

## NEIGHBOURHOODS

### top picks

- **Wat Pho** (p57) Stare up at the serene Reclining Buddha, then get a massage
- **River ferries** (p253) Discover the Mae Nam Chao Phraya and Thonburi by longtail or slow ferry
- **Wat Suthat** (p71) The way to see temples; a fine Buddha, sky-high murals and no tourists
- **Sampeng Lane** (p131) Commerce on steroids in a narrow lane that's seen trading for 230 years
- **Jim Thompson's House** (p97) The teak mansion that made Thai style cool
- **Baan Krua** (p100) The Muslim village where Jim Thompson discovered silk
- **Rooftop cocktails** Where else can you sip cocktails in an open-air, skyscraping rooftop bar? Moon Bar at Vertigo (p177) and Sirocco (p177).

# NEIGHBOURHOODS

Bangkok sprawls across the rice-paddy-flat Chao Phraya plain, hugging both the snaking river itself and a spaghetti of newer concrete arteries. At first it can be hard to get your head around, with concrete towers seemingly spread as far as the eye can see and no discernible centre. But delve into the rivers of flowing metal and sprouting concrete and you'll find a megalopolis that's much more diverse than it first appears, and easier to navigate than you might think.

Along the banks of Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River) the ancient monuments of king, country and religion marked the first shoots of the new capital to grow out of the flood plains. Straddling the river the ancient and relatively skyscraper-free districts of **Ko Ratanakosin** (Ratanakosin Island, p54) and **Thonburi** (p64) retain their historic charm. Ko Ratanakosin's relics of the old royal capital and the country's most revered Buddhist wats (temples) make it the most visited neighbourhood in the city.

The grand boulevard of Th Ratchadamnoen leads north to **Banglamphu** (p67), whose small villages of yellow-and-green shophouses once supplied the royal palace with its many ornate necessities. The regal enclave of **Dusit** (p78) sits like a crown on the northern apex of Banglamphu, fashioned after the capitals of Europe with wide boulevards and palaces set in manicured parks. It is flanked by the contrasting lower middle-class riverside neighbourhood of **Thewet**, which has an altogether less pretentious feel.

South of Ko Ratanakosin is the cramped and chaotic district of **Chinatown** (p82), where deals have been done since the city was founded and continue apace today. Chinatown is the most congested, hot and noisy part of town. South along the Mae Nam Chao Phraya the historic **Riverside** (p106) centre of international trade leads east into the business high-rise neighbourhoods of **Silom** and **Sathon**, and the relief and relative sanity of **Lumphini Park**.

To the north and east, the city pours forward like an endless concrete spill. Skyscrapers, shopping centres and expressway flyovers dominate the skyline in place of temples. Th Phra Ram I feeds into **Siam Sq** (p97), a thriving and heaving shopping district that has, for lack of a more obvious candidate, become the unofficial 'centre' of Bangkok. Further east is **Th Sukhumvit** (p116), a busy commercial neighbourhood where the internationals and cosmopolitans congregate.

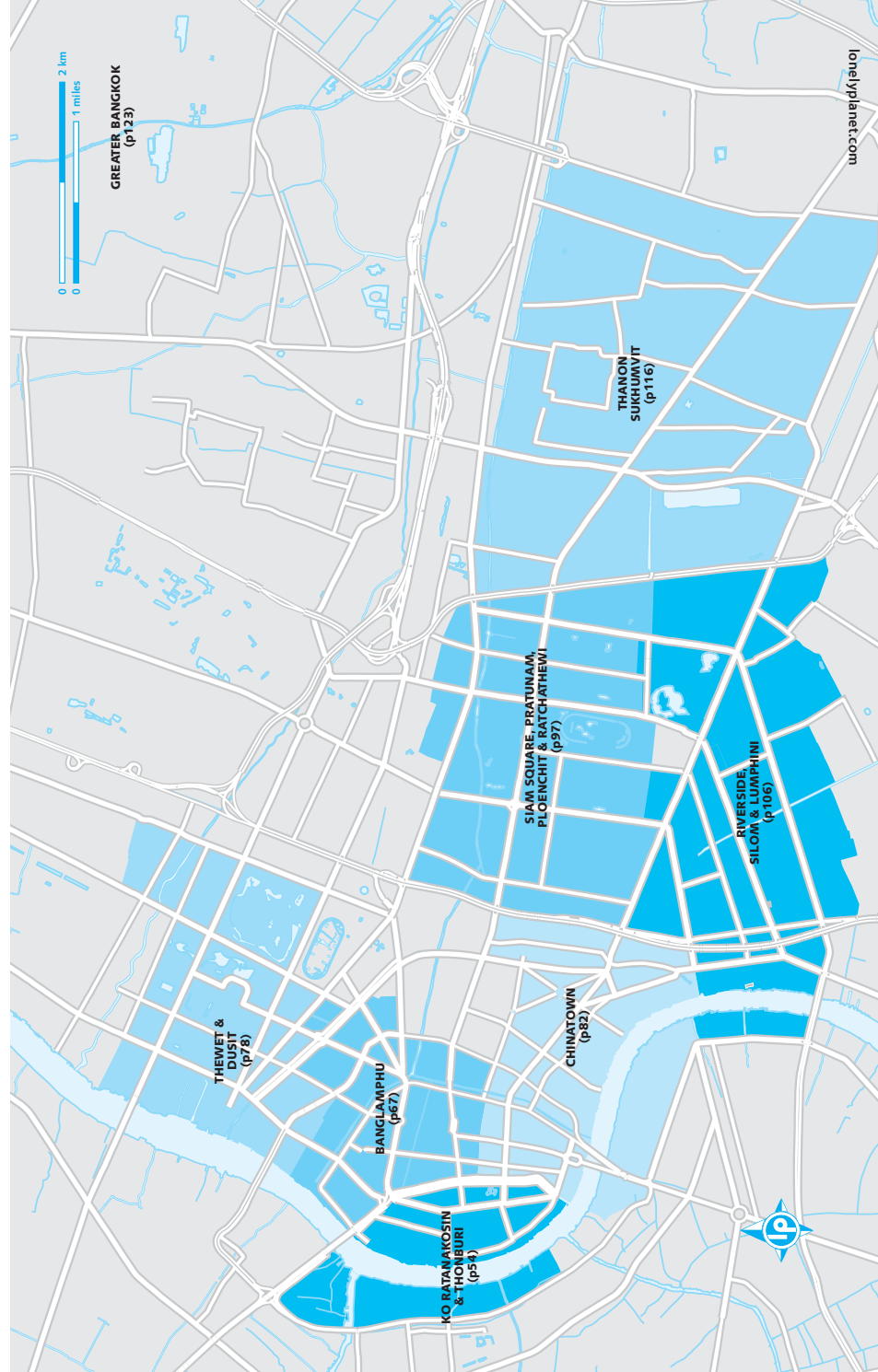
## GET LOST

Think of the 'sights' described in this chapter not as the only things to see in Bangkok, but rather as an excuse for exploring some of the city's most colourful neighbourhoods. These are your destinations but much of the most interesting travel is what happens in between, who you meet and what you see – especially if you get lost.

Every block will reveal something you've never seen before – blind troubadours with portable karaoke machines, *soi* dogs wearing T-shirts (who does dress these stray dogs?), vendors selling fresh pineapple, grilled meat, everything plus the kitchen sink. And, let's be honest, there'll be some things that are all too familiar – most likely another 7-Eleven store. To add to the excitement, you have to deal with Bangkok's notoriously dodgy pavements, which can be as traffic-clogged as its roads. Look forward to sidestepping a mass of humanity while ducking under huge umbrellas and canvas awnings pitched right at the level of your forehead, before having to squeeze through a bottleneck at a stall selling desserts that look like tacos. It's fun, really, as long as you take the occasional air-conditioned breather.

Most neighbourhoods have a walking tour and these are designed to be followed as strictly or loosely as you like. Or just invent your own, remembering that getting lost is the best gift Bangkok gives to visitors.

Bangkok's best neighbourhoods for getting lost in are its oldest districts. The maze of narrow streets, hidden temples and unconstrained commerce in **Chinatown** (p82) is a good start. Banglamphu boasts several village-like areas where modest communities live much as they have for decades. Those alongside **Khlong Lawt** (p67), **Khlong Saen Saeb** (p67) and **Khlong Ong Ang** (p82) are a hive of old-style activity and the *khlong*-side paths are often shaded and usually free of motorised transport. The columns and ornate façades of the warehouses and shops near **Tha Tien** (p54) show off the success of wealthier businesses, while the suburbs along the other side of the river in **Thonburi** (p64) are perhaps the best of the lot – as local as you like and barely a tourist anywhere. So go on, liberate yourself from the constraints of trying to follow a map, and go forth and wander.



# ITINERARY BUILDER

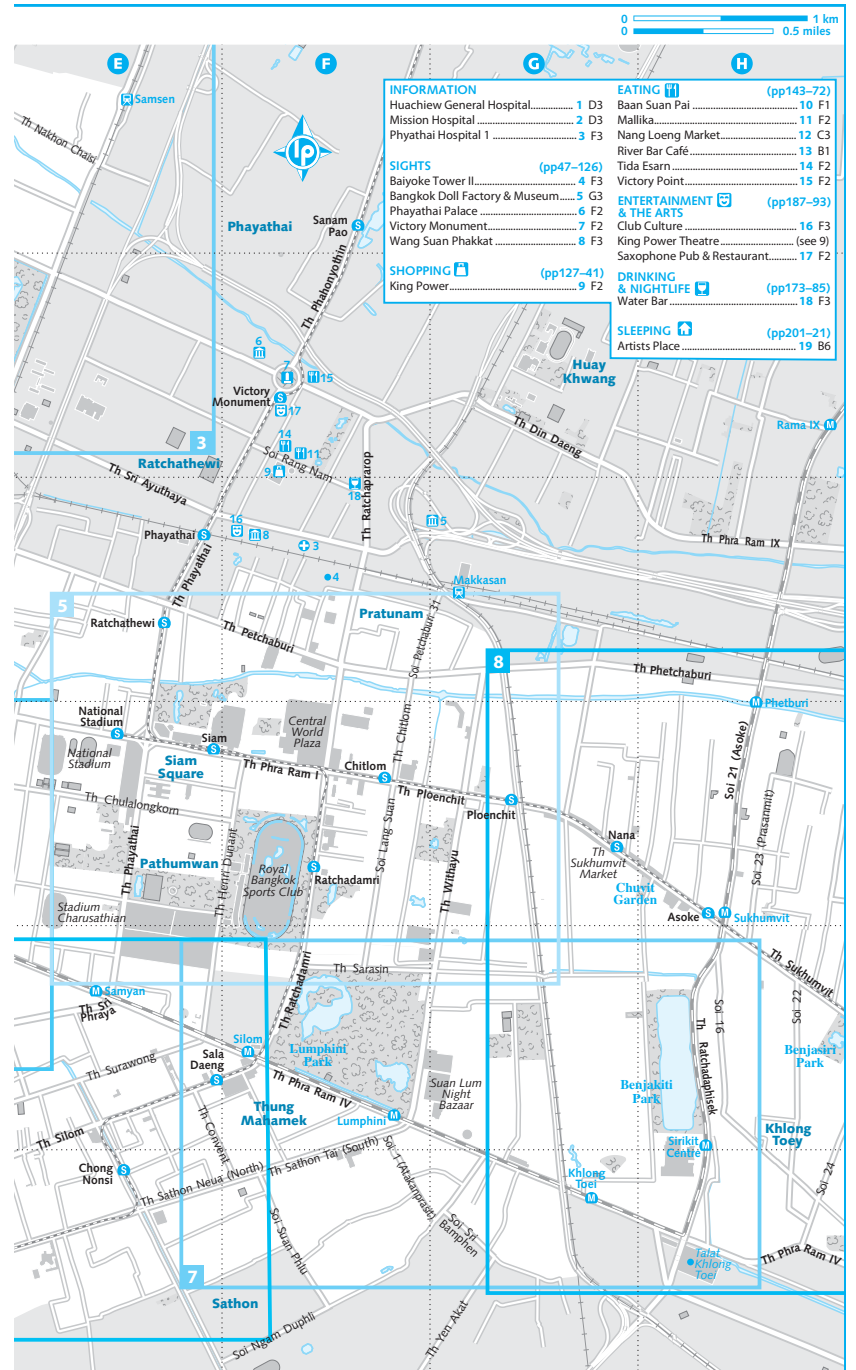
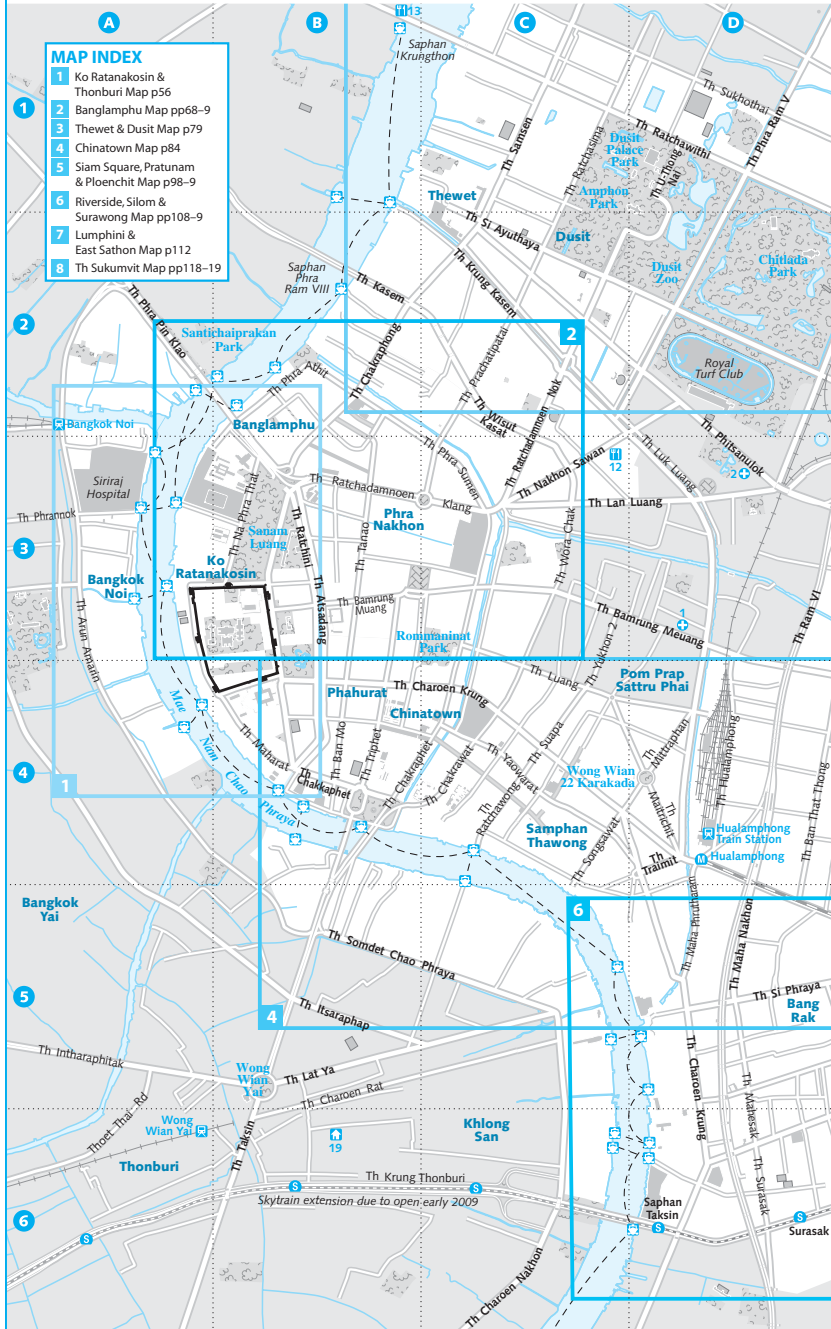
Bangkok's big-ticket sights are concentrated in the older part of town around Ko Ratanakosin, Thonburi, Dusit and Banglamphu. However, the city's shopping, eating, galleries, bars and places to get a good massage are widespread. For late-night entertainment, the Sukhumvit and Silom areas are probably best.

# HOW TO USE THIS TABLE

The table below allows you to plan a day's worth of activities in any area of the city. Simply select which area you wish to explore, and then mix and match from the corresponding listings to build your day. The first item in each cell represents a well-known highlight of the area, while the other items are more off-the-beaten-track gems.

AREA	ACTIVITIES	Sights	Outdoors	Shopping	Activities & the Arts	Eating	Drinking & Nightlife
NEIGHBOURHOODS ITINERARY BUILDER	<b>Ko Ratanakosin &amp; Thonburi</b>	<b>Wat Pho</b> (p57) <b>Wat Phra Kaew and Grand Palace</b> (p55) <b>Royal Barges National Museum</b> (p65)	<b>Wat Arun</b> (p65) <b>Chao Phraya Express Boat</b> (p253)	<b>Amulet Market</b> (p129) <b>Traditional Medicine Shops</b> (p128)	<b>Wat Pho Thai Traditional Massage School</b> (p197) <b>Patravardi Theatre</b> (p188) <b>National Theatre</b> (p188)	<b>Deck</b> (p154) <b>Rachanawi Samosawn (Navy Club Restaurant)</b> ; p154) <b>Wang Lang Market</b> (p154)	<b>Amorosa</b> (p154)
	<b>Banglamphu &amp; Dusit</b>	<b>Wat Suthat</b> (p71) <b>Wat Saket and Golden Mount</b> (p67) <b>Dusit Park</b> (p80)	<b>Dusit Park</b> (p80) <b>Monk's Bowl Village</b> (p71) <b>Th Khao San</b> (p72)	<b>It's Happened To Be A Closet</b> (p130) <b>Taekee Taekon</b> (p130) <b>Nittaya Curry Shop</b> (p130)	<b>Ratchadamnoen Stadium</b> (p199) <b>Num Thong Gallery</b> (p192) <b>Queen's Gallery</b> (p192)	<b>Chote Chitr</b> (p155) <b>Hemlock</b> (p155) <b>May Kaidee</b> (p157)	<b>Taksura</b> (p177) <b>Phranakorn Bar</b> (p177) <b>Brick Bar</b> (p181)
	<b>Chinatown</b>	<b>Wat Mangkon Kamalawat</b> (p83) <b>Wat Traimit</b> (p85) <b>Hualamphong Railway Station</b> (p83)	<b>Talat Noi</b> (p83) <b>Saphan Phut Night Bazaar</b> (p132)	<b>Sampeng Lane</b> (p131) <b>Pak Khlong Market</b> (p132) <b>Johnny's Gems</b> p131)	<b>Sala Chalermkrung</b> (p188) <b>About Café/About Studio</b> (p191)	<b>Tang Jai Yuu</b> (p158) <b>Chiang Kii</b> (p159) <b>Royal India</b> (p159)	<b>Nang Nual Riverside Pub</b> (p177) <b>River View Guest House</b> (p208)
	<b>Siam Sq &amp; Around</b>	<b>Jim Thompson's House</b> (p97) <b>Siam Ocean World</b> (p101) <b>Wang Suan Phakkat</b> (p104)	<b>Baan Krua</b> (p100) <b>Erawan Shrine</b> (p102) <b>Lingam Shrine</b> (p101)	<b>Siam Center &amp; Siam Discovery Center</b> (p135) <b>Mahboonkrong (MBK)</b> , p134) <b>Promenade Arcade</b> (p134)	<b>100 Tonson Gallery</b> (p191) <b>Bangkok Art &amp; Cultural Centre</b> (p191)	<b>Kuaytiaw Reua Tha Siam</b> (p160) <b>Gianni Ristorante</b> (p160) <b>Sanguan Sri</b> (p160)	<b>Café Trio</b> (p175) <b>To-Sit</b> (p178) <b>Club Culture</b> (p183)
	<b>Riverside, Silom &amp; Lumpini</b>	<b>Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute (Snake Farm)</b> , p107) <b>Oriental Hotel</b> (p212) <b>Bangkokian Museum</b> (p107)	<b>Lumphini Park</b> (p106) <b>Hotel ferries</b> (p113) <b>Haroon Village</b> (p113)	<b>Thai Home Industries</b> (p136) <b>Suan Lum Night Bazaar</b> (p137) <b>Patpong Night Market</b> (p137)	<b>H Gallery</b> (p192) <b>Lumphini Stadium</b> (p199) <b>Ruen-Nuad Massage</b> (p197)	<b>Cy'An</b> (p161) <b>Le Bouchon</b> (p162) <b>Khrua Aroy Aroy</b> (p163)	<b>Moon Bar at Vertigo</b> (p177) <b>Ad Makers</b> (p181) <b>DJ Station</b> (p179)
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# CENTRAL BANGKOK



# KO RATANAKOSIN & THONBURI

Eating p154; Shopping p128; Sleeping p202

Bordering the eastern bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, Ko Ratanakosin is the historic heart of Bangkok and is a veritable Vatican City of Thai Buddhism. Several of Thailand's most honoured and holy sites stand inside burly white walls here, **Wat Phra Kaew** and the **Grand Palace** (opposite), **Wat Pho** (p57) and the **Lak Meuang** (p58) being the most notable. As it happens, these are also Bangkok's most spectacular tourist attractions – and most obligatory sights – so expect camera-toting crowds rather than exotic eastern mysticism.

This collection of religious and architectural treasures wasn't accidental. Rama I (King Buddha Yodfa; r 1782–1809) intended to re-create the glory of the sacked Siamese capital of Ayutthaya by constructing a new island city – one that would be fortified against future attacks – and to elevate the newly established dynasty in the imagination and adoration of the populace. Both intentions succeeded. The Burmese and other noncommercial invaders never staged an assault on the new capital and the Chakri dynasty survives to the present day.

The ancient city has matured in modern times and is now a lively district of contradictions that only Thailand can juggle. The temples, with their heavenly status, are tethered to earth by nearby food markets shaded by faded green umbrellas clustered like mushrooms. In the shadows of the whitewashed temple walls are Buddhism's ancient companions – the animistic spirits who govern fortune and fate, neatly packaged into amulets and being sold by the thousand in the markets along **Thanon Maharat** (p59).

While the glimmering golden spires and Buddha images of the big-ticket sights are must-sees, the charm of Ko Ratanakosin is felt just as much – if not more – by just wandering on foot, taking in the street life, stopping for lunch at local restaurants or at the **Deck** (p154) and mixing with young Thais in **Thammasat** (p62) and **Silkaporn** (p61) universities.

Opposite Ko Ratanakosin, across the busy waters of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, **Thonburi** (p64) enjoyed a brief 15-year promotion from sleepy port town to royal seat of power immediately before the capital moved to Bangkok. If it weren't for timing, it might otherwise be a footnote in Thai history. Instead it is still revered as a patriotic and divinely inspired step in reuniting the country after the fall of Ayutthaya. The stories of the postwar reunification are filled with poetic symbolism: General Taksin, who expelled the Burmese and subdued rival factions, came across this spot in the river at dawn and pronounced it Ayutthaya's successor. But Taksin was later deposed by a more strategic leader, who decided on a more strategic position across the river for his capital.

Today Thonburi is a rarely visited gem for anyone looking to experience the less commercial, quieter side of Bangkok life. Where Bangkok's *khlong* have largely been concreted over to create traffic-packed roads in Thonburi they remain an integral part of daily life. To really experience this unique neighbourhood, stay at the **Thai House** (p221).

## KO RATANAKOSIN

Forming almost a tear-drop shape, Ko Ratanakosin's boundaries are defined by Mae Nam Chao Phraya on the western side, Th Phra Pin Klao on the northern side and Th Atsadang, which follows Khlong Lawt, on the eastern side. The district's attractions are concentrated in the area south of **Sanam Luang** (p60) and are

## top picks

### KO RATANAKOSIN & THONBURI

- **Amulet market** (p129) Traders, monks and collectors bartering for countless sacred amulets
- **Wat Arun** (p65) Mosaic-decorated stupa on the far bank of the river
- **Wat Phra Kaew & Grand Palace** (opposite) The Hollywood blockbusters of Thai architecture
- **Wat Pho** (p57) A rather large Reclining Buddha and rambling complex of hidden sights
- **Deck** (p154) Unbeatable sunset views over the river and Wat Arun

ideally visited on foot (see the **Walking Tour**, p63), preferably in the morning before it gets too hot. The pavements that circumnavigate the main sights and the temple courtyards are almost completely devoid of shade, so a hat, sunscreen and even an umbrella can be a good idea.

Four river piers – **Tha Phra Chan**, **Tha Maharat**, **Tha Chang** and **Tha Tien** – service this

district, making transport a scenic, convenient and relaxed experience. It's also a popular area from which to hire longtail boats for tours into Thonburi's canals.

South of Th Na Phra Lan is primarily a tourist zone with a few warehouses abutting the river as reminders that a measure of traditional life still exists. North of the Grand Palace is Sanam Luang, an expansive park where joggers shuffle along in the early morning hours. Alongside Sanam Luang the National Museum and the National Theatre stand with stoic resolve and people gather to celebrate and protest the kingdom's milestones. On the far eastern side of Wat Phra Kaew are government ministry buildings reflecting a pronounced Western architectural influence – an interesting contrast to the flamboyant Thai architecture across the street.

Rip-off artists prowl the tourist strip, using the country's legendary hospitality to earn a dishonest day's wages. Disregard any strangers who approach you inquiring about where you are from (usually followed by 'oh, my son/daughter is at university there'), where you are going or (the classic opening gambit) telling you the attractions are closed. Save the one-on-one cultural exchange for genuine people outside the tourist zone.

## WAT PHRA KAEW & GRAND PALACE

Map p56

วัดพระแก้ว/พระบรมมหาราชวัง

☎ 0 2222 6889; Th Na Phra Lan; admission to wat, palace & Dusit Park 250B; 🕒 8.30am–3.30pm; 🚗 Tha Chang (N9), 🚌 air-con 503, 508 & 512, ordinary 2 & 25

The Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew) gleams and glitters with so much colour and glory that its earthly foundations seem barely able to resist the celestial pull. Architecturally fantastic, the temple complex is also the spiritual core of Thai Buddhism and the monarchy, symbolically united in what is the country's most holy image, the Emerald Buddha. Attached to the temple complex is the former royal residence, once a sealed city of intricate ritual and social stratification.

If you're suitably dressed (see the boxed text, p59), enter Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace complex through the third gate from the river pier. Tickets are purchased inside the complex; anyone telling you it's closed is a gem tout or con artist.

Past the ticket counters you'll meet the *yaksha*, brawny guardian giants from the

Ramakian (the Thai version of the Indian Ramayana epic). Beyond the gate is a courtyard where the central *bòt* (chapel) houses the Emerald Buddha (p58). The spectacular ornamentation inside and out does an excellent job of distracting first-time visitors from paying their respects to the image. Here's why: the Emerald Buddha is only 66cm tall and sits so high above worshippers in the main temple building that the gilded shrine is more striking than the small figure it cradles. There are always postcards if you miss it.

Outside the main *bòt* is a stone statue of the Chinese goddess of mercy, Kuan Im, and nearby are two cow figures, representing the year of Rama I's birth.

In the 2km-long cloister that defines the perimeter of the complex are 178 murals depicting the Ramakian in its entirety, beginning at the north gate and moving clockwise around the compound. If the temple grounds seem overrun by tourists, the mural area is usually mercifully quiet and shady.

Adjoining Wat Phra Kaew is the **Grand Palace** (Phra Borom Maharatchawang), a former royal residence that today is used by the king only for certain ceremonial occasions; the current monarch lives in Chitralada Palace, which is closed to the public. Visitors are allowed to survey the Grand Palace grounds and exteriors of the four remaining palace buildings, which are interesting for their royal bombast.

