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Way of The Elders

Beyond Bangkok, you'll find Thailand's HOMAGE TO TRADITION, where monastic rituals and structural grandeur prevail.

text David Messiha

THAILAND'S CAPITAL city carries itself with restless magnetism, humming with activity and otherworldliness from every corner. From the billowing Chao Phraya River to a metropolis of ancient temples, extravagant shopping centres and effortlessly warm locals, the city beckons you in, daring to exceed all expectations. And yet there is more...

Away from the bustling City of Angels, the country's thoughtful tradition and Theravada Buddhism comes to life. Escape to the Tantra shrines and turquoise oases for a trip down imagination lane.

AYUTTHAYA OFFERINGS

Despite being subject to periods of conflict, Thailand has a wealth of locations with well-preserved ancient architecture, making its history >

1. Monks in front of an altar
2. Hua Hin Beach
3. Asiatique: The Riverfront, Bangkok
4. Stone buddha statue, Ayutthaya
5. Buddha head in a tree at Temple of the Great Relic
6. A Chinese opera performer in Chinatown, Bangkok
7. Amphawa Floating Market

Evan Krauss; igf/flickr; Javier Grateras; Corbis; Anisat; Wikimedia/Stockbyte

“Preserved monuments transport you back to a time of quiet grandeur”

ever-present; and the ancient city of Ayutthaya – an hour and a half’s drive north of Bangkok – is one of the country’s best examples. Once the capital of the Kingdom of Siam and a centre of commerce (it was a major trading port), Ayutthaya is now an archaeological treasure trove filled with relics of the past. This is fortunate considering that much of the city was destroyed during the Burmese-Siamese War (1765-67). Ayutthaya’s preserved monuments, which include more than 400 temples, transport you back to a time of quiet grandeur and architectural magnificence. The city’s most famous landmarks include Wat Phu Khao Thong (Golden Mountain) and Wat Phanan Choeng’s twinkling Buddha (a casual 19-m tall). It’s no wonder that the city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Don’t miss a chance to whisper along the waterfront at the majestic Bang Pa-In Royal Palace. The former summer residence of Thai kings is nestled in acres of lush gardens that also feature ponds and pavilions. If Buddha heads embedded in tree trunks interest you, check out the Temple of the Great Relic, which is tucked away in central Wasukri. Shrines drenched in colour complement the headquarters of Thailand’s largest Vipassana Meditation centre.

THE WATERWAY EXCHANGE

At the outer edges of Bangkok, you can experience the riverine life-style by taking a leisurely cruise on the Chao Phraya River, or (if you’re feeling feisty) a detour along one of its *khlongs* (canals). If you like glitzy palaces, there’s an array of them for you to admire there.

Relive an age-old tradition by gliding through murky waters to the Amphawa Floating Market, which is arguably one of the world’s most unique markets. It’s roughly an hour and half by car (50 km) from the city, and unlike other markets, it’s open at the weekend from noon until 8 p.m. Shop for souvenirs, tropical fruits (including Thai favourite, durian), spices, seafood and *Khanom Thai* (desserts). Experience the surrounding sights and sounds as you get attuned to life by boat. If you’re sold on boat wares and bona fide street food, continue your waterway escapade at Damnoen Saduak, Taling Chan and Bang Noi, where you’ll find plenty of them.

FOREVER EVERGREEN

Some of the most breathtaking scenes Mother Nature has to offer can be found in Khao Yai National Park. Located in Nakhon Ratchasima province, it’s a bumpy three-hour drive from Bangkok. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, this national park has no shortage of wildlife, including elephants, macaques, deer and tigers, roaming in 2,000 sq-km of forest and grassland. It’s also a great spot for bird-watchers, attracting the largest population of hornbills in the country. It also features picturesque waterfalls, such as Haew Suwat, Haew Narok and Nang Rong, that have turquoise pools and tropical evergreen forests in common. At Haew Suwat, which is popular because it’s easier to get to than the others, water topples from a 20-m cliff, making for some wonderful photo opportunities.

There are several tour operators offering excursions to Khao Yai National Park, but it’s also possible to get there by private car or motorcycle. The best time to visit is from November to February when >

EAT, DRINK AND SLEEP

AYUTTHAYA

Sala Ayutthaya Hotel

This ethereal oasis offers tantalising temple views and a number of luxurious amenities, including a pool suite. salahospitality.com/ayutthaya

Baan Thai House

Twelve individually themed villas, nestled in a lush tropical landscape, offer Thai hospitality at its best. This resort has a swimming pool, and a spa that offers traditional Thai massage and aromatherapy services by qualified therapists. baanthaihouse.com

Seven Seas Riverside Ayutthaya

There’s an abundance of authentic Thai restaurants in this area. Try the Seven Seas Riverside Ayutthaya, a lively spot opposite the main railway station that serves delicious Thai food, grilled steaks, fresh baguettes and lots more.

