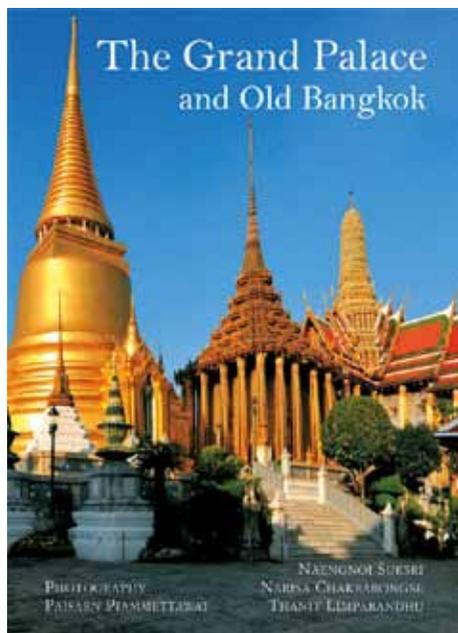


The Grand Palace and Old Bangkok by Naengnoi Suksri, Narisa Chakrabongse, Thanit Limpabandhu, with photography by Paisarn Piemmettawat. (Bangkok: River Books, 2014). ISBN 978-974-9863-41-1 (soft).



Visitors to Bangkok in the old days could scarcely know what to expect as they stepped off the boat. Indeed, the traveler in 1914 had only a Baedeker Guide to turn to—in German—in which Siam was lumped together with India, Malaya, Burma, and Java. Fast-forward a hundred years, to 2014, and the number of books on Thailand would require a fleet of tuk-tuks to transport. In fact, few topics in Thai life have not escaped investigation, from the nation's nightlife to its spiritual life, from its flora to fauna. Even Bangkok's celebrated 'street food' has spawned a few fresh titles. Paradoxically, as the number of books has mushroomed, the caliber has witnessed a corresponding decline. Hence, discerning visitors and

Bangkok residents alike will welcome this new work on the Grand Palace and nearby historical and cultural sites. No single book has hitherto covered quite the same ground and with such depth, thereby filling a tremendous vacuum. Moreover, with special permission accorded from His Majesty the King, River Books was able to photograph the interiors of many royal buildings that are completely off limits to the public.

Bangkok was born from the ashes of Ayutthaya, the former capital besieged by Burmese forces in 1767. A new capital arose the following year in Thonburi, situated opposite modern Bangkok on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River. A coup transpired in 1782 and a general named Chao Phraya Chakri emerged as king, known as Rama I (1782-1809) and founder of the current Chakri dynasty. The royal family identified itself with Rama, the champion of the Sanskrit epic, the Ramayana. The palace shifted from Thonburi across the river to its present location and on 21 April 1782 the symbolic 'city-pillar' was erected, marking the city's birth. The city-pillar lies just outside the palace walls and is protected by a pavilion constructed in 1978. The original wooden pillar still survives, gilded and capped with a lotus finial. Although few tourists are aware of the pillar, it is one of city's major sacred spots, together with the nearby Emerald Buddha and the Erawan shrine in central Bangkok.

The Chakri dynasty's imprint on Bangkok is incalculable in as much as the city's key monuments are tied to the patronage and cosmopolitan taste of its rulers

over a two hundred-year period, much like the Medicis in Florence or the Nasrids in Granada. All of the nine Chakri rulers are captured in a series of rather recent oil paintings, which are reproduced in the Appendices, accompanied by their formal titles, regnal dates and a list of the many monuments for which they are credited.

By the mid-19th century the Chakri monarchs chose to move Siam into the modern world, adopting Western technology, such as steam trains and the telegraph. European-style architecture also first appeared, together with Western modes of dressing. Coexisting with this wave of foreign influence were traditional Siamese court rituals that represented a complex blend of Theravada Buddhism and 'Brahmanism' that had evolved on Thai soil over nearly two millennia. The ancient plough ceremony is but one of these elaborate ceremonies, testimony to the tenacity of these traditions. A ten-page overview in the Appendices reviews the most important of these time-honored rituals, peppered with antique photographs. A long and fascinating description of royal cremations is paired with old and new photographs of processions transporting the funeral urn.

The key monuments open to the public are treated in a long section, "Emerald Buddha Temple Compound". The centerpiece is the Emerald Buddha shrine which merits twenty-three pages, with nearly double that number of photographs. Carved from green jade, this venerated image is emblematic of the Chakri dynasty. Its rich history is recounted on one page, with an instructive map indicating this Buddha's peripatetic progression over hundreds of years and hundreds of kilometers from its original home in Chiang Rai. The precious image was eventually seized in Vientiane and taken to Thonburi in 1784 before it entered the Grand Palace in Bangkok. The image rests on an elaborate high throne dating from the reign of Rama I. Sculptures placed on three ascending tiers are identified in three useful diagrams and the pedigree of each image is noted in the text. A marble throne at the base of the Emerald Buddha, imported from Europe early in the 19th century, appears at first glance to be out of place in this most sacred royal sanctum but is another poignant reminder of how East and West come together effortlessly even within such an environment.