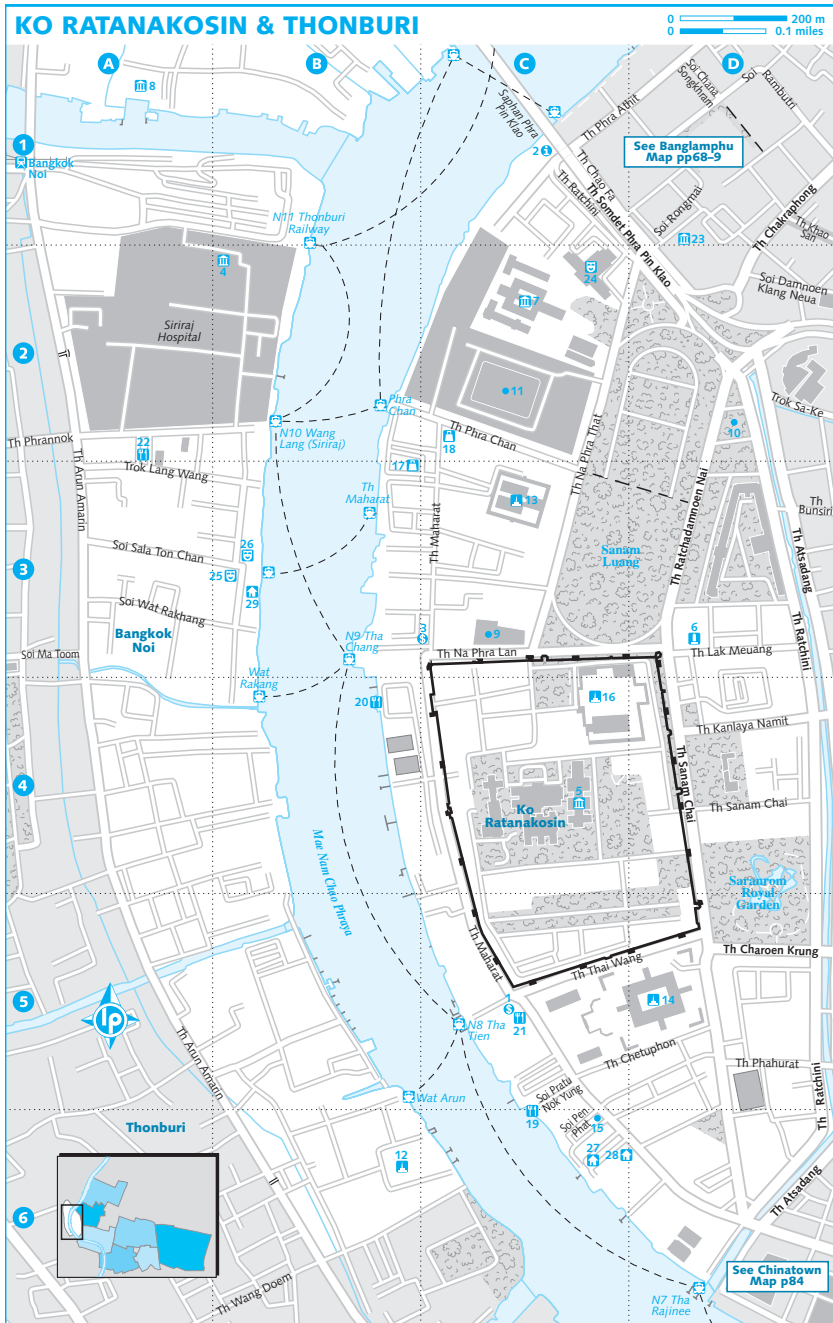
At the eastern end, **Borombhiman Hall** is a French-inspired structure that served as a residence for Rama VI (King Vajiravudh; r 1910–25). In April 1981 General San Chitpatima used it as headquarters for an attempted coup. **Amarindra Hall**, to the west, was originally a hall of justice but is used today for coronation ceremonies.

## TRANSPORT: KO RATANAKOSIN

There's no Skytrain or Metro to Ko Ratanakosin, so the easiest and most enjoyable ways to get here are by river ferry or on foot. From Banglamphu just walk through Thammasat University or Sanam Luang; from almost anywhere else take either a ferry direct or the Skytrain to Saphan Taksin and a ferry from there.

**Bus** Air-con 503, 508, 511 and 512, ordinary 3, 25, 39, 47, 53 and 70

**Ferry** Tha Rajinee (N7), Tha Tien (N8) and Tha Chang (N9)



## KO RATANAKOSIN & THONBURI

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The largest of the palace buildings is the triple-winged **Chakri Mahaprasat** (Grand Palace Hall). Completed in 1882 following a plan by British architects, the exterior shows a peculiar blend of Italian Renaissance and traditional Thai architecture, a style often referred to as *farang sai chá-daa* (Westerner wearing a Thai classical dancer's headdress), because each wing is topped by a *mondòp* (a layered, heavily ornamented spire). It is believed the original plan called for the palace to be topped with a dome, but Rama V was persuaded to go for a Thai-style roof instead. The tallest of the *mondòp*, in the centre, contains the ashes of Chakri kings; the flanking *mondòp* enshrine the ashes of Chakri princes who failed to inherit the throne.

The last building to the west is the Ratanakosin-style **Dusit Hall**, which initially served as a venue for royal audiences and later as a royal funerary hall.

Until Rama VI decided one wife was enough for any man, even a king, Thai kings housed their huge harems in the inner palace area (not open to the public), which was guarded by combat-trained female sentries. The intrigue and rituals that occurred within the walls of this cloistered community live on in the fictionalised epic *Four Reigns*, by Kukrit Pramoj, which follows a young girl named Ploi growing up within the Royal City.

The admission fee to Wat Phra Kaew also includes entry to Dusit Park (p80).

### WAT PHO Map p56

วัดโพธิ์ (วัดพระเชตุพน)  
☎ 0 2622 3533; www.watpho.com; Th Sanam Chai; admission 50B; ☎ 8am-5pm; 🚶 Tha Tien (N8), 🚗 air-con 503, 508 & 512, ordinary 12 & 53

Of all Bangkok's temples, Wat Pho is arguably the one most worth visiting for both its remarkable Reclining Buddha image and its sprawling grounds. The temple boasts a long list of credits: the oldest and largest wat in Bangkok, the longest Reclining Buddha and the largest collection of Buddha images in Thailand, and the earliest centre for public education. For all that, it's less of an attraction than neighbouring Wat Phra Kaew and retains a more laid-back, less commercial feel.

A temple has stood on this site since the 16th century, but in 1781 Rama I ordered the original Wat Photharam to be completely rebuilt as part of his new capital. Under Rama III (King Nang Klao; r 1824-51), the massive Reclining Buddha was built and Wat Pho became Thailand's first university. Today it maintains that tradition as the national headquarters for the teaching and preservation of traditional Thai medicine, including Thai massage.

Narrow Th Chetuphon divides the grounds in two, and it's well worth entering from this quiet street to avoid the touts and tour groups of the main entrance on Th Thai Wang. You'll come into the eastern courtyard of the northern compound (the southern part is closed to the public), where the main *bòt* is constructed in Ayutthaya style and is strikingly more subdued than Wat Phra Kaew. Rama I's remains are interred in the base of the presiding Buddha figure in the *bòt*.

The images on display in the four *wiháan* (sanctuaries) surrounding the main *bòt* are worth investigation. Particularly beautiful are the Phra Jinnarat and Phra Jinachi Buddhas in the western and southern chapels, both rescued from Sukhothai by relatives

## THE EMERALD BUDDHA

The Emerald Buddha's lofty perch in Wat Phra Kaew signifies its high status as the 'talisman' of the Thai kingdom. No-one knows exactly where the Buddha comes from or who sculpted it, but it first appeared on record in 15th-century Chiang Rai in northern Thailand. Legend says it was sculpted in India and brought to Siam by way of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), but stylistically it seems to belong to Thai artistic periods of the 13th to 14th centuries. Despite the name, the sacred sculpture is actually carved from a single piece of nephrite, a type of jade.

Some time in the 15th century, this Buddha is said to have been covered with plaster and gold leaf and placed in Chiang Rai's own Wat Phra Kaew. Many valuable Buddha images were masked in this way to deter potential thieves and marauders during unstable times. Often the true identity of the image was forgotten over the years until a 'divine accident' exposed its precious core. The Emerald Buddha experienced such a divine revelation when it was being transported to a new location. In a fall, the plaster covering broke off, revealing the brilliant green inside. But this coming out was not the beginning of this Buddha's peaceful reign.

During territorial clashes with Laos, the Emerald Buddha was seized and taken to Vientiane in the mid-16th century. Some 200 years later, after the fall of Ayuthaya and the ascension of the Bangkok-based kingdom, the Thai army marched up to Vientiane, razed the city and hauled off the Emerald Buddha. The return of this revered figure was a great omen for future fortunes of this new leadership. The Buddha was enshrined in the then capital, Thonburi, before the general who led the sacking of Vientiane assumed the throne and had it moved to this location.

A tradition that dates back to this time is the changing of the Buddha's seasonal robes. There are now three royal robes: for the hot, rainy and cool seasons. The three robes are still solemnly changed at the beginning of each season. This duty has traditionally been performed by the king, though in recent years the crown prince has presided over the ceremony.

of Rama I. The galleries extending between the four chapels feature no fewer than 394 gilded Buddha images.

Encircling the main *bôt* is a low marble wall with 152 bas-reliefs depicting scenes from the Ramakian. You'll recognise some of these figures when you exit the temple past the hawkers with the mass-produced rubbings for sale; these are made from cement casts based on Wat Pho's reliefs.

A collection of towering tiled stupas commemorates the first four Chakri kings and there are 91 smaller stupas. Rama IV ordered that the four stupas be surrounded by a wall to prevent future kings joining the memorial. Note the square bell shape with distinct corners, a signature of Ratanakosin style. Other smaller *chedi* (stupa) clusters contain the ashes of royal descendants.

Small rock gardens and hill islands interrupt the tiled courtyards providing shade, greenery and quirky decorations. Inherited from China, these rockeries are cluttered with topiary, miniature waterfalls and small statues depicting daily life. *Khao Mor* is the most distinctive of the rock gardens, festooned with figures of the hermit credited with inventing yoga in various healing positions. According to the tradition, a few good arm stretches should cure idleness.

In the northwest corner of the site you'll find Wat Pho's main attraction, the enormous, tremendous **Reclining Buddha**.

The 46m-long and 15m-high supine figure illustrates the passing of the Buddha into nirvana. It is made of plaster around a brick core and finished in the gold leaf that gives it a serene luminescence that keeps you looking, and looking again, from different angles. The 3m-high feet are a highlight, with mother-of-pearl inlay depicting 108 different auspicious *laksanà* (characteristics of a Buddha).

On the temple grounds, there are nonair-conditioned massage pavilions; air-con rooms are available in the **massage school** (p197), across the street from the temple. The two pavilions located nearby contain visual depictions of the body meridians and pressure points that were used to record the oral knowledge of the practice and are used as a teaching tool.

### LAK MEUANG Map p56

ศาลหลักเมือง

☎ 0 2222 9876; Cnr Th Sanamchai & Th Lak Meuang; admission free; ☎ 6am-6pm; 🕒 Tha Chang (N9), 🚗 air-con 508, 511 & 512, ordinary 15, 47, 53 & 59

What would otherwise be an uninteresting mileage marker has both religious and historical significance in Thailand. Lak Meuang is the city shrine, a wooden pillar erected by Rama I in 1782 to represent the founding of the new Bangkok capital. From this point, distances are measured to

## TEMPLE ETIQUETTE

Wats are sacred places and should be treated with respect. At all wats you must remove your shoes as you enter – if you see empty shoes scattered around a doorway or threshold, this is your cue. At some temples, and especially at Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace grounds, dress rules are strictly enforced. If you're wearing shorts or a sleeveless shirt you will not be allowed into the temple grounds – this applies to men and women. Long skirts and three-quarter length pants are not appropriate, either. If you're flashing a bit too much calf or ankle, expect to be shown into a dressing room and issued with a sarong. Once suitably attired, you'll be allowed in. For walking in the courtyard areas you are supposed to wear shoes with closed heels and toes. Sandals and thongs (flip-flops) are not permitted, though the guards are less zealous in their enforcement of this rule.

all other city shrines in the country. But its importance doesn't stop there. The pillar is endowed with a spirit, Phra Sayam Thewathirat (Venerable Siam Deity of the State), and is considered the city's guardian. To the east of the main shrine are five other idols added during the reign of Rama V (King Chulalongkorn; r 1868–1910).

Like the sacred banyan trees and the holy temples, Lak Meuang receives daily supplications from Thai worshippers, some of whom commission classical Thai dancers to perform *lakhon kâe bon* (shrine dancing) as thanks for granted wishes. Offerings also include those morbidly cute pigs' heads with sticks of incense sprouting from their foreheads.

Lak Meuang is across the street from the eastern wall of Wat Phra Kaew, at the southern end of Sanam Luang.

### THANON MAHARAT Map p56

ถนนมหาธาตุ

Btwn Th Phra Chan, Th Na Phra Lan & Mae Nam Chao Phraya; 🕒 Tha Chang (N9), 🚗 air-con 503, 508 & 512, ordinary 47 & 53

The northern stretch of this street is one of Bangkok's most interesting. On the opposite side of Wat Mahathat's whitewashed walls, the street is monopolised by ancient Thai industries: herbal apothecaries and

amulet dealers. In the cool season, medicinal bowls of ginger-infused broth are sold from steaming cauldrons to stave off winter colds. Outdoor displays of pill bottles are lined up and dusted daily like prized antiques. Each remedy bears a picture of a stoic healer, a marketing pitch that puts a human face on medicine. Further along, the **amulet market** (*talàat phrá khreuang*; p129) spills out of its medieval warren into the street, forcing pedestrians to run zigzag patterns through the spread blankets on which the tiny images are displayed.

This is a great place to just wander and watch men (because it's rarely women) looking through magnifying glasses at the tiny amulets, seeking hidden meaning (and value). The market stretches all the way to the riverside, where a narrow alley leads north to wooden kitchens overhanging the water. Each humble kitchen garners a view of the river; students from nearby Thammasat University congregate here for cheap eats before heading off to class. The food reflects Bangkok's peculiar student menu: a motley mix of Thai comforts and Western adaptations.

The municipal government has grand plans for this area to be demolished and redeveloped as a cultural theme park with more river vistas and shops catering to tourists. The proposal has met with fierce

## STONE COLD STARE: WAT PHO'S ROCK GIANTS

Aside from monks and sightseers, Wat Pho is filled with an altogether stiffer crowd; dozens of giants and figurines carved from granite. The rock giants first arrived in Thailand as ballast aboard Chinese junks and were put to work in Wat Pho (and other wats, including Wat Suthat), guarding the entrances of temple gates and courtyards.

Look closely and you'll see an array of Chinese characters. The giants with bulging eyes and Chinese opera costumes were inspired by warrior noblemen and are called *Lan Than*; notice their swords tucked behind their ornate robes. The political nobleman wears his hair and moustache below his shoulders and carries a scroll in one hand; his long cloak indicates that he is a member of the aristocracy. The figure in a straw hat is a farmer, forever interrupted during his day's work cultivating the fields. And can you recognise the guy in the fedora-like hat with a trimmed beard and moustache? Marco Polo, of course, who introduced such European styles to the Chinese court.

resistance from residents, and many hope that this is one of the many Bangkok pipe dreams that ultimately gets smoked. But with Bangkok's love of reinvention, it is better to savour its few remaining medieval corners while they last.

### NATIONAL GALLERY Map p56

หอศิลป์แห่งชาติ

☎ 0 2282 2639; **Th Chao Fa**; admission 30B;  
🕒 9am-4pm Wed-Sun; 📍 **Tha Phra Athit (N13)**,  
🚗 air-con 508, 511 & 512, ordinary 47 & 53

Housed in a weather-worn early Ratanakosin-era building just north of Sanam Luang, the National Gallery displays traditional and contemporary art, mostly by artists receiving government support. Secular art is a fairly new concept in Thailand and some of the country's best examples of fine art reside in temples rather than galleries. Most of the permanent collection documents Thailand's homage to modern styles. One noteworthy exception is the *Musical Rhythm* sculpture, by Khien Yimsiri, which is considered one of the most remarkable fusions of Western and Thai styles of the mid-20th century. More uniquely Thai expressions can be seen in the rotating exhibitions by young artists. The general opinion is that this gallery is not Thailand's best, but with air-conditioning and its historic setting it is a quiet place to escape the crowds and the sun. A weekend art market, set up in the museum courtyard, is accessible without having to pay admission.

### NATIONAL MUSEUM Map p56

พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติ

☎ 0 2224 1402; [www.thailandmuseum.com](http://www.thailandmuseum.com); **Th Na Phra That**; admission 50B; 🕒 9am-4pm Wed-Sun;  
🚗 air-con 508, 511 & 512, ordinary 12, 47 & 53;  
📍 **Tha Chang (N9)**

Thailand's National Museum is the largest museum in Southeast Asia and covers a broad range of subjects, from historical surveys to religious sculpture displays. The buildings were originally constructed in 1782 as the palace of Rama I's viceroy, Prince Wang Na. Rama V turned it into a museum in 1884.

The history wing presents a succinct chronology of events and figures from the prehistoric, Sukhothai, Ayuthaya and Bangkok eras. Despite the corny dioramas, there are some real treasures here: look for King Ramakamhaeng's inscribed stone pillar (the

oldest record of Thai writing), King Taksin's throne and the Rama V section.

The other parts of the museum aren't as well presented, but this might be part of the charm. Dimly lit rooms, ranging in temperature from lukewarm to boiling, offer an attic-like collection of Thai art and handicrafts.

In the central exhibits hall, there are collections of traditional musical instruments from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Indonesia, as well as ceramics, clothing and textiles, woodcarving, royal regalia, and Chinese art and weaponry. The art and artefact buildings cover every Southeast Asian art period and style, from Dvaravati to Ratanakosin. The collection is impressive but hard to digest due to poor signage and sheer volume.

The museum grounds also contain the restored **Phuthaisawan (Buddhaisawan) Chapel**. Inside the chapel (built in 1795) are some well-preserved original murals and one of the country's most revered Buddha images, Phra Phuttha Sihing. Legend claims the image came from Ceylon, but art historians attribute it to the 13th-century Sukhothai period.

The museum runs (highly recommended) free tours in English and French on Wednesday and Thursday, Japanese on Wednesday and German on Thursday. All tours start from the ticket pavilion at 9.30am.

### SANAM LUANG Map p56

สนามหลวง

**Bounded by Th Na Phra That, Ratchadamnoen Nai & Na Phra Lan**; 🚗 air-con 503, 508, 511 & 512, ordinary 15, 47, 53 & 59, 📍 **Tha Chang (N9)**

On a hot day, Sanam Luang (Royal Field) is far from charming – a shadeless expanse of dying grass ringed by flocks of pigeons and homeless people. Despite its shabby appearance, however, it has been at the centre of both royal ceremony and political upheaval since Bangkok was founded. Indeed, the yellow-shirted masses who protested for months before Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted in a coup d'état often used this field to air their grievances.

Less dramatic events staged here include the annual Royal Ploughing Ceremony, in which the king (or more recently the crown prince) officially initiates the rice-growing season (p13). After the rains, the kite-flying season (mid-February to April) sees the

open space filled with butterfly-shaped Thai kites. Matches are held between teams flying either a 'male' or 'female' kite in a particular territory; points are won if they can force a competitor into their zone.

Large funeral pyres are constructed here during elaborate, but infrequent, royal cremations.

In a way the park is suffering a career crisis, having lost most of its full-time employment to other locales or the whims of fashion. Until 1982 Bangkok's famous Weekend Market was regularly held here (it's now at Chatuchak Park; see p140). Previously the wealthy came here for imported leisure sports; these days they head for the country club. Today the cool mornings and evenings still attract a health-conscious crowd of joggers, walkers and groups playing *tàkràw*. If you fancy a big-crowd experience, Sanam Luang draws the masses in December for the King's Birthday (5 December), Constitution Day (10 December) and New Year.

Across Th Ratchadamnoen to the east is the **statue of Mae Thorani**, the earth goddess (borrowed from Hindu mythology's Dharani), which stands in a white pavilion. Erected in the late 19th century by Rama V, the statue was originally attached to a well that provided drinking water to the public.

### SARANROM ROYAL GARDEN

Map p56

สวนสระอวมัย

**Btwn Th Ratchini & Charoen Krung**; 🕒 5am-9pm;  
📍 **Tha Tien (N8)**, 🚗 air-con 503, 508 & 512, ordinary 12, 25 & 53

Easily mistaken for a European public garden, this Victorian-era green space was originally designed as a royal residence in the time of Rama IV (King Mongkut; r 1851–68). After Rama VII abdicated in 1935, the palace served as the headquarters of the People's Party, the political organisation that orchestrated the handover of the government. The open space remained and in 1960 was opened to the public.

Today a wander through the garden reveals a Victorian gazebo, paths lined with frangipani and a moat around a marble monument built in honour of Rama V's wife, Queen Sunantha, who died in a boating accident. The queen was on her way to Bang Pa-In Summer Palace in Ayuthaya when her boat began to sink. The custom at the time was that commoners were for-

## top picks

### FOR CHILDREN

Aside from the play centres found on the top floors of several major shopping centres, Bangkok has plenty to keep kids amused (at least until they're exhausted by the heat).

- **Tha Thewet** (Map p79; Th Krung Kasem; 🕒 7am-7pm) Join the novice monks and Thai children as they throw food (bought on the pier) to thousands of flapping fish.
- **Wat Prayoon** (Map p84; 24 Th Prachathipok, cnr Thetsaban Soi 1; 🕒 8am-6pm; 📍 from Tha Pak Talat/Atsadang) This artificial hill beside the Memorial Bridge is cluttered with miniature shrines and a winding path that encircles a pond full of turtles.
- **Children's Discovery Museum** (p123) Fun, and they might learn something too.
- **Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute** (Snake Farm; p107) Cool snake shows and a chance to touch some cool snake skin.
- **Lingam Shrine** (p101) Face it, your kids are probably going to love this stand of giant stone and wooden phalluses.
- **Theme parks** (p248) There are plenty to choose from.

bidden to touch royalty, which prevented her attendants saving her from drowning.

The satellite corners of the park are filled with weightlifting equipment where a tük-tük driver might do some leg crunches in between telling tourists that the sights they are looking for have closed. As the day cools various aerobics and dance classes practise their synchronisation.

### SILPAKORN UNIVERSITY Map p56

มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร

☎ 0 2623 6115; [www.su.ac.th](http://www.su.ac.th); 31 Th Na Phra Lan;  
📍 **Tha Chang (N9)**, 🚗 air-con 508 & 512, ordinary 47 & 53

Thailand's universities aren't usually repositories for interesting architecture, but the country's premier art school breaks the mould. Partly housed in a former palace, the classical buildings form the charming nucleus of what was an early Thai aristocratic enclave and the traditional artistic temperament still survives. The building immediately facing the Th Na Phra Lan gate





royal field of **Sanam Luang** (p60). Turn right along Th Na Phra That and walk to the end.

### 6 & 7 Wat Phra Kaew & Grand Palace

Cross Th Na Phra Lan and turn left to the official tourist entrance to Thailand's holiest temple, **Wat Phra Kaew**, and the formal royal residence, the **Grand Palace** (p55). All visitors to the palace and temple grounds must be appropriately attired; see p59 for details.

### 8 Lak Meuang

Exiting via the same gate, take a right and cross Th Ratchadamnoen Nai to reach **Lak Meuang** (City Pillar; p58), a shrine to Bangkok's city spirit and the foundation stone embodying the city's guardian deity. This shrine is one of Bangkok's most important sites of animistic worship; watch as believers offer flowers, incense, fruit and even the odd bottle of fiery local whisky.

### 9 Wat Pho

From Lak Meuang, follow Th Sanam Chai beside the white palace wall until you come to Th Chetuphon (the second street on your right after the palace walls end, approximately 600m from the pillar). Turn right onto Th Chetuphon and enter **Wat Pho** (p57) through the second portico. Meander through the grounds on your way to the massive Reclining Buddha.

### Options, options

Okay, so now you have to decide. Depending on the time, levels of interest, energy, hunger and thirst – and how many litres of sweat you've already lost today – you can finish your walk in various ways. Get your timing right and you can do some or all of these and still watch the sun set behind Wat Arun with a cold drink and a freshly de-knotted body. Remember that the last ferry leaves Tha Tien soon after 7pm, and taxis around here are notorious for refusing to put the meter on – if you need one, insist on the meter.

### 10 Deck

Exit beside the Reclining Buddha, turn left on Th Maharat and then right at Th Soi Pratu Nok Yung. Walk past the old Chinese godowns to the end of the *soi* and the **Deck** (p154), a restaurant with spectacular views of the river and Wat Arun. The upstairs bar here is easily the best place to finish this tour, but unfortunately it doesn't open until 6pm.

### 11 Rub Aron

Exit beside the Reclining Buddha, turn left on Th Maharat and settle into **Rub Aron** (p154), a friendly café serving Thai standards and fresh fruit drinks.

**12 Wat Arun** Exit beside the Reclining Buddha, walk to Tha Tien (N8) and take the regular cross-river ferry to **Wat Arun** (p65) to see its striking Hindu-Khmer stupa.

### 13 Get a massage

Wat Pho (see stop 9) is the national repository for traditional massage and offers massages on the wat grounds (no air-con) and at the nearby **training school** (p197). A thoroughly sensible choice, and it's very conveniently open until 6pm.

## THONBURI

Thonburi has lived in the shadow of Bangkok for more than 200 years and is today a not entirely fashionable suburb of the capital. Fashion, of course, is a subjective thing. There aren't that many raised freeways, expensive cars or modern transportation systems on this side of Mae Nam Chao Phraya. Instead Thonburi retains enough of the traditional transport corridors – the *khlong* that once caused Bangkok to be known as the 'Venice of the East' and Thai to call themselves *jào nàam* (water lords) – to give it a decidedly different feel. A day exploring them is likely to be one of the most memorable of your stay in the Thai capital.

The network of canals and river tributaries still carries a motley fleet of watercraft, from paddled canoes to rice barges. Homes, trading houses and temples are built on stilts with front doors opening out to the river. According to residents, these waterways protect them from the seasonal flooding that plagues the capital.

Khlong Bangkok Noi is lined with greenery and historic temples, reaching deep into the Bang Yai district, a brief five-minute ride from the concrete entanglements of central Bangkok. Khlong Bangkok Yai was in fact the original course of the river until a canal was built to expedite transits. Today the tributary sees a steady stream of tourists on longtail boat tours en route to floating markets, the Royal Barges Museum (opposite) or Wat Intharam, where a *chedi* contains the ashes of Thonburi's King Taksin, assassinated in 1782. Fine gold-and-black lacquerwork adorning the main *bòt* doors depicts the mythical *naariiphôn* tree, which bears fruit shaped like beautiful maidens.

Most tourists meet only the river-facing part of Thonburi between Khlong Bangkok Noi and Khlong Bangkok Yai, directly across from Ko Ratanakosin, leaving the interior of the community predominantly Thai with hardly an English sign or pestering *túk-túk* driver in sight. As the river ferries ricochet

## TRANSPORT: THONBURI

**Bus** Air-con 507 and 509, ordinary 21, 42 and 82

**Ferry** A tour of Thonburi by longtail boat is fun and easy, but for a more local experience that's also much cheaper consider taking the public ferries. Bang Yai-bound boats from Tha Chang leave every 30 minutes between 6am and 8am, every hour from 9am to 3pm, and depart when the boat is full between 3pm and 9pm. The main Chao Praya Express ferries stop at a few key Thonburi piers, most notably Wang Lang (Siriraj, N10), Thonburi Railway (N11) and Saphan Phra Pin Klao (N12). Several cross-river ferries also connect to Bangkok piers.

from stop to stop, a steady stream of commuters is shuttled to and from jobs in downtown Bangkok, impatient for the Skytrain to be extended to their dormitory community.

