



Discovering the Land of Golden Buddhas, Pad Thai and Kickboxing



JODY HOUTON



TUTTLE



A GEEK IN

THAILAND

**Discovering the Land of Golden
Buddhas, Pad Thai and Kickboxing**



JODY HOUTON



TUTTLE Publishing

Tokyo | Rutland, Vermont | Singapore





Contents

004 Harmony, Disorder and Smiles

CHAPTER 1

Thai History and Culture

- 008 A Brief History of Thailand
- 011 The Color of Politics
- 012 What to Do But Launch a Coup
- 014 The Land of Plenty
- 016 The Thai Language
- 018 Thailand's Most Important Religious Sites
- 022 The Importance of Thai Buddhism
- 024 Other Religions in Thailand
- 025 Thai Folklore
- 028 Thailand's Royal Palace

CHAPTER 2

Thai Design and Craftsmanship

- 032 Style Starts at Home
- 036 Thai Antiques and Crafts
- 038 Revival of the Thai Silk Industry
- 040 The Artistry of Tribal Textiles
- 042 Little Pieces of Paradise
- 044 A Shopaholic's Paradise
- 046 A Market for Every Purpose

CHAPTER 3

The Unique Thai Character

- 050 Mai Phen Rai: Behind the Thai Smile
- 054 Ethnic and Regional Differences
- 057 Thai 'Pretties': The Thai Ideal of Beauty
- 059 Ladyboys: Thailand's Third Gender
- 061 Living in the City
- 064 Thriving Companies in Thailand
- 066 Working with Thais
- 070 Successful Foreigners in Thailand
- 072 Jobs for Foreigners



CHAPTER 4

Amazing Thailand

- 076 Weird and Wonderful Thai Pastimes
- 078 Thailand's Karaoke Culture
- 080 The Joys of Thai Massage
- 083 Muay Thai Past and Present
- 086 The Ladyboy Cabaret Show

CHAPTER 5

The Joys of Thai Food

- 090 Food in Thailand
- 094 What Makes Thai Food Thai?
- 096 Thai Street Food
- 100 A Guide to Popular Restaurant Dishes
- 102 Thai Bar Culture and Etiquette
- 105 A Guide to Thai Beverages

CHAPTER 6

Thai Music, Movies, Art, Theater, TV and Books

- 118 Traditional Thai Dance and Puppet Theater
- 120 The Thai Music Scene
- 118 The Bewildering World of Thai TV
- 120 Thai Film
- 124 Thai Art and Artists
- 128 Thai Literature

CHAPTER 7

Visiting Thailand

- 132 Bangkok: The City of the Future
- 138 Phuket and Other Andaman Islands
- 144 Chiang Mai and the North
- 148 Colorful Thai Festivals
- 150 Adventure of a Lifetime
- 154 Advice, Tips and Warnings

- 158 Photo Credits

HARMONY, DISORDER AND SMILES

A visit to Thailand is likely to be an infuriating, alienating and head-scratching experience that will also provide the most wonderful and welcoming of culture shocks.

Thailand assaults the senses with an overload of activity—an explosion of colors, sounds, sights, smells and tastes. It possesses a seductive spirituality born not only from Buddhist values but from an ancient animist approach that has its origins in the country's folklores and forests.

This book is an attempt to understand one of the world's most visited countries—but goes beyond the usual tourist brochures and guidebooks. *A Geek in Thailand* is an exploration of why Thailand at once appears so foreign and chaotic yet familiar and ordered. Through a journey that includes understanding the complex cacophony of components that make up Thailand's food, noise levels, politics, traffic and contradictory character traits, we will begin to discover how seeking a balance, a harmony and a level of calm in all these integral elements is at the heart of the soul and culture of the country and essence of being Thai.

LOOKS CAN BE DECEPTIVE

Although young Thai men may wear T-shirts bearing the names of Western bands and cheer for English football teams on Saturday nights, and although Thai women may wear the



latest fashions and cultivate looks championed by their Japanese and Korean counterparts, Thais are inexplicably unique in their outlook. There is pride in the nation's individualistic Thai perspective that stems not only from it being the only Southeast Asian country

to ever resist colonization by Western powers but also from the deep reverence and respect for the intrinsic national Thai values of Nation, Religion and Monarchy.

The longer you stay in Thailand, the more questions you are likely to ask. To understand Thailand, you must have a knowledge of its geographical position and the influence of

LIVING THE HOLIDAY DREAM

The story of how I came to live in Thailand is quite a common one for those who choose the 'Land of Smiles' as their adopted homeland. I came for a holiday, well no, actually, that's not entirely true.... I came seeking relaxation, to de-stress at the end of a joyless English-teaching contract in Korea. Rather than return to the gray and dreary streets of my hometown of Manchester in the UK, where I would be twiddling my thumbs until my Masters course in journalism began, I went to Thailand at the suggestion of my girlfriend at the time.

I headed straight for the holiday island of Phuket. I think it was on day three, while I was sitting on the sand at Kata beach looking out at the water and the cliffs and peaks and distant green hills, that the hustle and bustle and toil and trouble of my recent time in Korea began to feel like years, not mere days, away.

I stayed in Phuket for a month, writing the odd travel article for a local newsmagazine to help subsidize my English breakfasts, bowls of chicken

fried rice and bottles of Singha beer. Being a sun-starved Mancunian, I then decided to do some more beach-hopping and ended up on the more remote and less-developed (at the time) island of Samui. I stayed in the Fisherman's Village, a lovely little beachside town with cheap accommodation and a lively selection of bars and foreign and Thai restaurants. I spent my days jogging on the beach and learning shorthand and writing. In the evenings I worked my way through a seemingly never-ending menu of delicious spicy, sour and sweet Thai dishes to the sounds of live music.





Tourists on a jungle trek in Maetang get a good soaking.



its neighbors. To understand Thai people, you must at least know of the one-time existence of more than 50 ethnic groups that were ‘unified’ and rebranded ‘Thai’ by one of the country’s most controversial and influential 20th-century prime ministers. To understand the Thai national character, you must have an awareness of its people’s propensity to smile, to save face and to respect the ‘tribe’ above all else. To

understand Thailand is to understand the political divisions of its people, which at times seem to manifest itself as little more than a preference for a particular color of clothing.

Writing this book has involved adventures down alleyways, gallons of coffee in cafes, thousands of emails and phone calls and fascinating days spent with professors, experts, artists, musicians, writers, street vendors, waitresses, taxi drivers, businessmen and everyday Thais who make up the eclectic mix of contemporary Thai society.

