

Wat Phra Kaew - the Temple of the Emerald Buddha

Wat Phra Kaew, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, and the adjoining [Grand Palace](#) together form perhaps the greatest spectacle for the visitor to Bangkok. Despite the fact that the whole compound is so full of tourists you spend half the time trying to avoid getting in people's photos, it's still a pretty amazing place to visit.



It consists of over 100 brightly colored buildings, golden spires and glittering mosaics, and dates back to 1782, when Bangkok was founded. When you enter the compound, you first of all see Wat Phra Kaew and the nearby attractions, and then move on to the [Grand Palace](#) afterwards.

Wat Phra Kaew itself, generally known to the Thais as Wat Phra Si Rattana Satsadaram, is perhaps the main attraction. This is Thailand's most important and sacred temple, so you're expected to act with due respect inside it. It houses the tiny (between 60 and 75 cm) Emerald Buddha, which is located high above the heads of the worshippers and tourists. Not much is known for certain about the statue, except that it isn't actually made of emerald but rather of green jade or jasper. Getting a good look at it is difficult as photography is forbidden inside the temple, and it's perched so high up inside its glass box that it's difficult to really see.



It's thought to have been made in the 15th century and was the cause of several wars before ending up for good in Bangkok in 1782. The image is considered a talisman and holds tremendous significance for Thailand and the Thais. The 'robe' that it wears

is changed 3 times each year by the King himself, at the start of each season: A diamond encrusted gold robe during the hot season, a solid gold robe in the cool season and a gilded monk's robe in the rainy season. There are also many other Buddha images inside the temple.



Round the interior walls are murals depicting the *jataka* stories. These are located according to the typical Thai conventions inside temples. The ones facing the altar depict the victory of the Buddha over the evil demon Mara, as he

subdues her and achieves enlightenment. As is normal for Thai temples, shoes must be taken off before entering into the temple.

Despite its national importance, Wat Phra Kaew is the only temple in Thailand that doesn't have any resident monks, and so is not a seat of Buddhist learning in the same way as the likes of [Wat Pho](#) and [Wat Mahathat](#).

A cloister surrounds the temple, and depicted along here is an extensive mural of the *Ramakian*, the Thai version of the famous Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. In total there are 178 sections, and although they date from the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV 1825-1850) they have since been restored on numerous occasions. The explanatory texts across from each were devised by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V).

Also in the compound is:

- A miniature model of the famous Cambodian temple complex Angkor Wat, made during the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV) when the Thai empire extended over Cambodia.
- Two libraries, built to protect copies of important Buddhist literature. The Phra Mondop library is impressive, but almost always closed to the public. If not, it's well worth looking at.
- The impressive golden Phra Si Rattana Chedi, which it's claimed (somewhat improbably) houses ashes of the Buddha.
- The Royal Pantheon, with full size statues of the first seven kings of the reigning Chakri dynasty (Rama I - Rama VII). Only open on April 6th, the anniversary of the founding of this dynasty. Surrounding this are large statues of mythical guardians (pictured right), such as the *kinaree*, half human-half bird and the Hindu *garuda* bird. It contains the sacred Buddhist scriptures, the Tripitaka.

After exiting Wat Phra Kaew, you enter the adjoining [Grand Palace](#).

The Grand Palace

The Grand Palace adjoins [Wat Phra Kaew](#) in a common compound, and is where you will end up after exiting Wat Phra Kaew. Despite the proximity of the two, there's a distinct contrast in style between the very Thai Wat Phra Kaew and the more European inspired designs of the Grand Palace (the roof being the exception). The Grand Palace is nowadays used only for occasional ceremonial purposes and is no longer the royal residence. The present King Bhumibol (Rama IX) lives in Chitralada Palace (also closed to tourists), which is located not too far away in Bangkok's [Dusit](#) district. Though the interior of most of the buildings remain closed to the public

Highlights of it are:

- Boromabiman Hall, built by King Rama VI and every king since has lived here at some time.

- Amarinda Hall, the original residence of King Rama I and the Hall of Justice. Nowadays it's impressive interior is used for ceremonial occasions and coronations. It



contains the antique throne, used before the Western style one presently in use.

- Grand Palace Hall / Chakri Maha Prasat. Visitors are allowed inside the spacious European style reception room. This building has not been used for royal residence since the mysterious death of King Rama VIII (the older brother of the current King), found shot dead in his room in 1946. The reverence for the monarchy in Thailand means that, even today, this remains a

completely taboo subject to talk publicly about in Thailand.

- The impressive Dusit Hall, rated as perhaps the finest architectural building in this style.