Two major bridges fuse the two banks together – Saphan Phra Pin Klao and Saphan Phra Phuttha Yot Fa (Memorial Bridge) – and husky cross-river ferries plod from one side to another in stress-relieving slow motion. The few major roads include those delivering passengers to the southern bus station. Thonburi has two minor rail services: one departs from Bangkok Noi (near Siriraj Hospital and about 900m from the Thonburi Railway ferry pier) and trundles west to Kanchanaburi; the other is a commuter line that goes from Wong Wian Yai to the gulf coast suburbs (see p236).

### WAT ARUN Map p56

วัดอรุณฯ

☎ 0 2891 1149; www.watarun.org; Th Arun Amarin; admission 20B; 🕒 8am-6pm; 🚶 from Tha Tien (N8) to Tha Thai Wang

The missile-shaped temple that rises from the banks of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya is known as Temple of Dawn and named after the Indian god of dawn, Aruna. It was here that, in the wake of the destruction of Ayuthaya, King Taksin stumbled upon a small shrine used by the local population and interpreted the discovery as an auspicious sign for building a new Thai capital. King Taksin built a palace beside the shrine, which is now part of Navy Headquarters, and a royal temple that housed the Emerald Buddha for 15 years before Taksin was assassinated and the capital moved across the royal river to Bangkok.

The central feature is the 82m-high Khmer-style *praang* (spire), constructed

during the first half of the 19th century by Rama II (King Buddha Loetla; r 1809–24) and Rama III. From the river it is not apparent that this corn-cob shaped steeple is adorned with colourful floral murals made of glazed porcelain, a common temple ornamentation in the early Ratanakosin period, when Chinese ships calling at Bangkok used broken porcelain as ballast.

Also worth a look is the interior of the *bòt*. The main Buddha image is said to have been designed by Rama II; you can judge his artistic ability. The murals date to the reign of Rama V; impressive is one that depicts Prince Siddhartha (the Buddha) encountering examples of birth, old age, sickness and death outside his palace walls, an experience that led him to abandon the worldly life. The ashes of Rama II are interred in the base of the *bòt*'s presiding Buddha image.

On the periphery of the temple grounds are simple wooden cut-outs of Thai dancers, luring visitors to photograph each other with their mugs above the figures – for an extra 40B.

Wat Arun is located directly across from Wat Pho on the Thonburi side of the river. A lot of people visit the wat on expensive river tours, but it's dead easy and more rewarding to just jump on the 3.50B cross-river ferry from Tha Tien. For our money, visiting Wat Arun in the late afternoon is best, with the sun shining from the west lighting up the *praang* and the river behind it. Photographers – or indeed anyone with a romantic bone in their body – can then take the ferry back to Tha Tien, walk south for five minutes and perch on a stool in the Amarosa Bar, upstairs at the **Deck** (p154) restaurant. Wat Arun is directly across the river and there are few sights in Bangkok as serene as watching the sun sink below the horizon as the lights on the *praang* come spectacularly up while barges and ferries motor past in the twilight.

If you come earlier, consider taking a stroll away from the river on Th Wang Doem, a quiet tiled street of wooden shophouses.

## ROYAL BARGES NATIONAL MUSEUM

Map p56

เรือพระที่นั่ง

☎ 0 2424 0004; Khlong Bangkok Noi; admission 30B, still/video camera fee 100/200B; 🕒 9am-5pm; 🚶 tourist shuttle boat from Tha Phra Athit (N13) or Tha Saphan Phra Pin Klao (N12)

Every foreign country has its famous religious monuments and museums, but how many have their own fleet of royal boats on display? As a former riverine culture, Thailand still maintains the royal barges, once used daily by the royal family for outings and events and now used only for grand ceremonies.

The royal barges are slender like their mainstream cousins, the longtail boats, and are fantastically ornamented with religious symbolism. The largest is more than 45m long and requires a rowing crew of 50 men, plus seven umbrella bearers, two helmsmen and two navigators, as well as a flag bearer, rhythm keeper and chanter.

*Suphannahong*, or 'Golden Swan', is the king's personal barge and is the most important of the boats. Built on the orders of Rama I after an earlier version had been destroyed in the sacking of Ayuthaya, this barge is made from a single piece of timber, making it the largest dugout in the world. Appropriately, a huge swan's head is carved into the bow. More recent barges feature bows carved into other Hindu-Buddhist mythological shapes such as the seven-headed naga (sea dragon) and Garuda (Vishnu's bird mount).

To mark auspicious Buddhist calendar years, the royal barges in all their finery set sail during the royal *kàthīn*, the ceremony that marks the end of the Buddhist retreat (or *phansaā*) in October or November. During this ceremony, a barge procession travels to the temples to offer new robes to the monastic contingent and countless Bangkokians descend on the river to watch.

The museum consists of sheds near the mouth of Khlong Bangkok Noi. Getting here is easiest by regular tourist boat from N13 Tha Phra Athit, but is also possible on foot from Saphan Phra Pin Klao (N12) river ferry pier.

## YOU, YOU, WHERE YOU GO?

A direct translation of a standard Thai inquiry 'Pai nai?', the English phrase 'Where you go?' will be hurled at you by money-struck *túk-túk* and taxi drivers as if it were a military interrogation. Despite that nagging feeling of rudeness, you don't have to respond and the best answer is to master the public transport system, which is cheap and reliable, and won't steer you to its cousin's tailor shop. If that doesn't work, you can always retaliate with a playground comeback like 'I've come to see you'.

## FORENSIC MEDICINE MUSEUM

Map p56

พิพิธภัณฑ์นิติเวชศาสตร์สงครามตนิยมเสนา  
☎ 0 2419 7000; 2nd fl, Forensic Medicine Bldg, Siriraj Hospital; admission 40B; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat; 🚶 Tha Rot Fai (Thonburi Railway Pier, N11) or Tha Wang Lang (Tha Siriraj, N10)

Pickled body parts, ingenious murder weapons and other crime-scene evidence are on display at this medical museum, intended to educate rather than nauseate. Among the grisly displays is the preserved cadaver of Si Ouey, one of Thailand's most prolific and notorious serial killers who murdered – and then ate – more than 30 children in the 1950s. Despite being well and truly dead (he was executed), today his name is still used to scare misbehaving children into submission: 'Behave yourself or Si Ouey will come for you'. There are another five dusty variations on the hospital premises, all with variations on the medical theme.

Given the huge construction project at the northern edge of the hospital grounds, the best way to get here is by express ferry or cross-river ferry to Tha Wang Lang (Tha Siriraj) in Thonburi, then walk north through the hospital grounds almost to the end, turn left and follow the signs; or just say 'Si Ouey' and you'll be pointed in the right direction.

## BANGLAMPHU

Eating p155; Shopping p130; Sleeping p203

Banglamphu is old Bangkok. Once an aristocratic and artistic enclave of teak houses and tended gardens, here trees still outnumber high-rises, fashion comes from the market not the malls and you're more likely to see monks than chauffeurs.

Most of the district is a maze-like circuit board of streets and two-storey shophouses, each decorated with terracotta water gardens or potted plants and low-hanging shades that block out the sun. During the Chinese New Year, merchants do a little 'spring cleaning'. Workers scour pavements, mop floors and polish neon signs. Once all the soap is rinsed away, the scene looks inexplicably just like it did before. These shops sell ordinary items that fill wardrobes, utility closets and kitchen pantries in a typical Thai home.

But the most famous draw is Th Khao San, the backpacker enclave of guesthouses and amenities that has become the benchmark by which backpacker ghettos are measured the world over. These days 'ghetto' is a little bit harsh, as the lodgings increasingly cater to 'flashpackers', and the lodgings themselves have spread in a 1km radius from its namesake street. (For the Khao San story see p72.)

Long before Banglamphu landed on travelers' itineraries, this was the original residential district for farmers and produce merchants from Ayuthaya who followed the transfer of the royal court to Bangkok in the late 18th century. The name means 'Place of Lamphu', a reference to the *lamphuu* tree (*Duabanga grandiflora*) that was once prevalent in the area. By the time of King Rama IV, Banglamphu had developed into a thriving commercial district by day and an entertainment spot by night, a role it continues to fulfil today.

Banglamphu spreads from the river north of Th Phra Pin Klao and eventually melts into Dusit and Thewet beyond Khlong Padum Kaseng. The royal boulevard of Th Ratchadamnoen Klang (royal passage), suitably adorned with billboard-sized pictures of the king, queen and other royal family members, links the Grand Palace in Ko Ratanakosin with the new palace in Dusit. This central section of the royal road is lined by identical Art Deco-influenced low-rise buildings that were built in the early 1940s to house the administration of the new democratic Thailand. Plans to upgrade them and make Th Ratchadamnoen Klang a cultural promenade documenting Thailand's transition to democracy have stalled, with only **King Prajadhipok Museum** (p73) and the long-established **Queen's Gallery** (p192) currently welcoming visitors. Running south from Th Ratchadamnoen Klang is Th Tanao, one of Bangkok's most famous food streets.

Running parallel to the river to the west of Th Khao San, Th Phra Athit is known as the avenue of mansions built to house Thai nobility during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among the most splendidly restored Ratanakosin-era buildings is **Ban Phra Athit** (201/1 Th Phra Athit), which once belonged to Chao Phraya Vorapongpipat, finance minister during the reigns of Rama V, VI and VII. It now belongs to a private company, but a coffee shop within the grounds is open to the public.

## WAT SAKET & GOLDEN MOUNT

Map pp68-9

วัดสระเกศ

☎ 0 2223 4561; soi off Th Boriphart; admission to summit of Golden Mount 10B; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm; 🚶 air-con 511 & 512, ordinary 2, 🚶 khlong boat to Tha Saphan Phan Fah

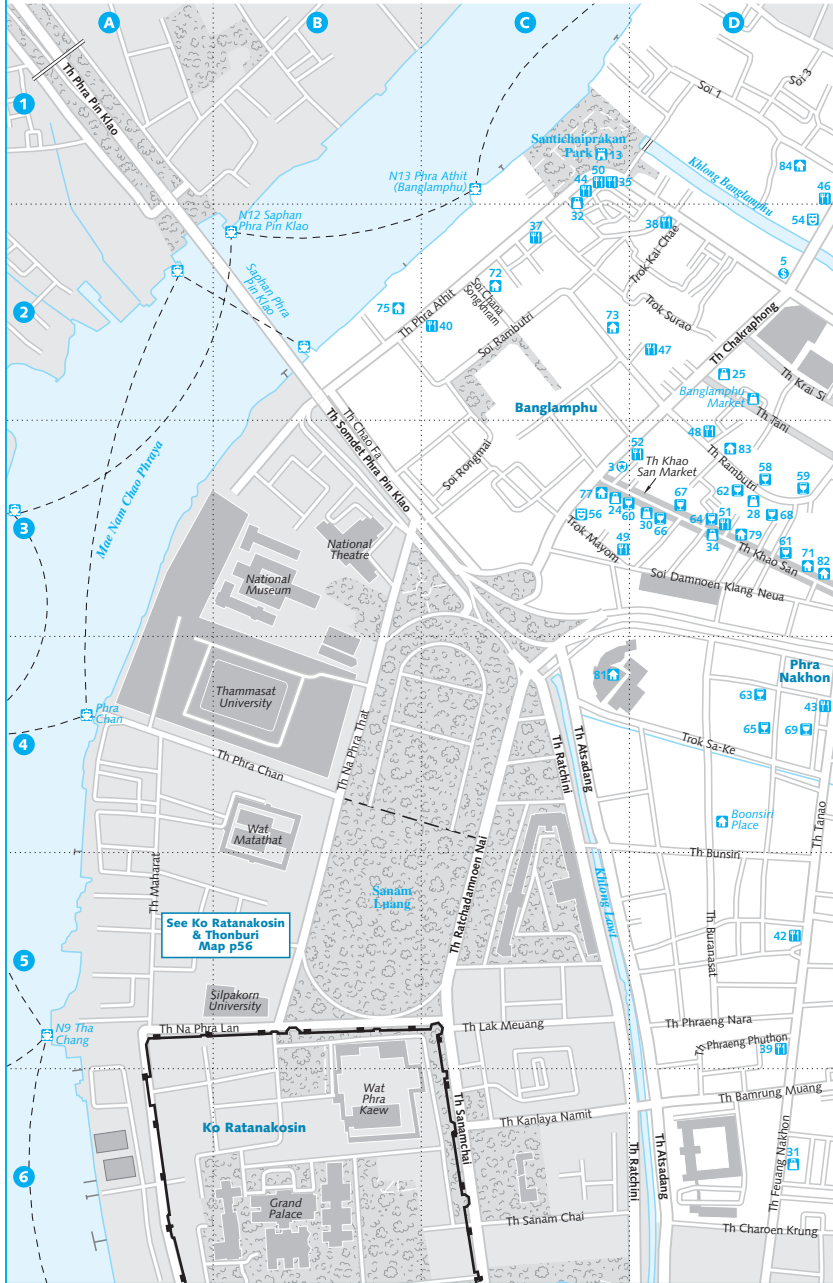
## top picks

### BANGLAMPHU

- **Th Khao San** (p72) Soak up the atmosphere in this backpacker mecca that's unlike any other place on earth (or beyond).
- **Wat Saket & Golden Mount** (left) Take in the panoramic views and divine your future on this artificial mount.
- **Chote Chitr** (p155) Taste genuine Bangkok-style food – especially the *mii kráwp* (sweet-and-spicy crispy fried noodles).
- **Taksura** (p177) Join the Thai artsy crowd in this old mansion-cum-bar.
- **Wat Suthat** (p71) Sit and gaze at the huge Buddha and sky-high murals in this peaceful temple.

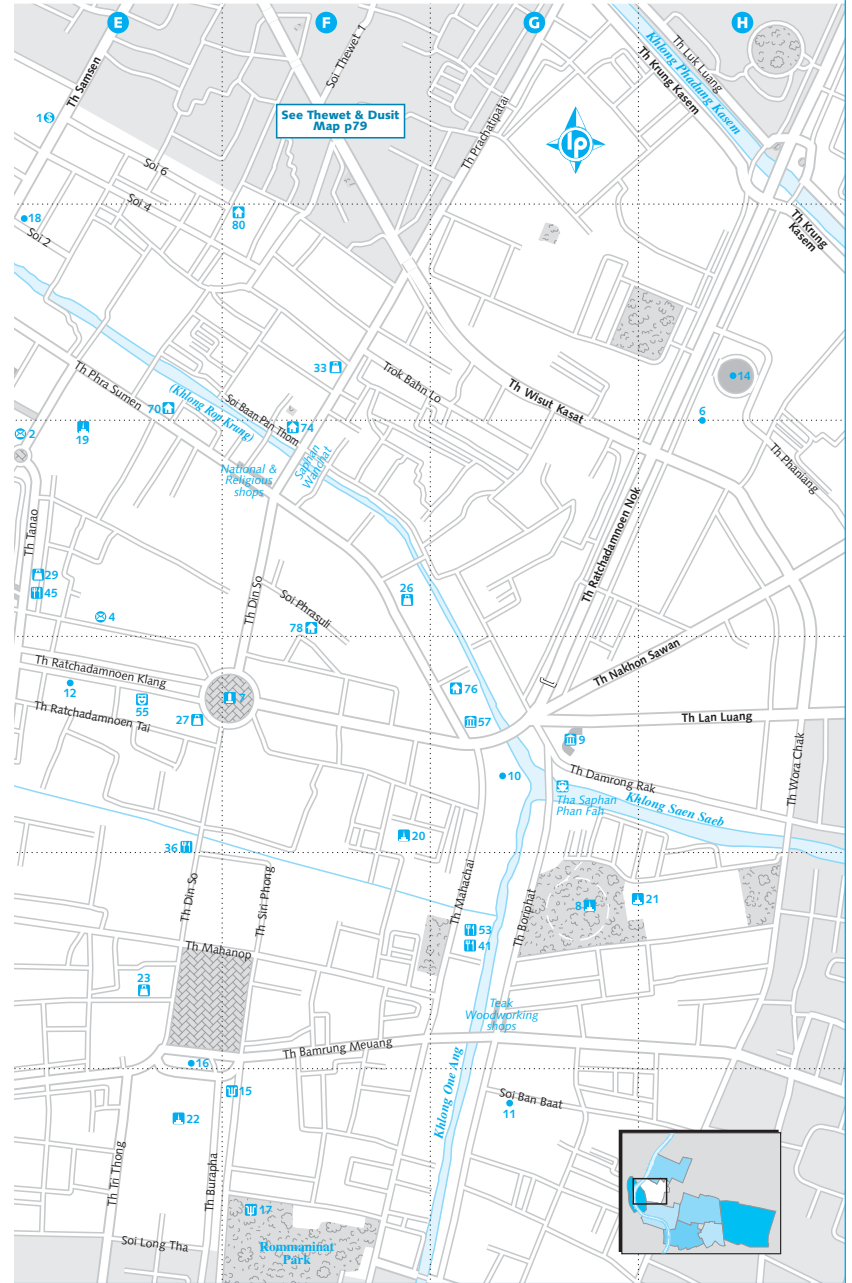
Before glass and steel towers began growing out of the flat monotony of Bangkok's riverine plain, the massive Golden Mount (Phu Khao Thong) was the only structure to make any significant impression on the horizon. At the eastern entrance to Banglamphu, the mount was commissioned

# BANGLAMPHU

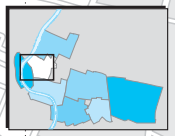


See Ko Ratanakosin & Thonburi Map p56

Ko Ratanakosin



See Thewet & Dusit Map p79



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by Rama III. He ordered that the earth that was dug out to create Bangkok's expanding *khlong* network be piled up to build an enormous, 100m-high, 500m-wide *chedi*. As the hill grew, however, the weight became too much for the soft soil beneath and the project was abandoned until Rama IV built a small gilded *chedi* on its crest and added trees to stave off erosion. Rama V later added to the structure and interred a Buddha relic from India (given to him by the British government) in the *chedi*. The concrete walls were added during WWII.

Today serpentine steps wind through gnarled trees, past small tombstones and up to two platforms that afford panoramic views across the city. At the top-most level Thais pray to a central Buddha shrine and test their fortune at a shrine to the Chinese goddess of mercy, Kuan Im. Make a small donation then shake the numbered *siem see* sticks until one falls to the floor. The piece of paper with the corresponding number gives a no-nonsense appraisal of your future in Thai, English and Chinese. It's a fun diversion,

but hopefully you receive a more positive prognosis than ours, which included, 'Lost items could never be recovered. Illness condition unfavourable. No lucks. Should be careful.' Well, great! At least we now know that: 'Forthcoming child shall be baby girl.' When Thais are the subject of such a dire forecast (ahm, try not to shake out stick number 10) they burn it on the spot (the fortune, not the stick), or at least leave it at the temple.

If your fortune is so disturbing you feel the need to seek assistance from a higher power, it's comforting to know that peaceful Wat Saket is just next door. In November the grounds host a festival that includes an enchanting candlelight procession up the Golden Mount, and a similar procession is held at Makha Bucha in February.

### MAHAKAN FORT

Map pp68-9

#### ป้อมมหากาฬ

**Th Ratchadamnoen Klang;** ☎ 8.30am-6pm; 🚏 air-con 511 & 512, ordinary 2, 🚢 *khlong boat to Tha Saphan Phan Fah*

The area around white-washed Mahakan Fort, one of two surviving citadels that

defended the old walled city, has recently been converted into a small park overlooking Khlong Ong Ang. The octagonal fort is a picturesque stop en route to Golden Mount, but the story of its conversion is probably more interesting. For more than 13 years the community of 55 simple wooden houses that surrounded the fort fought for its survival against the Bangkok municipal government, which wanted to demolish it in order to create a 'tourist' park, the modern term for urban renewal. The community blocked progress and even proposed the development of another tourist attraction: a *li-keh* museum honouring the dance tradition that traces its creation to a school located here in 1897. Some of the homes were demolished, resulting in the park you see today. But behind the fort others remain, and just before we went to print residents, city authorities and tourism authorities were still arguing about the creation (or not) of a 'living museum'.

### MONK'S BOWL VILLAGE

Map pp68-9

#### บ้านบาตร

**Soi Ban Baat, Th Boriphat;** 🚏 ordinary 12 & 42, 🚢 *khlong boat to Tha Saphan Phan Fah*

This is the only remaining village of three established in Bangkok by Rama I for the purpose of handcrafting *bàat* (monk's bowls), the ceremonial bowls used to collect alms from the faithful every morning. As cheaper factory-made bowls are now the norm, the artisanal tradition has shrunk to about half a dozen families. You can usually observe the process of hammering the bowls together from eight separate pieces of steel said to represent Buddhism's

Eightfold Path. The joints are then fused with melted copper wire, and the bowl is beaten, polished and (usually) coated with several layers of black lacquer. A typical *bàat-smith's* output is one large bowl per day; more for smaller bowls.

The alms bowls are sold for between 600B and 2000B and make great souvenirs. But the village itself is just as interesting. When we visited, an elderly woman intercepted us just nanoseconds after we'd walked into the *soi* and quickly ushered us through her living room, and out the back door down a series of tiny lanes populated by kids, sleeping cats and cockroaches, and delivered us to one of the bowl makers, who showed us his bowls and others making them. Competition is certainly keen for your tourist baht, but you wouldn't call it touristy. More a raw, poor Bangkok community, and a chance for you to experience that side of life and maybe buy a bowl. To find the village, walk south on Th Boriphat, south of Th Bamrung Meuang, then follow the signs into narrow Soi Ban Baat.

### WAT SUTHAT

Map pp68-9

#### วัดสุทัศน์

☎ 0 2224 9845; Th Botphram; admission 20B; ☎ 8.30am-9pm; 🚏 ordinary 12 & 42, 🚢 *khlong boat to Tha Saphan Phan Fah*

Wat Suthat's truly remarkable Buddha image, acres of colourful murals and – during most of the year – relative tranquillity make it arguably the most attractive of all of Bangkok's Buddhist temples. The main attraction is Thailand's largest *wihāan* (main chapel). Set inside a large cloister that is itself lined with gilded Buddha images, it houses the 8m-high Phra Si Sakayamuni, Thailand's largest surviving Sukhothai-period bronze, a serene-looking gilded masterpiece that was cast in the former capital in the 14th century. In 1808 it was retrieved from Sukhothai and floated on a barge down Mae Nam Chao Phraya to be installed in this temple and serve as both the centre of Bangkok and a representation of Mt Meru, the mythical centre of the universe. Today the ashes of Rama VIII (King Ananda Mahidol, the current king's older brother; r 1935-46) are contained in the base of the image.

The colourful, if now somewhat faded, *Jataka* (murals depicting scenes from the Buddha's life) cover every wall and pillar;

## WHAT'S SO LONELY ABOUT THE KHAO SAN ROAD?

Thanon Khao San, better known as the Khao San Road, is genuinely unlike anywhere else on earth. It's an international clearing house of people either entering the liberated state of travelling in Southeast Asia or returning to the coddling bonds of first-world life, all together in a neon-lit melting pot in Banglamphu. Its uniqueness is probably best illustrated with a question: apart from airports, where else could you share space with the citizens of dozens of countries at the same time, people ranging from first-time backpackers scoffing banana pancakes to 75-year-old grandparents ordering G&Ts, via hippies, trendies, squares, style queens, package tourists, global nomads, people on a week's holiday and those taking a gap year, people of every colour and creed looking at you looking at them looking at everyone else?

Th Khao San – pronounced 'cow sam' and meaning 'uncooked rice' – is perhaps the most high-profile bastard child of the age of independent travel. Of course, it hasn't always been this way. For its first two centuries or so it was just another unremarkable road in old Bangkok. The first guesthouses appeared in 1982 and as more backpackers arrived through the '80s, so one by one the old wooden homes were converted into low-rent dosshouses. By the time Alex Garland's novel *The Beach* was published in 1997, with its opening scenes set in the seedier side of Khao San, staying here had become a rite of passage for backpackers coming to Southeast Asia.

The publicity from Garland's book and the movie that followed pushed Khao San into the mainstream, romanticising the seedy and stereotyping as unwashed and counter-culture the backpackers it attracted. It also brought the long-simmering debate about the relative merits of Th Khao San to the top of backpacker conversations across the region. Was it cool to stay on KSR? Was it uncool? Was this 'real travel' or just an international anywhere surviving on the few baht Western backpackers spent before they headed home to start their high-earning careers? Was it really Thailand at all?

Perhaps one of Garland's characters summed it up most memorably when he says: 'You know, Richard, one of these days I'm going to find one of those Lonely Planet writers and I'm going to ask him, what's so fucking lonely about the Khoa San Road?'

Today more than ever the answer would have to be: not that much. With the help of all that publicity Khao San continued to evolve, with bed-bug-infested guesthouses replaced by boutique hotels, and downmarket TV bars showing pirated movies transformed into hip design bars peopled by flashpackers in designer threads. But the most interesting change has been in the way Thais see Khao San.

Once written off as home to cheap, dirty *faràng kii ngòk* ('stingy foreigners'), Banglamphu has become just about the trendiest district in Bangkok. Attracted in part by the long-derided independent travellers and their modern ideas, the city's own counter-culture kids have moved in and given the whole area a decidedly more hip feel. Indeed, Bangkok's indie crowd has proved to be the Thai spice this melting pot always lacked.

Not that Khao San has moved completely away from its backpacker roots. The strip still anticipates every traveller need: meals to soothe homesickness, cafés and bars for swapping travel tales about getting to the Cambodian border, tailors, travel agents, teeth whitening, secondhand books, hair braiding and a new generation of Akha women trying to harass everyone they see into buying wooden frogs.

see how many crabs (or crab claws) you can find, and not just in the murals. The deep-relief wooden doors are also impressive and were carved by artisans including Rama II himself.

Behind the *wihān*, and accessed via a separate entrance on Th Burapha, the ordination hall is the largest in the country. Wat Suthat holds the rank of Rachavoramahavihan, the highest royal temple grade, and maintains a special place in the national religion because of its association with the Brahman priests who perform important ceremonies, such as the **Royal Ploughing Ceremony** (p13) in May. These priests also perform religious rites at two Hindu shrines near the wat – the **Thewa Sathan** (Devi Mandir) on Th Siri Phong, and the smaller **Saan Jao Phitsanu** (Vishnu Shrine) on Th Din

So. The former shrine contains images of Shiva and Ganesha while the latter shrine is dedicated to Vishnu.

### SAO CHING-CHA Map pp68–9

เสาชิงช้า

☎ 0 2222 6951; Th Botphram, btwn Th Tri Thong & Th Burapha; ☎ ordinary 12, 42, 🚢 khlong boat to Tha Saphan Phan Fah

It is easy to forget the powers of the Brahmans in Thai Buddhism, unless you happen upon the giant red poles of Sao Ching-Cha (the Giant Swing). During the second lunar month (usually in January), Brahman beliefs dictate that Shiva comes down to earth for a 10-day residence and should be welcomed by great ceremonies (and apparently great degrees of daring) includ-

ing the acrobatics of the Great Swing. The ceremony saw the brave or foolish swing in ever-higher arcs in an effort to reach a bag of gold suspended from a 15m bamboo pole.

The Brahmans enjoyed a mystical position within the royal court, primarily in the coronation rituals. But after the 1932 revolution the Brahmans' waning power was effectively terminated and the festival, including the swinging, was discontinued during the reign of Rama VII.