This project has also, perhaps most importantly, been inspired and motivated by each and every stranger’s smile, a reminder to this English geek of why he wanted to write a book about their country and culture in the first place.

Opposite top The Thai New Year, Songkran, is perhaps the world’s biggest water fight. **Opposite center** Being happy in Thailand is important, and there are even military-led campaigns to encourage it. **Opposite bottom** I’ve met many interesting people in my time in Thailand. Performance artist and *Thailand’s Got Talent* contestant Romadon is definitely in my top three. **Above center** The infamous Full Moon Party in Koh Phangan has become a rite of passage for young visitors. **Above left** Just dance: A cheerleading flash mob performing in Bangkok.

The time for me to return to the UK, and the responsibilities associated with it, was drawing ever closer. I decided that I should at least make an attempt at seeing another side of Thailand, something different from the idyllic paradise-like corners of the earth. I went to Bangkok, then to Chiang Mai and finally to Ayutthaya. In Bangkok I saw an urban Asian metropolis that straddled modernity and tradition and poverty and wealth like no other capital city I had ever visited. In Chiang Mai I saw a beautiful city surrounded by breathtaking countryside, with wonderful wildlife and awesome architecture, temples and ruins, and in Ayutthaya I experienced a glimpse of the Thailand of the past.

I had spent three months in Thailand, a lengthy holiday by any stretch of the imagination. But the fact that as soon as I had completed my Masters degree, I looked at ways of returning to Thailand is testament to the attraction of the country, to the fact that everything just seems so dull, so gray, so cold, so non-spicy and so un-Thai in comparison.

Like many expats who choose Thailand as their adopted home, I came for a holiday and stayed for the laid-back lifestyle. I came because I loved something about Thailand, something that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. When I left seven years earlier, I wasn’t quite sure what it was, but I was determined to find out. So I returned and began to work for the same newsmagazine I had written for during my initial visit. For my first Christmas in Thailand, I bought a Christmas tree, but when January came around I threw the little plastic thing out as I doubted I’d be there when the bells started jingling again. After three more tree-less Christmas festive periods, I admitted to myself that I should probably buy one again. I now live and work in Bangkok.

As with most other expats in Thailand, there have been times when I’ve wanted to tear my hair out with the ‘Thai’ way of doing things, but the anger and incredulity always pass and I remain, with a smile on my face and a Christmas tree and water pistol for Songkran in my cupboard.

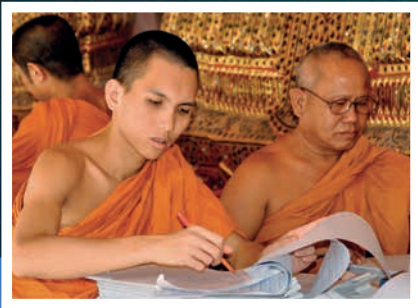
CHAPTER 1

THAI HISTORY AND CULTURE



How did ancient Siam come to be the colorful country of contemporary Thailand? Here, we will discover some of the most famous, influential and controversial Thais, both past and present. Religion, Nation, Monarchy are at the heart of Thai culture and are where, as geeks in Thailand, we will begin.





A BRIEF HISTORY OF THAILAND

The ancient kingdom of Siam—from the Sanskrit word *Syama*, meaning ‘dark’ or ‘brown’—was renamed Thailand in 1948.

This was, in fact, the second time the country’s name had changed. Siam was first renamed Thailand in 1939, at the onset of World War II, by then Prime Minister Field Marshal Luang ‘Plaek’ Phibunsongkhram who believed the name change would whip up much-needed ultra-nationalist spirit to unify or at least inform the approximately 50 ethnic groups resident in the country that it was a land for ‘Tais’, the dominant ethnic group at the time.

Although Thailand’s hosting of Japanese forces and perceived alignment with the Japanese in World War II was retrospectively deemed to have been ‘under duress’ as opposed to being ‘allied’ (Thailand was ‘occupied’ by 150,000 Japanese troops), it was decided to revert to the pre-war name Siam at the end of the war, in 1945.

Field Marshal Plaek was subsequently forced out of office and put on trial for war crimes, but was acquitted owing to strong Thai public support. In 1947, he led a coup and once again became prime minister. The following year Siam, for the second and final time, became Thailand.

THAILAND’S FOUR KINGDOMS

Thailand has gone through a myriad of changes and been exposed to numerous influences throughout its history. The existence of a number of separate, distinct and often co-existing Thai kingdoms has been largely responsible for the formation of the multifaceted Thailand we know today.

Sukhothai The Sukhothai kingdom of Thailand (1238–1448) is considered to be the ‘Golden Age of Thailand’. As the first independent Thai state follow-



SUKHOTHAI

ing the decline of the Khmer empire in the early 13th century, it is also believed to signal the beginning of modern Thai history.

The Sukhothai kingdom was a prosperous and plentiful place for the country and its people, one where ‘rivers were full of fish and fields of rice’. It was also a time of relative peace, with good relationships with neighboring countries. During the Sukhothai period, it was believed that kings would keep bells outside of their palaces. If any subject had a grievance, he would ring the bell and the king would come to the gate and dispense justice accordingly. This leadership style was later to become known as ‘father governs children’ and is still relevant today, not only in the palace but also in the hierarchy of Thai companies and organizations.

Although its authenticity has subsequently been questioned, the Thai alphabet was created by King Ramkhamhaeng during this period, evidenced by the discovery of an inscribed tablet, the Ramkhamhaeng Stele. In the script, the king speaks of his benevolent leadership style. King Ramkhamhaeng’s ‘paternal rule’ and the culture and traditions of Sukhothai were later to take on further significance during the 1932 pro-democracy revolution, when scholars

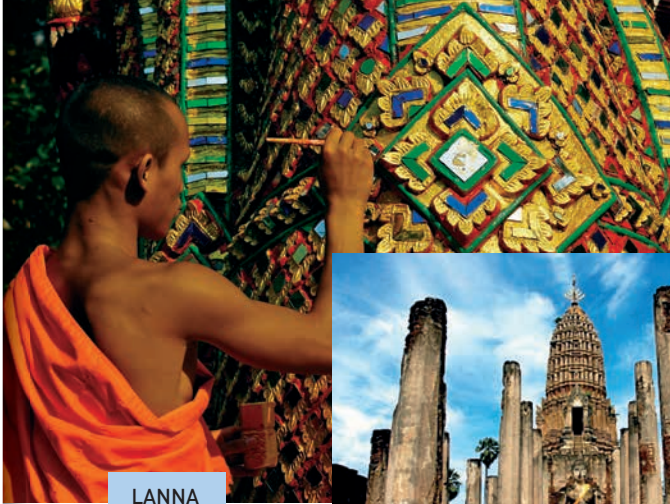
WHAT’S IN A NAME?

