

The Bangkok Story



Jonathan Copeland

The Bangkok Story

An historical guide to the most exciting city in the World

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*For Murni,
who by living in Bali,
enabled me to visit Bangkok.*

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What they said about *The Bangkok Story*, an historical guide to the most exciting city in the World

“Jonathan Copeland lifts the lid on the planet’s most captivating metropolis – every page offers the reader a highly delicious serving that will keep you coming back for more and more!”

Vinder Balbir, owner of Mrs Balbir’s Indian Restaurant, Bangkok

“*The Bangkok Story* tells the story of the most interesting city in the World – brought to life by more than four hundred glorious photographs.”

Marc Pettibone, long-time resident of Thailand

“My favourite book about my favourite city”

Stephanie Brookes, Travel Writer

“When I step out the door, *The Bangkok Story* is my constant companion.”

Gavin Gough, freelance travel photographer based in Bangkok

“*The Bangkok Story* – like the great city itself – is irresistible.”

Dr Rob Goodfellow, author, journalist, researcher and academic

Prologue

I've spent over thirty-five years visting Bangkok and spending extended periods of time there. Recently I have spent even longer. It always struck me as strange that there were books on history and places to go but no books that placed the buildings in historical context so as to give them meaning and relevance. There might be a brief mention of Rama III or Rama IV, but I suspect that to most visitors, and certainly to me, whether it was Rama III or Rama IV would have no significance whatsoever and half the interest went out the window. So I gave myself the task of trying to remedy the situation and it was a revelation, and a very interesting revelation.

As I sit here in 2013, pecking away at the keyboard, Bangkok has been voted the World's best city for four consecutive years in a survey carried out by *Travel+Leisure* magazine. The scoring is based on the following main criteria: tourist attractions, culture and tradition, food and shopping facilities, friendliness of the people, value and satisfaction. And according to the Global Destination Cities Index Forecast 2013, Bangkok is set to become the most visited international city on the planet, expecting 15.98 million international visitors in 2013, and overtaking London, which took the top spot in 2012. And to complete the hat trick, a third accolade has awarded Bangkok the World Book Capital for 2013, which has encouraged the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration to rent an historic building in Ratchadamnoen Klang to create a new City Library, which will be open twenty-four hours a day.

It is hard to believe that Bangkok, the most exciting and most visited city in the World, is only slightly over 200 years old – London and Paris are almost 2,000 years old. That made my task of putting buildings in an historical context slightly less daunting, but still a challenge.

Rama I – now I've started mentioning a person, without even a proper introduction – you'll just have to get into the book to find out who he was – named the city *Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahinthara Yuthaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom Udomratchaniwet Mahasathan Amon Piman Awatan Sathit Sakethattiya Witsanukam Prasit*. The Guinness World of Records says that it is the longest name of any capital city in the

World with forty-three syllables and means *The city of angels, the great city, the eternal jewel city, the impregnable city of God Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the happy city, abounding in an enormous Royal Palace that resembles the heavenly abode where reigns the reincarnated god, a city given by Indra and built by Vishnukam.*

That says it all. The older name is less of a mouthful: Bangkok. It comes from two words: *bang* which is Thai for a village on a river bank and *kok*, which is a shortened version of *makok*, the name for a species of wild olive.

Bangkok is also the World's hottest city, not just from the continual partying, and there's a lot of that, but according to the World Meteorological Organisation. There are three seasons: hot, hot and damn hot. The damn hot temperature often rises to above 40c during the day and night-time temperatures are not much lower, especially around Songkran in April, the Thai New Year.

The city may be hot, or cool, depending on your temperament, but what makes it one of the most loved cities in the World is its people. They are kind, helpful and tolerant, and in my case extremely tolerant. The tolerance may come from Buddhism, their religion, but wherever it comes from, I'm very grateful and thank them for allowing me to visit so many fascinating places and photograph so freely.

The photographs are available in higher resolution and for download on my photography web site: www.jonathaninbali.com.

Bangkok is a big place and I've had to be selective. I know there are gaps waiting to be filled. I hope that I've been able to make the places that you already know and love more interesting and provided an incentive to visit those that you don't know. My thanks go especially to *Achan* Bob McCarthy, a long time resident of Thailand, for his patience in answering my many questions about Bangkok. He has been an invaluable source, but clearly any mistakes are my own. I plan to update the book from time to time and would welcome any corrections and suggestions.

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Chapter 1

Ayutthaya (1350-1767)

Bangkok was founded in 1782. The former Thai capital for 417 years was Ayutthaya, founded in 1350, about an hour up the Chao Phraya River, until the Burmese totally destroyed it in April 1767 in the most destructive of numerous attacks. The king was killed, many were taken captive and the population was scattered.



