

PERSONAL JOURNEYS

A Memorable Place

Getting to know all about Bangkok

By PEG SILLOWAY
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He loomed over me with a fiendish grin and wild eyes above vicious tusks. Immense blue hands grasped an intricately carved staff. I was face to face — well, face to knee — with an armored, helmeted and gilded demon. Squinting against the intense Bangkok sun, I braced myself and leaned back to take in the full impact.

Until this business trip, what I knew of Thailand came from *The King and I*. But in Bangkok I saw a city of beauty, noise, smiles, congestion, courtesy, pollution, tradition and surging growth. The streets are always crowded with drivers who could teach New York cabbies a thing or two, and motor scooters zigzag heedlessly. Yet quiet shrines to Buddha dot city streets and occupy important corners. Near my hotel, surrounded by upscale malls and Starbucks shops, a group of dancers in traditional costume performed for the Buddha while worshippers prayed.

In the midst of the cacophony, the Grand Palace is an oasis of serenity, as it has been since 1782, when King Rama I ordered its construction. His Chakri dynasty continues in the current king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, though the government is no longer an absolute monarchy and the palace now is a place for ceremonial occasions.

The Grand Palace is many buildings, each more magnificent than the last. Carvings, colorful paint, ceramic tiles, mirror pieces and gold



Demons set in the king's path were intended to keep Thailand's ruler honorable.

leaf cover every surface. As remarkable as the design is the condition of the buildings and grounds, which are reverently maintained.

At the heart of the Grand Palace is the candlelit Royal Chapel, Wat Phra Kaeo, where the exquisite Emerald Buddha rests on a high altar of gold. Carved from a massive piece of jade, the Buddha is arrayed in one of three gold costumes, depending on the season: winter, rainy or spring. Visitors may enter and sit quietly on the floor, shoeless feet facing away from the Buddha so as not to show disrespect. As worshippers brought flower garlands and incense, I sat on that cool marble and marveled at the floor's intricate inlaid designs, at the red and gold ceiling and at the mural-covered walls.

Outside, the sunlight blazed off nearby Phra Si Ratana Chedi, a monument to Buddha. The entire building, from bell-shaped roof to the base, is covered with hundreds of thousands of square gold-leaf tiles, each about the size of a thumbnail. Amid buildings ornamented with texture and color, this structure dazzles with massive, smooth gold.

Not long ago, only royalty walked through the Grand Palace compound, and, surrounded by this grandeur, they might have believed in their own divinity. But our guide told us they were wise enough to understand the seductive power of royalty and veneration and so placed demons in the king's path as reminders to live a good and honorable life.

As I stared up at the maniacal face, it was easy to understand how these demons must have been effective guides to the straight and narrow.

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