Sao Ching-Cha is two long blocks south of the Democracy Monument and outside Wat Suthat. Despite no longer being used, the Giant Swing was recently replaced with a newer model, made from six giant teak logs. The original is kept at the National Museum.

### DEMOCRACY MONUMENT Map pp68–9

อนุสาวรีย์ประชาธิปไตย

Traffic circle of Th Ratchadamnoen Klang & Th Din So; ☎ air-con 511 & 512, ordinary 2 & 82

The Democracy Monument is the focal point of the grand, European-style boulevard that is Th Ratchadamnoen Klang. It was designed by Thai architect Mew Aphaiwong and the relief sculptures were created by Italian Corrado Feroci who, as Silpa Bhirasri, gives his name to Silpakorn University. As the name suggests, it was erected to commemorate Thailand's momentous transformation from absolute to constitutional monarchy. Feroci combined the square-jawed 'heroes of socialism' style popular at the time with an Art Deco influence and a keen sense of relevant revolutionary dates.

There were 75 cannonballs around the base, to signify the year BE (Buddhist Era) 2475 (AD 1932). The four wings of the monument stand 24m tall, representing 24 June, the day the constitution was signed, and the central plinth stands 3m high (June was then the third month in the Thai calendar) and supports a chiselled constitution. Each wing has bas-reliefs depicting soldiers, police and civilians who helped usher in the modern Thai state.

During the era of military dictatorships demonstrators often assembled here to call for a return to democracy, protests that ended in violence and death on 17 May 1972 and 14 October 1973.

While you're in this area, if you head north from the Democracy Monument

on Th Din So you'll see many shophouses that date to the reigns of Rama V (King Chulalongkorn; r 1868–1910) and Rama VII (King Prajadhipok; r 1925–35). As the entire block to the northwest of the Democracy Monument belongs to **Wat Bowonniwet** (p74), the shop owners pay rent directly to the temple.

### OCTOBER 14 MEMORIAL Map pp68–9

อนุสาวรีย์ 14 ตุลาคม

Th Ratchadamnoen Klang; ☎ air-con 511 & 512, ordinary 2 & 82

A peaceful amphitheatre commemorates the civilian demonstrators who were killed on 14 October 1973 by the military during a prodemocracy rally. Over 200,000 people assembled at the Democracy Monument and along the length of Th Ratchadamnoen to protest against the arrest of political campaigners and continuing military dictatorship. More than 70 demonstrators were killed when the tanks met the crowd. The complex is an interesting adaptation of Thai temple architecture for a secular and political purpose. A central *chedi* is dedicated to the fallen and a gallery of historic photographs lines the interior wall. The stalled redevelopment of Th Ratchadamnoen Klang called for a museum to be created in the underground portion of the amphitheatre.

### KING PRAJADHIPOK MUSEUM

Map pp68–9

พิพิธภัณฑ์พระบาทสมเด็จพระปกเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว

☎ 0 2527 7830; www.kpi.ac.th/museum; 2 Th Lan Luang; ☎ 9am–4pm Tue–Sun; admission 40B; 🚢 khlong boat to Tha Saphan Phan Fah, ☎ air-con 511 & 512, ordinary 2

A visit to a royal museum might sound like a royal bore, but this collection uses modern techniques to relate the rather dramatic life of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII; r 1925–35) and neatly documents Thailand's transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy. As you wander among the exhibits in the neocolonial-style former administrative building, you'll learn that Prajadhipok did not expect to become king. However, once on the throne he showed considerable diplomacy in dealing with what was, in effect, a revolution fomented by a new intellectual class of Thais who had returned home from European educations

## WHAT'S A WAT?

**Bòt** A consecrated chapel where monastic ordinations are held.

**Chedi (stupa)** A large bell-shaped tower usually containing five structural elements symbolising (from bottom to top) earth, water, fire, wind and void; relics of the Buddha or a Thai king are housed inside.

**Praang** A towering phallic spire of Khmer origin serving the same religious purpose as a *chedi*.

**Wat** Temple monastery.

**Wihaan** The main sanctuary for the temple's Buddha sculpture and where laypeople come to make their offerings. Classic architecture typically has a three-tiered roof representing the triple gems, Buddha (the teacher), Dharma (the teaching) and Brotherhood (the followers).

## Buddha Images

Elongated earlobes, no evidence of bone or muscle, arms that reach to the knees, a third eye: these are some of the 32 rules, originating from 3rd-century India, that govern the depiction of Buddha in sculpture and denote his divine nature. Other symbols to be aware of are the 'postures', which depict periods in the life of Buddha.

**Sitting** Teaching or meditating. If the right hand is pointed towards the earth, Buddha is shown subduing the demons of desire. If the hands are folded in the lap, Buddha is meditating.

**Reclining** The exact moment of Buddha's passing into *parinibbana* (postdeath nirvana).

**Standing** Bestowing blessings or taming evil forces.

**Walking** Buddha after his return to earth from heaven.

with dreams of democracy. Prajadhipok's reign eventually ended when he abdicated while in England in 1935, just two months after the sesquicentenary of the Chakri dynasty.

## PHRA SUMEN FORT & SANTICHAIPRAKAN PARK

Map pp68–9  
ป้อมพระสุเมรุ/สวนสาธารณะสันติชัยปราการ  
Cnr Th Phra Athit & Th Phra Sumen; ☎ 5am–10pm;

📍 Tha Phra Athit, 🚗 ordinary 15, 30 & 53  
Beside Mae Nam Chao Phraya in Banglamphu stands one of Bangkok's original 18th-century forts. Built in 1783 to defend against potential naval invasions and named for the mythical Mt Meru (Phra Sumen in Thai) of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, the octagonal brick-and-stucco bunker was one of 14 city watchtowers that punctuated the old city wall alongside Khlong Rop Krung (now Khlong Banglamphu but still called Khlong Rop Krung on most signs). Apart from Mahakan Fort, this is the only one still standing.

Alongside the fort and fronting the river is a small, grassy park with an open-air pavilion, river views, cool breezes and a bohemian mix of alternative young Thais and backpackers, the latter often wearing fisherman pants and trying to learn the current backpacking fad of twirling fire sticks.

It's an interesting place to sit, people-watch and see what are said to be the last two *lamphu* trees in Banglamphu.

From the park a walkway zigzags south along the river – and in some cases is suspended right over it – from the fort all the way to Saphan Phra Pin Klao. Follow this walk and along the way you can catch glimpses of some of Th Phra Athit's classic old Ratanakosin-style mansions that are not visible from the street, including those housing parts of the Buddhist Society of Thailand and the UN's Food & Agriculture Organization.

## WAT BOWONNIWET

Map pp68–9  
วัดบวรนิเวศ  
☎ 0 2281 2831; www.watbowon.org; Th Phra Sumen; admission free; ☎ 8.30am–5pm; 📍 Tha Phra Athit, 🚗 air-con 511

Founded in 1826, Wat Bowonniwet (commonly known as Wat Bowon) is the national headquarters for the Thammayut monastic sect, a reformed version of Thai Buddhism. The Thammayuts focused on reinstating purer rituals (based on Mon traditions) and orthodox theology expunged of folk beliefs. Rama IV, who set out to be a scholar, not a king, founded the Thammayuts and began the royal tradition of ordination at this temple. In fact, Mongkut

was the abbot of Wat Bowon for several years. Rama IX (King Bhumibol; r 1946–) and Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, as well as several other males in the royal family, have been temporarily ordained as monks here.

Bangkok's second Buddhist university, Mahamakut University, is housed at Wat Bowon. Selected monks are sent from India, Nepal and Sri Lanka to study here. Because of its royal status, visitors should be particularly careful to dress properly for admittance to this wat – shorts and sleeveless clothing are not allowed.

## WAT RATCHANATDA

Map pp68–9  
วัดราชนาคดา  
☎ 0 2224 8807; Th Mahachai; admission free;  
☎ 8am–5pm; 🚗 air-con 511 & 512, ordinary 2,  
📍 khlong boat to Tha Saphan Phan Fah

Across Th Mahachai from the Golden Mount, this temple is most stunning at night when the 37 spires of the all-metal Loha Prasat (Metal Palace) are lit up like a medieval birthday cake. Displaying Burmese influences, it dates from the mid-19th century and was built under Rama III in honour of his granddaughter. The design is said to derive from metal temples built in India and Sri Lanka more than 2000 years ago.

Behind the formal gardens is a well-known market selling Buddhist *phrá khreúang* in all sizes, shapes and styles. The amulets feature images not only of the Buddha, but also famous Thai monks and Indian deities. Full Buddha images are also for sale.

## PHRA NAKHON MEANDER

### Walking Tour

If the tourist buses and touting *túk-túks* around the Ko Ratanakosin sights threaten to do your head in, the more local feel of this part of Banglamphu should be more appealing. The area south of Wat Saket combines old wooden and terrace houses, parks, shops selling religious paraphernalia aimed purely at locals and a wat that will leave you wondering why no-one else is there. Begin at the Tha Saphan Phan Fah *khlong* boat pier, or walk from the Khao San area accommodation. If you don't have much time and don't mind sweating, you could follow this walk with the [Chinatown tour](#) (p86) or [Ko Ratanakosin walk](#) (p63).

**1 King Prajadhipok Museum** Opposite the *khlong* boat pier is the handsome, modern [King Prajadhipok Museum](#) (p73), which details Thailand's turbulent pre-democracy years.

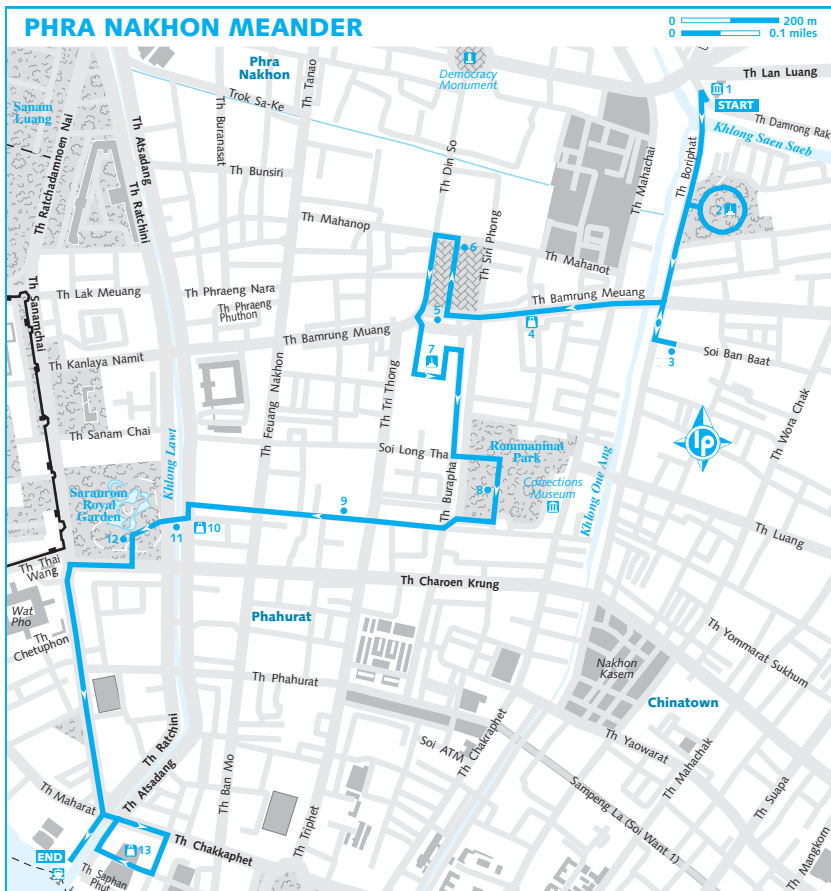
**2 Golden Mount** From the museum, cross over Saphan Phan Fah to [Golden Mount](#) (p67) for a panoramic view of the city and a chance to have your fortune foreseen: your trip to Bangkok might have you 'discovering a mate who could become a satisfactory match', but then again, you might also 'like being dumb' and have to 'be careful'. *Chok dee!* (Good luck!)

**3 Monk's Bowl Village** Leave the Golden Mount and turn left (south) along Th Boriphat, where you'll walk past shops selling carved teak lintels and other decorations for turning your apartment into a Thai restaurant. Cross Th Bamrung Meuang and turn left at Soi Ban Baat to see (actually, it's more of an experience) [Monk's Bowl Village](#) (p71), the artisan village of beaten steel bowls and life amid atmospheric, eye-opening alleys.

**4 Religious Shops** Backtrack to Th Bamrung Meuang, turn left across the bridge and go straight ahead. The religious shops on this stretch, and others in the crescent-shaped area of shophouses on the corner of Th Din So and Bamrung Meuang, are where Bangkokians come to buy the sort of goods needed in temples. These are primarily Buddha images of all shapes and sizes, though usually only one colour – gold. Wealthy families make merit by donating these items to their local temples. Of course, you can't actually 'own' a Buddha image so technically these Buddhas are rented, not sold. If you're lucky you'll see a new Buddha 'shipment' arrive, the huge figures delivered aboard pick-ups, all wrapped up like abductees in monks' robes. Then begins the touch-up process on their golden paint jobs, and the wait for an 'adoption'.

**5 Sao Ching-Cha** Continue to the spindly red [Sao Ching-Cha](#) (Giant Swing; p72), a gatelike structure that once hosted a death-defying (or sometimes not) Brahmin spectacle.

**6 Marble Sign** To the right of the Giant Swing is the Bangkok City Hall (BMA building), which is thoroughly unremarkable except for the [marble sign](#) in front of the square spelling out Bangkok's official Thai name; a quirky photo-op recommended for travellers



## WALK FACTS

**Start** Tha Saphan Phan Fah (*khlong* boat)

**End** Tha Saphan Phut (river ferry)

**Distance** 4km

**Duration** Two to three hours

**Fuel Stops** *Khlong*-side noodle shops and Thai restaurants on Th Din So

with very wide-angle lenses. If you're hungry, wander north on Th Din So to choose from several long-established restaurants in old shophouses.

**7 Wat Suthat** Passing the Giant Swing, turn left into **Wat Suthat** (p71), one of the biggest, holiest, most beautiful and most undertouristed temples in Thailand.

**8 Rommaninat Park** Leave Wat Suthat via the east entrance onto Th Burapha and turn right (south). You can re-enter Wat Suthat to see the Ordination Hall, or continue for a few minutes and turn left into **Rommaninat Park**, a pretty green space of fountains, walking paths, piped music, sleeping people and *soi* dogs. On the far side of the park is the **Corrections Museum** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri), a rehabilitated colonial building covering the park's former career as a prison in the early 1900s. Most displays are in Thai but the maintenance staff and other hangers-on turn the tour into a social event, giggling at the gruesome displays of torture used in the good old days.

**9 Khlong** Exit the park at the southwest corner, cross the street and follow the small *khlong* through the neighbourhood on Soi Long Tha,

past fruit vendors, drying laundry, the neighbourhood shrine, a newly renovated Chinese temple and noodle and soup vendors. This is what Bangkok looked like when the city's footpaths were riverbanks and, provided the *khlong* isn't having one of its especially stinky days, this is a good place to stop for a real local meal.

**10 Shopfronts** At Fuang Nakhon turn left and then right on Soi Phra Si past the heavily ornamented **shopfronts** decorated in a style often referred to as Sino-Portuguese. In the early 20th century these buildings were the height of fashion and sold new luxury goods, like motor cars, to the modernising country. Today the fashions have shifted to downtown malls and the old buildings are either warehouses or offer more mundane items – like car parts.

**11 Saphan Hok** Cross Th Atsadang to Saphan Hok, a simple lever bridge across Khlong Lawt, the inner-city moat that cut off royal Ko Ratanakosin from the plebeian Bangkok. Small trading ships from Mon settlements would dock near here on trading missions.

**12 Saranrom Royal Garden** Enter the **Saranrom Royal Garden** (p61), a park favouring English Victorian gardens with tropical perfumes and earnest exercisers.

**13 Pak Khlong Market** Exit near the fountain to the old ministry buildings and turn left on Th Sanam Chai all the way to Th Triphet and **Pak Khlong Market** (p132), Bangkok's wholesale flower and vegetable market.



# THEWET & DUSIT

Eating p157; Sleeping p207

Formerly a fruit orchard north of the royal island of Ratanakosin, Dusit was transformed into a mini-European city by Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), complete with wide avenues and shady walkways. The area begins east of Th Samsen and follows Th Phitsanulok and Th Sri Ayuthaya to the district's most famous sites: **Dusit Park** (p80), **Dusit Zoo** (p81) and **Wat Benchamabophit** (p81). Further east is the present monarch's residence of Chitralada Palace, which is open to the public only by appointment and with a good reason.

But for all the elegance of Dusit Park and the European-style grandeur of its buildings and boulevards, the district is hollow in spirit precisely because this is Bangkok, not London or Paris. You can walk for blocks without spotting any of the things that make Bangkok wonderful: street vendors, motorcycle taxis, random stores selling random stuff. Or, as Somerset Maugham put it when driving through Dusit's streets in 1923, 'They seem to await ceremonies and procession. They are like the deserted avenues in the park of a fallen monarch.'

Devotion to the venerated monarch is the primary purpose of an average Bangkokian's visit to Dusit. Many people come to make merit at the bronze equestrian statue of Rama V, which stands in military garb at the Royal Plaza. Although originally intended as mere historical commemoration, the statue has quite literally become a religious shrine, where every Tuesday evening Bangkok residents come to offer candles, flowers (predominantly pink roses), incense and bottles of whisky.

Rama V is also honoured with an annual festival on 23 October that celebrates his accomplishments in modernising the country, abolishing slavery and maintaining the country's independence when all other Southeast Asian countries were being colonised – avoiding such a fate is a matter of enormous pride to Thais. During this festival thousands of visitors converge on the plaza, accompanied by cacophonous loudspeakers and attendant food vendors, briefly disrupting Dusit's aloofness with Bangkok's engaging chaos. For visitors accustomed to more subdued places, Dusit and its well-maintained green spaces will provide a necessary break from Bangkok's incessant noise. Dusit is also home to the prime minister's residence at **Government House** (Map p79; Th Phitsanulok), several ministries and the UNESCAP complex, the United Nations' vast Southeast Asian headquarters.

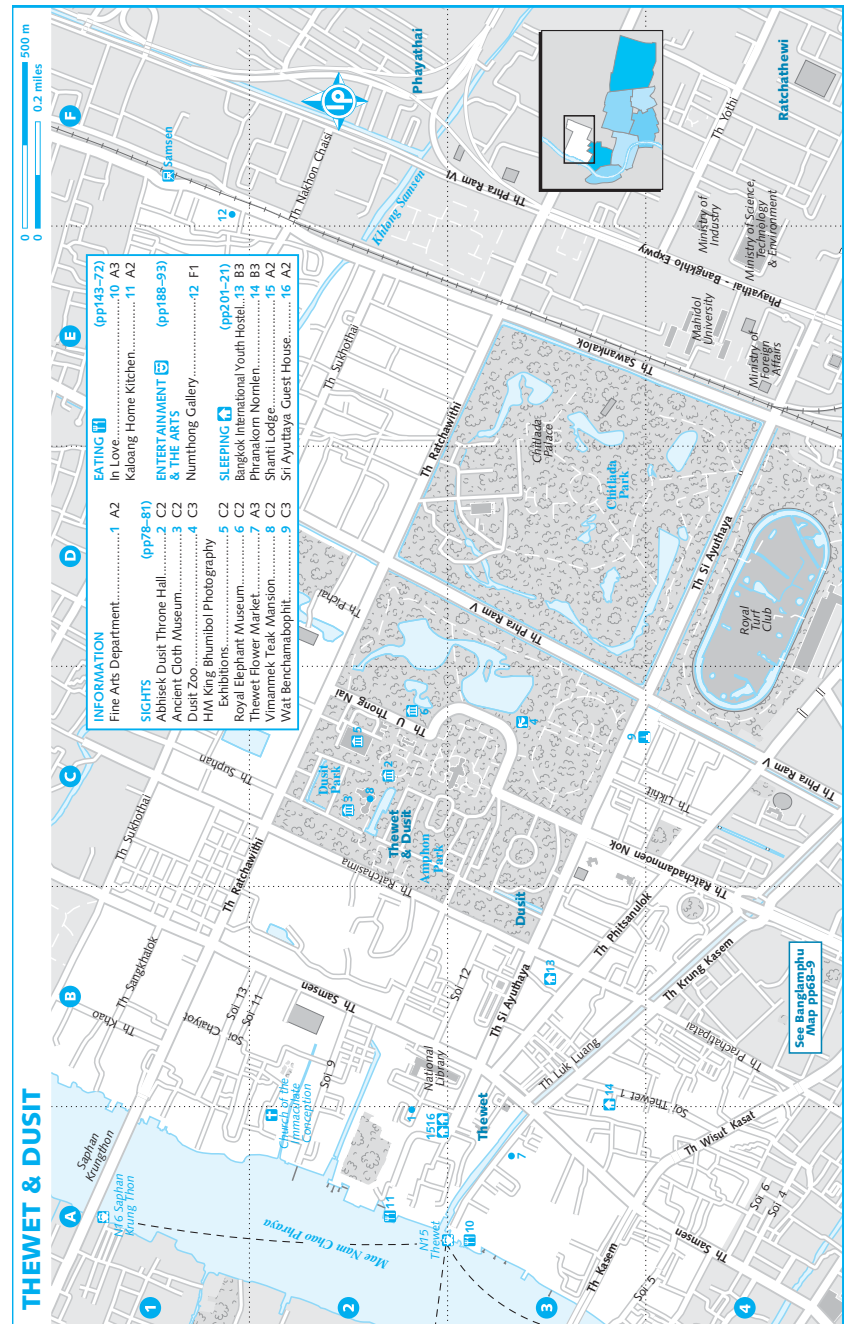
Cradled between Th Samsen and the river, the riverside section of the district is referred to as Thewet, after the nearby temple, Wat Ratchathewet. Thewet shelters **Thewet Flower Market** (Map p79; Th Krung Kasem; 8am-6pm), a popular flower market beside the *khlong*, and a refreshingly quiet backpacker scene existing cheek-by-jowl with a lively wet market selling vegetables, meat, fish and other sundries that makes a great local breakfast or lunch experience. In spite of the scores – or sometimes hundreds – of backpackers staying here at any one time, the neighbourhood has resisted the temptation to transform its businesses into the internet cafés, tattoo parlours, bars or souvenir shops that usually pop up where travellers go. Instead vendors prefer the traditional course of business with the Thais, allowing the foreigners to adjust to local customs. Largely a residential neighbourhood, at rush hour Thewet is packed with uniform-clad residents climbing aboard rickety buses for a sweaty commute to the office districts of Silom or Sukhumvit, while Th Samsen is a near-continuous stream of rattler buses and screaming tük-tük.

Street stalls and food markets are most prolific near Thewet, but be sure to be well watered and fed before venturing into food-free Dusit on foot.

## top picks

### THEWET & DUSIT

- **Dusit Park** (p80) Witness the Victorian sense and Thai sensibilities merging in this royal enclave.
- **Ratchadamnoen Stadium** (p199) Makes Steven Seagal look soft as a pillow.
- **Kaloang Home Kitchen** (p157) Soak up the view of the Saphan Rama VIII while chowing down on cheap seafood.
- **Wat Benchamabophit** (p81) Does this Italian-marble temple remind you of an ice palace?
- **Dusit Zoo** (p81) Where kids can stretch their legs and imaginations.



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Wat Benchamabophit	9 C3		

## DUSIT PARK Map p79

สวนดุสิต

☎ 0 2628 6300; bounded by Th Ratchawithi, Th U Thong Nai & Th Ratchasima; admission adult 100B, with Grand Palace ticket free; 🕒 9.30am-4pm; 🚶 510 & 70, 72

Please note: because this is royal property, visitors should wear long pants (no capri pants) or long skirts and shirts with sleeves.

A modern country, King Chulalongkorn pronounced, needed a modern seat of government. And so the king moved the royal court to Dusit, where he had built Beaux Arts institutions and Victorian manor houses. The royal residence was removed from the cloistered city of Ko Ratanakosin to the open and manicured lawns of Dusit Park. Confectionery buildings of European and Thai fusions housed members of the royal family in a style that must have seemed as futuristic as today's skyscrapers. The maturing art of architecture has been kind to the romantic Victorian period and Dusit Park is a worthwhile escape from Bangkok's chaos and egg-carton Bauhaus and blue-glass buildings.

The highlight of the park is **Vimanmek Teak Mansion**, said to be the world's largest golden teak mansion, built with nary a single nail. For all of its finery, grand staircases, octagonal rooms and lattice walls that are nothing short of magnificent, it is surprisingly serene and intimate. The mansion was originally constructed on Ko Si Chang in 1868 as a retreat for Rama V; the king had it moved to its present site in 1901. For the following few years it served as Rama V's primary residence, with the 81 rooms accommodating his enormous extended family. The interior of the mansion contains various personal effects of the king and a treasure-trove of early Ratanakosin and European art objects and antiques. Compulsory English-language tours of the building start every 30 minutes and last an hour, though it's a lucky dip as to whether your guide will actually speak decent

English or not. Try to time your visit to see the Thai classical and folk dances staged in an open-sided *sala* beside the mansion at 10.30am and 2pm.

Immediately behind Vimanmek mansion is **Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall**. Visions of Moorish palaces and Victorian mansions must have still been spinning around in the king's head when he commissioned this intricate building of porticoes and fretwork fused with a distinctive Thai character. Built as the throne hall for the palace in 1904, it opens onto a big stretch of lawn and flowerbeds, just like any important European building.

Inside, the heavy ornamentation of the white main room is quite extraordinary, especially if you've been visiting a lot of overwhelmingly gold temples or traditional wooden buildings. Look up to just below the ceiling to see the line of brightly coloured stained-glass panels in Moorish patterns. The hall displays regional handiwork crafted by members of the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations & Related Techniques (SUPPORT) charity foundation sponsored by Queen Sirikit. Among the exhibits are *mát-mii*-style (a form of tie-dyeing) cotton and silk textiles, *málaeng tháp* collages (made from metallic, multi-coloured beetle wings), damascene and nielloware, and *yaan liphao* basketry (made with a type of vine).

Built in the early 1900s by Italian architects, the great neoclassical dome of the **Ananta Samakh** anchors Royal Plaza. The building is still used for its intended purpose: hosting foreign dignitaries. Frescoes on the gilded dome ceiling depict the monarchs and the important works of the early Chakri dynasty. The first meeting of the Thai parliament was held in this building before being moved to a facility nearby.

Beside the Th U Thong Nai gate, the **Royal Elephant Museum** (opposite) showcases two large stables that once housed three white elephants; it's more interesting than it sounds.

Near the Th Ratchawithi entrance, two residence halls display the **HM King Bhumibol Photography Exhibitions**, a collection of photographs and paintings by the present monarch – a man who even today is rarely seen without a Canon SLR camera slung around his neck. Among the many loving photos of his wife and children are pictures of the

## THE ORIGINAL WHITE ELEPHANTS

Think 'white elephant' and things like Howard Hughes' *Spruce Goose* wooden plane and the Millennium Dome/02 Arena in London come to mind. But why is it that these and other supposedly valuable, but hugely expensive and basically useless items are known as white elephants? The answer lies in the sacred status given to albino elephants by the kings of Thailand, Laos and Burma.

The tradition derives from the story in which the Buddha's mother is said to have dreamt of a white elephant presenting her with a lotus flower – a symbol of purity and wisdom – just before she gave birth. Extrapolating this, a monarch possessing a white elephant was regarded as a just and benign ruler. Across the region any genuinely albino elephant automatically became crown property; the physical characteristics used to rank white elephants are outlined in the **Royal Elephant Museum** (Dusit Park; 🕒 9.30am-4pm). Laws prevented sacred white elephants from working, so despite being highly regarded they were of no practical use and still cost a fortune to keep.

