# BABYLON REVISITED

Few of the world's great cities have such a potent reputation as Bangkok. Fewer still have such a capacity to confound expectations and defy stereotypes

By JULIAN EVANS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICK SHIPPEN

**THE SHOW MUST GO OM**
**Buddhist monks gather for morning prayers at Wat Rajabophit temple, Bangkok.**

Bangkok, its critics will tell you, is an absurd place. Hard to know, because it is such a fast mover—only just two centuries old—and because in the last 30 years it has hit warp speed, accelerating into a megacity simultaneously Orwellian and Dickensian. It develops like time-lapse photography: blink and it's different. It is as successful as it is absurd, because Thais have long been Asia's most willing Terences: nothing human is alien to their genius for turning visitors' desires into a commercial opportunity. It can be a tedious place—its malls, its air quality, its static-frenzied traffic, its gem scams, all of which are capable of being boring, horrible encounters.

The first time I visited Bangkok, nearly 20 years ago, I went where everyone else did, downtown, between Sathorn and Sukhumvit, and I remember realising what it felt like to be a stereotypical Victorian spinster: curious, repelled, titillated, ready to swoon. Having done my due diligence in Patpong, I fled to the glittering needle-spires of the Grand Palace and the soaring solid prongs of the Temple of Dawn and closed my eyes with relief.

But as that experience suggests, Bangkok is crucially—and for this we must thank Buddha and the beliefs that make every Thai, from the pavement seller who rises at 4am to make her delicious sweets of caramelised coconut and sticky rice to the most Gomorrah-loving businessman, wear at least one amulet to ward off evil influences—a dual place too. Amoral and spiritual; in fact, more Dickensian and Langian than Orwellian (it would be a perfect location to remake Fritz Lang's 1927 masterpiece, *Metropolis*); wicked and stately; foolish and wise; the Babylon of our days.

This time, for all the above reasons, I started in Dusit, in the north of the city. The Siam Hotel, on a deep, narrow riverside plot there, seems to fly against commercial reason. This is the somnolent royal quarter, two or three miles from anywhere. The land the Siam is built on has been owned by the Sukosol family since the 1970s, when the late Kamol Sukosol leased it to a seafood restaurant and used it as his private pier for exploring the length of the river. When the restaurant's lease expired in 2005, Kriss Sukosol-Clapp, youngest of the next generation and one of Asia's best-known indie singers and actors, persuaded his mother to let him build a hotel.

The result is a brilliant unfolding of Tardis-like interiors in white plaster and black tiling and joinery—a patio, a soaring Spanish Revival courtyard with a raised palm lake, a temple-like cube housing the hotel spa. Its public spaces showcase Sukosol-Clapp's extensive antique and art collection. The monumental courtyard is graced with an exquisitely intact Han-dynasty bronze horse-and-carriage sculpture.

Gardens and villas unroll down to the river. My villa comprised three double-height rooms, flanked by orchids, cool and impeccably comfortable, its courtyard containing a plunge pool with fountain and a spiral staircase to an upper terrace overlooking the Chao Phraya.

At dinner with Kriss and his wife Mel the first evening, Kriss's mother Kamala snorted, "That hotel! It's a Kremlin!"

I know the bit she was referring to: the high, white, black-barred façade of the main building overlooking the river. But Mrs Sukosol, who is 78 and also a jazz singer and lively philanthropist, has many firm opinions.

"Mikel Arteta is just a holding midfielder in a tactical position. They need to attack more!"

She has been to Highbury to watch Arsenal play twice, but her interest in the club is fanatical. On the hotel, I sense her criticism is that of a tiger mother rather than genuine disapproval.

"She sounds hard, but she knows I'm the introverted, romantic one," Kriss said later. "She's just cautioning me against too much romanticism."

The Siam is a remarkable hotel, a luxuriously serene escape from mad, bad Bangkok, and certainly romantic, if romance is about feeling loved as much as about material elegance and pleasure. In theory, of course, it is perfectly possible to be sceptical about a hotel where your butler springs into existence, bowing, hands together, outside your villa the minute you leave it, and where the combined lobby staff wave you off from the pier as its Riva launch bears you away downriver. But it is all done with such graciousness, politeness and sweetness that I found it impossible not to be won over.

