



*Known as the
Venice of the East,
Bangkok has become an
attractive destination
for the tourists from all
over the world drawing
over six million foreign
tourists each year.*

Sights and Sounds of Bangkok

Text & photographs : Robin Smillie



If your visit to Bhutan includes a halt in Bangkok for only a day or two to shake the jet lag or wait for flight connections, you will want to visit at least a few of the traditional attractions or seek out some of the hidden jewels that are not usually highlighted by the hotel travel desks and guide books.

Most of the attractions in Bangkok can be accessed by taking a river taxi on the *Chao Phraya* river, the main artery that runs through the centre of Bangkok. You can get just about anywhere by hopping aboard one of these floating buses that quickly dock and depart from most of the major piers that line the river. From the pier, take a *TukTuk* (Bangkok's festooned motorised version of the rickshaw) to your destination. The open-air ride is as exhilarating as the sights and sounds of Bangkok. If you get caught in one of Bangkok's famous traffic jams, get out and walk - it's faster!

A tour of Bangkok wouldn't be complete without a visit to the temples that are the cultural heart and soul of the city. Known as *wats*, hundreds of these dazzling gilded spires studded with glittering glass tiles and gold leaf dot the urban landscapes. The temple complexes are home to saffron robed Buddhist monks who rise before dawn each morning for prayers and then begin a daily ritual of collecting food and other necessities from local residents and people on the street. This serves the monks as a way to survive the rigours of monastic life, and more importantly offers devotees an opportunity to practise the Buddhist philosophy of giving freely to earn the merit to move on to a better life.





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Since the number of *wats* is daunting and would take a month-long stay to tour them all, a highlight tour of Bangkok should include a visit to Wat Po, Bangkok's largest and most famous temple. First built in the 17th century, Wat Po is the eternal home of the Reclining Buddha, a 45 metre (150 feet) statue gilded in gold leaf, with feet covered in mother of pearl illustrating 108 auspicious signs that distinguish a true Buddha. The Buddha's face depicts extreme serenity as he attains *nirvana*. The temple also houses a small museum, several smaller temples, numerous pagodas and meandering colourful gardens.

Close by and within a few minutes ride on a *Tuk Tuk*, is another must-see Bangkok attraction – the opulent Grand Palace and adjoining Wat Phra Kaew, better






known as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. This 60 acre compound of the Grand Palace houses the royal residences, throne room, government offices, several garden complexes, and the focus of national religious pride, an image of Buddha carved from a five-ton block of jade. The Wat Phra Kaew is one of the richest artistic sites in Thailand, containing a library, a gallery of statues of past kings, a model of Angkor Wat, and a 176-segment

Another interesting sight in Bangkok is the Thai Boxing match. It is as much a dance and musical event as it is a pugilistic "knock-down, drag-out." The young muscular opponents spend as much time in the pre-fight ceremony as they do trying to knock out their adversary. The final outcome of the fight is determined by the accuracy of lightning-fast blows. The fight is accompanied by music from a four piece Thai band using

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mural portraying the great Asian epic, the *Ramayana*. The garden and courtyard walls are resplendent in tile and glass covered edifices.

Another close-by destination, hidden away just inside a canal across the river from the Grand Palace, is the Royal Barge Museum. Here are displayed some of the huge canoe-like boats adorned with carved figureheads, gilded in gold and brightly painted. In ancient times these barges carried the king and royal family up and down the rivers that are Thailand's arteries. Today, just a dozen or so are maintained for very important occasions. The barges on display are magnificently restored authentic heirlooms passed down through generations of Thailand's royal family.




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traditional instruments to dictate the pace of the fight — when the music speeds up, the action increases. Much of the fight consists of combatants locking each other in a bear hug and quickly raising a knee to his opponent's midsection. A standing ringside cheering section of friends and relatives of each fighter, cordoned off from the seated crowd, gives forth a collective "whoa" every time their favourite fighter lands a blow.

Even if you are not interested in the Western form of boxing, the experience of sitting on the ringside to such choreography and music are worth the trip. Bangkok has two main boxing stadiums, Ratchadamnoen and Lumpini, that host matches on alternate nights throughout the week. Tickets can be purchased in advance from most major hotels or purchased at the window, but don't fall for touts on the street in front of the stadiums.

If time permits a second day of touring, try a tour of the residential canals that lead off from the *Chao Phraya* river. These ancient watery roadways are known as *klongs* and serve both the commercial and residential sectors comprising stilt houses. Ranging from huge barges piled high with stacks of products to hand-paddled canoes carrying children to school ply on these waterways. The most common form of canal transportation are the large bus-like long-tail boats which are found at many river landings. The children delight the tourists by enthusiastically jumping off from the porches of their stilt houses in the canals to show off their diving skills.

Perhaps these attractions will tempt you to come back to one of the world's most vibrant cities for a longer stay. With more time, you could get a world-famous Thai massage, and shop until you drop for Thai jewellery and clothing, and roam around the open-air shops that line the streets of Chinatown. ♦

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