In modern Thailand the white elephant retains its sacred status, and one is kept at Chitralada Palace, home to the current Thai king. The museum houses sculptural representation of that elephant. Draped in royal vestments, the statue is more or less treated as a shrine by the visiting Thai public.

king playing clarinet with Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong in 1960. The **Ancient Cloth Museum** presents a beautiful collection of traditional silks and cottons that make up the royal cloth collection.

## DUSIT ZOO Map p79

สวนสัตว์ดุสิต(เขาดิน)

☎ 0 2281 9027; www.zoothailand.org; Th Ratchawithi; adult/child 100/50B; 🕒 8am-6pm; 🚶 air-con 510, ordinary 18 & 28

The collection of animals at Bangkok's 19-hectare zoo comprises more than 300 mammals, 200 reptiles and 800 birds, including relatively rare indigenous species. Originally a private botanic garden for Rama V, Dusit Zoo (Suan Sat Dusit or *khǎo din*) was opened in 1938 and is now one of the premier zoological facilities in Southeast Asia – though that doesn't mean all the animal enclosures are first-rate. The shady grounds feature trees labelled in English plus a lake in the centre with paddle boats for rent. There's also a small children's playground.

If nothing else, the zoo is a nice place to get away from the noise of the city and observe how the Thais amuse themselves –

mainly by eating. There are a few lakeside restaurants that serve good, inexpensive Thai food. Be warned, Sundays can be awfully crowded.

## WAT BENCHAMABOPHIT Map p79

วัดเบญจมบพิตร (วัดเบญฯ)

☎ 0 2282 7413; cnr Th Si Ayutthaya & Th Phra Ram V; admission 20B; 🕒 8.30am-5pm; 🚶 ordinary 72

The closest Thailand will come to an ice palace, this temple of white Carrara marble (hence its alternative name, 'Marble Temple') was built at the turn of the century under Rama V. The large cruciform *bôt* is a prime example of modern Thai temple architecture. The base of the central Buddha image, a copy of Phra Phuttha Chinnarat in Phitsanulok, holds the ashes of Rama V. The courtyard behind the *bôt* has 53 Buddha images (33 originals and 20 copies) representing every *mudra* (gesture) and style from Thai history, making this the ideal place to compare Buddhist iconography. If religious details aren't for you, this temple offers a pleasant stroll beside landscaped canals filled with blooming lotus and Chinese-style footbridges.

## TRANSPORT: THEWET & DUSIT

**Bus** Air-con 505 and 510, ordinary 3, 16, 18, 32, 53, 70 and 72

**Ferry** Tha Thewet

With no Skytrain or Metro connections, peak hour traffic gets very busy around here.

# CHINATOWN

Eating p158; Shopping p131; Sleeping p207

Although many generations removed from the mainland (see boxed text, [opposite](#)), Bangkok's China-town could be a bosom brother of any Chinese city. The streets are crammed with shark-fin restaurants, gaudy yellow-gold and jade shops and flashing neon signs in Chinese characters. But these characteristics are just window dressing for the relentlessly entrepreneurial soul of the neighbourhood.

Chinatown fans out along Mae Nam Chao Phraya between Saphan Phra Phuttha Yot Fa to the west and [Hualamphong Railway Station](#) ([opposite](#)) to the southeast, near where are the relatively quiet lanes of [Talat Noi](#) ([opposite](#)). Th Yaowarat and Th Charoen Krung are the main arteries and provide the greatest diversity of services, from shopping and eating to promenading (as much as you can when the pavements are heaving with vendors) in the latest mainland Chinese styles. The whole district is buzzing from dawn until after dusk, with only the overfed *soi* dogs played out on footpaths seeming in any way relaxed. And where the narrow market *soi* can be a world of elbows during the day, things are marginally more mellow by night, when banquet dining and dazzling neon contribute to a carnival atmosphere.

Until the 1970s Chinatown was, in effect, the country's most important market, supplying and wholesaling pretty much anything that could be bought in the kingdom from stores self-segregated by profession – whole streets or blocks are dedicated to sign making, gold and jewellery stores, and machine and tyre shops. However Bangkok's ongoing affair with consumerism, and its resulting brood of lust children in the form of multistorey megamalls, have seen a steady decline in the area's commercial importance. Much of the middle class has moved out of the cramped district to the villas and condos of Bangkok's new suburbs (*mìu bāan*).

It's a slow process, though, and after shouldering your way through the claustrophobic commercial chaos of Trok Itsaranuphap (p86) you'll find it difficult to imagine it could ever have been busier. Chinese remains the district's primary language, and goods, people and services are on a continuous conveyor belt into and out of the area. All of which makes this one of Bangkok's most rewarding areas to simply set out and explore.

To do this you could follow the walking tour (p86), or perhaps starve yourself for two days before embarking on a voyage of street food discovery, or just make it up as you go along. Whichever option you choose, expect it to be memorable.

At the western edge of Chinatown, near the intersection of Th Phahurat and Th Chakraphet, is a small but thriving Indian and Islamic district, generally called Phahurat or Little India. The dim alleys and affinity for commerce tie these two heritages together, although their particular expressions provide a fascinating diversity. Th Chakraphet is home to several cheap Indian restaurants (p159) that serve delicious food.

## CHURCH OF SANTA CRUZ [Map p84](#)

☎ 0 2466 0347; Soi Kuti Jiin, Thonburi;  
🌞 Sat & Sun; 🏠 from Tha Pak Talat/  
Atsadang

Centuries before Sukhumvit became the international district, the Portuguese claimed *faràng* (Western) supremacy and built the Church of Santa Cruz in the 1700s. The land was a gift from King

## top picks

### CHINATOWN

- [Talat Noi](#) ([opposite](#)) Stroll through this cramped neighbourhood of oil-stained machine shops.
- [Phahurat](#) ([opposite](#)) Bollywood-style markets of flashy colours and sequins galore.
- [Sampeng Lane](#) (p131) Regimented chaos and commerce are staged deep in the bowels of this outdoor market.
- [Wat Traimit](#) (p85) Meet the temple's Buddha made of 5.5 tonnes of gold.

Taksin in appreciation for the loyalty the Portuguese community had displayed after the fall of Ayuthaya. The surviving church dates to 1913. Very little activity occurs on the grounds itself, but small village streets break off from the main courtyard into the area known as Kuti Jiin. On Soi Kuti Jiin 3, several houses sell the Portuguese-inspired cakes.

## HUALAMPHONG RAILWAY STATION

[Map p84](#)

สถานีรถไฟหัวลำโพง

Th Phra Ram IV; 📍 air-con 501, ordinary 25 & 75;  
🚆 [Hualamphong](#)

At the southeastern edge of Chinatown, Bangkok's main train station was built by Dutch architects and engineers just before WWI. It is one of the city's earliest and most outstanding examples of the movement towards Thai Art Deco. If you can zone out of the chaos for a moment, look for the vaulted iron roof and neoclassical portico that were a state-of-the-art engineering feat, and the patterned, two-toned skylights that exemplify pure de Stijl Dutch modernism.

## PHAHURAT [Map p84](#)

พาหุรัด

West of Th Chakrawati; 🏠 [Tha Saphan Phut](#) (Memorial Bridge, N6), 🚆 ordinary 53 & 73

Fabric and gem traders set up shop in this small but bustling Little India, where everything from Bollywood movies to bindis is sold by enthusiastic small-time traders. Behind the more obvious storefronts are winding alleys that criss-cross Khlong Ong Ang, where merchants grab a bite to eat or make travel arrangements for trips home – it's a great area to just wander, stopping for masala chai or lassi as you go.

Just off Th Chakraphet is [Sri Gurusingh Sabha](#) (Th Phahurat; 🕒 6am-5pm), a gold-domed Sikh temple best viewed from Soi ATM. Basically it's a large hall, somewhat reminiscent of a mosque interior, devoted to the worship of the Guru Granth Sahib, the 17th-century Sikh holy book, which is itself considered the

last of the region's 10 great gurus. *Prasada* (blessed food offered to Hindu or Sikh temple attendees) is distributed among devotees every morning around 9am, and if you arrive on a Sikh festival day you can partake in the *langar* (communal Sikh meal) served in the temple. If you do visit this shrine, be sure to climb to the top for panoramic views of Chinatown. Stores surrounding the temple sell assorted religious paraphernalia.

## TALAT NOI [Map p84](#)

ตลาดน้อย

Bounded by the river, Th Songwat, Th Charoen Krung & Th Yotha; 🏠 [Tha Si Phraya](#)

This microcosm of *soi* life is named after a *noi* (little) market that sets up between Soi 22 and Soi 20, off Th Charoen Krung, selling goods from China. Wandering here you'll find streamlike *soi* turning in on themselves, weaving through people's living rooms, noodle shops and grease-stained machine shops. Opposite the River View Guesthouse, [San Jao Sien Khong](#) (unnamed *soi*; admission by donation; 🕒 6am-6pm) is one of the city's oldest Chinese shrines, which is guarded by a playful rooftop terracotta dragon. A former owner of the shrine made his fortune collecting taxes on bird-nest delicacies.

## WAT MANGKON KAMALAWAT (LENG NOI YEE) [Map p84](#)

วัดมังกรกมลาวาส

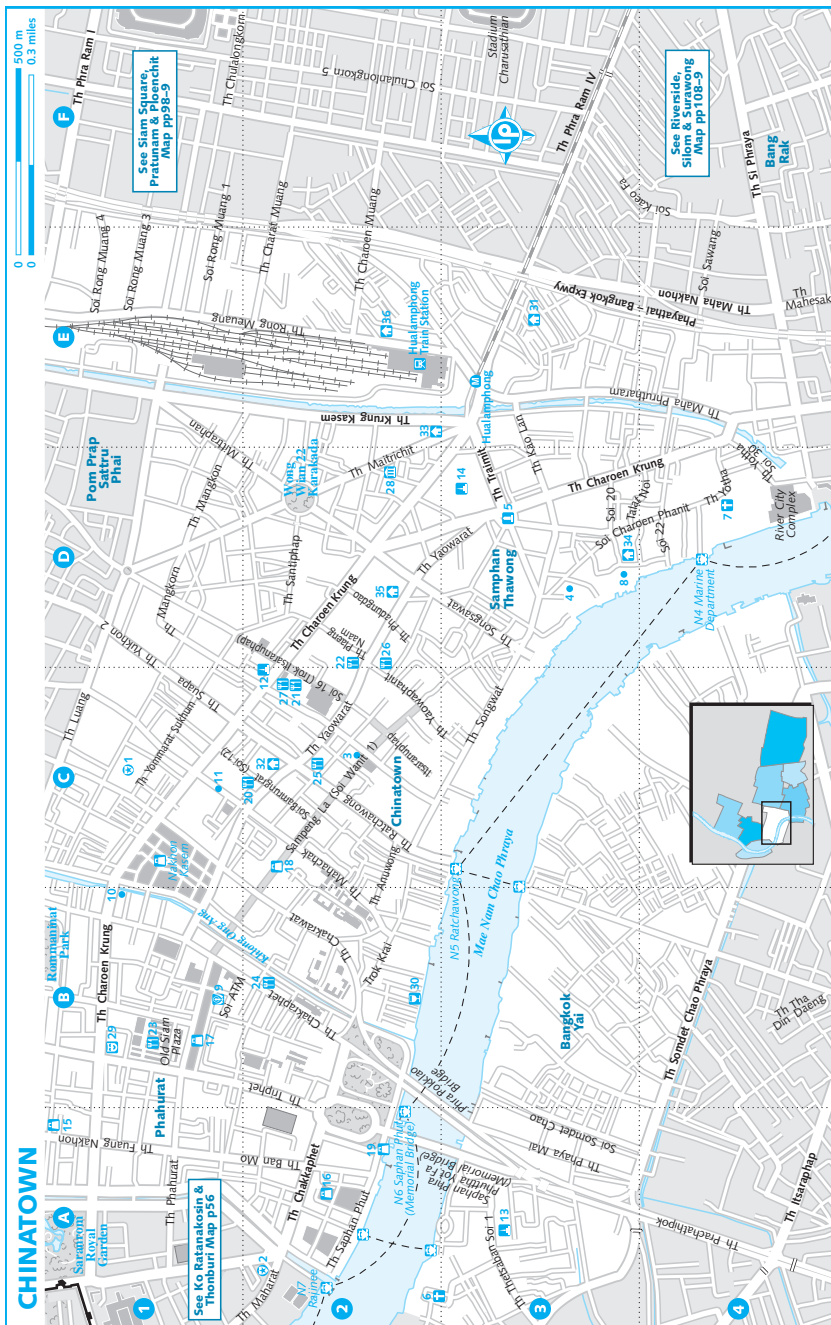
Th Charoen Krung; 🕒 6am-5:30pm; 🚆 air-con 508, ordinary 16, 73, 75 & 93; 🏠 [Tha Ratchawong](#)  
Explore the cryptlike sermon halls of this busy Chinese temple (also known as Leng

## BANGKOK: A CHINESE STORY

The longer you spend in Thailand the more you realise that, unlike most of the rest of the country, the face of Bangkok has a noticeable Chinese look. Indeed, the influence of the Chinese and their integration within the Bangkok community means that as many as half of all Bangkokians claim some Chinese ancestry.

For many that ancestry dates to a mass migration from China's Teochew region in the late 1700s, when peasants came to labour first on the new capital of Thonburi and, later, on Bangkok. The Chinese, who had lived in the Ko Ratanakosin area while working in Thonburi, were moved outside the walls of the new capital to a neighbourhood that went on to become Chinatown. In the best Chinese traditions, impoverished peasants started menial jobs and worked their way up eventually to establish business empires. A pepper grinder who had a stall on Th Charoen Krung tugged at his bootstraps hard enough to corner the country's herbal export trade. Chinatown was a breeding ground for such rags-to-riches stories, and many immigrant families' names are now affixed to some of the country's largest businesses and economic engines.

Thais have been ambivalent about their long-running relationship with Chinese immigrants. The peasant newcomers were despised until their fortunes turned; today attitudes are complimentary, now that affluence, rather than poverty, is the norm. The umbilical cord to the cultural motherland is still strong and can be seen in such events as the Vegetarian Festival (p13). But many descendants of immigrants consider themselves 100% Thai.



## CHINATOWN

## CHINATOWN

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Noi Yee) to find Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian shrines. During the annual Vegetarian Festival (p13), religious and culinary activities are centred here. But almost any time of day or night this temple is busy with worshippers lighting incense, filling the ever-burning altar lamps with oil and making offerings to their ancestors. Offering oil is believed to provide a smooth journey into the afterlife and to fuel the fire of life. Mangkon Kamalawat means 'Dragon Lotus Temple'. Surrounding the temple are vendors selling food for the gods – steamed lotus-shaped dumplings and oranges – that are used for merit making.

## WAT TRAIMIT Map p84

วัดไตรมิตร

☎ 0 2225 9775; cnr Th Yaowarat & Th Charoen Krung; admission Golden Buddha/temple 20B/free; 🕒 8am-5pm; 🚶 Tha Ratchawong, 🚊 ordinary 25 & 53, 🚇 Hualampong

Wat Traimit (Temple of the Golden Buddha) is home to the world's largest gold Buddha image, a gleaming, 3m-tall, 5.5-

tonne behemoth whose story is probably the most interesting aspect of a visit here. Sculpted in the graceful Sukhothai style (notice the hair curls and elongated earlobes), the image was only 'rediscovered' some 50 years ago when it was dropped from a crane while being moved. This divine act cracked a plaster exterior that was, it is thought, applied to disguise it from marauding hordes in either the late Sukhothai or the Ayutthaya period, when the Burmese repeatedly threatened and eventually pillaged Siam.

Wat Traimit is on every tour guide's itinerary, and the seemingly endless procession of tour groups seems to have scared off most of the genuine worshippers. The spectacle can be underwhelming. After viewing the image, head to the main bòt and the mechanical horoscope machines outside, which look like an import from a boardwalk amusement strip. Put a coin in the machine that corresponds to the day of the week you were born, lights flash mystically and then a number appears that corresponds to a printed fortune.

## TRANSPORT: CHINATOWN

**Bus** Air-con 507 and 508, ordinary 53, 73 and 75

**Ferry** Tha Ratchawong (N5), Tha Saphan Phut (Memorial Bridge, N6)

**Metro** Hualampong

While we list bus numbers here, traffic in Chinatown is so dire that you're strongly advised to avoid all forms of road transport. Instead, plan your route and arrive by river ferry to Tha Ratchawong or Tha Saphan Phut, or take the Metro to Hualampong and walk. Following the walking tour (p86), or just making up your own as you wander, is undoubtedly the most interesting (and, ahm, hot, crowded, slow and sweaty) way to get around. If it all gets too much, at weekends a hop-on hop-off tourist bus loops from opposite Hualampong station up Th Yaowarat and back down Th Charoen Krung.



## GOING WITH THE FLOW

For a day of sightseeing, you'll need a good map, comfortable shoes, patience, and coins and small notes to buy water. Don't bring your Western concept of pavement etiquette. You're in Asia now, and the rules of personal space – not to mention the laws of physics – are completely different. Human traffic in Bangkok acts like flowing water: if there is an empty space, it will quickly be filled with a body, regardless of who was where in some unspoken queue. With an increase of mass (a motorcycle or pushcart), a solid state is achieved and the sea of pedestrians can be pushed out of the way in a textbook example of might-makes-right – or size matters. Once you master these simple concepts, you can enjoy shuffling along with the flow.

past the street's famous gold shops (gold is sold by the *bàat*, a unit of weight equal to 15g, and prices are good). After 100m or so, gird your loins and cross Th Yaowarat, then head straight into a tiny lane known variously as Soi Charoen Krung 16 and Trok Itsaranuphap. There's no sign, but you'll know by the queue of people shuffling into the alley one at a time. If you thought Soi Sampeng was busy, this crush of humanity, also known as Talaat Mai (New Market), will have your head spinning like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*.

**7 Talat Leng-Buai-la** A short way along on the left is Talat Leng-Buai-la. A spry 80 years old, it was once the city's central vegetable market but today sells mainly Chinese ingredients such as fresh cashews, lotus seeds and shiitake mushrooms. The first section is lined with vendors purveying cleaned chickens, plucked ducks, scaled fish, unnaturally coloured vats of pickled food and prepackaged snacks – hungry yet? [Hong Kong Noodles](#) (p159), on the left side of the alley, does a rollicking business catering to appetites aroused by such sights.

**8 Wat Mangkon Kamalawat** You will, eventually, pop out the far end onto Th Charoen Krung. Cross over and go a short way down Soi Charoen Krung 21 to [Wat Mangkon Kamalawat](#) (p83), one of Chinatown's largest and liveliest temples. Along this stretch of the street neighbouring shops sell fruit, cakes, incense and ritual burning paper, all for offering at the temple.

**9 Thanon Plaeng Naam** Head back to Th Charoen Krung, turn left (east) and walk one

block and turn right on Th Plaeng Naam. This atmospheric street of shophouses and street food is a more leisurely place for a feed, particularly at the two streetside kitchens at the north end.

**10 Thanon Yaowarat** Continue south, then turn left onto hectic Th Yaowarat. This is the neon-side of Chinatown; great for photos in the late afternoon and early evening. After passing a couple of old Art Deco buildings that have seen better days, turn left at the Odeon Circle, with its distinctive Chinese gate, onto Th Mitthaphap (aka Th Traimit).

**11 Wat Traimit & the Golden Buddha** A couple of minutes along this street of brushes and wicker furniture is Wat Traimit and its 5.5 tonnes of [Golden Buddha](#) (p85). If you've timed your run to get here in late afternoon (but before it closes at 5pm), it should be free of the usual tour buses and make a welcome respite from all those markets.

**12 Talat Noi** If you're knackered, it's a short walk eastwards to Hualamphong and the Metro. But if it's anywhere near sunset, we strongly recommend heading back to Odeon Sq, braving the traffic and heading down Soi Yaowarat 1. Follow this road of machine shops, then continue onto Soi Charoen Phant into the local Talat Noi neighbourhood. Follow the signs to the [River View Guest House](#) (p208), where the 8th-floor restaurant-bar has cheap beer and amazing sunset views. It's not far from here to the Tha Maritime Department ferry pier, but remember the last boats pass a little after 7pm.

## SIAM SQUARE, PRATUNAM, PLOENCHIT & RATCHATHEWI

Eating p160; Shopping p132; Sleeping p209

It's not often that you'll see 'Bangkok' and 'organisation' used in the same sentence. But this central shopping district is surprisingly well connected, and it can be dangerously convenient for unleashing cash. At first glance this neighbourhood is all about shopping, a shrine to modern consumerism where mega-malls cater to every whim and exclusive brands outbid each other for the prime, ground-floor storefronts in the most exclusive malls (currently that's [Siam Paragon](#), p132).

This is modern Bangkok, where flimsy fashion is no longer a saffron monks' robe but a flouncy skirt and clicky heels. Packs of teenagers shuffle across the concrete pathways, breaking all the social mores their ancestors ever created. Female students wear miniskirts that could easily be mistaken for wide belts, cutesy couples stroll hand in hand, hipsters (*dèk naew*) assume gangster styles from ghettos they've only heard rapped about. Give Bangkok another 10 years of disposable income and the city – which is rightly proud of its creative side – will rival Tokyo and New York for pop power.

The centre of the action is Siam Skytrain station, the interchange for both Skytrain lines, which acts as the heart of the district. Through its network of concrete walkway veins it pumps thousands of passengers into nearby [Siam Sq](#) (p135), an ageing ground-level mall peopled by baht-flexing students – in black and white uniforms – who trawl through the closet-sized boutiques that dictate what's hot and what's not. Exit to the north and you'll arrive in the air-conditioned atmosphere of [Siam Paragon](#) (p135), with its super-expensive boutiques, European sports cars and world-class [oceanarium](#) (p101) or the more affordable (and more funky) [Siam Discovery Center](#) (p135). Further along Bangkok's miracle mile of shopping centres on Th Phra Ram I (aka Rama I) are [Mahboonkrong](#) (MBK, p134) to the west and the vast [Central World Plaza](#) (p133), plus others, to the east. Beware of consumer euphoria.

All the action here, coupled with the massive Skytrain station that looms above everything, means the area is constantly buffeted by a cacophonous din and suffocating exhaust fumes, which also make this area alone a significant contributor to Bangkok's image as an unpleasant and difficult place to visit.

Mercifully, respite is near at hand. If you spend enough time you'll find [cinemas](#) (p190) abound. For something more cerebral head to [Bangkok Art & Culture Centre](#) (p191), which should be open by the time you read this. And there's a chance to step out of the air-conditioned, international city entirely and enter old Bangkok at the famous [Jim Thompson's House](#) (below) or, across Khlong Saen Saeb in Pratunam district, the much less touristed and thoroughly original Muslim village of [Baan Krua](#) (p100). Pratunam is also home to Thailand's tallest skyscraper, the [Baiyoke Tower II](#) (Map pp52–3).

South of Th Phra Ram I and west of Th Phayathai the Pathumwan district is filled with the [National Stadium](#) (Map pp98–9) and surrounding sports facilities, and the huge campus of Chulalongkorn University, one of Thailand's most prestigious universities.

Heading east at the intersection of Th Phra Ram I and Th Ratchadamri the area known as Ratchaprasong supports a clutch of luxury hotels, more malls and the [Erawan Shrine](#) (p102). The area extending east along Th Ploenchit includes the tree-lined Soi Lang Suan, with its expensive condos and serviced apartments, and Th Withayu (Wireless Rd), which is home to embassies and expatriates.

**JIM THOMPSON'S HOUSE** Map pp98–9

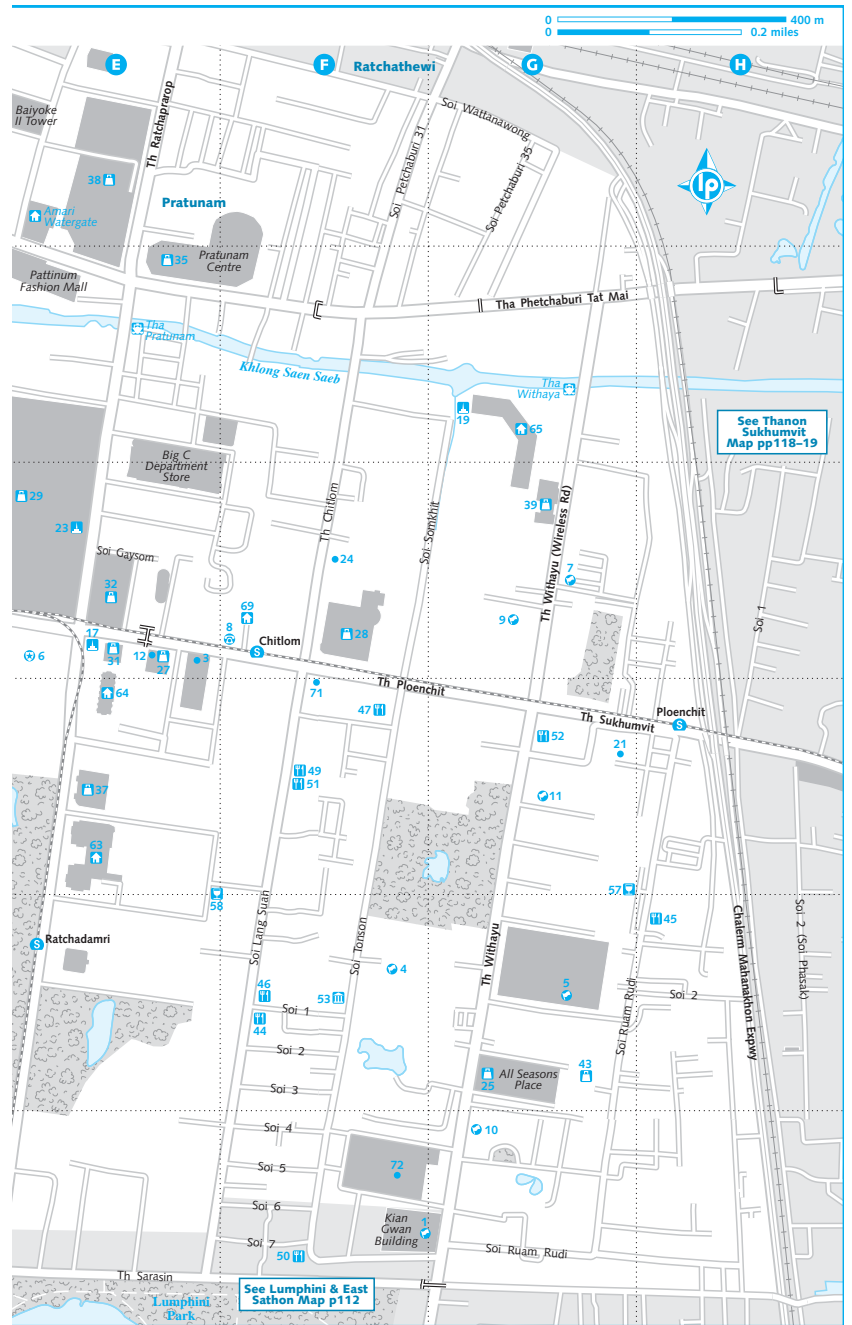
บ้านจิมทอมป์สัน

☎ 0 2216 7368; [www.jimthompsonhouse.org](http://www.jimthompsonhouse.org); 6 Soi Kasem San 2, Th Phra Ram I; adult/concession 100/50B; ☎ 9am–5pm; 🚢 khlong boat Hua Chang Pier; 📍 National Stadium

In 1959, 12 years after he discovered the fine silks being woven across the *khlong* in Baan Krua and single-handedly turned Thai silk into a hugely successful export

business, American Jim Thompson bought this piece of land on Khlong Saen Saeb and built himself a house. It wasn't, however, any old house. Thompson's love of all things Thai saw him buy six traditional wooden homes and reconstruct them in the jungle-like garden here. Some of the homes were brought from the old royal capital of Ayuthaya; others were pulled down and floated across the *khlong* from

# SIAM SQUARE, PRATUNAM & PLOENCHIT



## SIAM SQUARE, PRATUNAM &amp; PLOENCHIT

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Baan Krua – including the first building you enter on the tour, which once belonged to the parents of Khun Nippon Manuthas (see p92).