The hotel, just as importantly, is also an interesting attempt to redefine Bangkok's topography.

Use its Riva for the sheer visual pleasure of every boat ride down the Chao Phraya, past the bankside teak shanties, the temples and forts, the carnival flash of garlanded longtail boats; this way you'll also avoid every hideous gridlock between Dusit and

Chinatown. Or leave by the hotel's front gate (*wai*-ed by the lobby staff) to appreciate the city's royal precinct returned to a sense of itself as a cultural reference point, not just a negligible grid of temples, high-walled palaces and drab civil-service buildings. Thonburi's *khlongs* (canals), the Portuguese settlement, Chinatown, Rattanakosin Island—all are accessible by launch; and so are most of the best of the city's temples.

But before I talk about temples, it is important to grasp that there are two presiding influences in this city (aside from naked commerce). One is the Buddha. The other, occupying such a central place in Thai loyalties it is regarded as quasi-divine, is the royal family.

Constitutional monarchy does not mean stable democracy here: since 1932, when the absolute monarchy was abolished, Thailand has averaged a coup or attempted coup every four years. The most recent was on May 22, 2014 when the army got fed up with the machinations of both populist Thaksinites and conservative Democrats and stepped in.

The present king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, has reigned for 68 years. He and his queen have earned deep loyalty by their reign's social aspects, sponsoring agricultural education, preserving Thai crafts by generous training programmes. But that doesn't make the future ruction-free. Thailand's demographics are wildly polarised between urban elite and rural poor; and while strict lèse-majesté laws prevent me from saying much that is critical of King Bhumibol's heir, Maha Vajiralongkorn, one is unconvinced that the people feel as warmly towards him as they do towards his parents.

About the Buddha's place there is no such uncertainty. Bangkok Buddhas know it. They smile and are much prettier than Buddhas from Ayutthaya (the seat of the original Thai kingdom). They know that a city based on the evil of trade needs a lot of counterbalancing virtue, and they smile at the roughly 500 temples in their city, from the Khmer Wat Arun—the Temple of Dawn, which was here when General Thaksin founded the city in 1768 before becoming so paranoid he had to be bundled into a velvet sack—to the European-influenced "marble temple", Wat Benjamabophit, designed by one of the royal family's most unsung members, the artist and Europhile Prince Naris (1863–1947).

Prince Naris was appointed director-general of public works under King Rama V. The city's more recent administrators, who have overseen the pricking of its sky by hundreds of unspeakable metallic, cartoon-like skyscrapers and the carpeting of its in-between lots with slums and giant free-standing billboards ("The Perfect Wedding Starts Here!"), could have taken a leaf out of Prince Naris's book instead of the kickbacks they received.

On a Saturday morning I was fortunate to visit the rarely opened Naris Foundation at Ban Plainern, run by his grandson, Mr Chakrarot Chitrabongs. "He had a motto to be very careful about everything you undertake, or it will become a monument of shame," Mr Chitrabongs said.

Later that day I took a longtail boat into Thonburi, where some of the city's oldest and most eclectic temples are, serving communities rather than grandeur. On Khlong Bang Noi canal local women fed the catfish, making the water boil in their thousands, and on Khlong Bangkok Yai was an 1830s side-chapel, crumbling now, its windows bordered by superb stone peonies. Downstream from the *khlong*'s mouth, next to the Portuguese settlement, is a perfectly preserved private Chinese shrine to the goddess of mercy Wat Kian An Keng. Bangkok is the only city I have heard of where Sunni Muslims, the descendants of Persian merchants, have come to trade then converted to Buddhism and become temple-builders.

At Wat Prayurawongsawas, near the Memorial Bridge, there was some controversy. My companion, Poomchai, irrepressibly knowledgeable and, I suspected, well-connected, had secured permission to visit its white *stupa*, where there were relics of the Buddha enshrined.