The word Thai in the Thai language means ‘independence’, leading many to believe the choice of name refers to Thailand’s ability to resist attempts at Western colonization, the only Southeast Asian country to successfully do so. Others believe the name refers to those who were to become the country’s most populous and dominant group of people—the Tais. The Tais were initially an ethnic group hailing from southern China, who migrated into the Chao Phraya River valley in central Thailand around AD 1000, an area already inhabited by two main Austro-Asiatic groups speaking Mon and Khmer. Present-day Thais are the product of the assimilation and fusion of these three groups.

In recent years, some Thai scholars, including historian Charnvit Kaset-siri, have called on the country to revert to its original name, Siam. Although the widespread practice of Theravada Buddhism has promoted racial harmony, Charnvit points out that it was only when the country became known as Thailand—‘a land for Tais’—that its 50 other ethnic groups currently residing alongside the Tais, including Yuan, Lao, Malayu, Karen, Hmong, Chinese and, most recently, *farang* (people of European descent), were discriminated against and dissuaded from expressing their customs, dress and language in favor of a unified Thai existence or Thai-ness. Charnvit believes that a return to the name Siam would be the first step in signaling that not only the country’s past but also its present is made up of many different ethnicities and ideologies, and is the only way to bring about reconciliation of its mosaic of peoples and cultures.



AYUTTHAYA



LANNA



THONBURI AND RATTANAKOSIN

argued that it was the ‘Golden Age of Thailand’ that, in fact, had given birth to what was to become a peculiarly Thai style of democracy.

Ayutthaya The Ayutthaya kingdom (1350–1767) is perhaps the best-known ancient Thai kingdom as its capital is still resplendent with historical buildings and artifacts. This period of Thai history witnessed huge economic growth as well as the establishment of relations with foreign traders, especially the Portuguese. With great power came great change and during the Ayutthaya period Thai society became distinctly hierarchical, with the large majority of Thais working as slaves or serfs for landowners, nobles and officials. Unlike the paternalistic rule of the Sukhothai period, the kings of Ayutthaya had absolute power and were perceived as incarnations of gods.

The Ayutthaya period was integral in developing the Thai arts where all members of society, from court officials to artisans and scholars of Buddhist learning joined together to make and decorate the area’s temples and palaces.

But this period in Thai history was also fraught with wars and battles with Burma, which led to the ultimate sacking of the city in 1767 and subsequent destruction of a large number of records, palaces and temples. Despite this, for a long period during the Ayutthaya reign the kingdom was largely considered to be the strongest power in mainland Southeast Asia.

Lanna Much like the Sukhothai kingdom, the Lanna kingdom, which ruled from the 13th to 15th century in northern Thailand, had an incredible influence on Thai society and culture and is still nostalgically regarded.

The Lanna kingdom co-existed during the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms, and at its height its power and influence were said to have rivaled Ayutthaya’s with whom it had repeated battles and skirmishes. It was during this period that Lanna’s culture and traditions of what is widely considered as the cultural capital of Thailand, Chiang Mai, were developed and firmly entrenched in Thai culture. Lanna architecture, woodcraft and masonry are easily identifiable and revered today. The kingdom eventually fell to the Burmese in 1558 but returned as a vassal state of Siam in the latter part of the 18th century.

Thonburi and Rattanakosin King Taksin the Great of Thonburi managed to reunite the country the following year, which gave birth to Thailand’s shortest reigning kingdom, the brief age of the Thonburi kingdom (1768–82).

The capital of Siam was moved to Thonburi and located on the opposite side of the Chao Phraya River where Bangkok now stands. As a result of numerous internal political problems, King Taksin was reported to have succumbed to stress and was subsequently ordained as a monk, disappearing from sight.

Because of its more advantageous position, Bangkok was then chosen as the new capital city, and in 1782 King Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke (Rama I) took over and became the first Chakri (royal ruling house) king in the Rattanakosin kingdom—the dynasty that presently encompasses Thailand.

SIAMESE TWINS

Chang and Eng Bunker (1811–74), who were joined at the sternum, were perhaps the first two Siamese men known to the larger world. Commonly known as the ‘Siamese Twins’, they toured the world as an exhibit of interest before settling and marrying two sisters in North Carolina, USA. Owing to their Chinese ancestry, they were known as the ‘Chinese Twins’ in Siam.





Left King Rama V, widely considered one of the greatest kings of Siam.

Above right King Rama IV, who provided the inspiration for the play and movie, *The King and I*.

ROYALTY IN THAILAND

The monarchy in Thailand is highly revered and staunchly protected by the *lèse-majesté* law. The current King of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), is the world's longest serving monarch and is dearly loved by the people of Thailand.

A testament to the Thai people's love for the king and the royal family, past and present, is the sheer number of royal portraits in premises throughout the Thai social structure, including homes, factories, offices and roadside garages.

Whether Thai or not, you are expected to show the utmost respect for the Thai royal family, and on occasions that demand it, such as before movie screenings and football matches, stand for the Thai national anthem, which is also played at 8 am and 6 pm every day. In public places, such as bus train platforms or market places, where the anthem is often broadcast through loudspeakers, it is remarkable to see everybody come to a halt.

Color of Love According to both Thai and Khmer astrology, each day of the week is associated with a particular color. As King Bhumibol was born on a Monday, which is associated with yellow, the most loyal of royalists can be identified by their choice of yellow clothing on Mondays. Blue garb is also a popular color to wear on Fridays out of respect for Queen Sirikit's birthday.

The King's Predecessors

Another much-respected member of the monarchy from the Chakri dynasty was King Rama IV or King Mongkut. Reigning from 1851 to 1868, he was known as the 'Father of Science and Technology' for embracing Western technologies and innovations, effectively beginning Thailand's modernization process. He also hired English and American missionaries to teach the princes English, and Western mercenaries to train Siamese troops.

King Mongkut's son, Chulalongkorn the Great, otherwise known as King Rama V (1868–1910), was also a hugely popular king. He is credited with abolishing the slave trade in Thailand, (depicted on the back of the B100 note), building railways, introducing electricity and through various reforms in the Thai feudal system and his influence in 'modernizing Siam', continuing to save the country from Western colonization.