- The Museum, which has information on the restoration of the Grand Palace, scale models of the Wat and Palace and numerous Buddha images. Labels are in Thai only, but there are free English tours available frequently.

Wat Pho – The Temple of the Reclining Buddha

Wat Pho, or Wat Phra Chetuphon as it is generally known to the Thais, is mainly famous for the huge Reclining Buddha statue it houses. At 20 acres large, it is the largest Wat in Bangkok, and is technically the oldest too, as it was built around 200 years before Bangkok became Thailand's capital. However, today the Wat today bears virtually no resemblance to that originally constructed, as it was almost entirely rebuilt by Rama I when the capital was moved to Bangkok. It holds the dual honors of having both Thailand's largest reclining Buddha image and the most number of Buddha images in Thailand.



The highly impressive gold plated reclining Buddha is 46 meters long and 15 meters high, and is designed to illustrate the passing of the Buddha into nirvana. The feet and the eyes are engraved with mother-of-pearl decoration, and the feet also show the 108 auspicious characteristics of the true Buddha.

The large grounds of Wat Pho contain more than 1000 Buddha images in total, most from the ruins of the former capitals Ayuthaya and Sukhothai. The grounds are split

in two by Chetuphon road. The northern section is generally the only one most people



go to, and it includes a large *bot* (temple hall), enclosed by 394 bronze Buddha images. Outside the bot, there are 152 marble slabs depicting the second half of the epic *Ramakian* story. Also near here are four *chedis*, constructed to honor the first three Chakri kings (two for King Rama III). There are also a massive 91 others Chedis of varying sizes around the grounds, along with chapels, rock gardens, an array of different types of

statues, inscriptions, belltowers and resident fortune tellers. The library is nearby too, decorated impressively with figures and pagodas made of porcelain, in much the same way as [Wat Arun](#) across the river. The much less visited southern section has less of interest, but makes a good place to find a monk to chat to for a while. Most would welcome the chance to practice their English on visitors.

Massage - Wat Pho is also famous as Thailand's first university, and is center for traditional Thai massage - the rich, famous and powerful have all been known to come here. Inscribed on stone in the walls of Wat Pho are all that was known about Thai massage dating from the reign of King Rama III (most previous texts were lost when the Burmese destroyed Ayuthaya)

To get a traditional massage here costs 150B for 30 mins, 250B for an hour and herbal massages are available at 350B an hour. If you want to experience traditional Thai massage, this is probably the best place available and is highly recommended, though be aware that it's not exactly a gentle experience. A foot reflexology massage is also available at 250B for 45 minutes.

It is also possible to take courses to learn traditional Thai massage. These are for 30 hours and cost 4,500B. Courses can be spread over either 10 or 15 days. The massage center is situated at the back of the Wat, the opposite side from the entrance. To get a massage, simply turn up here and wait in line until a masseur is available - perhaps 10 or 20 minutes in the quieter periods in the early morning and late afternoon. Contact them on (+662) 221 2974 or (+662) 225 4771 if you need any more information about it.

Wat Arun, the Temple of the Dawn

The famous **Wat Arun**, perhaps better known as the Temple of the Dawn, is one of the best known landmarks and one of the most published images of Bangkok. It consists of a massive elongated *prang* (Khmer-style tower), and is surrounded by four smaller *prangs*. The *prang* is described by the Tourism Authority of Thailand as 104m high, while most other sources quote figures around 80-85m. It is decorated by bits of



porcelain which had previously been used as ballast by boats coming to Bangkok from China, a hallmark of the reign of King Rama III. The Wat had a brief period as host of the celebrated Emerald Buddha, which now resides in nearby [Wat Phra Kaew](#).

The Wat really looks better from a distance than close up, and you're not missing out too much even if you only view from across the river. The grounds are fairly pleasant and peaceful though, with good murals and a main Buddha image supposedly designed by King Rama II. The mythical guardians here are also quite impressive, though very similar to those at [Wat Phra Kaew](#).

It is possible to walk a limited way up the (very steep) stairs of the main prang, which gives a reasonable view of the Chao Phraya river.

Despite its name (coming from Aruna, the Indian god of the dawn), the best views and photos of Wat Arun are in the evening with the sun setting behind it. There are some restaurants on the opposite side of the river that are good for watching this, though you'd be lucky to see the image of Wat Arun that's on all the postcards - that of the red sky sunset with the sun setting directly behind the temple. Sunset is around 6pm - 7pm all year round in Bangkok.

Note:

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- **Male: trousers with full-length legs/ boots and shoes**
- **Female: skirt or trousers with full-length legs/ boots and shoes**