"Go on! It's a perfect place to have your fortune told," he said.

I knelt at the shrine, revolved the bamboo cup and whispered my question, then shook out the first numbered stick: 22.

Poomchai pulled the corresponding paper from its pigeonhole. I read the English translation.

"I don't like it," I said.

I expected him to be concerned, or annoyed. Instead he giggled.

"Oh, that's OK. Just throw it away! Throw it away. You can divert your karma, the Buddha will respect that too."

Next morning I felt a need to go back to a temple, to seek the Buddha's blessing. Almost at random I chose Wat Rajabophit, a dazzlingly pretty and playful assemblage of styles—Chinese (yellow and pink tiles, mother-of-pearl inlay), Gothic, Napoleonic—with carved British riflemen guarding the doors.

I found the deputy abbot. He smiled. He could have been 16 or 46.

"Wake up with fresh feeling. Think good thoughts. Do not let bad emotions increase; if you do, they will attack you. Always give. Do not take. All will be well," he said.

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That evening, with Dan Fraser, a local documentary maker, I went to Chinatown. We walked through the riverside *sois* (lanes) along Songwat Road. On the bigger lanes were mountains of recycled axles, transmissions and clutches. A two-metre-high pile of engines, cooling fans outwards, looked like a bank of supersized gerberas. In a warehouse actors were applying makeup for a community *ngiew* (Chinese opera) performance to celebrate the Tae-Krajak festival, in which rice is donated to villagers. Then on Phad Sai Lane the shophouses went quiet. Some were wooden, with verandahs and balustrades—fretsaw wonders. But down this narrow alley, rice, unloaded from barges, had once been carted to be stored; it had been Bangkok's first green-lantern district, rife with brothels and opium dens.

We stopped at a late-night shop for a beer. Dan had a copy of the Royal State Railway Department of Siam's 1927 *Guide to Bangkok*, the first guide to the city published in English. "In no other city," it begins, "is it possible so often to turn from the throng of a city street and to find oneself, miraculously it would seem, in a little residential quarter..."

"Where are you from?" the shopkeeper asked.

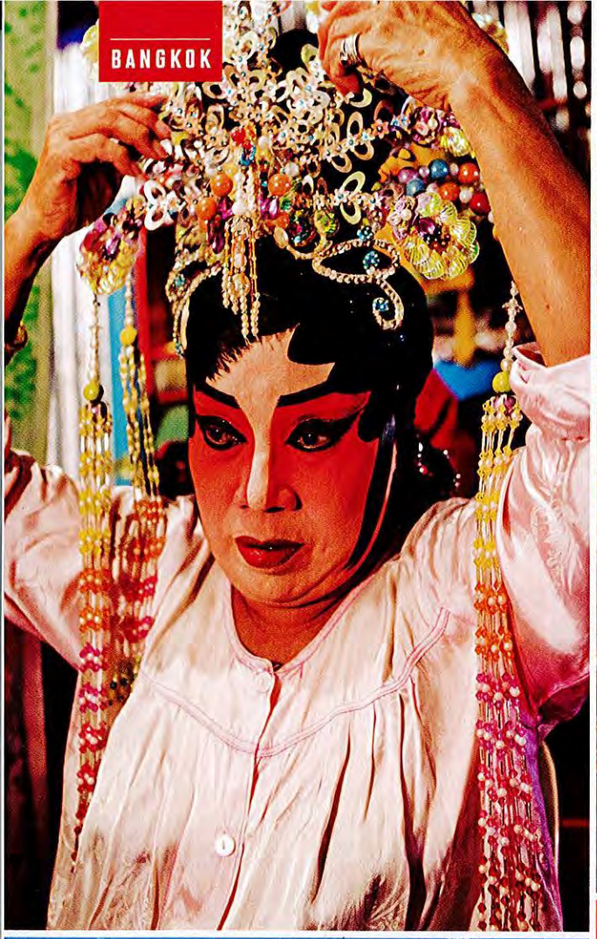
"The U.S.," Dan answered.