The Man Who Brought Democracy

One Thai who has had immeasurable influence on modern Thailand is former prime minister Pridi Banomyong. He was one of the leaders of the 1932 Pro-Democracy Coup that saw the end of absolute monarchy and the adoption of the current and more popular constitutional monarchy. Pridi helped draft a new constitution and was, and still is, seen as a controversial figure in Thai history. He spent his remaining years in exile in France. After a generation overseas, his grandson, Ariya Banomyong, has returned to Thailand and is the current manager of Google in Thailand.

Making Siam 'Civilized'

Another influential but controversial figure among Thais is Field Marshal Luang 'Plaek' (Strange) Phibunsongkhram, who is also a former prime minister of Thailand. Phibunsongkhram was charged with inculcating a sense of nationalism among Thai people during his time in the National Assembly and Thai military. Through various mandates, he ordered the Thais to learn the national anthem, salute the flag in public and communicate in public only in the Thai language.

Phibunsongkhram was also responsible for promoting the use of forks and spoons instead of hands for eating and adopting more Western attire. Indeed, up until a 1940 Thai Cultural Mandate, the common traditional costume for women, especially in rural areas, was a wrapped sarong and little else. Despite being the son of a Chinese immigrant, he was also responsible for the launch of numerous anti-Chinese policies and the closing down of Chinese schools all over Thailand. Many older Thai people remember him for his simple and easy to remember mandate of 'Wear a hat and become civilized.'

Like his political nemesis Pridi, Phibunsongkhram died in exile, his final years being spent in Japan.



Field Marshal Luang 'Plaek' (Strange) Phibunsongkhram



Left A protestor waves a flag at the popular pro-democracy site, the Victory Monument, in Bangkok. **Above** Thousands gathered every day in the capital, listening to speeches, attending rallies and mainly blowing whistles.

THE COLOR OF POLITICS

Thaksin Shinawatra is a former prime minister of Thailand (2001–6) who remains both revered and disliked. After courting previously neglected rural Thai voters, he won two landslide election victories and arguably changed the face of Thai politics forever. Many of his policies, including providing universal affordable health coverage and low-interest agricultural loans, were hugely effective and consolidated his support base among the poorer classes.

Thaksin's emerging power and popularity unsettled the elite, the middle classes and Thailand's traditional establishment who had, almost exclusively, been in the political driving seat for decades.

Thaksin is also controversial for leading Thailand's 'War on Drugs', which saw around 2,275 drug traffickers and addicts killed over a three-month period in 2003. The government claimed that only 50 deaths were the result of police actions, the rest being assassinations and revenge attacks by drug dealers and gangs. In 2006, the telecommunications billionaire was stripped of his family fortune of \$1.4 billion by the Supreme Court after being found guilty of corruption. Since then, half has been returned. He lives in self-imposed exile in Dubai following protests led by the conservative royalist People's Alliance for Democracy (its supporters known as Yellow Shirts), which overthrew his government in December 2006 while he was abroad—one of 19 military coups and attempted coups since the founding of the constitutional monarchy in 1932.

After Abhisit Vejjajiva from the People's Alliance for Democracy replaced Thaksin as prime minister, supporters of Thaksin, made up of mostly poor and rural Thais, known colloquially as Red Shirts, have clashed

many times with the Yellow Shirts. During the tenure of what the Red Shirts consider the illegal, undemocratic and unlawful appointment of Abhisit, there have been numerous Red Shirt protests. The most notable occurred in 2010, when hundreds of thousands of Red Shirt protesters took to the streets. Violent clashes between the protesters and the military left 92 dead and more than 2,000 injured.

In 2011, Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra, leader of the Pheu Thai party, was elected prime minister. One of the populist policies on the Pheu Thai party's agenda for 2013 was to pass a blanket amnesty bill which would have retroactively exonerated political criminals from crimes they had committed. This would have allowed her exiled brother Thaksin Shinawatra to return to Thailand without fear of charges. Needless to say, the Thai people opposed and supported the plan in equal numbers.

Many of the protesters in 2013–14 were unified in their anti-Shinawatra sentiments.



Support for Sale

The Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts are not officially aligned with any political party. Rather, they are independent supporter groups. Many believe that the two high-profile supporter groups could one day officially launch their own political parties.

WHAT TO DO BUT LAUNCH A COUP



When Yingluck Shinawatra, the leader of the Pheu Thai Party, won a landslide victory in the 2011 elections, many Thais were prepared to give her a chance despite the fact that she was the sister of the deposed Thaksin Shinawatra. For others, old wounds heal slowly and allegations came swiftly that she was merely a puppet for a political party that Thaksin would still be controlling.

The final straw for the non-believers came in November 2013 when Yingluck attempted to pass a broad amnesty bill that would, in effect, allow Thaksin to return to Thailand where he would not face any charges nor serve the two years in prison that he was sentenced to in absentia, and, most controversially, have all his seized assets returned. Anti-government protests quickly formed up and down the country, especially in Democrat stronghold areas like Bangkok and Phuket, with pockets of protesters traveling to Bangkok to join the street marches. Their aim, as seen on various items of merchandise made quickly available, was to Shut Down Bangkok in order to Restart Bangkok.

SUTHEP STEPS UP

Former Democrat Party Secretary-General Suthep Thaugsuban quickly became a figurehead and spokesperson for the anti-government protesters, and later formed the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). Fearing that the present government was so

corrupt that any elections or attempted reforms would be rejected or dealt with unfairly, he called for Yingluck to be ousted in favor of installing an unelected people's council. His aims were dismissed, mainly by outside foreign and international observers, as fanciful and unrealistic. Despite this, Suthep and the protesters, clad in merchandise emblazoned with the Thai flag, continued marching every day, whistles blowing. Donations were collected, often by Suthep himself, which went to cover the cost of providing food and water for the faithful. Protesters set up camp on the streets and even in Lumpini Park and there were regular concerts and speeches to boost morale.

In December 2013, Yingluck dissolved the House of Representatives and scheduled a general election for February 2014. She ignored plans to step down in the interim, maintaining that it was her duty to continue to lead the country as a caretaker prime minister.

DON'T VOTE FOR DEMOCRACY

In the run up to election day, February 2, anti-government protesters called on the Thai people not to vote and on the day itself blocked many polling stations, preventing people from voting. They feared that despite all their whistle blowing, the vast majority of Thais (in the rural north of Thailand at least) would go ahead and vote in a party that was sympathetic to the Red Shirt (Thaksin Shinawatra) cause and all the marching and blowing of whistles would have been for nothing. It was a minor victory for the PDRC but not for democracy, as the elections were nullified in March. This enraged pro-government supporters and there were numerous Red Shirt protests held in retaliation, mainly in the north. As the weeks progressed, there were also mounting rumors that the protesters might be heading to Bangkok. In the meantime, skirmishes between protesters and riot police in the capital had turned violent, leading to 28 deaths, including those of two child protesters. Each group blamed the other and accused the police of siding with the opposing faction.