Thompson became one of the first Westerners to embrace the traditional Thai home as a thing of beauty. Thai homes would traditionally have been multipurpose affairs, with little room for luxuries like separate living and sleeping rooms. Thompson adapted his six buildings, joining some, to create a larger home in which each room had a more familiar Western function. One room became an air-conditioned study, another a bedroom and the one nearest the *khlong* his dining room.

As well as having good taste in silk, Thompson was an eagle-eyed collector of Thai goods, from residential architecture to Southeast Asian art. Today the house operates as a museum for his collection and a tribute to the man. Viewing is by regularly

departing tour only, and photography is not allowed inside the buildings. New buildings house the **Jim Thompson Art Center** (p192), a café selling drinks and light meals and a vast shop flogging Jim Thompson-branded goods. For a taste of the Bangkok Thompson grew to love (and cheaper drinks and silks), follow your visit here with the walking tour, p105.

Beware well-dressed touts in *soi* near the Thompson house who will tell you it is closed and then try to haul you off on a dodgy buying spree.

## BAAN KRUA Map pp98–9

**Btwn Khlong Saen Saeb, Th Phayathai & Th Phra Ram VI;** **khlong boat Tha Hua Chang** Baan Krua (literally 'Muslim Family Village') is one of Bangkok's oldest communities. It dates to the turbulent years at the end of the 18th century, when Cham Muslims from Cambodia and Vietnam fought on

## top picks

## SIAM SQUARE, PRATUNAM &amp; PLOENCHIT

- **Erawan Shrine** (p102) A splash of religion in the midst of all the money
- **Jim Thompson's House** (p97) A teak mansion with a jungle-like garden and informative tours
- **Baan Krua** (opposite) The Muslim village where Jim Thompson first encountered silk
- **Khlong Saen Saeb Canal Boats p253** Commute with the locals the old-fashioned way, along this atmospheric (in more ways than one) *khlong*
- **Mahboonkrong** (MBK; p134) Indulge in air-con, junk food, a million mobile phones, clothes and plastic stuff
- **Wang Suan Phakkat** (p104) Pretend you're a minor Thai royal in the quiet museum grounds
- **Sanguan Sri** (p160) Ignore the surrounds and dive in for the red curry with duck breast
- **Siam Sq** (p132) Immerse yourself in the epicentre of Thai teen culture in the cafés and boutiques of Siam Sq

the side of the new Thai king and were rewarded with this plot of land east of the new capital. The immigrants brought their silk-weaving traditions with them, and the community grew with the arrival of other Muslims and when the residents built the *khlong* to better connect them to the river.

The 1950s and '60s were boom years for Baan Krua, after Jim Thompson (see p102) hired the weavers and exported their silks across the globe. Production was moved elsewhere following Thompson's disappearance, and many Muslims have moved out of the area; today about 30% of the population is Muslim, the rest primarily immigrants from northeast Thailand. However, it retains its Muslim character, and one of the original families is still weaving silk on old teak looms; see p92 for an interview with Nippon Manuthas. The village consists of old, tightly packed homes threaded by tiny paths barely wide enough for two people to pass. It has been described as a slum, but the house-proud residents are keen to point out that they might not live in high-rise condos, but that doesn't make their old community a slum.

The best way to visit Baan Krua is to wander; see the DIY Walking Tour, p105, to get started.

## SIAM OCEAN WORLD Map pp98–9

2687 2000; www.siamoceanworld.com; basement, Siam Paragon, Th Rama 1; adult/child 750/600B; 9am–10pm (last entry 9pm); Siam Southeast Asia's largest oceanarium is also one of its most impressive. Hundreds of species of fish, crustaceans and even penguins populate this vast underground facility. The oceanarium is divided into several zones accommodating specific species. The main tank is the highlight, with an acrylic tunnel allowing you to walk beneath sharks, rays and all manner of fish. Diving with sharks is also an option if you have your licence (for a fee), though you'll have almost as much fun timing your trip to coincide with the shark and penguin feedings; the former are usually at 1pm and 4pm, the latter at 12.30pm and 4.30pm – check the website for details.

## LINGAM SHRINE (SAAN JAO MAE THAP THIM) Map pp98–9

ศาลเจ้าแม่ทับทิม

**Nai Lert Park Hotel, Th Withayu;** **khlong boat to Tha Withayu;** **Ploenchit**

Every village-neighbourhood has a local shrine, either a sacred banyan tree tied up with coloured scarves or a spirit house. But it isn't everyday you see a phallus garden like this lingam shrine, tucked back behind the staff quarters of the Nai Lert Park Hotel. Clusters of carved stone and wooden shafts surround a spirit house and shrine built by millionaire businessman Nai Loet to honour Jao Mae Thap Thim, a female deity thought

## TRANSPORT: SIAM SQUARE, PRATUNAM &amp; PLOENCHIT

**Bus** Air-con 141, 183, 204, 501, 508 and 547, ordinary 15, 16, 25, 47 and 73, among other grid-locked rattlers

**Khlong boat** Tha Hua Chang for Siam Sq shopping centres, Jim Thompson's House and Baan Krua, Tha Pratunam for Central World and Pantip Plaza, Tha Withayu for Lingham Shrine and Central World

**Skytrain** Siam, National Stadium, Chitlom and Ploenchit

Even by Bangkok standards, traffic around here is nightmarish. If you're coming from the Silom, Sathon or Sukhumvit areas, or from north towards Chatuchak Market, take the Skytrain. Coming from Banglamphu and the Th Khao San area, take the *khlong* boat.



to reside in the old banyan tree on the site. Someone who made an offering shortly after the shrine was built had a baby, and the shrine has received a steady stream of worshippers – mostly young women seeking fertility – ever since.

If facing the entrance of the hotel, follow the small concrete pathway to the right, which winds down into the building beside the car park. The shrine is at the end of the building next to the *khlong*.

## RATCHAPRASONG INTERSECTION SHRINES Map pp98–9

**Cnr Th Ratchadamri & Th Ploenchit;** **Chitlom**

A crowd in this part of town usually means a bargain market is nearby. But in this case the continuous activity revolves around the Hindu shrines credited with making this commercial corridor a success. It's a fascinating place to come and just watch the way modern Thais have pragmatically adapted their beliefs – and their hopes – to the perceived reality that success breeds success, especially with the deities on your side.

The primary focus is the **Erawan Shrine** (Map pp98–9; San Phra Phrom; ☎ 6am–10.30pm), on the corner beside the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel. Brahma, the four-headed Hindu god of creation, holds court here. Brahma would normally command great respect in Thai Buddhism but not nearly enough to warrant this sort of idolatry. The human traffic jam can be directly attributed to the

perceived powers of the shrine since it was established in 1954. Originally, a simple Thai spirit house occupied this spot during the construction of the first Erawan Hotel (named after Indra's three-headed elephant mount). After several serious mishaps delayed the hotel's construction, the developers erected this Brahman shrine to ward off future injuries. The Erawan Hotel was finished, business boomed and eventually the shrine took on a cult of its own, being seen as a harbinger of material success.

There is a constant cycle of worshippers seeking divine assistance for good luck, health, wealth and love. Most people offer marigold garlands or raise a cluster of joss sticks to foreheads in prayer. The flowers are left on the shrine for a few minutes, before attendants gather them up to be resold. Not everyone goes for that, however, and one ex-student told us how, in her university days, a Big Mac would be offered, left for a few minutes and then retrieved; why waste it?

When wishes are granted, the worshippers show their gratitude by commissioning shrine musicians and dancers for a performance. The tinkling tempo, throaty bass and colourful dancers are in marked contrast to the ordinary street corner on which the shrine stands, surrounded by idling cars and self-absorbed shoppers – though most of them will still offer a passing *wai* (bringing the hands together in a prayer-like manner at chest level).

The businesses posted on the other corners of the intersection have erected their own Hindu shrines in order to counter and/or copy the power of the Erawan Shrine. This godly one-upmanship sees Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu, standing atop Gaysorn Plaza while Vishnu himself is mounted upon Garuda at the Intercontinental Hotel. Another Garuda can be found in the Police Hospital, while Indra is appropriately placed outside the Amarin Plaza, beside the Erawan.

If your head is spinning, you could settle for crossing diagonally from the Erawan Shrine to the square outside Central World for a look at elephant-headed Ganesha – whose presence is no great surprise given his parents are Lakshmi and Vishnu. On the same corner, most likely as a cosmic mediator between all these rival deities, is the **Trimurthi Shrine** (San Trimurthi). This shrine depicts the three supreme Hindu gods (Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma) and symbolises creation, destruction and preservation. Note that 'love' is not mentioned here, but peace and love aren't that far removed and that's enough to have Thai teenagers descending on the shrine on Thursdays to seek romantic success.

## CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

Map pp98–9

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

☎ 0 2215 0871; [www.chula.ac.th](http://www.chula.ac.th); 254 Th Phayathai; air-con 502, ordinary 21; Siam; Samyan

Thailand's oldest and most prestigious university is nestled in a leafy enclave south of busy Th Phra Ram I. The centrepiece of the campus is the promenade ground on the east side of Th Phayathai where a seated statue of Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) is surrounded by purple bougainvillea and offerings of pink carnations. The showcase buildings display the architectural fusion the monarch favoured, a mix of Italian revival and Thai traditional. The campus has a parklike quality, with noble tropical trees considerably labelled for plant geeks. Of the many species that shade the campus, the rain trees with their delicate leaves are considered symbolic of the university, even commemorated in a school song, and the deciduous cycle matches the beginning and ending of each school year.

The university has two art galleries, Jamjuree and the **Art Centre** (Map pp98–9;

# top picks

## IT'S FREE

The value of the Thai baht in international currencies might turn misers into spendthrifts, but there are still plenty of cheap and even free thrills in Bangkok.

- **Hotel river boats** (p113) Take a free hotel ferry from Central Pier or River City to the plush hotel of your choice; whether you have a drink when you get there is up to you
- **Erawan Shrine** (opposite) See traditional Thai dancing, paid for by a Bangkokian making merit
- **Lumphini Park** (p106) Sweat in synchrony at the free evening aerobics classes
- **Victory Monument Skytrain station** (Map pp52–3) See break dancers practising their moves, young couples flirting, fashion trendies exhibiting themselves, and illegal markets on the elevated walkway leading to this station

0 2218 2911; [www.car.chula.ac.th/art](http://www.car.chula.ac.th/art); Centre of Academic Resources Bldg, 7th fl, Chulalongkorn University, Th Phayathai; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–4pm Sat; Siam, Samyan). The latter shows Chula Professors as well as major names in the Thai and international modern art scene; permanent exhibits include Thai art retrospectives.

On the west side of Th Phayathai is the teak **Thai Pavilion**, in which the Center of Arts and Culture performs cultural displays on the first Friday of each month.

## RATCHATHEWI

Spreading north of Pratunam is Ratchathewi, an area that attracts few tourists but does have some sights. The area around Victory Monument is also an interesting area to find bars and restaurants that are very much the staples of the Thai middle class.

## VICTORY MONUMENT Map pp52–3

อนุสาวรีย์ชัยสมรภูมิ

**Th Ratchawithi & Phayathai;** Victory Monument; ordinary 12, 62

A busy traffic circle revolves around this obelisk monument that was built in 1914 to commemorate a 1939 Thai victory against the French in Laos. But the monument is only a landmark for observing the social universe of the local university students. An elevated walkway circumnavigates the roundabout, funnelling the pedestrian traffic

## JIM THOMPSON: INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY... AND SILK

Born in Delaware in 1906, Jim Thompson was a New York architect who served in the Office of Strategic Services (a forerunner of the CIA) in Thailand during WWII. After the war he found New York too tame compared to his beloved Bangkok. When in 1947 he spotted some silk in a market and was told it was woven in Baan Krua (see walking tour, p105), he found the only place in Bangkok where silk was still woven by hand.

Thompson thought he could sell the fine silk from Baan Krua to a postwar world with a ravenous appetite for luxury goods. He attracted the interest of fashion houses in New York, Milan, London and Paris, and gradually built a worldwide clientele for a craft that had, just a few years before, been in danger of dying out. They were heady days for the poor Muslim weavers of Baan Krua. Thompson was noted for both his idealism and generosity, and when he set up the Thai Silk Company in 1948 he insisted that his contract weavers became shareholders.

By 1967 Thai Silk had annual sales of almost US\$1.5 million. In March that year, when Thompson went missing while out for an afternoon walk in the Cameron Highlands of western Malaysia, his success as a businessman and background as a spy made it an international mystery. Thompson has never been heard from since, but the conspiracy theories – fuelled even further by the murder of his sister in the USA during the same year – have never stopped. Was it communist spies? Business rivals? A man-eating tiger? The most recent theory is that the silk magnate was accidentally run over by a Malaysian truck driver who hid his remains.

*The Legendary American: The Remarkable Career & Strange Disappearance of Jim Thompson*, written by his long-time friend William Warren, is an excellent account of Thompson's life.

in and out of the Skytrain station as well as providing a gathering spot for break dancers, flirts and lots of fashion experiments. The neighbourhood around Victory Monument is less cosmopolitan and more reminiscent of provincial towns elsewhere in Thailand, but that doesn't mean it's hicksville. Nearby bars and cafés cater to the university crowd – try the rooftop Skytrain Bar on the corner of Th Rang Nam. If you wander down Th Rang Nam you'll find local *lùuk thung* and *phleng phéua chii-wit* (songs for life) places with live music most evenings.

### BAIYOKE II TOWER Map pp52–3

☎ 2656 3000; 22 Th Ratchaprarop; admission 200B; ☎ 10am–10pm; 🚢 *khlong boat* Tha Pratumam

Thailand's tallest tower, if not its most architecturally attractive, the Baiyoke II tower soars to 88 storeys, the upper of which are often clad with some truly huge advertising. The main, and indeed the only, attraction here is the 77th floor observation deck. The views are as impressive as you'd expect (unless its too smoggy) but only just compensate for the tacky décor and uninspiring restaurant. If you have a choice, the rooftop bars are better.

### WANG SUAN PHAKKAT Map pp52–3

วังสวนผักกาด  
☎ 0 2245 4934; Th Si Ayuthaya, btwn Th Phayathai & Th Ratchaprarop; admission 100B; ☎ 9am–4pm; 🚪 ordinary 72; 📍 Phayathai

Everyone loves Jim Thompson's house, but few have even heard of Wang Suan Phakkat (Lettuce Farm Palace), another noteworthy traditional Thai house museum. Once the residence of Princess Chumbon of Nakhon Sawan, the museum is a collection of five traditional wooden Thai houses linked by elevated walkways containing varied displays of art, antiques and furnishings. The landscaped grounds are a peaceful oasis complete with ducks, swans and a semi-enclosed, Japanese-style garden.

The diminutive **Lacquer Pavilion** at the back of the complex dates from the Ayuthaya period (the building originally sat in a monastery compound on the banks of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, just south of Ayuthaya) and features gold-leaf *Jataka* and Ramayana murals as well as scenes from daily Ayuthaya life. Larger residential structures at the front of the complex contain

displays of Khmer, Hindu and Buddhist art, Ban Chiang ceramics and a collection of historic Buddhas, including a beautiful late-U Thong-style image. In the noise and confusion of Bangkok, the gardens offer a tranquil retreat.

### PHAYATHAI PALACE Map pp52–3

King Mongkut Hospital, ☎ 0 2354 7732; 315 Th Ratchawithi; admission free; ☎ 9am–4pm Sat; 📍 Victory Monument

West of the Victory Monument roundabout, Phayathai Palace was built by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in 1909 as a cottage for retreats into what was then the country. The surviving throne hall, encased in French glass doors and a fanciful tiered roof, is now part of a hospital complex and is open to the public. Note the limited hours; tours are conducted at 9.30am and 1.30pm on Saturdays. The grounds are open at other times. There isn't much in the way of tourist displays, but it's worth a visit to survey the architecture of the buildings and escape the sightseeing masses.

### BANGKOK DOLL FACTORY & MUSEUM Map pp52–3

พิพิธภัณฑ์ตุ๊กตาบางกอกดอล  
☎ 0 2245 3008; www.bangkokdolls.com; 85 Soi Ratchataphan (Soi Mo Leng), Th Ratchaprarop; admission free; ☎ 8.30am–5pm Mon–Sat; 📍 ordinary 62 & 77

Khunying Tongkorn Chandevimol became interested in dolls while living in Japan. Upon her return to Thailand, she began researching and making dolls, drawing from Thai mythology and historical periods. Today her personal collection of dolls from all over the world and important dolls from her own workshop are on display. You can also view the small factory where family members continue to craft the figures that are now replicated and sold throughout Thailand's tourist markets. A large selection of her dolls are also for sale.

It is difficult to find this well-hidden spot, but perseverance will reward any doll lover, especially the pint-sized connoisseurs. The museum is in Ratchathewi and is best approached via Th Si Ayuthaya heading east. Cross under the expressway past the intersection with Th Ratchaprarop and take the *soi* to the right of the post office. Follow this windy street until you start seeing signs.

## DIY BAAN KRUA

### Walking Tour

We could tell you to take lefts and rights down little alleys, but exploring this historic Muslim village is more fun if you just venture forth and find your own way. But we will get you into the village... Start this DIY tour when you finish your tour of **Jim Thompson's House** (p97); head left to the *khlong* and left again. You'll soon come to Garimmin & Sobereen, a make-shift, *khlong*-side place selling food and cold drinks, which is a great spot to sit and watch the *khlong* boats motor by while observing village life on the other side: men dressed in white dishdashas, exotic caged birds yapping and women selling food and everyday items from tiny stores that are a world away from the nearby mega-malls.

Refreshed, cross the footbridge and dive in. Wander around and try to keep a smile on your face. The local people are welcoming and enjoy a bit of banter, but don't enter anyone's house unless you're invited. You can spend as little or long as you like wandering

### WALK FACTS

**Start** Jim Thompson's House

**End** Wherever you like

**Distance** not very far

**Duration** 15 minutes to one hour

**Fuel Stops** Corner stores in Baan Krua, or Garimmin & Sobereen across the footbridge.

through Baan Krua, but do try to see the silk weavers in action. You'll probably hear the clickety clack of the looms before you see them; if you can't find them ask for directions (hint: they are in an alley leading off the *khlong*-side path).

Of the two, **Phamai Baan Krua** (☎ 0 2215 7458) is the easiest in which to watch the weaving and (if he's around) owner Niphon Manuthas speaks English and German; see p92 for an interview with him. The high-quality handwoven silk that originally attracted Jim Thompson is still sold here, and prices are very reasonable compared with the chic store across the *khlong*.

# RIVERSIDE, SILOM & LUMPHINI

Eating p160; Shopping p136; Sleeping p211

During Bangkok's shipping heyday, the city faced outward toward the river to welcome foreign trading ships and European envoys. All along the Mae Nam Chao Phraya are the remnants of this mercantile era: the ornate French and Portuguese embassies, crumbling Customs House and the elegant **Oriental Hotel** (p212). Little lanes wind through abandoned warehouses, gated headquarters of historic shipping companies, and the Muslim and Indian communities that replaced the European presence.

Th Charoen Krung, which runs parallel to the river and links Th Silom with Chinatown, was Bangkok's first paved road – built at the behest of European residents who wanted a place for their horses and buggies. How times have changed. The water-based society was so taken by this innovation that, one by one, nearly all the canal routes were concreted over to become roads. Today the southern end of Th Charoen Krung is lined with silk and jewellery businesses that sell to wealthy tourists staying at the luxury riverside hotels. But not far away, back behind the commercial façade, are the residential areas where curry shops are more likely to serve Indian-style roti than rice, and silken headdresses distinguish Muslim Thais from their Buddhist sisters.

As industries changed the financial district migrated inland along Th Silom, which runs from Th Charoen Krung northeast to Lumpini Park and Th Phra Ram IV and was once the outskirts of the riverside city. Windmills (*silom*) once dotted the landscape, conveying water to the area's rice fields.

Today Silom experiences a daily tide of people. Workers flood into the office towers in the morning, are released into the streets for lunch and return home aboard public transport in the evening. Foreigners sweat in their imported suits, maintaining the corporate appearance of New York and London in styles that are ill suited for the tropics. Thai secretaries prefer polyester suits that are sold off the rack at small markets, alongside walking toiletries and thick-heeled sandals. Workers returning to the office after lunch are usually loaded down with plastic bags of food for midafternoon snacks: in Thailand the snack table is the equivalent of the Western water cooler.

Parallel to Th Silom are Th Surawong to the north and Th Sathon to the south, which is divided into northbound Th Sathon Neua and southbound Th Sathon Tai, running either side of the remains of the *khlong* it has now replaced. None of these streets is especially well blessed with traditional 'sights', but wedged between Silom and Surawong, uncannily convenient to the heart of the business zone, is Bangkok's most infamous attraction, the Patpong strip of **bars and clubs** (p111).

Th Sathon is home to several embassies (p258), three of Bangkok's best hotels and endless speeding traffic. One of those hotels hosts the dreamy, decadent **Moon Bar at Vertigo** (p177), while State Tower on the corner of Th Silom and Th Charoen Krung is crowned with **Sirocco** (p177). Both host some of the most breathtaking, cocktail-enhanced sunset views on earth.

At the eastern end of this neighbourhood is delightfully, mercifully green Lumpini Park, the city's central green space where kids learn to ride bikes, grandmas stretch out stiff joints, office workers work out and (relatively) fresh air never tasted so good. Lumpini Park is bounded by Th Sarasin, Th Phra Ram IV, Th Withayu (Wireless Road) and Th Ratchadamri. East of the park is **Suan Lum Night Bazaar** (p137), a shopping mecca with an uncertain future, and **Lumpini Stadium** (p199). Just off the southeastern corner of the park is the area known as Soi Ngam Duphli, the backpacker predecessor of Th Khao San's guesthouse scene.

## LUMPHINI PARK Map p112

สวนลุมพินี

☞ 5am-8pm; ☞ air-con 505, ordinary 13; ☞ Lumpini & Silom; ☞ Sala Daeng & Ratchadamri

Named after Buddha's birthplace in Nepal, this is Bangkok's largest and most popular park. An artificial lake in the centre is surrounded by broad, well-tended lawns,

wooded areas, walking paths and, around sunset, the odd ambling turtle – it's the best outdoor escape from Bangkok without leaving town.

One of the best times to visit the park is in the early morning before 7am, when the air is fresh (well, relatively so for Bangkok) and legions of Chinese are practis-

# top picks

## RIVERSIDE, SILOM & LUMPHINI

- **Oriental Hotel** (p212) Relive the steamship era of globetrotting aristocrats with tea and crumpets at this legendary establishment
- **Lumphini Park** (opposite) Relax Bangkok-style among the exercisers and exercise-observers in this peaceful park
- **Patpong** (p185) Ping pong? Well, not exactly...
- **Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute** (right) Confront your fear of snakes at this humanitarian snake farm
- **Cy'an** (p161) Eat where Bangkok's best chefs choose to eat
- **Cocktail hour** Soak up the sunset views and knock back a cocktail or two at Bangkok's tower-top bar-restaurants, **Moon Bar at Vertigo** (p177) and **Sirocco** (p177)

ing t'ai chi, doing their best to mimic the aerobics instructor or doing the half-run half-walk version of jogging that, you have to agree, makes a lot of sense in this oppressive humidity. Meanwhile, vendors set up tables to dispense fresh snake's blood and bile, considered health tonics by many Thais and Chinese. A weight-lifting area in one section becomes a miniature 'muscle beach' on weekends. Facilities include a snack bar, an asphalt jogging track, a picnic area, toilets and a couple of tables where women serve Chinese tea. There are no shops inside the park, but cold drinks are available at the entrance.

During the kite-flying season (from mid-February to April), Lumpini becomes a favoured flight zone, with kites (*wáo*) for sale in the park.

## OLD CUSTOMS HOUSE Map pp108-9

กรมศุลกากร

Soi 36, Th Charoen Krung; ☞ Tha Oriental

The Old Customs House was once the gateway to Thailand, levying taxes on traders moving in and out of the kingdom. Designed by an Italian architect and built in the 1880s, the front door opened onto its source of income (the river) and the grand façade was ceremoniously decorated in columns and transom windows. Today it's a crumbling yet hauntingly beautiful home

to the fire brigade, with sagging shutters, peeling colonial yellow paint and laundry flapping on the unpainted balconies. Plans to resurrect this building as a luxurious Aman Resort seem to have stalled, so anyone with a large wad of spare cash and ambitions as a hotelier should contact the government. It's not open to the public, but it is OK to wander around...as long as you don't get in the way of the volleyball game.

## BANGKOKIAN MUSEUM Map pp108-9

☞ 0 2233 7027; 273 Soi 43, Th Charoen Krung, Bangrak; admission free; ☞ 10am-4pm Wed-Sun; ☞ Tha Si Phraya

This collection of three wooden houses illustrates an often-overlooked period of Bangkok's history, the 1950s and '60s. The main building was built in 1937 as a home for the Surawadee family and, as the signs inform us, was finished by Chinese carpenters on time and for less than the budgeted 2400B (which would barely buy a door handle today). This building and the large wooden one to the right, which was added as a boarding house to help cover costs, are filled with the detritus of family life and offer a fascinating window into the period. The third building, at the back of the block, was built in 1929 as a surgery for a British doctor, though he died soon after arriving in Thailand.