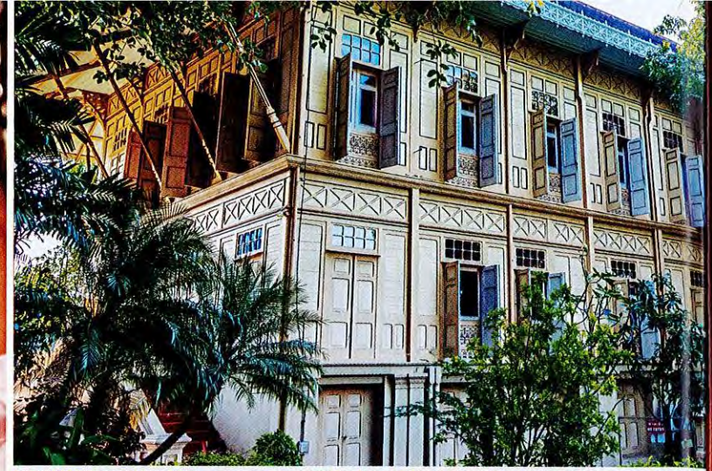
She nodded knowingly.

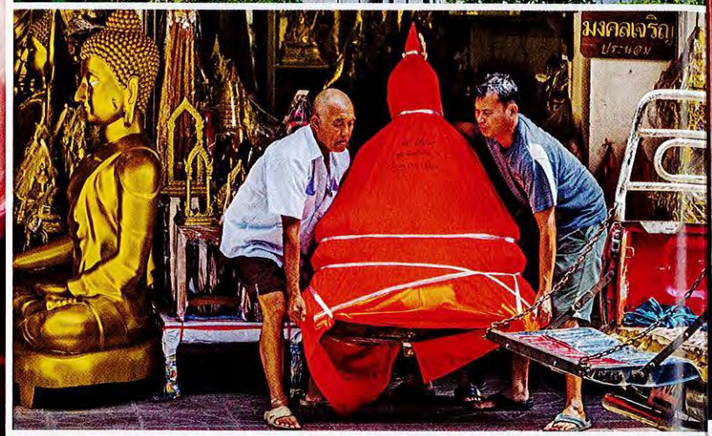
To me he said, "They don't know England."

I would happily have sat there all

SIAMESE, IF YOU PLEASE
*Clockwise from left:* the swimming pool at the Siam; a view of the hotel's library and screening room; guests with an interest in Thai cuisine can have personal tuition from the Siam's chefs; the interiors have been decorated with an eclectic mixture of antiques and memorabilia from the owner's personal collection; an inner courtyard; geometric Art Deco flourishes are characteristic of the hotel's interior design.

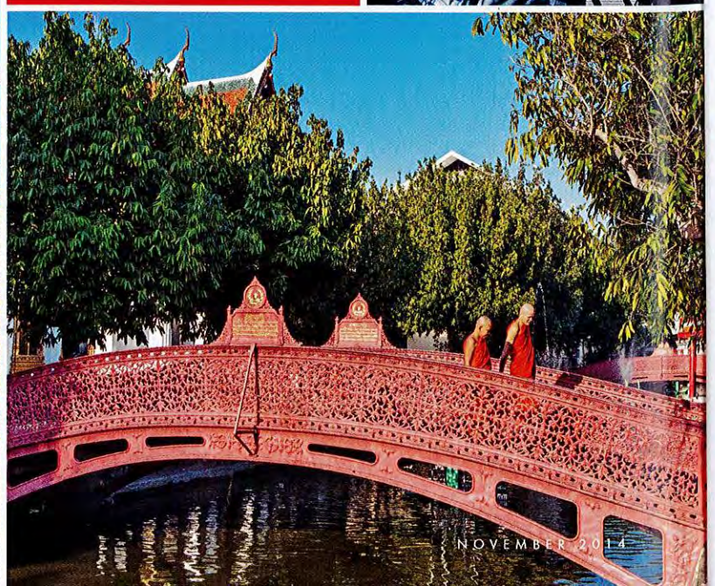






**WAT A SIGHT**
The spires of Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn, shown here in the early evening.

**OUT ON THE TILES**
*Clockwise from top left:* an itinerant actress in a traditional *ngiew* (Chinese opera) prepares for a performance off Chareon Krung Road in Chinatown; Vimanmek Palace, a former royal residence, was built in 1900 for King Rama V; a wrapped statue of the Buddha is delivered to a shop near Wat Rajabophit; a local enjoys a bowl of noodles at a street stall in Chinatown; Buddhist monks crossing a bridge at Wat Benjamabophit; the elaborately tiled exterior of Wat Rajabophit.