IT'S NOT A COUP (REALLY...)

Something had to be done. In May 2014, following six months of protests, Yingluck and nine other ministers were removed from office by the Constitutional Court. A few weeks later, martial law was imposed under a law promulgated by King Rama VI almost a hundred years earlier to the day.

Like many generals before him, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Commander of the Royal Thai Army, launched a coup d'état against the caretaker government. The junta was known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO).

From the outset, General Prayut was quick to point out that what was taking place was not a military coup in the traditional sense of the word and there would be no violence. In fact, he stated that the coup was launched to prevent the kind of violence that was being seen at that time in Ukraine. Many Thais and



HAPPINESS FESTIVALS

Throughout the month of June 2014, the Royal Thai Army staged a number of ‘Happiness Festivals’ in the capital, including at the highly symbolic site of the Victory Monument, popular with protesters past and present, with the aim of restoring happiness to the people. Activities included music concerts, free movie screenings, a petting zoo, free haircuts, free meals and even a sexy coyote performance.

Apart from a few tourists intent on obtaining a soldier selfie, there were many more who were wary of the political situation in Thailand and visitor numbers plummeted.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand hit upon the idea of promoting Martial Law Tourism, stating that, in fact, the country was now safer than ever, what with soldiers, machine guns at the ready, guarding the streets.

Following the murder of two British backpackers in late 2014, the Thai Tourism Minister stated that she had another idea to ensure the safety of the country’s visitors: every single one of them would be asked to wear a wristband containing a serial number that corresponded with their ID, which would work much like a sort of rudimentary tracking device. It was met with a mixture of incredulity and ridicule and the idea was soon dropped. A curfew for tourists was another idea that was quickly dismissed.

From July 2014 onwards, the sight of soldiers in the streets became less and less common and life returned to as normal as it has ever been for the Thai people.

visiting foreigners seemed to agree, with some posing for pictures with bemused soldiers holding machine guns.

Despite the ‘it’s not a coup’ claims, a curfew was swiftly imposed from 10 am to 5 pm, which quickly had the desired effect of removing the protest camps that were sporadically placed throughout the capital and elsewhere in the country, regardless of color.

BACK TO ‘NORMAL’

Once the coup was imposed and the country was, for the twelfth time, under military rule, Thailand began to return to a sense of military normalcy that almost every generation since 1932 had experienced at one time or another. Suthep shaved his head, joined the monkhood and disappeared from public view for the next few months, while Yingluck went abroad to catch up with her brother. Towards the end of the year, however, she began to be spotted at glitzy events in the capital. The good times weren’t to last, however. In January 2015, Yingluck, despite no longer being in office, was impeached and banned from participating in politics for five years.

The NCPO had cleared the streets and seemed to have been successful in reminding the two warring factions about what really mattered. All that remained was to try to convince the general public that they were doing the right thing. And so began the Happiness campaign in June 2014.

HARDLINE POLITICS

Although the NCPO initially said that it was their ultimate intention to hold elections in the latter part of 2015, when Prime Minister Prayut would step down, the former general also hinted on a number of occasions, especially on his weekly Friday night TV address, *Kuen Kwam Suk* (Returning Happiness), that this would only be the case if he thought that the government and Thai society were in a stable enough position for him to do so.

Although martial law was finally lifted in April 2015, it was quickly replaced with the invocation of Article 44 from the interim constitution. Commonly referred to as ‘dictator law’, it gave Prayut absolute power to override any branch of government as long as such actions were done in the name of national security.



Above Prayut, Suthep and Thaksin were front page news for much of 2014 and 2015.

Below Protestors changed tack, from anti-Shinawatra to anti-coup, in 2014.



THE LAND OF PLENTY

Once touted as a land of plenty because of its rich, varied and abundant agricultural products, Thailand is still able to make such claims, albeit in a slightly more corporate and less romanticized rural way. It continues to have one of the lowest levels of unemployment in the world.

The story of the Thai economy really began to change pace, along with its main characters, when King Rama V, in an attempt to sidestep the sort of bloodshed seen during the American Civil War, abolished slavery and serfdom in 1905. From then onwards, opportunities were available not only to wealthy landowners and noblemen but also to a new wave of entrepreneurs and merchants. Soon after, the export of agricultural products, including most significantly rice, became paramount in the steady growth of the economy and Thailand's inclusion in the global market.

A cultural and economical hangover from Siam's reliance on serfdom is, arguably, still present in Thai society. As such, living like a king or a queen, or at the very least a master, is relatively achievable, at least for the middle and upper classes. Taking taxis everywhere,

eating out every day, having regular massages and employing gardeners, maids and cleaners is not seen as particularly indulgent for a large percentage of the kingdom's residents. Of course, this is only made possible by Thailand's huge socio-economic disparity, its ingrained, clearly defined hierarchical structures and its slew of servile jobs. In Thailand, there are whistle-blowing car park attendants, guards who appear to be guarding little more than their plastic seats, well-dressed doormen employed solely to salute customers at shopping malls, and countless other subservient jobs that have disappeared from many a developed country's workplace.

Gender inequality is another remnant of traditional Thai culture that hasn't dramatically changed over the years. Although women can be found on construction sites, collecting trash and



Although rice fields can still be found in the countryside, many rural Thais have migrated to the cities to find work.

generally doing any job that men do, they also tend to earn, on average, 81 percent of what men earn for doing the same job. Thai women have to compete with very traditional, stereotypical and downright sexist views, both inside and outside the office. At home, they are expected to take care of the children and perform all domestic duties, all of which are done with virtually no governmental assistance.

Most Thais work long, hard days, the average being from 8 am to 6 pm, five days a week, often with a half or full day on Saturday.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

As long as Thai workers have not been fired or have left their position without due cause, they are eligible for up to 15,000 baht (US\$450) unemployment benefit per month, depending on the amount of social security contributions they have made. Although this may not

seem like a huge amount, the minimum wage in Thailand is just 300 baht a day (\$9), so 15,000 baht a month is actually a well above average monthly amount.