## QUEEN SAOVABHA MEMORIAL INSTITUTE (SNAKE FARM) Map pp108-9

สถานเสาวภา

☞ 0 2252 0161; 1871 Th Phra Ram IV, Lumpini; adult/child 200/50B; ☞ 9.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm Sat & Sun; ☞ air-con 507, ordinary 4, 47 & 50; ☞ Sala Daeng; ☞ Silom

## TRANSPORT: RIVERSIDE, SILOM & LUMPHINI

Bus Air-con 502 and 505, ordinary 15, 22 and 62

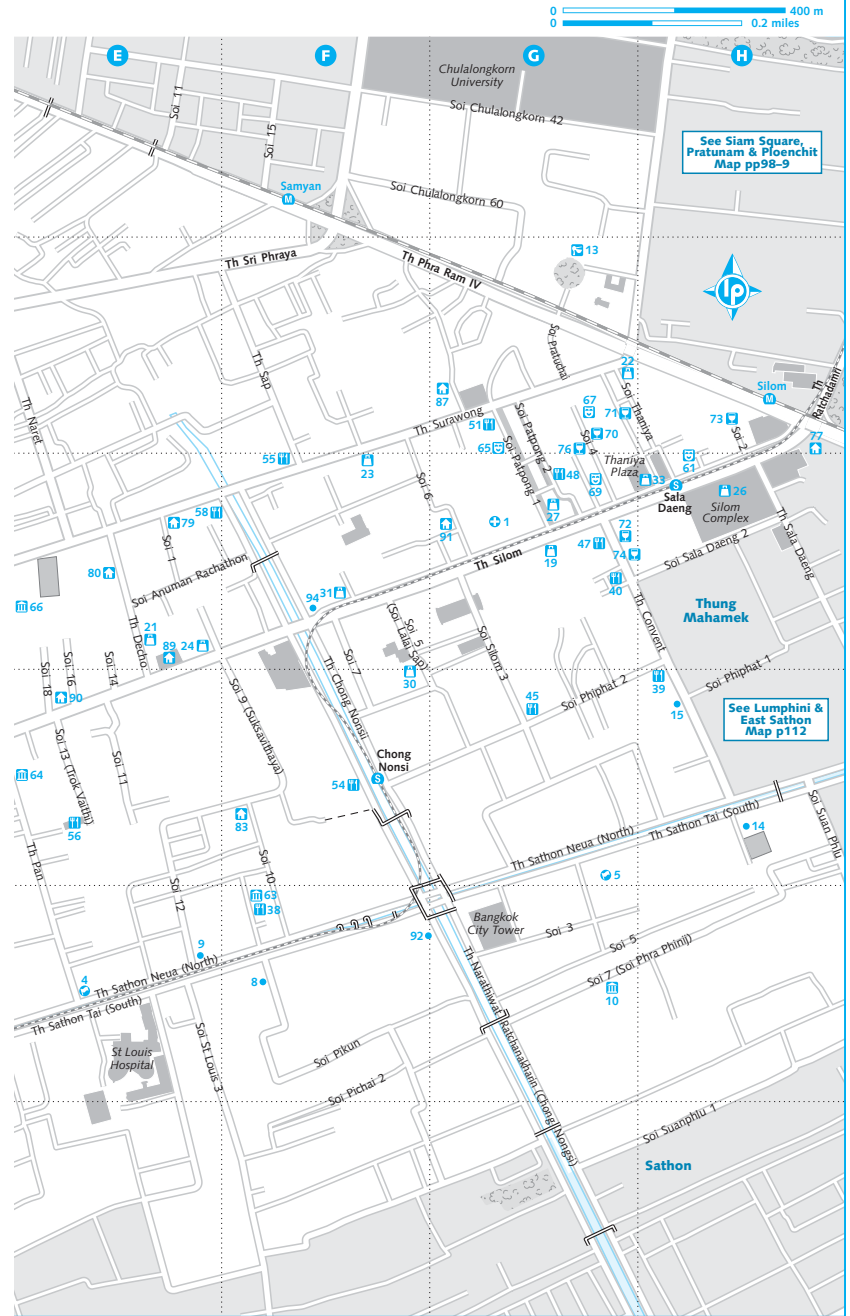
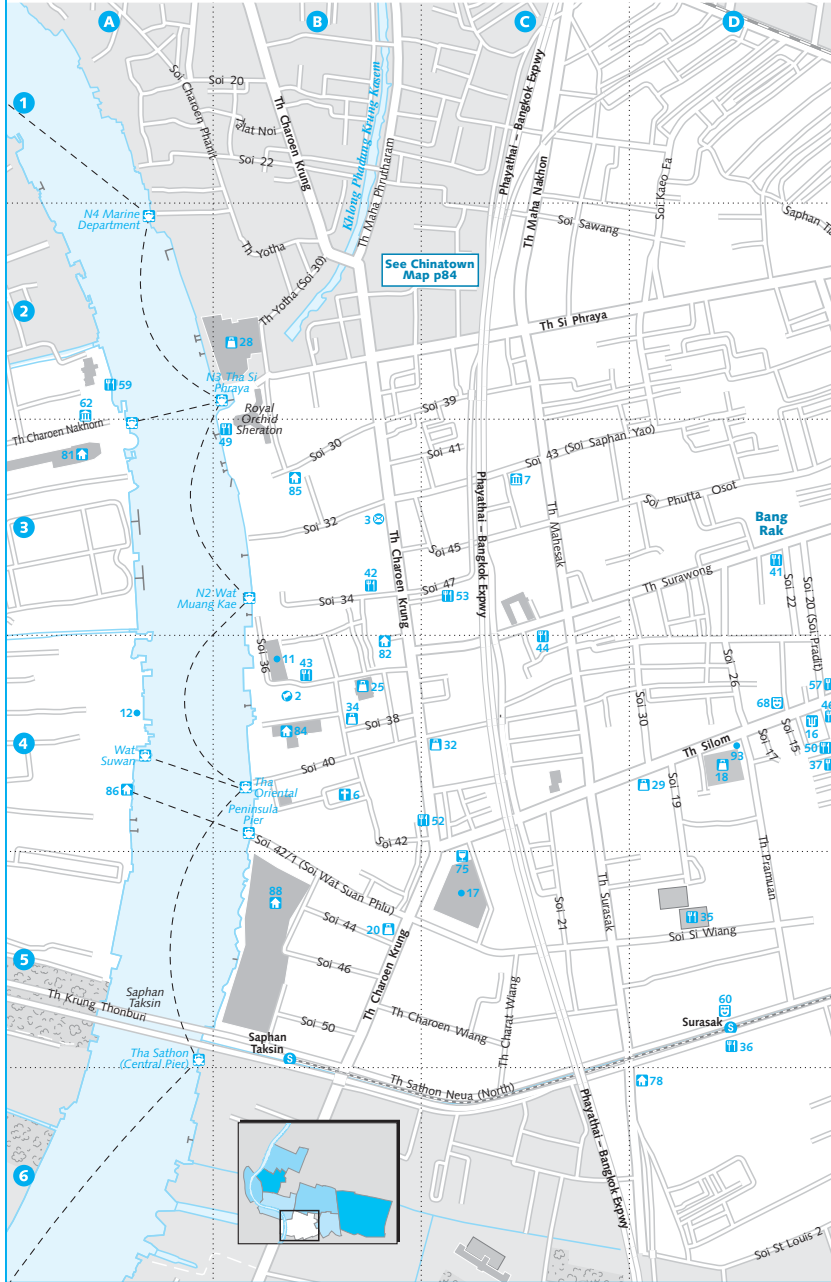
Ferry Tha Si Phraya (N3), Tha Oriental (N1) and Tha Sathon (Central Pier)

Skytrain Sala Daeng, Chong Nonsi and Surasak

Metro Silom and Lumpini

Th Silom is busy at almost every hour, and the Skytrain is a better alternative for reaching destinations on this street. Traffic moves more regularly on Th Sathon, though U-turn possibilities are rare.

# RIVERSIDE, SILOM & SURAWONG



## RIVERSIDE, SILOM &amp; SURAWONG

<b>INFORMATION</b>		<b>EATING</b> 🍴 (pp143–72)		H Gallery.....	63 F5
Bangkok Christian Hospital.....	1 G3	Ban Chiang.....	35 D5	Kathmandu Photo Gallery.....	64 E4
French Embassy.....	2 B4	Blue Elephant.....	36 D5	Lucifer.....	65 G2
Main Post Office.....	3 B3	Blue Elephant Cooking School.....	(see 36)	Neilson Hays Library Rotunda	
Myanmar Embassy.....	4 E5	Chennai Kitchen.....	37 D4	Gallery.....	66 E3
Singapore Embassy.....	5 G4	Chocolate Bar.....	(see 86)	Noriega's.....	67 G2
<b>SIGHTS</b> (pp106–15)		Circle of Friends.....	38 F5	Sala Rim Nam.....	(see 84)
Assumption Cathedral.....	6 B4	D'Sens.....	(see 77)	Silom Village.....	68 D4
Bangkokian Museum.....	7 C3	Eat Me Restaurant.....	39 H4	Tang Gallery.....	(see 29)
Bank of Asia (Robot Building).....	8 F5	Epicurean Kitchen Thai		Tapas Room.....	69 G3
Healthland Spa & Massage.....	9 E5	Cooking School.....	40 G3	Thavibu Gallery.....	(see 29)
Kukrit Pramoj House.....	10 G5	Foo Mui Kee.....	41 D3	Three Sixty.....	(see 81)
Old Customs House.....	11 B4	Harmonique.....	42 B3	<b>DRINKING &amp; NIGHTLIFE</b> 🍷 (pp173–85)	
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Queen Saovabha Memorial		Restaurant.....	43 B4	Barbican Bar.....	71 G2
Institute (Snake Farm).....	13 G2	Indian Hut.....	44 C4	Coyote On Convent.....	72 G3
Red Bull X Park.....	14 H4	Jay So.....	45 G4	DJ Station.....	73 H2
Ruen-Nuad Massage & Yoga.....	15 H4	Khrua Aroy Aroy.....	46 D4	Molly Malone's.....	74 G3
Sri Mariamman Temple.....	16 D4	La Boulange.....	47 G3	Sirocco & Sky Bar.....	75 C5
State Tower.....	17 C5	Le Bouchon.....	48 G3	Telephone.....	76 G2
<b>SHOPPING</b> 🛍️ (pp127–41)		Le Normandie.....	(see 84)	<b>SLEEPING</b> 🛏️ (pp201–21)	
Asia Books.....	(see 33)	Loy Nava.....	49 B3	Mashoor.....	50 D4
B2S.....	(see 18)	Mashoor.....	50 D4	Mizu's Kitchen.....	51 G2
Baan Silom.....	18 D4	Muzulim Restaurant.....	52 C4	Muslim Restaurant.....	52 C4
Bookazine.....	19 G3	Naaz.....	53 C3	Oriental Hotel Thai Cooking	
Bookazine.....	(see 26)	Oriental Hotel Thai Cooking		School.....	(see 84)
Chiang Heng.....	20 B5	Ran Nam Tao Hu Yong Her.....	54 F4	Ran Nam Tao Hu Yong Her.....	54 F4
House of Chao.....	21 E3	Scoozi.....	55 F3	Scoozi.....	55 F3
Jim Thompson.....	22 G2	Shanghai 38.....	(see 89)	Shanghai 38.....	(see 89)
Jim Thompson Factory		Silom Thai Cooking School.....	56 E4	Silom Thai Cooking School.....	56 E4
Outlet.....	23 F3	Soi Pradit Market.....	57 D4	Soi Pradit Market.....	57 D4
NIP/Nava Import Export.....	24 E3	Somboon Seafood.....	58 E3	Somboon Seafood.....	58 E3
OK (Oriental Plaza) Place.....	25 B4	Wan Fah.....	(see 49)	Wan Fah.....	(see 49)
Orchid Press.....	26 H3	Yok Yor Restaurant.....	59 A2	Yok Yor Restaurant.....	59 A2
Patpong Night Market.....	27 G3	<b>ENTERTAINMENT &amp; THE ARTS</b> 🎨 (pp188–93)		<b>TRANSPORT</b> 🚆 (pp250–5)	
River City.....	28 B2	Ad Makers.....	60 D5	Air Canada.....	92 F5
Silom Galleria.....	29 D4	Bamboo Bar.....	(see 84)	Air France.....	93 D4
Soi Lalai Sap.....	30 F4	Eat Me Restaurant.....	(see 39)	Air New Zealand.....	94 F3
Sunny Camera.....	31 F3	G O D (Guys On Display).....	61 H3	KLM-Royal Dutch Airlines.....	(see 93)
Sunny Camera.....	32 C4	Gallery Ver.....	62 A2		
Tamnan Mingmuang.....	33 H3				
Thai Home Industries.....	34 B4				

Venomous snakes such as the formidable cobra, banded krait and pit viper live a peaceful and – though they probably don't know it – altruistic existence at this institute affiliated with the Thai Red Cross. And watching the snakes being milked of their venom (daily at 11am) or, in the case of the python, draped around tourist necks (2.30pm Monday to Friday) – which feels surprisingly pleasant, smooth and cool – has become such a tourist draw that a new and very interesting serpentarium was opened in early 2008.

Of course, all the fun isn't just for the amusement of tourists. The institute was founded in 1923, when it was only the second of its kind in the world (the first was in Brazil), and has gone on to become one of the world's leading centres in the study of snakes. The venom collected during the

milkings is used to make snake-bite antivenins, which are distributed throughout the country.

It's best to arrive 30 minutes before the advertised show time to see a video presentation about the institute and its work (usually in Thai with English subtitles). Outside show times you can stroll the small garden complex where the snakes are kept in escapeproof cages. The snakes tend to be camera shy during nonperformance times, though you could get lucky and spot a camouflaged king cobra poised to strike.

This institution is named in honour of Queen Saovabha, wife of Rama V, who championed a wide variety of medical causes and education, including a school for midwives and other modern birthing practices.

## PUSSY GALORE

Super Pussy! Pussy Collection! The neon signs leave little doubt about the dominant industry in Patpong, the world's most infamous strip of go-go bars and clubs running 'exotic' shows. There is enough skin on show in Patpong to make Hugh Hefner blush, and a trip to the upstairs clubs could mean you'll never look at a ping-pong ball or a dart the same way again.

For years opinion on Patpong has polarised between those who see it as an exploitative, immoral place that is the very definition of sleaze, and others for whom a trip to Bangkok is about little more than immersing themselves in planet Patpong (or *Nana*, or *Soi Cowboy* – p185). But Patpong has become such a caricature of itself that in recent times a third group has emerged: the curious tourist. Whatever your opinion, what you see in Patpong or any of Bangkok's other high-profile 'adult entertainment' areas depends as much on your outlook on life as on the quality of your vision.

Prostitution is actually illegal in Thailand but there are as many as 2 million sex workers, the vast majority of whom – women and men – cater to Thai men. Many come from poorer regional areas, such as Isaan in the northeast, while others might be students helping themselves through university. Sociologists suggest Thais often view sex through a less moralistic or romantic filter than Westerners. That doesn't mean Thai wives like their husbands using prostitutes, but it's only recently that the gradual empowerment of women through education and employment has led to a more vigorous questioning of this very widespread practice.

Patpong actually occupies two *soi* that run between Th Silom and Th Surawong in Bangkok's financial district. The two streets are privately owned by – and named for – the Thai-Chinese Patpongpanich family, who bought the land in the 1940s and initially built Patpong Soi 1 and its shophouses; Soi 2 was laid later. During the Vietnam War the first bars and clubs opened to cater to American soldiers on 'R&R'. The scene and its international reputation grew through the '70s and peaked in the '80s, when official Thai tourism campaigns made the sort of 'sights' available on Patpong a pillar of their marketing.

These days Patpong has mellowed considerably, if not matured. Thanks in part to the popular tourist night market that fills the *soi* after 5pm, it draws so many tourists that it has become a sort of sex theme park. There are still plenty of the stereotypical middle-aged men ogling pole dancers, sitting in dark corners of the so-called 'blow-job bars' and paying 'bar fines' to take girls to hotels that charge by the hour. But you'll also be among other tourists and families who come to see what all the fuss is about.

Most tourists go no further than stolen glances into the ground-floor go-go bars, where women in bikinis drape themselves around stainless-steel poles, between bouts of haggling in the night market. Others will be lured by men promising 'fucky show' to the dimly lit upstairs clubs. But it should be said that the so-called 'erotic' shows usually feature bored-looking women performing shows that feel not so much erotic as demeaning to everyone involved. Several of these clubs are also infamous for their scams, usually involving the nonperforming (ie clothed, if just barely) staff descending on wide-eyed tourists like vultures on fresh meat. Before you know it you've bought a dozen drinks and racked up a bill for thousands of baht, followed by a loud, aggressive argument flanked by menacing-looking bouncers and threats of 'no money, no pussy'.

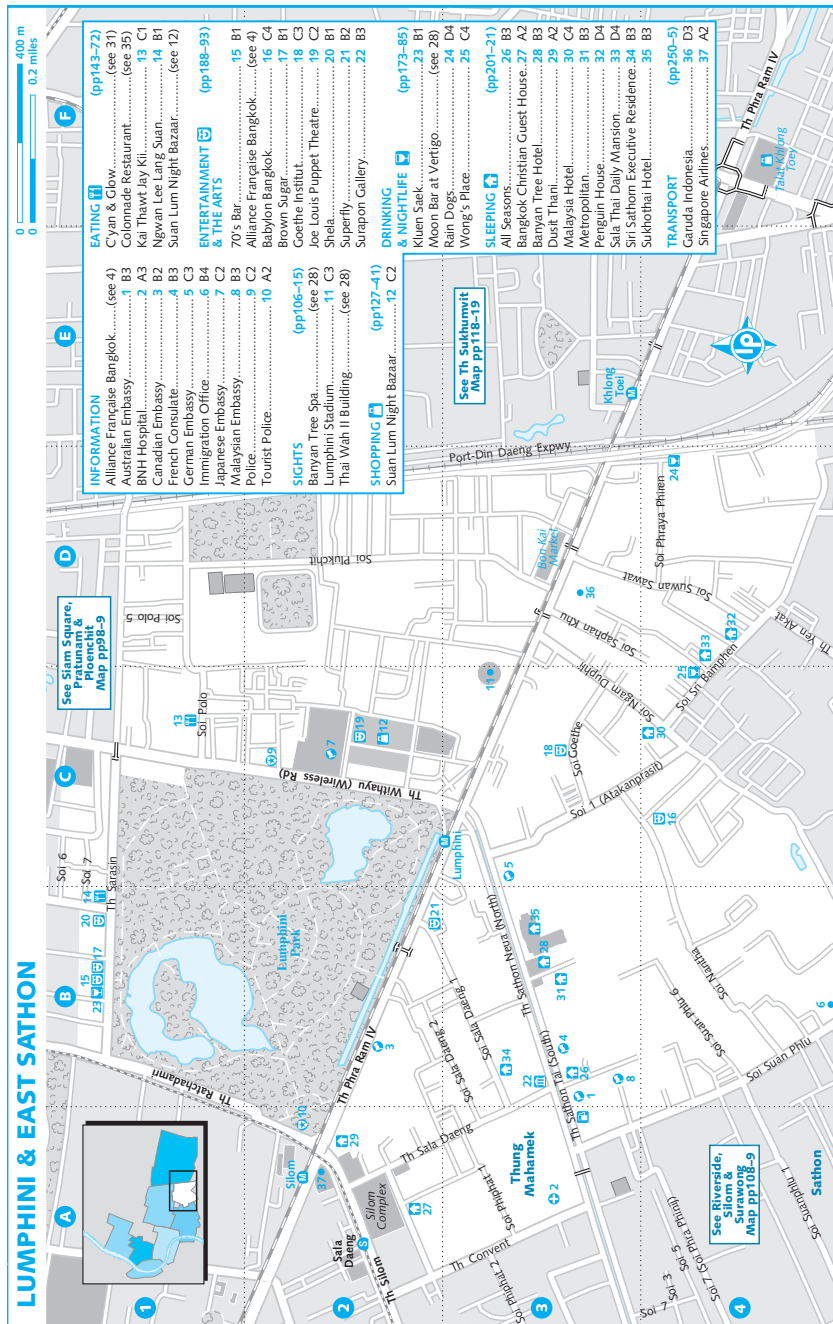
Were we saying that Patpong had mellowed? Oh yes, there is a slightly softer side. Several bars have a little more, erm, class, and in restaurants such as the French bistro *Le Bouchon* (p162) in Patpong 2 and *Mizu's Kitchen* (p162), a divey place that has been running more than 50 years, you could forget where you are – almost.

## SRI MARIAMMAN TEMPLE Map pp108–9

วัดพระศรีมหาอุมาเทวี (วัดแขก)  
☎ 0 2238 4007; cr Th Silom & Th Pan; admission free; 🕒 6am–8pm; 🚶 Tha Oriental; 🏠 Chong Nonsi or Surasak

Arrestingly flamboyant, this Hindu temple is a wild collision of colours, shapes and deities. Built in the 1860s by Tamil immigrants, the principal temple features a 6m façade of intertwined, full-colour

Hindu deities. The temple's main shrine contains three supremes: Jao Mae Maha Umawehi (Uma Devi; also known as Shakti, Shiva's consort) at the centre; her son Phra Khanthakuman (Khanthakumara or Subramaniam) on the right; and her elephant-headed son Phra Phikhanesawora (Ganesha) on the left. Along the left interior wall sit rows of Shivas, Vishnus and other Hindu deities, as well as a few Bud-



## ON THE RIVER

Getting out on the Mae Nam Chao Phraya is a great way to escape the Bangkok traffic and experience the city's maritime past. So it's fortunate that the city's riverside hotels also have some of the most attractive boats shuttling along the river. In most cases these free services run from Tha Sathon (Central Pier) and River City to their mother hotel, departing every 10 or 15 minutes. There's no squeeze and no charge, and the uniformed crew help you on and off. The Millennium Hilton boat has arguably the most polite crew and runs the most useful route. The boat services usually finish at about 10pm.

dhas. While most of the people working in the temple are of Subcontinental origin, you'll likely see plenty of Thai and Chinese devotees praying here because the Hindu gods figure just as prominently in their individualistic approach to religion.

The official Thai name of the temple is Wat Phra Si Maha Umathewi, but sometimes it is shortened to its colloquial name Wat Khaek – *khaek* is a common expression for people of Indian descent. The literal translation is 'guest', an obvious euphemism for any group of people not particularly wanted as permanent residents; hence most Indian Thais don't appreciate the term.

## BANK OF ASIA Map pp108-9

ธนาคารเอเชีย  
**Cnr Th Sathon Tai & Soi Pikitun**

During the crazy 1980s, when no building project was too outlandish or expensive, architect Sumet Jumsai created his now-famous 'Robot Building' for the Bank of Asia. Few were keen on it at the time, but now it seems quaint and retro. The building is not open to the public; its whimsical façade is best viewed on the Skytrain between Surasak and Chong Nonsi stations.

## KUKRIT PRAMOJ HOUSE Map pp108-9

บ้านหม่อมราชวงศ์คึกฤทธิ์ปราโมช  
 ☎ 0 2286 8185; Soi 7 (Phra Phinij), Th Narathiwat Ratchankharin; admission adult/uniformed student 50/20B; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Sat & Sun; ☎ Chong Nonsi  
 Author and statesman Mom Ratchawong Kukrit Pramoj once resided in this charming complex now open to the public for tours. Surrounded by a manicured garden,

five teal buildings introduce visitors to traditional Thai architecture and to the former resident, who wrote more than 150 books (including the highly respected *Four Reigns*) and served as prime minister of Thailand.

## ASSUMPTION CATHEDRAL Map pp108-9

☎ 0 2234 8556; Soi Oriental, Th Charoen Krung, Bangrak; ☎ 7am-7pm; ☎ Tha Oriental; ☎ Saphan Taksin

Marking the ascendancy of the French missionary influence in Bangkok during the reign of Rama II, this Romanesque church with its rich golden interior dates from 1910 and hosted a mass by Pope John Paul II in 1984. The schools associated with the cathedral are considered some of the best in Thailand, and you'll probably need to walk through one to reach the red-brick building.

## RIVERSIDE RAMBLE

### Walking Tour

There's more to the riverside district of Bangrak than large luxury hotels. Once Thailand's gateway to the world, its quiet tree-lined *soi* retain enough of their past character – in the form of old shophouses, embassies and godowns converted into antique stores – for an interesting couple of hours of walking and looking. The starting point is one of the most accessible in Bangkok, at the end of the Skytrain and the main river ferry terminal. If you plan to start after lunch it should be easier to justify regular drink stops in the hotel bars.

**1 Bangrak Market** Walk away from the river and turn left onto Th Charoen Krung. The street is lined with street food sellers and eventually opens into Bangrak Market, either of which makes a cheap, tasty pit stop.

**2 Assumption Cathedral** Continue along Th Charoen Krung, past the monumentally ugly neoclassical State Tower at the corner of Th Silom. Turn left through a schoolyard-cum-parking lot and walk through to red-brick Assumption Cathedral (above), in the midst of Bangkok's former centre of international commerce.

**3 East Asiatic Company building** Exit the cathedral through the front door, walk



# THANON SUKHUMVIT

Eating p165; Shopping p138; Sleeping p216

The Sukhumvit neighbourhood starts at the fleshpots of Nana in what could be loosely called central Bangkok and tracks its namesake street for 20km all the way to the Gulf of Thailand. Like Bangkok as a whole, it has no real centre and numerous distinct personalities. Apart from the Skytrain, which looms above much of the street, the thing that brings it all together is money. This is Bangkok's most exclusive residential area, one packed with the city's most expensive apartments, villas, restaurants, shops, spas, cars, hospitals and, not surprisingly, its wealthiest residents.

Sukhumvit's two main personality blocks are either side of Soi 21 (Asoke). West of Soi Asoke, the *soi* branching off the main road are dominated by the sleazy sex tourist scene around **Nana Entertainment Plaza** (p185) and **Soi Cowboy** (p185), which tends to attract the expat (sexpat) and repeat visitor market. On Th Sukhumvit itself the scantily clad bargirls share space with men using battered laminated cards to tout eye-opening shows and a night market flogging fake DVDs, T-shirts and other junk to tourists. But it's not all sex and souvenirs. Several chic boutique hotels embellish these *soi*, and the city's most fashionable nightclubs, including **Bed Supperclub** (p183) and **Q Bar** (p184), can be found on Soi 11. Meanwhile down at Soi 3/1 you can feast on cheap Middle Eastern food in what is known as Little Arabia, where we recommend **Nasser el Massry** (p168).

West of Soi Asoke is where the bulk of the international residents and wealthy Thais live. During the postwar period, the green swathes of rice paddy were initially developed into large, contemporary villas occupying even larger blocks; for a prime example dine at **Spring** (p167). Over the years these huge blocks have proved prime targets for developers looking to cash in on the Thai infatuation with the high-rise apartment building. It's a continuing trend – there is almost nowhere in the neighbourhood where you can't hear the sweet sounds of construction.

This area is the primary address for the city's most recent expat arrivals, from Japanese engineers to Lebanese importers. Whole neighbourhoods are populated by company families temporarily transplanted to the tropics. Middle-class lives in the West are transformed into upper-class status in Thailand, and families are expected to contribute to the local economy by hiring maids, gardeners and other household staff. However, the majority of residents are still Thai, from both the established old families who run Thailand and the ranks of wannabe young professionals. Mixed Thai-*faràng* households are also very common in this area.

Most *faràng* live between Soi 21 (Asoke) and Soi 63 (Ekamai), near the Eastern bus station. Beyond here is primarily Thai, though that could change as the Skytrain extension comes online from 2009 (hopefully). And while the long noses, expensive restaurants and air-conditioned shops can sometimes have you wondering what country you're in, you only need to walk to the mouth of almost any *soi* to be reminded you're in a Thai city: street food vendors, motorcycle taxis waiting to cart you home for 10B and the ubiquitous 7-Eleven store, known hereabouts as a 'severn'. For street food, *soi* 20, 23, 33 and 38 are particularly good.

Sukhumvit doesn't boast much in the way of bona fide sights, with temples to mammon and bacchanalian pleasure more prevalent than those to the Buddha; the restaurants are probably the main draw.

## BENJAKITI PARK Map pp118–19

สวนเบญจกิติ

**Th Ratchadaphisek**; ☎ 5am–8pm; 🚶 Sirikit Centre

The latest addition to Bangkok's emaciated green scene, this 130-rai (20.8-hectare) park encircles a large lake on the former grounds of the Tobacco Monopoly, just behind the Queen Sirikit Convention Centre, and marks the queen's sixth cycle (72nd birthday). Another 300 rai (48 hectares) of former factory buildings is earmarked for transformation into a manmade rainforest,

though it has yet to open. The park makes a pleasant walk between the Sukhumvit strip and the Lumpini area.