evening, hearing the burr of the pavement fridge and breathing the warm, fish-sauce-scented air. We wound up eating *kuay jap* at Mr Aek's noodle stall on the corner of Yaowarat Soi 9—rolled rice noodles with crispy pork belly in a white-pepper broth, which made the best *phat thai* I had tasted lack all depth. Bangkok may be absurd, but its food is as inexhaustible as its experiences of wickedness. It is infinitely socially mobile. I had *khao tom* with duck—peasant food, delicious morning soup—in a street in Chinatown whose name I forget: they made their own saucepans and smoked their own sausages there. I had sweet pork dumplings at a stall in Sam Sen Road near the Siam, where I went with the celebrated chef David Thompson, followed by stir-fried crab and yellow curry with lotus shoots at Krua Apsorn; raw prawns with fish sauce and kaffir lime leaves, and fried snapper with lemongrass and raw mango salad, before visiting the 80-room doll's house that is Vimanmek Palace at Dusit, built from golden teak without a single nail; and the best crab omelette I have had for 15 years at Jae Fai's street café. (Jae Fai, at seventysomething looking like a demonic queen bumblebee, cooks every dish on her pair of ancient charcoal buckets.)

On the last night Poomchai invited me to dinner. He lived in a craftily hidden, incongruous Thai house on a secluded turning off the endless Sukhumvit Road. His neighbours were hotels and malls, unseen and unheard over the sound of an ornamental waterfall. It took two hours to get there in the traffic from Dusit.

My earlier suspicion was confirmed. The guests of honour were Princess Chimi, sister of the Dragon King of Bhutan, and her consort Dasho Sangay Wangchuk. Poomchai served pork canapés in huge ceramic lilies, and later traditional desserts nesting in hanks of sugar floss cooled with dry ice. At his table were some of the most beautiful women I have ever met, especially Princess Chimi.

But—with all due respect to Himalayan and Thai beauty—it is another encounter in old Bangkok that I remember.

At the end of our Chinatown walk, Dan Fraser and I had stopped in an alley in Chum Chon near the Golden Mount to talk to a woman making monks' robes.

She must have been about 45. She had two sewing machines in her open workshop, a Juki her mother had bought secondhand 50 years before—which was still best for the fine stitching of the linings, she said—and a Singer. It was coming up to Buddhist Lent. Many new monks would be inducted. Demand for robes had been high.

"If you'd come earlier, you would've seen the pile, this high," she said, raising her hand as high as she could, smiling.

She had been working all day. All the houses in her alley once produced monks' necessities, she said: robes, fans, scarves. She was just finishing. She was happy to talk. She smiled broadly, her eyes screwed up, almost on the edge of laughter. As she kept smiling, her smile had a strange effect on me. Warm, unchecked, it made me feel, for a moment, like her long-lost brother, as if I'd just come home. Then I thought, it's not about you. It's about her good thoughts, and her pleasure. What she's giving from inside herself, that's coming out in that smile. Just as the deputy abbot had said. □

*VANITY FAIR* TRAVELS TO...

## BANGKOK

*Bespoke travel company Cleveland Collection (clevelandcollection.co.uk) can arrange a five-night stay for the price of four at the Siam in Bangkok (thesiamhotel.com) from £3,345 per person, based on two people sharing on a bed-and-breakfast basis. The price includes business-class flights on British Airways (britishairways.com), return private airport transfers and accommodation in a Siam Suite. For reservations, ring 020 7843 3531.*