Any Thai who earns less than 150,000 baht (US\$4,500) per year is exempt from paying tax, meaning, in effect, that a huge percentage of the Thai population and workforce do not pay taxes or make any social security contributions whatsoever. This includes Thailand's street vendors, fruit sellers, DVD merchants, tourist touts, illegal taxi drivers, and all those employed in cash-in-hand industries. A downside of this seemingly kind concession is that should disaster strike and they find themselves unable

to sell pineapples, or without customers, then they will invariably find themselves on their own, unable to receive any help from the state. In Thailand, one must be part of and pay into the system to benefit from it.

Foreigners in Thailand who find themselves in a similar situation are also rarely entitled to any financial support despite the significant tax and social security payments they may have made. This is because a foreigner's residence and status as a non-tourist in Thailand is usual dependent on having a work permit. Once that is taken away, so too are the majority of a foreigner's rights to aid.

It is fortunate, therefore, that at least statistically Thailand enjoys one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world, standing at around 0.8 percent.



THE NEW THAILAND

A walk around any Thai supermarket or shopping mall, where an unbelievable number of smartphone-using staff are sitting down and chatting, is testimony to the unnecessarily high level of employment in Thailand. From the spare tire store worker whose only duty appears to be glancing slightly over the shoulder of an unattended customer to the staff who monitor and wield flashlights while commuters walk through metal detectors at train stations, many of Thailand's shops, stores and industries seem to employ around a third more workers than a foreigner is normally used to. Indeed, it often appears that Thailand creates a job and employs somebody to complete a task that only needs doing because it wasn't done by the relevant person in the first place.

Do not make the misguided assumption, however, that this increase in numbers of staff correlates with an increase in productivity or efficiency. Asking the whereabouts of an item in a Thai store merely results in an extended game of Chinese whispers. Salaries being so low, combined with staff numbers being so high, often results in either an unwillingness or an unrequited ability to think or perform a duty outside the very narrow remit of a job.

The flip side of the 100 baht note depicts King Rama V freeing slaves.



CAN I HELP YOU?

Appearances are doubly deceptive, with many economists suggesting that Thai employment figures probably aren't as rosy as they first appear. A significant percentage, they suggest, are merely not officially unemployed or are working fewer than 20 hours per week. There are also many Thai workers, especially in the tourist industry, who suffer from off-season unemployment.

As millions of Thais are not required to pay tax, the knock-on effect contributes to the woefully inadequate welfare system, which often means little or no help when Thais get down on their luck and really need it.

Like many welfare programs in Thailand, child care, and even a knowledge of it, is mainly only available to those within the system and those who have made social security contributions. For those who have, a pilot child welfare program was launched in 2015 that

equates to, on average, around 400 baht (US\$12) a month for children up to one year old. After that, parents are on their own. In contrast, the Thai government is more accommodating towards senior citizens, regardless of whether they have paid social security during their lifetime. They qualify for a state pension of 600 baht per month in their sixties, 700 baht in their seventies and so on.

Some 40 percent of Thailand's workforce is engaged in the agricultural sector, 40 percent in service industries and 20 percent in manufacturing. The combined success of the manufacturing and service industries, alongside Thailand's strong, steady industry of agricultural exports, has resulted in a reduction in the number of people living below the poverty line from 65 percent in 1988 to 13 percent in 2011. According to the World Bank, Thailand is one of the great development success stories of the 20th century.



Left Long commutes to work are often part of the daily slog.

Below Four hands are not necessarily better than two.



THE THAI LANGUAGE

With seemingly lax one-size-fits-all rules regarding tenses, relatively simple sentence structures and mainly monosyllabic words, the Thai language appears to be one of the easier constructed languages.

Once you dig deeper, however, you will learn that the tonal language of Thai, with its subtle nuances, is incredibly difficult to master. There are also different dialects depending on region, and particular words, sentence structures and phrases that are only used in certain circumstances. There are even different registers, including Religious Thai and Royal Thai. There are also masculine and feminine versions of some Thai words. *Krab* for men and *ka* for women, as polite particles to end sentences, are the most commonly used.

The spoken language of Thai is purported to have originated from the border of Vietnam and China and has similarities with the languages of Laos, Myanmar and northern Vietnam. In fact, around 70 percent of the words from the Thai dialect of Isan (bordering Laos) and the Lao language are the same, as is the sentence structure. Despite these similarities, however, there are still enough differences to mean that someone who speaks only Thai, Thai Isan or Lao will not necessarily be able to understand other languages.

'THAI ONLY'

The majority of residents of the rural Thai area of Isan are ethnic Lao and as such are bilingual. Although Thai is now taught and used in schools, as decreed by Field Marshal Plaek through his process of 'Thaification', a mixture of Thai and Lao is used in the social environment. 'Thaification' was also imposed on the Chinese community in Thailand, resulting in the teaching of Chinese being banned in favor of the Thai language.

HARDER THAN IT LOOKS

On paper, it gets harder, with written Thai at first, second and third glance resembling little more than a series of squiggles. It is believed to have been introduced during the reign of the third Sukhothai sovereign, King Ramkhamhaeng, in 1283. Written Thai was based on the pre-existing Pali, Sanskrit and Indian writing systems and has remained largely unchanged since its inception.

One of the most difficult aspects of the language is that unlike English and other European 'alphabet



languages', Thai is a tonal (phonemic) language. This means it contains a much greater degree of variation in the pronunciation of its syllables. There are five lexical tones in Thai (low, mid, high, falling, rising), which makes for a very melodic but consequently hard to decipher language. For example, the word *mai* means 'new' if said with a low tone, 'no' if said with a falling tone, 'silk' if said with a rising tone but creates a question if used at the end of a sentence.

Thai people have a great love of puns and double entendres as heard in the sometimes risqué *molam* (country music) lyrics, which adds to the complexity.

HEARING THE DIFFERENCE

The Thai written language uses a phonemic alphabet of 44 consonants and 32 vowels. Perhaps because of the diversity and range of sounds, most Thais carry all their lives a school-learned mnemonic picture association



Above Believed by some, but not all, to be the first example of Thai writing.



Above Easy as A, B, C. Most start off by learning the Thai alphabet.

Left Although many signs are also in English, there is no guarantee you won't get lost.



GRUNT LIKE A LOCAL

All manner of grunts, exclamations and interjections pepper Thai conversation. Here are some of the most common you're likely to hear:

Aow! Used to show either surprise or disappointment.

Hoh! Used to show admiration or astonishment.

Ore! Used to show sudden realization, understanding.

Eh! Used to show confusion.

Oie! Used to show anger or frustration.

