Klugh and Bob James – focusing on the lighter side of jazz, per Thai public taste.

CONCERT IN THE PARK

www.bangkoksymphony.net
Playing every Sunday evening (from 5.30pm to 7.30pm) between mid-December and mid-February at Lumpini Park.

PHRA NAKHON SI AYUTHAYA WORLD HERITAGE FAIR

Ayuthaya
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 buying horrible Chang beer at 7-Elevens. With closer to 2000B you can creep into the comforts of the mid-range, and with 3000B you can find a dash of style, a decent restaurant meal and

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 33B
500ml/1.5L bottle water 7/15B
Phat thai 25–40B
Cup of coffee 40–70B
Two-hour traditional Thai massage 400–4000B
Souvenir T-shirt 160–250B

perhaps a rooftop cocktail or two. If you plan on frequenting the city's best hotels, restaurants and clubs you're looking at more than 5000B a day. See p209 for detailed accommodation costs and p154 for meal costs. 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 p263.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Take a look at these websites to help plan your trip.

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

Bangkok Scam (www.bangkokscam.com) Forewarned is forearmed.

Bangkok Tourist (www.bangkoktourist.com) Enough Bangkok sights to fill a lifetime of sightseeing.

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

Thai Students Online (www.thaistudents.com) Sriwit-tayapaknam School in Samut Prakan maintains one of Thailand's most informative websites.

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

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

THE AUTHORS

Andrew Burke



Andrew has been coming to Bangkok long enough to remember Th Khao San with barely any neon and Sukhumvit traffic before the Skytrain (not a good memory). Since then he's spent 15 years travelling through,

photographing and writing about Asia, the Middle East and Africa, and the last eight living in Hong Kong, Phnom Penh and now the manic megalopolis that is Bangkok. Andrew has written or contributed to more than 15 books for Lonely Planet, including *Thailand's Islands & Beaches*, *Laos*, *Iran* and *The Asia Book*.

ANDREW'S TOP BANGKOK DAY

This morning, I'll take the Chao Phraya Express (p253) up to Th Saphan Phut and start on a Chinatown walking tour (p86). I'll eat breakfast at any street stall that takes my fancy and continue south to Talat Noi. I'll take a river ferry ride up to Wang Lang, then the cross-river ferry to Tha Hua Chang. Time for lunch at one of the restaurants overhanging the river before getting the camera out and delving into the amulet market (p129). Then I'll head to Wat Pho (p57) for a massage. It's now time for a drink at the Deck (p154) to enjoy the views over Wat Arun (p65). Friends join me for dinner here before we head to Banglamphu for more drinks.

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 a great way to connect with people.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the internet or phone, and they don't take freebies, so you can rely on their advice being well researched and impartial. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take great pride in getting all the details right and telling it like it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at lonelyplanet.com

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'