

Bangkok's Grand Palace a Paean to Royalty, Religion



Wahyuni Kamah

This is the center of Bangkok. You can get stuck [in traffic] here during rush hour," said my Thai friend Ike while pointing to Rattanakosin Island — a historical part of Bangkok — on the map.

After some consideration, I finally decided to take the Sky Train to Saphan Taksin BTS station and cross the Chao Phraya River with a public ferry to reach the Grand Palace on Rattanakosin Island. Although the ferry was crowded, the route turned out to be the most efficient.

As I got out at Tha Chan pier, I abruptly felt a touristic atmosphere as I was met with a panoply of kiosks selling Thai souvenirs, snacks and dresses.

I followed the signs pointing to the Grand Palace, leading me to an open space with many tempting food stalls.

After passing the stalls I found a plaza crammed with people and tour buses. In the distance I could see a large, white wall, behind which lay my main destination. The Grand Palace complex is surrounded by a lush green lawn free of any cars or shops.

To my surprise, the complex was packed with visitors, most of whom came in large groups.

The former home of past Siam kings, the palace is one of Bangkok's largest attractions. Visitors shuffled through the front gate elbow to elbow.

Knowing I was about to visit a sacred city, I had decided dress "properly" that morning, making sure my legs and upper arms were modestly covered.

Both male and female tourists wearing shorts and tank tops were stopped and asked to rent clothes at a booth near the entrance.

The 400 baht (\$12.34) admission fee for foreigners is worth the awe-inspiring tour of the Grand Palace complex, which served as a home to Thai royalty and government agencies from 1782 to 1932.

The Grand Palace symbolizes the ruling Chakri dynasty of Thailand, which was established on April 6, 1782, when Phra Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke, better known as King Rama I, ascended to the throne.

King Rama I moved the kingdom's capital from Thonburi, west of the Chao Phraya River, to Krung Thep — modern-day Bangkok. After constructing fortifications and monasteries, the king ordered the construction of the palace — entirely out of wood.

Today, the complex is used for ceremonial purposes. The current King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) resides at the Chitralada Palace in the Dusit district of Bangkok.

The palace complex is divided into an Outer Court, where visitors first enter; the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, in the Central Court, where kings and queens once resided; and an Inner Court for female members of the royal family.

The vast Outer Court is home to offices, many of which were constructed after King Rama I's reign.

When I entered Wat Phra Gaeo, or the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, I once again had to move slowly with the crowd.

The temple is beautiful and houses a number of monuments, including the chapel of the Emerald Buddha.

As the name suggests, the chapel holds a small Buddha statue carved out of green jasper.

Adorned in gold, the 76-centimeter figure sits under an intricately decorated, three-tiered roof, and between two sturdy columns painted in gold.

Photography is strictly prohibited. Next to the chapel is the upper terrace where four monuments are found: a reliquary in the shape of a golden Chedi; the mondop, a repository of Buddhist sacred scripture; a miniature of Cambodia's

A tour of the historical Grand Palace complex, one of Bangkok's most popular tourist destinations, is well worth the 400 baht entrance fee. JG Photos/Wahyuni Kamah

Angkor Wat; and the Royal Pantheon. I was amazed by the intricate wood carvings and decorations that represent a rich history of Thailand's best artwork.

Walking through a gate guarded by large demon-like figures called yakshas, I entered the Central Court — the most important court of the complex where Thailand's royal families once lived. It is also home to state buildings.

The palace is both traditional and luxurious in architecture, with carvings and artistic details that are just splendid.

Gold is a prominent color throughout the entire complex, adding a nuance of royal glamor.

The gate separating the Central Court and Inner Court — which is not open to the public — is guarded by royal guards dressed in black-and-white uniforms and a white helmet.

Tourists take turns taking photographs with them, but the guards seem unfazed by the attention; they continue to remain still and stone-faced.

The Central Court is made up of three distinguished groups of Throne Halls. The Phra Maha Monthien Prasat group is in the east and houses some of the oldest buildings in the palace complex.

It served as the main audience hall for the king.

The Chakri Maha Prasat hall is situated in the middle. This wide building has a fabulous mix of European and Thai architectural influences. The hall is still used for state events.

The Dusit Maha Prasat hall in the west was being renovated during my visit. Again, I was astonished by its elegant and well-designed architecture.

It is now used as a lying-in-state venue for kings, queens and favored members of the royal family.

As I stepped out of the Central Court, I was still mesmerized by the Chakri dynasty and the graceful designs found throughout the palace complex.

Every year on April 6, Thailand celebrates Chakri Memorial Day to commemorate the establishment of the ruling Chakri dynasty and of Bangkok.

And each year, the king and members of the royal family hold a religious ceremony at the Royal Chapel of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.



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