Uh! Used to show acknowledgement that the person you're speaking to has finally understood.

with every consonant, for example, *gaw gai* (chicken), *taw tao* (turtle), *law ling* (monkey). In fact, tones are so important that quite often a Thai speaker will add extra sounds when speaking a foreign language. This is most noticeably done when an extra vowel is added between two consecutive consonants. 'Steak' becomes 'st-ay-ke' and 'stamp' becomes 'sa-ta-m'. Sometimes the Thai speaker may just decide to omit sounding one of the consonants altogether.

The characters are written left to right, and spaces are only used to indicate the end of a sentence, not to separate words. The Thai language also has its own set of Thai numerals based on the Hindu Arabic numeral system, but nowadays the standard Western system is more common. Thai numerals can, however, still sometimes be seen, especially at places employing a dual pricing system.

Scholars fear that more letters, sounds and, of course, cute accompanying pictures will be lost to future generations as younger Thais seek new, quick and easy ways to communicate in text-speak.

In Thailand, a popular way of showing the 'efficiency' of the large smartphone screen is by showing a young Thai texting quickly on the 'large-enough-screen' that can accommodate all of the Thai letters, consonants and vowels.

Learning TINGLISH

Anybody who stays in Thailand for an extended period, even if they make little or no effort to learn Thai, will find they will begin to possess a rudimentary level of 'Tinglish'—a hybrid of Thai and English based on existing Thai rules of grammar and cultural practices.

Tinglish tends to omit pronouns and the verb 'to be' as these are not necessarily used in the Thai language. For example, instead of saying "We don't have....," a cashier might say, in Tinglish, "No have," as this is the most accurate translation from the Thai for *Mai mee*.

Walk past any taxi driver in the kingdom and the likelihood of him enquiring in Tinglish "Where you go?" is not necessarily rude and intrusive but merely a direct translation of the common Thai greeting/enquiry *Bai nai?* ("Go where?")

Also quite common in Tinglish is the addition of a Thai particle, for example, *ka/krab/na*, at the end of a perfectly well-constructed English sentence to indicate polite conduct, as these particles are always used to end a sentence if the speaker wishes to speak formally. I hope you understand *krab*.

Other common mistakes made in Tinglish include:

I am boring = I am bored

Although it may initially seem like a refreshingly honest statement, it is likely that the Thai speaker merely wishes to convey their lack of interest in a particular activity. This misuse of the present continuous is simply a result of not understanding or remembering the difference in use and meaning. The Thai equivalent of bored (*beau*) and boring (*naa beau*) is created in a totally different way.

I play Internet = I go on/use the Internet

This is simply a case of first language interference, as in Thai the verb *len* (play) is used in conjunction with all games, including football and computers. In Thai, to work is associated with making money, while to play is any activity that doesn't involve making money.

Same, same = Similar/the same

The doubling up of 'same' is, again, a result of direct translation. In Thai, one way of saying 'similar' can be *deeokwan deeokwan* or *khelai khelai gap*.

After a few months of living in Thailand, do not be surprised if some bad grammatical habits start to form. As there are no articles ('a', 'an', 'the') in Thai, and pronouns are largely omitted, new arrivals may suddenly find themselves speaking a rather neanderthal version of English, with utterances like "Want beer".

There is also no Thai equivalent of 'some' or 'any', and when forming a question in Thai, the subject normally begins the sentence. This means that once the feckless foreigner masters the modern art of Tinglish, he will probably begin constructing sentences like "Beer have?" It's not all bad though, as he is likely to also add *krab* on the end of every sentence.



Wat Arun is a particularly beautiful Bangkok temple, especially when viewed at sunset. Although more like a theme park than a tranquil place of contemplation, the Grand Palace attracts thousands of visitors every day.



THAILAND'S MOST IMPORTANT RELIGIOUS SITES

Many of the most stunning and historically significant Thai *wat* (temples) are located in the cities of Ayutthaya, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and, of course, Bangkok. Thai temples are often used for multiple purposes and are therefore central to Thai life.

Some Thai temples act as rehabilitation centers, while others serve as festival venues. Some host huge annual temple fairs, complete with funfair rides, games, contests, live music and an obligatory Thai market. Entry to temples in Thai-

land is free for Thais but there may be a small entry fee for foreign visitors.

Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn) is located on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. This iconic riverside structure is breathtaking and when

viewed from the water the temple's reflection makes for a truly memorable experience, especially at sunset or sunrise. This beautiful structure is further characterized by its two central *prang* (spires), decorated with multicolored ceramic, that seem to stretch right up into the sky.

Another popular temple site is **Wat Phra Mahatata** in Ayutthaya. The temple ruins are in a similar state to

Wat Pho

As its name suggests, **Wat Pho** (Temple of the Reclining Buddha) contains a 151 ft (46 m) long gold leaf-covered reclining Buddha statue. It is the biggest temple complex in Bangkok and is home to the Thai Traditional Medical and Massage School, where weary travelers can revive their aching feet, shoulders and body with a traditional Thai massage for a very reasonable price. Aspiring masseurs can even take a Thai massage course.



WAT PHRA KAEW



WAT PHRA MAHATHAT



WAT SAKET

other sites in Ayutthaya. However, it is the spectacular Buddha image embedded in a tree trunk that prompts many to visit. Theories vary as to its existence. Most Thais believe that Burmese ransackers had tried to steal the head,

failed because of its weight, dropped it and that trees had subsequently grown around it.

Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) is perhaps the most important temple in the whole of Thailand. Situated within the grounds of the Grand Palace, the exquisite structure contains a Buddha image dating from the 15th century, raised high upon a platform.

Wat Saket (Temple of the Golden Mount) in Bangkok dates back to the Ayutthaya kingdom. The Golden Mount refers to the manmade mound upon which the temple sits. To reach the top of the mount, worshippers and visitors have to climb 300 steps. The crowning glory of Wat Saket is the wonderful golden *chedi* (stupa).

Wat Suthat is not only one of the

WAT SUTHAT



largest temples in Bangkok (it covers around 10 acres/4 ha) but also one of the oldest. A huge red teak arch at the entrance is all that remains of a giant swing that once welcomed visitors to the complex. Inside the complex are wonderful murals, numerous pagodas and a 25 ft (7.6 m) tall bronze Buddha image.

A patron receives a traditional Thai massage at the Wat Pho Thai Traditional Medical and Massage School.





WAT TRAIMIT

Housed in **Wat Traimit** in Chinatown, Bangkok, is the world's largest golden-seated Buddha. Carved in solid gold, the 5 ft (1.5 m) high statue, which weighs around 5 tons, is believed to date back to the Sukhothai period. It is well worth a visit if only to learn more about the interesting story of the structure.