BANGKOK

The Mandarin Oriental Hotel

Located along the banks of the Chao Phraya River, within walking distance of the Skytrain and Grand Palace, this hotel epitomises luxury. mandarinoriental.com/bangkok

Blue Elephant Restaurant

For a truly remarkable experience head to Blue Elephant, an award-winning Michelin restaurant that only uses local ingredients. blueelephant.com/bangkok



1. Heo Narok Waterfall in Khao Yai National Park 2. Cottages on Sichang Island 3. A northern pig-tailed macaque 4. Sichang Island harbour 5. Yaowarat Road, Bangkok 6. A food vendor in Chinatown, Bangkok 7. A vendor at Bangkok’s Paak Klong Talad Market 8. A kitesurfer 9. Seafood at Amphawa Floating Market, Bangkok

David McEneaney, Shutterstock; ANP; Wikimedia; Joe, Geoff; Anand; @gfbangkok/Mattias Colombo



Mattio Colombo, Hollandse Hoogte; Craig Arnold, Max Brander, Marcin Czerniawski, Shostky

EAT, DRINK AND SLEEP

KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK

Muthi Maya Forest Pool Villa Resort

This resort has an open architecture concept that captures the essence of natural living. Enjoy breathtaking panoramas of Khao Yai National Park, which is close by.

kirimaya.com

La Purinée

This luxurious resort, which is on a hill in Khao Yai National Park, is in the style of a European village. Benefit from spectacular views as you bathe in the outdoor swimming pool.

lapurinee.com

Sala Hilltop Restaurant and Bar

This open-air establishment has a natural ambience and overlooks the lush green landscape of Khao Yai National Park.

salahospitality.com/khaoyai

HUA HIN

Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin

This luxurious resort is equipped with modern amenities including golf courses, swimming pools, tennis courts, a snooker room, a fitness centre and a luxurious spa.

centarahotelsresorts.com/centaragrand/chbr

Supatra by the Sea

Located at the heart of Hua Hin Beach, close to the Khao Takiab hills, this restaurant serves sumptuous Thai dishes with lots of seafood options in an open garden setting.

supatrabymythesea.com

KOH SICHANG

Paree Hut Koh Sichang

A dreamlike experience awaits you here. Each hut has a different design, but all of them have a private bathroom with a shower, and an outdoor pool. Guests can enjoy activities such as canoeing, hiking and swimming.

pareehutresort.com

A variety of seafood restaurants are available on the island. The dishes are authentic and reasonably priced. Some of the local favourites include **iThalay Sea View Thai & Seafood Restaurant**, and **Pan & David**, which serves local and western dishes.



Kenya Airways operates non-stop daily flights to Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok from Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport.

daytime temperatures are more tolerable than they are during the summer months. In terms of accommodation, there's a number of hotels and guesthouses in the city of Pak Chong. Alternatively, if you prefer a rugged experience you can camp inside the park for an additional fee.

MAMMAL ESCAPISM

Bypass the city hustle and head to Hua Hin for a relaxing time out. Renowned for its golf and family-oriented atmosphere, this seaside resort is an hour's drive from Bangkok, in the Gulf of Thailand. Hua Hin isn't a typical palm-fringed getaway, but its lively markets, luxury accommodation and modern golf courses make it popular with city dwellers. There's no shortage of things to do here. For instance, you can tour Maruekathaiyawan Palace (built during the reign of King Rama VI), visit the town's oldest railway station, or revel in a shopping spree at the night market.

The nearby Cha-am Beach is packed with activities for all ages, such as water-skiing, parasailing, windsurfing and banana-boat rides. There are also pony rides for children. You can enjoy a traditional Thai massage on the beach or opt for a special spa treatment in one of the many high-end resorts and hotels here.

For an authentic cultural experience, head 6 km south of Hua Hin to Khao Takiab, which is popular with locals and tourists alike. Stop by Monkey Mountain, which, boasting the best views of the area and a lot of monkeys, has a reputation that precedes it. Ditch the selfie stick and explore the striking Buddha temple overlooking the bay.

ROYAL VIBRATIONS

A unique tropical paradise awaits you on Koh Sichang, an island that has spectacular sunsets, is replete with white-sand beaches and offers an array of outdoor activities, including snorkelling and kayaking. Having been a haven for the monarchy in the past, Koh Sichang has the sort of allure that makes it the ideal honeymoon destination. To get to the island, take a bus or a taxi to Sri Racha Koh Loi pier, and then hop on a ferry.

There are plenty of things to see and do here. Traffic is light, and strolling is the preferred method of transport, along with the traditional tuk-tuk (a three-wheeled motor vehicle). After a long day kicking back in the crystal waters, visit the Royal Palace, which was built by King Chulalongkorn in 1890. After the island was occupied by the French in 1893, the palace was left deserted. Now open to the public, it provides an envy-inducing look into the life of Thailand's royal family. Ostentatious mansions, halls and pavilions are positioned amid rolling gardens and walkways; don't forget to peak at the private beach to end your jaunt.

Other attractions on Koh Sichang include caves, temples and the old stone bell: a natural rock formation that emits a resonating ring when struck. It's a marvel to see and hear.

So, there you have it. If you visit Thailand, dive beyond the popular locations made famous by Instagram and you'll find yourself deep in the heart of ancient folklore, where you'll discover Thailand's real glitz and glamour.

1. Statue at Temple of The Emerald Buddha, Bangkok 2. BTS Sky Train, Bangkok 3. Hua Hin Beach 4. Office workers at Soi Convent's famed Tom Yum Noodle stand, Bangkok 5. A tuk-tuk 6. Fresh fish at Amphawa Floating Market, Bangkok 7. Hua Hin Beach 8. A child leaning against a scooter in Bangkok 9. Buddhist prayer candles