## SIAM SOCIETY & BAN KAMTHIENG

Map pp118–19

สยามสมาคม/บ้านกำแพง

☎ 02661 6470; www.siam-society.com; 131 Soi Asoke (Soi 21), Th Sukhumvit; admission 100B;

☎ 9am–5pm; 🚶 Asoke; 🚶 Sukhumvit

Stepping off cacophonous Soi Asoke and into the Siam Society's Ban Kamthieng

## TRANSPORT: THANON SUKHUMVIT

**Bus** Air-con 501, 508, 511 and 513, ordinary 2, 25, 30 and 48

**Skytrain** From Nana east to On Nut stations are all along Th Sukhumvit. Stations beyond On Nut are due to open by 2009

**Metro** Sirikit Centre, Sukhumvit & Phetchaburi (Phetburi)

All odd-numbered *soi* branching off Th Sukhumvit head north, while even numbers run south. Unfortunately, they don't line up sequentially (eg Soi 11 lies directly opposite Soi 8, Soi 39 is opposite Soi 26). Some larger *soi* are known by alternative names, such as Soi Nana (Soi 3), Soi Asoke (Soi 21), Soi Phrom Phong (Soi 39) and Soi Thong Lor (Soi 55). Traffic on Th Sukhumvit is notorious; use the Skytrain if you can.

house museum is as close to a northern Thai village as you'll come in Bangkok. Ban Kamthieng is a traditional 19th-century home that was located on the banks of Mae Ping in Chiang Mai. Now relocated to Bangkok, the house presents the daily customs and spiritual beliefs of the Lanna tradition. Communicating all the hard facts as well as any sterile museum (with detailed English signage and engaging video installations), Ban Kamthieng instils in the visitor a sense of place, from the attached rice granary and handmade tools to the wooden loom and woven silks. You can't escape the noise of Bangkok completely, but the houses are refreshingly free of concrete and reflecting glass and make a pleasant, interesting break.

Next door are the headquarters of the prestigious Siam Society, publisher of the

renowned *Journal of the Siam Society* and a valiant preserver of traditional Thai culture. Those with a serious interest can use the reference library, which has the answers to almost any question you could have about Thailand (outside the political sphere, since the society is sponsored by the royal family).

## THAILAND CREATIVE & DESIGN CENTER Map pp118–19

ศูนย์สร้างสรรค์งานออกแบบ

☎ 0 2664 8448; www.tcdc.or.th; 6th fl, Emporium, Th Sukhumvit; ☎ 10.30am–9pm Tue–Sun; 🚶 Phrom Phong

Move over Scandinavian minimalism, this is the dawning of Thai style. This centre is a government-backed initiative intended to incubate design innovation, which is seen as Thailand's next step in the global marketplace now that labour is no longer competitive. The centre acts as both show-room and shop for Thai design, and is a good place to buy quality (if more expensive) Thai products and souvenirs. Rotating exhibitions feature profiles of international products and retrospectives of regional handicrafts and creativity. Material ConneXion is a permanent library of design-related materials, the first of its kind in Asia. In 2008 it was suggested the centre could be moving; call before you go.

## MARKET, PARK & SPA

### Walking Tour

This walk takes in the teeming commerce of Bangkok's largest market, the contrasting quiet of one of the city's newer parks, a bit of northern Thai culture and a massage to help you recover from it all. Khlong Toey market is busiest between about 5am and 10am, so if you want to be in the thick of the action start early. It's

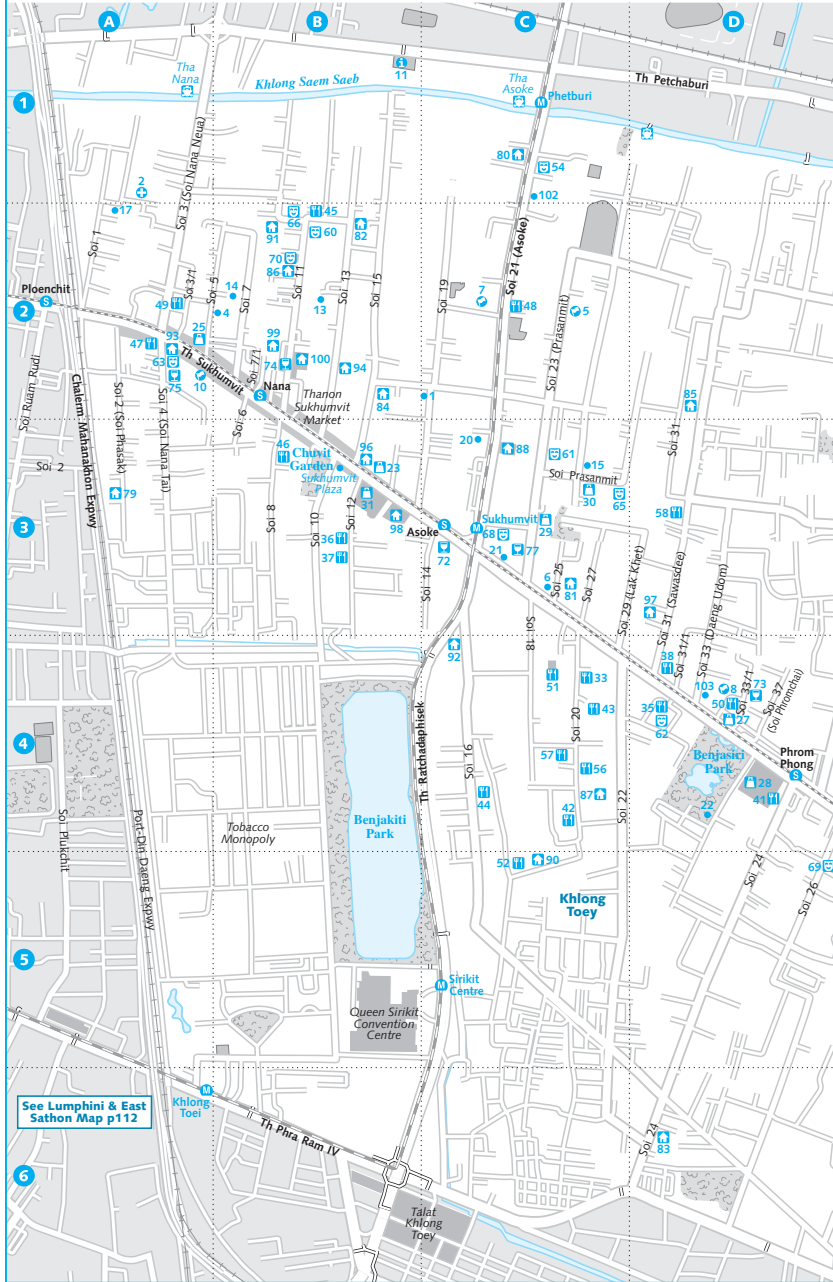
## top picks

### THANON SUKHUMVIT

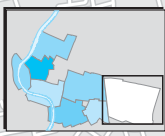
- **Ban Kamthieng** (opposite) An informative, well-presented taste of northern Thailand in this pretty teak building
- **Tuba** (p178) If you fancy a drink in a used furniture store, look no further
- **Soi 11 Clubs** Dance your way down Bangkok's premier clubbing *soi*, where new compete with favourites **Bed Supperclub** (p183) and **Q Bar** (p184)
- **International restaurants** (p165) Pasta, sushi, tapas, hommus – Sample Sukhumvit's huge selection of foreign cuisine
- **Skytrain** (p254) Peek into the neighbourhood's many fortified mansions from this moving vantage point



# THANON SUKHUMVIT



See Lumpini & East Sathon Map p112



## THANON SUKHUMVIT

### INFORMATION

Bangkok Dental Spa.....	1	C2
Bumrungrad International Hospital.....	2	A1
Dental Hospital.....	3	F3
Foodland Pharmacy.....	4	B2
Indian Embassy.....	5	C2
Indian Visa Outsourcing Office.....	6	C3
Israeli Embassy.....	7	C2
Norwegian Embassy.....	8	D4
Rutnin Eye Hospital.....	(see 0)	
Samitivej Sukhumvit Hospital.....	9	E3
Swedish Embassy.....	10	A2
TAT Main Office.....	11	B1

### SIGHTS (pp116–22)

Absolute Yoga.....	12	F5
Ambassador Hotel Fitness Centre.....	13	B2
Buathip Thai Massage.....	14	B2
Mulberries.....	15	C3
Ozono Complex.....	16	E1
Pirom Spa: The Garden Home Spa.....	17	A2
Play Gallery.....	18	G3
Rasayana Retreat.....	19	E4
Siam Society & Ban Kamthieng.....	20	C3
Thailand Creative & Design Centre.....	(see 28)	
Thaiish Language School.....	21	C3
World Fellowship of Buddhists.....	22	D4

### SHOPPING (pp127–41)

Asia Books.....	(see 28)	
Asia Books.....	23	B3
Asia Books.....	(see 31)	
Basheer.....	24	G2
Bookazine.....	25	A2
Dasa Book Café.....	26	E4
Elite Used Books.....	27	D4
Emporium Shopping Centre.....	28	D4
Kinokuniya.....	(see 28)	
L' Arcadia.....	29	C3
Nandakwang.....	30	C3
Times Square.....	31	B3

### EATING (pp143–72)

Ana's Garden.....	32	F5
Bed Supperclub.....	(see 60)	
Bei Otto.....	33	C4
Boon Tong Kiat Singapore Hainanese Chicken Rice.....	34	G3
Bourbon St Bar & Restaurant.....	35	D4
Cabbages & Condoms.....	36	B3
Crêpes & Co.....	37	B3
Duc de Praslin.....	38	D4
Emporium Food Hall.....	(see 28)	
Face.....	39	F6
Great American Rib Company.....	40	E6
Greyhound Café.....	(see 28)	
Imoya.....	41	D4
Je Ngor.....	42	C4
Kalapapreuk on First.....	(see 28)	
Komala's.....	43	C4
Kuppa.....	44	C4
La Piola.....	45	B2
Le Banyan.....	46	B3
Marriott Café.....	47	A2
Memay Café.....	48	C2
Nasser Elmassy Restaurant.....	49	A2
Park Food Hall.....	(see 28)	
Ramentei.....	50	D4
Rang Mahal.....	51	C4
Ruen Malika.....	52	C5
Scoozi.....	53	F5
Soi 38 Night Market.....	54	F5
Spring.....	55	E3
Tamarind Café.....	56	C4
Tapas Café.....	(see 99)	
Thonglee.....	57	C4
Yuy Lee.....	58	D3

### ENTERTAINMENT (pp188–93) & THE ARTS

Bangkok Playhouse.....	59	G2
Bed Supperclub.....	60	B2
Gallery F-Stop.....	(see 56)	
Glow.....	61	C3
Living Room.....	(see 98)	
Mambo Cabaret.....	62	D4
Nana Entertainment Plaza.....	63	A2
Nang Len.....	64	C4
Narcissus.....	65	C3
Q Bar.....	66	B2

SFV.....	(see 28)	
Santika.....	67	G3
Soi Cowboy.....	68	C3
Teo+Namfah Gallery.....	(see 16)	
Tokyo Joe's.....	69	D5
Twisted Republic.....	70	B2
Witch's Tavern.....	71	G4

### DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE (pp173–85)

Black Swan.....	72	C3
Bull's Head & Angus Steakhouse.....	73	D4
Cheap Charlie's.....	74	B2
Jool's Bar & Restaurant.....	75	A2
Nest.....	(see 91)	
Opera Riserva Winetheque.....	76	E3
Ship Inn.....	77	C3
Tuba.....	78	H3

### SLEEPING (pp201–21)

Atlanta.....	(see 21)	
Bangkok Boutique Hotel.....	80	C1
Bangkok Centre Sukhumvit 25.81.....	81	C3
Citichic.....	82	B2
Davis.....	83	D6
Dream.....	84	B2
Eugenia.....	85	D2
Federal Hotel.....	86	B2
Grand Mercure Park Avenue.....	87	C4
Grand Millennium Sukhumvit.....	88	C3
Hi Sukhumvit.....	89	F6
House By The Pond.....	90	C5
Le Fenix.....	91	B2
Ma Du Zi.....	92	C4
Majestic Suites.....	93	A2
Miami Hotel.....	94	B2
Napa Place Bed & Breakfast.....	95	E6
S15.....	96	B3
Seven.....	97	D3
Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit.....	98	B3
Suk 11.....	99	B2
Swiss Park Hotel.....	100	B2

### TRANSPORT (pp250–5)

Air India.....	(see 10)	
Eastern Bus Terminal.....	101	G6
Lufthansa Airlines.....	102	C1
PB Air.....	103	D4

## ENGLISH: BEYOND EXPECTATION

Peppering documents, ad campaigns, magazine covers and pop songs with English is a sure-fire status symbol in Thailand. This isn't unconscious fluency but premeditated posturing. The thinking goes like this: the language associated with the richest nations of the world will surely divert just a little of that wealth to the business venture that masters a few key phrases.

The most creative and excessive uses of English as a good omen are found on billboard ads for new condominiums. 'Beyond expectation' is a common sales pitch. 'The ultimate in luxury living in prestige village' is another superlative-laden line that might make Muhammad Ali blush. The residents in the ads are always beautiful *lầu khрэung* (half-Thai, half-*farang*) impeccably dressed and enjoying a sweat-free existence in the tropics. They stare out at a misty future enjoying 'the best of tomorrow today, in the most extravagant, exciting, trendy place in the universe'.

most easily reached via the Khlong Toei Metro station and a walk.

**1 Khlong Toey Market** Despite being Bangkok's biggest market, and the distribution point for countless goods going to countless other stores, **Khlong Toey market** sees very few tourists. It's authentic and a photographer's dream.

**2 Benjakiti Park** Once you've had enough of the market, head out and cross busy Th Phra Ram IV, then west across Th Ratchadaphisek and north past the Stock Exchange of Thailand and finally into **Benjakiti Park** (p116).



Head across to the far side of the lake and walk north.

**3 Ban Kamthieng** At the far north end of the park, step back out onto Th Ratchadaphisek and continue north to Th Sukhumvit. Cross over (the new overpass should be finished by now), and continue north on busy Soi Asoke to **Ban Kamthieng** (p116), the traditional Lanna wooden home relocated to Bangkok. Adjoining is the welcome air-con of Black Canyon Coffee, which also serves cheap, tasty light lunches.

**4 Massage time** Refreshed enough that you're no longer dripping with sweat, brave the traffic and cross Soi Asoke, then walk through the Grand Millennium Hotel driveway to Soi 23. Turning right, there are a few local restaurants, and you have a choice of massage places. Those on Soi 23 itself are cheap (less than 300B an hour) but the women wear suspiciously short skirts so asking for an 'oil massage' might get you more than you bargained for (foot massages are a safer bet). If you walk along to the T-junction and turn left, just beyond the next corner Mulberries offers a more spa-like experience, with more professional English-speaking masseuses.

**5 Soi Cowboy** Rejuvenated, return to Soi 23, turn left (north) and walk along until you come to neon-filled **Soi Cowboy** (p185). Depending on the time, you'll find the bars sleepy or just warming up – fun photos if

## WALK FACTS

**Start** Khlong Toei Metro station  
**End** Asoke Skytrain station  
**Distance** 4km  
**Duration** Two to four hours  
**Fuel Stops** Naaz (p164)

## WORKING FROM HOME: ARTISAN VILLAGES

Long before multinational factories, Bangkok was a town of craftspeople who lived and worked in artisan villages, inheriting their skills and profession from their parents. Many villages made stylised arts and crafts for the palace and minor royalty living along the fashionable avenues of the time. Today most of the villages still remain, but the descendants of the craftspeople have become office workers commuting to jobs no longer based in their homes.

**Soi Ma Toom** (Map p56; off Th Arun Amarin) is a surviving example of the old home-and-factory paradigm. This quiet lane, just off a traffic-clogged artery in Thonburi, across from the Naval Department, is where the *ma toom* (bael fruit) is peeled, cut into horizontal slices and soaked in palm sugar to make a popular candy.

Surviving primarily on tourist patronage, the **Monk's Bowl Village** (p71) dates back to the first Bangkok king and continues to create ceremonial pieces used by monks to collect morning alms.

The silk weavers of **Baan Krua** (p100) no longer weave for Jim Thompson, but a couple of families are still producing high-quality silks from looms in their living rooms.

Near the old timber yards and saw mills, **Woodworking Street** (Map pp124–5; Soi Pracha Narumit, Th Pracharat, Bang Sue) is still going strong with small Thai-Chinese-owned factories fashioning wooden eaves, furniture and shrines. Shops are open daily, and an annual street fair is celebrated in January.

the neon is on. At the far end turn left and after a few metres left again into the Metro station, which connects under Soi 21 (Asoke) to Asoke Skytrain.

We apologise for not ending this tour with a drinking spot with a view (though some will

want to stop for the views in Soi Cowboy), but it is supposed to start early. If you've managed to stretch it out to the end of the day, consider walking down to [Cheap Charlies \(p175\)](#) in Soi 11, and be sure to check out the Sukhumvit [restaurants \(p165\)](#).

## GREATER BANGKOK

Once rice fields, voracious Bangkok has expanded in every possible direction with few concessions to charm. Surrounding the previously defined neighbourhoods are seemingly endless flat residential suburbs with a small number of scattered attractions. Some of these sights are conveniently located along the Skytrain route, making them easily accessible from downtown. Chatuchak and Victory Monument are both on the northern branch of the Skytrain, while Rama IX Royal Park is in the far-eastern part of town, currently beyond the last Skytrain stop but not for long.

The other attractions listed here will require several forms of public transport (and lots of time and patience) or personal transport. The prisons are located west of Chatuchak and north of central Bangkok.

### BANG KWANG & KHLONG PREM PRISONS Map pp124-5

เรือนจำบางขวางและคลองเปรม  
Bang Kwang ☎ 0 2967 3311; fax 0 2967 3313;  
Th Nonthaburi, Nonthaburi; 📍 Nonthaburi  
Khlomg Prem ☎ 0 2580 0975; 33/3 Th Ngam  
Wang Wan, Chatuchak; 📍 Nonthaburi; 🚗 Mo  
Chit

Thailand's permissive reputation is juxtaposed by strict antidrug laws that often land foreign nationals in a prison system with feudal conditions. A sobering and charitable expedition is to visit an inmate, bringing them news of the outside, basic supplies and reading materials. The regulations for visits are quite involved and require pre-arrival research (see p261). You must dress respectfully (long sleeves and long pants), bring your passport for registration purposes, and have the name and building number of the inmate you plan to visit. Inmate information can be obtained from most embassies. Visiting hours and days vary depending on the building the inmate is housed in.

Male inmates who have received sentences of 40 years to life (often for drug offences) are detained in Bang Kwang Prison, north of central Bangkok. To reach the prison, take the Mae Nam Chao Phraya ferry north to Nonthaburi (the last stop); the prison is 500m from the pier.

Women sentenced to seven to 40 years are detained in the Bang Khen section of Khlomg Prem Prison. From Nonthaburi, take a minibus (15B) to the prison, or take the Skytrain to Mo Chit and then a taxi to the prison gates.

For more information, see [www.phaseolop.com/foreignprisoners/prisoners-thailand.html](http://www.phaseolop.com/foreignprisoners/prisoners-thailand.html) or [www.bangkwang.net](http://www.bangkwang.net).

### CHILDREN'S DISCOVERY MUSEUM

Map pp124-5  
พิพิธภัณฑ์เด็กกรุงเทพมหานคร  
☎ 0 2618 6509; [www.bkkchildrenmuseum.com](http://www.bkkchildrenmuseum.com);  
Queen Sirikit Park, Th Kamphaeng Phet 4; adult/  
child 70/50B; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat  
& Sun; 🚗 Mo Chit

Through hands-on activities, learning is well disguised as fun at this museum opposite Chatuchak Weekend Market (p140). Kids can stand inside a bubble, see how an engine works, or role-play as a firefighter. Most activities are geared to primary-school-aged children. There is also a toddlers' playground at the back of the main building.

### RAMA IX ROYAL PARK Map pp124-5

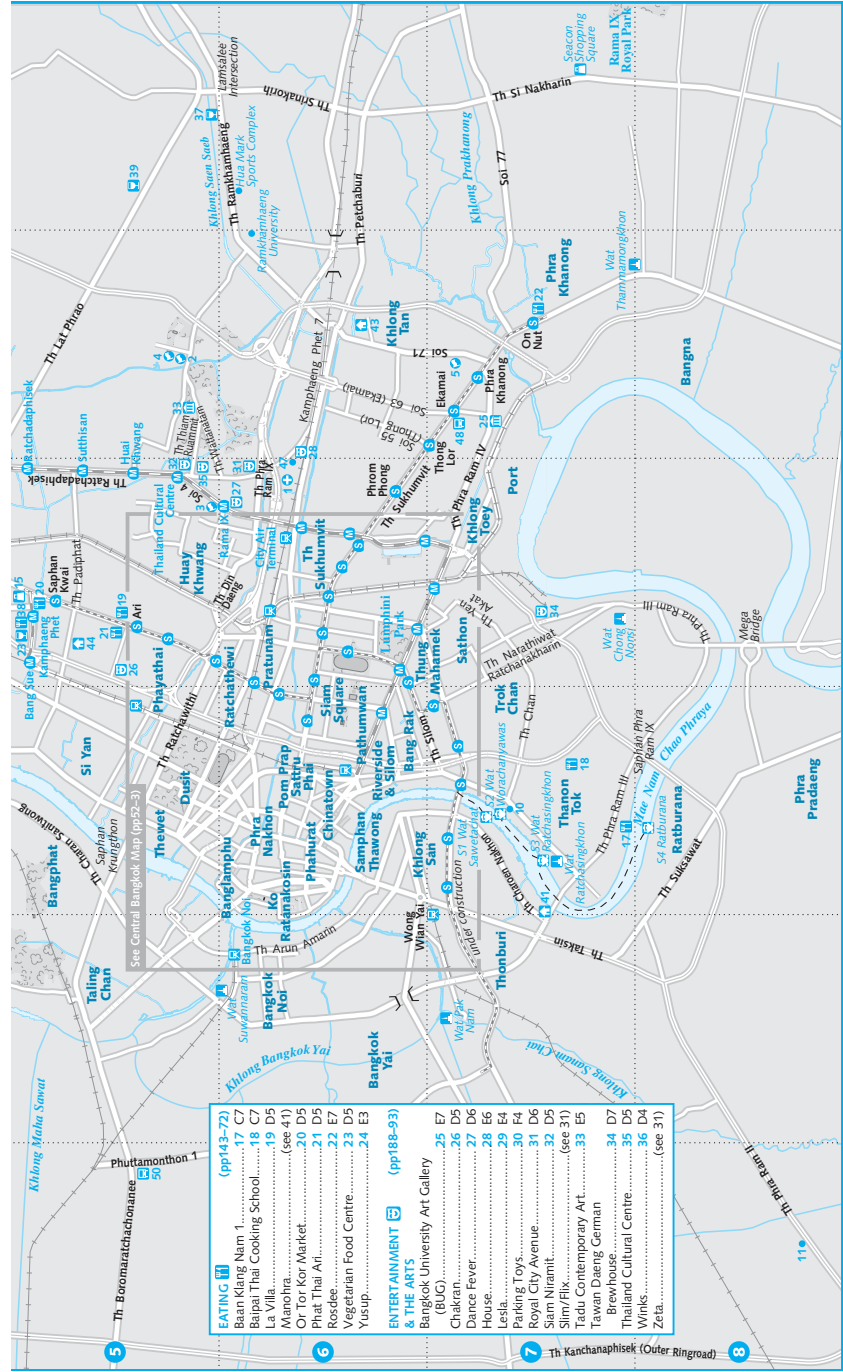
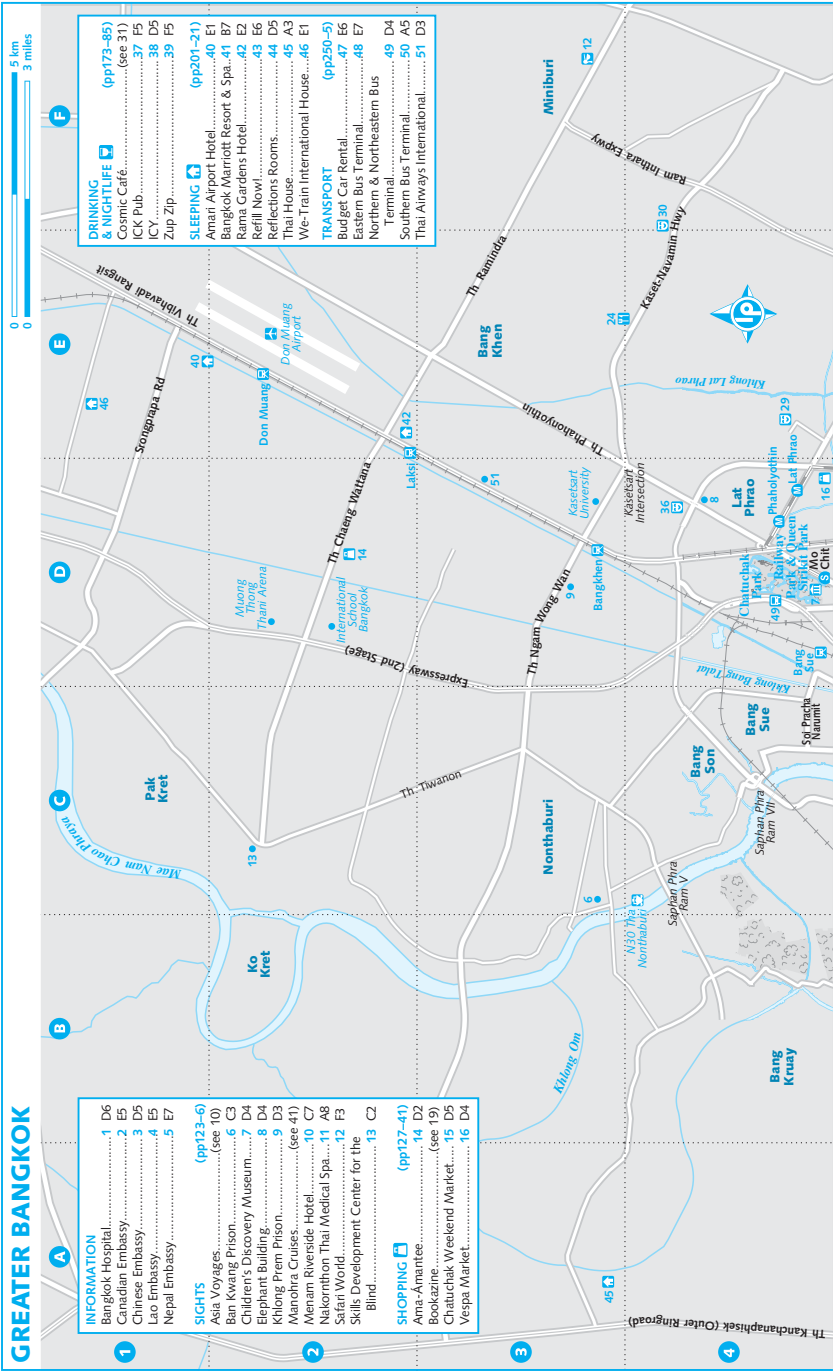
สวนหลวงว.๙  
Soi 103 (Soi Udom Suk), Th Sukhumvit; admission  
10B; 🕒 5am-6pm; 🚗 ordinary 2, 23 & 25, transfer  
to green minibus at Soi 103

Opened in 1987 to commemorate King Bhumibol's 60th birthday, this green area, about 15km southeast of central Bangkok, covers 81 hectares and has a water park and botanic garden. Since its opening, the garden has become a significant horticultural research centre. A museum with an exhibition about the king's life sits at the park's centre. There are resident lizards, tortoises and birds. A flower and plant sale is held here in December. From Th Sukhumvit it's about 7km along Soi 103, after it bends left.

### SAFARI WORLD Map pp124-5

ซาฟารีเวิลด์  
☎ 0 2518 1000; [www.safariworld.com](http://www.safariworld.com); 99 Th  
Ramindra 1, Miniburi; adult/child 750/450B;  
🕒 9am-5pm

**GREATER BANGKOK**



Claiming to be world's largest 'open zoo', Safari World is divided into two parts the drive-through Safari Park and the Marine Park. In the Safari Park, visitors drive through different habitats with giraffes, lions, zebras, elephants, orang-utans, and

other African and Asian animals. A panda house displays rare white pandas. The Marine Park focuses on stunts by dolphins and other trained animals. Safari World is 45km northeast of Bangkok, and is best reached by car.