Wat Ratchabophit is a temple designed in rather a unique manner and is well worth a visit. Although its layout includes a traditional Thai circular courtyard, complete with golden *chedi*, the interior design of the temple was heavily influenced by the gilded Italian architecture of the time. There is also a royal cemetery in the temple grounds.

The otherworldly design of the interior of **Wat Paknam** is strikingly beautiful. Unlike other traditional Thai temples, the ornate décor is colored with unconventional light blues and reds, and unusual shapes and hues. The temple is also well known for its meditation lessons, and monks here instruct in Buddhism and meditation in both English and Thai and therefore attract many visitors each day.

Another Thai temple worthy of mention is **Wat Rong Khun** (White Temple) in Chiang Rai. As its name suggests, it is a completely white structure (representing purity) that would not look out of place in a *Lord of the*



Wat Benchamabophit

Wat Benchamabophit is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful temples in Thailand. Designed by Prince Naris, a brother of the king at the time, it stands out from the majority of temples in Bangkok as it uses the finest Italian marble. This major tourist attraction draws huge numbers of visitors who come to marvel at the majesty and beauty of the temple and its 52 Buddha statues that decorate the exterior.

Wat Rakhang

Wat Rakhang (Bell Temple) is a popular temple for visitors who wish to ring in good fortune to their lives. The ringing of the temple bell is a common practice for those wishing to bring positive influence in their life. Wat Rakhang is also well known for its artistic exterior design.



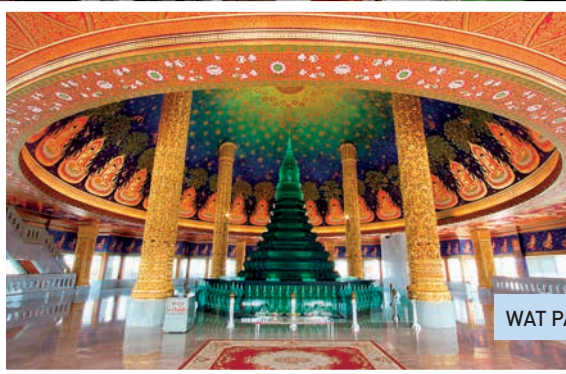


WAT RATCHABOPHIT



WAT RONG KHUN

Rings movie. The unconventional temple was designed in 1997 by Chalermchai Kositpipat, who once said that it would never be finished in his lifetime. He plans to build—or have someone build—another nine dream-like structures and aims to have them all finished by 2070.



WAT PAKNAM

OTHER PLACES OF WORSHIP

Thailand is also home to some beautiful Christian churches. Increasingly of late, more and more Russian Orthodox churches have sprung up around the kingdom. One incredible structure, built in a classic cross-shaped plan and topped with a gold onion-shaped dome, is the Church of the Holy Trinity Church in Phuket.

Because of the relatively large Muslim population in Thailand, there is understandably more than a fair share of spectacular mosques in the kingdom. A stand-out mosque is the Pattani Grand Mosque, situated in the

CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY, PHUKET



troubled south of the country. Easily the largest mosque in Thailand, the Pattani Grand Mosque, opened in 1963, is also widely regarded as one of the hundred most beautiful mosques in the world, with the large dome in the center and four smaller surrounding ones often drawing comparisons with India's Taj Mahal.



PATTANI GRAND MOSQUE

The best-known Sikh temple (Gurdwara) in Thailand is located in Bangkok. The structure that stands today, the Siri Guru Singh Sabha, was originally built in 1933. Located in the Phra Nakhon district, known to the locals as Little India, this six-story temple, trimmed in gold and topped by a gold dome, is steeped in Sikh culture and heritage.

Owing to the sizable Nepalese community in Thailand, there are also a number of Nepalese temples in the country, including Phuket. A temple stands at the top of Patong hill and is immediately recognizable and distinguishable from Thai Buddhist temples owing to the use of more vibrant and mixed colors and, of course, the representation of the multitude of Hindu gods.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THAI BUDDHISM

If you're an early riser in Thailand and regardless of whether you're in the metropolis of Bangkok or the smallest village in Surat Thani, it is likely you will see orange-robed monks walking through the neighborhood giving blessings and receiving alms.

Around 95 percent of Thais are Buddhists, the highest percentage of Buddhist nationals in the world. The Thai version of Buddhism is chiefly derived from the Theravada or southern school of Buddhism, which originated in Sri Lanka, but over time has incorporated elements of Thai myths and folk stories and, owing to the large Thai Chinese population, various Chinese gods. Thai Buddhism has also been heavily influenced by Hinduism.

In 2013, following the death of Kanchanaburi born Supreme Patriarch Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, who was also Sangha Leader of the Buddhist World as bestowed by the World Fellowship of Buddhists, King Bhumibol ordered a 30-day national mourning period.

The importance of Buddhism in Thailand cannot be understated. Around 50 percent of Thai boys and young men typically enter the monkhood or become ordained at least once in their lifetime. King Mongkut himself was a monk for 27 years. In days gone by, the king of Thailand was seen as a protector of the religion. Kings, queens, princes and princesses therefore take part in religious ceremonies, attend services and make merit each year.

MAKING MERIT

Thai people 'make merit' (do good things as prescribed through religious doctrine), whether giving alms to monks or visiting temples on birthdays, significant dates and religious holidays. They make merit to bring inner happiness, become successful, gain guidance and cease earthly desires.

It is quite common for a Thai home to have some sort of Buddhist shrine, complete with Buddha image, to which family members pray, meditate or make merit. Outside homes and places of business, daily food offerings are made to the spirits and ancestors in a bid to appease them.

MULTIPURPOSE MONASTERIES

Many Buddhist temples in Thailand double up as retreats or places of rehabilitation. Each year, thousands of young Thai offenders are dispatched to their local temple for guidance, instruction or therapy. Treatment often involves taking an alcohol or drug vow against the use of either for a certain period of time. Attendees also purge themselves regularly and drink herbal concoctions that make them vomit into large trough-like areas in the temple.

A much-revered monk, who ran the country's largest drug rehabilitation program at Wat Thamkrabok in Saraburi province, was former police officer Phra Chamroon Panchan. His treatment of those suffering from narcotic addiction was internationally recognized. In the 1970s, at the end of the Vietnam War, the temple also became a shelter for up to 30,000 hill tribe (Hmong) refugees from Laos. Controversy has,



Left Novice monks accept morning alms at Amphawa Floating Market.

Below Monks set out to get their daily food donations.