The Emerald Buddha hall and other monuments are encompassed within a covered corridor embellished with 178 large murals devoted to the entire *Ramayana*, the story of Rama's quest for his kidnapped sweetheart, Sita. King Rama I himself produced a version of this classic epic, known as the *Ramakien*, a measure of the dynasty's identification with this ancient tale. Although the original murals from the late 18th century have been extensively 'refreshed' and 'restored' in the last hundred years, the animated compositions are immediately engaging. The panels themselves are numbered and correspond to a synopsis of the story told over several pages. Linking the murals to the narrative of the story is another valuable contribution by the authors, since the paintings by themselves, without explanation, are pleasing but perplexing. That there are no posted explanations for the paintings in languages other than Thai greatly enhances the value of this newly published guide.

Other key structures within the compound wall are the Royal Pantheon, built during the reign of Rama IV (1851-1868) and now dedicated to all of the Chakri kings. Other sites include a Sri Lanka style gilded stupa and a remarkable miniature stone replica of Angkor Wat. Nearby is a group of small open pavilions dedicated to the nine Chakri kings, each represented by an unique insignia. The Second Reign for example is symbolized by a *garuda* holding two snakes, while the Sixth Reign is marked by a three-pronged thunderbolt. A full page shows all nine insignia in their pavilions, each dazzling with gold. Another highlight are pairs of creatures inhabiting the mythical Himaphan (Himavanta) Forest. The delightful demi-gods are depicted in two pages of color photographs. One of the figures, a fusion of a woman with a lion, has been cut out from its background and silhouetted against the white page, a stunning effect achieved by the layout team at River Books.

The remainder of this first section of the guide is devoted to “Throne Halls and Royal Residences.” Less than a handful of the many buildings covered here are open to the public, but River Books takes the reader inside to these generally unknown interior spaces. These photographs illustrate the shift in styles over the various reigns. The most remarkable is a chapel dedicated to a Buddha image conveyed from Champasak, Laos, at the beginning of the 19th century. Restored in 1982, the inside walls are adorned with multiple fresh paintings showing many chief events in the history of the dynasty. A single panel features Rama VI (1910-1925) as a crown prince bidding farewell to troops at the advent of World War 1, beneath which is shown his marriage with great pageantry in 1924. The style is modeled deliberately on 19th century murals, but the compositions and details are executed with a modern flair.

The second part of the guide, “Old Bangkok: The Heart of the City”, covers sites in the environs of the palace. The range is inclusive, from the sacred to the profane. For the latter, a page is given over to Khao San Road, a secular pilgrimage destination for backpackers from all over the world. Other sites include the lively Tha Phra Chan market specializing in a huge variety of amulets and Tha Chang pier with its mouthwatering selection of Thai dishes and fresh fruit. Another section explores the Saranrom Royal Garden, partially laid out by an Englishman, Henry Alabaster, and a segment on Wat Arun.

The longest single section covers the Bangkok National Museum. The authors rightly liken a visit there to a “stroll through an old palace”. A handy plan of the museum makes getting lost impossible and the photographs are carefully selected to highlight both the masterpieces and lesser known works, such as a model steam train gifted to King Rama IV by Queen Victoria in 1855. The spectacular Weapons Room boasts in its center a model of a full-scale elephant surmounted by two men, ready for combat. Other sections describe Silpakorn University and the museum in the university’s compound dedicated to one of its foreign art instructors, Corrado Feroci, from Florence. Wat Pho, or Wat Chetuphon, is another jewel in Bangkok’s crown,

and this section records how King Rama I employed 20,000 workers to replace an older temple built on the same site.

This guide is a treasure trove of information, photographs and helpful maps. Even for residents or those on frequent visits to the city, new surprises unfold across the pages. To properly explore all of the sites covered in the guide would take at least two weeks. It is hoped that River Book intends to issue guides on parts of Bangkok not treated in this volume, specifically the many 19th century temples with mural paintings throughout Thonburi and other important religious complexes, such as Wat Suthat and Wat Saket. The city never sits still and is constantly evolving, but this new book provides a unique window to its past. This book aptly demonstrates that Bangkok has a little something for everyone, from its multitude of historic shrines and museums to its vibrant street life. Dr. Johnson observed long ago, “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life”. The same needs to be said about Bangkok.

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