Ayutthaya.

It was a shattering blow, and the Thais are still emotional about it. It was a lovely, flourishing city conducting two-way trade with China and India. The directors of the East India Company compared it to London. When the

Portuguese, the first Westerners, arrived in 1511, following their takeover of Malacca in the Malay Peninsula, there were a million people living in Ayutthaya. After the Burmese attack, there were barely 10,000.



Aisawan Thiphya pavilion with four porches and a spired roof in the middle of the lake at the Bang Pa-In Palace, Ayutthaya.

King Prasat Thong built Bang Pa-In Palace, also known as the Summer Palace, in 1632. It was abandoned when the Burmese sacked Ayutthaya in 1767.



Chulalongkorn developed Bang Pa-In with European-style buildings.

In the 1850s Mongkut restored part of the site. What you see today is the work of Chulalongkorn, who developed the grounds with European-style buildings in 1872-1889. Aisawan Thiphya is the only Thai-style building in the place.



Sages' Lookout (*Ho Withun Thasana*): painted lighthouse-style lookout tower for viewing the countryside at Bang Pa-In.

Chapter 2

Thonburi (1767-1782)

Taksin founded a new capital in Thonburi on the west side of the Chao Phraya River and was crowned king. Attracted to the temple of Wat Arun he built his palace next to it in 1767. He was called Taksin because his name was Sin and he was the governor of Tak province.

Wat Arun



Wat Arun, the Temple of the Dawn.

Wat Arun, the Temple of the Dawn, is the highest religious structure in Bangkok. It has become a symbol of the city and occupies a commanding position on the river on the Thonburi side. Old French maps printed in the reign of King Narai (1656-1688) show the existence of Wat Arun.

It was originally called Wat Makok and it is said that it looked so beautiful in the morning light that after the fall of Ayutthaya Taksin decided to establish his capital there. He renamed the temple Wat Chaeng and housed the Emerald Buddha inside and determined to restore the temple.

Rama I renovated the temple and moved his capital across the river and in 1785 brought the Emerald Buddha from Wat Arun to Wat Phra Kaeo

inside the Grand Palace. Rama II built the tall Khmer-style spires, *prang*, and his son Rama III completed the work. Rama IV (Mongkut) carried out further renovations and named it Wat Arun Ratchawararam. The temple is called the Temple of the Dawn because the first rays of the sun hit at dawn.

The structure shows cultural fusion: Khmer, Indian and Chinese. The main central *prang* is Khmer and symbolises Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain where the gods reside – it is 81 metres (266 feet) high and has three terraces with four steep staircases, one on each side. The *prang* is decorated with seashells and millions of pieces of broken Chinese porcelain, donated by local people, which glitter in the light, and make it so distinctive. Over the second terrace are four statues of the Hindu god Indra riding Erawan, the three-headed elephant. There are a number of Chinese stone guards at the entrance to the terrace.

There are smaller *prang* at the corners dedicated to Phra Phai, the wind god. The towers are supported by rows of monkeys and demons taken from the Indian *Ramayana* epic.

The main Buddha image was cast in the reign of Rama II. Rama II's ashes are interred in the base. His statue is outside.

Each year, in October or November, the king (or a member of the royal family representing him) travels down the river to Wat Arun in a procession of royal barges to give new robes to the monks after the three-month Lent period. It is the royal *Kathin* festival.

Wat Arun is featured on the ten baht coin.

How to get there

Go to Saphan Taksin station on the Skytrain, walk to Sathorn pier, take the boat to Tha Tien pier, No 8, and then transfer to the cross-river ferry.

Taksin recovered all the territories the Burmese had taken and added the kingdom of Lanna, driving the Burmese from Chiang Mai, in the north. He extended the kingdom into Cambodia and Laos.



Taksin encouraged Chinese immigrants from southern China. They brought their gods with them.

Taksin welcomed Chinese immigrants from southern China. They were a cheap source of labour and he was partly Teochew himself. His father was Chinese and his mother Siamese. In 1769 he sent an army into Cambodia and annexed Battambang and Siem Reap, where Angkor Wat is.



The Chinese immigrants brought not only their gods, but also business acumen.

By 1779 Taksin was devoting himself mainly to religious matters, praying, fasting, and meditating.



The Chinese immigrants brought not only their gods and business acumen, but also their food.

General Sanka led a bloodless revolution in 1781. The rebels seized Taksin and invited his favourite general Chao Phraya Chakri to become king, which he did on 6 April 1782. He is now known as Rama I, the first of the Chakri dynasty.