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**Imperial Grandeur**  
**Bangkok, Thailand and *The Oriental Hotel***

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Words and Photography by Kennie Ting



Fig 1 – Dazzling, dizzying facades in Bangkok’s Royal Palace complex.

“There it was, spread out largely on both banks, the Oriental capital which had yet suffered no white conqueror...”

Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow Line*

*River of Kings*

I had fully intended to arrive at the Palace by river that morning. But I was advised by the hotel concierge that there wasn’t really a convenient riverine approach anymore. At least, not since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when most of the grand canals in Bangkok had been filled in and replaced by more conventional motorways. Pity really. If there’s one thing I could never seem to get enough of in Bangkok, it was the river – *Meinem Chao Phraya* it’s called, “River of Kings.”

As a Singaporean, Bangkok has never been too far from my mind. There are two things one usually associates with it – shopping and sex. I’ve never been one for shopping, and so sex, I suppose, always loomed large in my general impression of the City of Angels. As a child accompanying my parents on arduous packaged tours to the city, I remember experiencing, with not a little bit of envy, those brassy revues performed by impossibly beautiful ladyboys with their sassy attitudes and over-the-top finery. And then as a young man going to Bangkok on business trips, I was always inevitably corralled, with my colleagues, into one of those ghastly “tiger shows” in Patpong, where no tigers are featured whatsoever. Bangkok seemed to me the epitome of bad taste – but fascinatingly, liberatingly so. There was nowhere else in Asia like it, and there still isn’t.



Fig 2 – Tradition and modernity: Bangkok in a nutshell.

In all my previous trips to Bangkok, I had always inexplicably steered clear of the river and the much older parts of the city that occupy its banks. The river, ironically, seemed to me to be peripheral to the modern metropolis, which had long since outgrown its traditional boundaries to become the sprawling, skyscraping monster of a city it is today – the second largest city in Southeast Asia by size and population (Jakarta being number one by a longshot). And so it felt like I was visiting

an entirely different city altogether when I arrived that morning, and took to the river for the very first time in my life.

In the early 1800s, Bangkok was a floating city bisected by canals, much like Venice and Amsterdam still are today. European visitors then hailed it as the Venice of the East, gleaming with golden temples, or wats, and quaint villages built entirely over the water. The Chao Phraya was the heart of that old city, linking it to the outside world, and bringing goods and people from all over that outside world to Siam. Today, the river still plays an important role in the cultural identity of the city – Floating Market anyone? – but it has long since lost its importance to international trade, except, perhaps for the hotel and tourism industry.



Fig 3 – The old Customs House, on the banks of the Chao Phraya. Now a dilapidated but still functioning Fire Station.

Siam, and Bangkok in particular, are important in the colonial history of Southeast Asia because nation and city never succumbed to Western Colonialism; because, in other words, *there is no colonial history of the city*, though the city came very close to having one. It was less than a century ago that French warships sailed up the Chao Phraya, intent on claiming Siam as their equivalent of British India. It took some deft foreign policy and significant territorial concessions on the part of the



Siamese Monarch then – King Chulalongkorn, also known as Rama V of the Chakri Dynasty – for Bangkok to avoid being the capital of Indochine. The King himself we know well. We all met him when he was but a little boy, getting to know a very persistent Deborah Kerr in the 1954 Hollywood movie, *The King and I*. Educated in the Western tradition, he would prove to be a vanguard, modernizing his kingdom and playing British insecurities against French egocentrism so deftly that he managed to secure from both Great Powers a promise to ensure the independence and neutrality of his Kingdom.



Fig 4 – Character from the *Ramakien*, the Thai adaptation of the Ramayana, outside the National Theatre.

That doesn't mean Siam, or Thailand rather (the name means "Land of the Free Peoples"), has no relation whatsoever to colonialism in Southeast Asia. Make no mistake about it. While Thailand was never a colony, *Siam* was a colonising power, exerting its influence over Laos and Cambodia (which it conceded to French Indochina), and the primarily Malay Muslim region along the Kra Isthmus, of which the provinces of Kelantan, Trengganu, Perlis and Perak were conceded to British Malaya. A trip to Laos and Cambodia will reveal just how pervasive the Thai cultural influence was in that country – Lao, Cambodian and Thai are mutually intelligible, and their sacred and royal architectural styles are very similar.

At the same time, Siam, being independent of any colonial empire, paid host to Europeans from almost every creed and language. The Portuguese and Dutch were the first to arrive in the 1500s and stayed for more than four hundred years. Then there were the French in the 1600s, the Danish in the 1700s, the British in the 1800s, and finally the Americans, with their investment dollars, after World War II. The European Quarter of the city, replete with colonial period buildings in various European styles and states of disrepair, is known as *Bang Rak*. Today it forms part of the larger *Silom* district of the city, which itself is dotted with a surprising number of colonial-era mansions. One interesting aspect about the this entire area was that it was fluid racially. The Europeans lived alongside other immigrant races such as the Chinese (in particular), Hindus from Southern India, Malays from the Malay states and Java, as well as Lao, Cambodians and other races from the Siamese Empire. All these made Bangkok quite possibly the original cosmopolitan city in Southeast Asia.



Fig. 5 – Crumbling European façade in Bang Rak.

The heart of this multi-cultural city, and the seat of the Siamese Empire, was the Grand Palace, occupying its own small island (*Rattanakosin*) at a strategic turn of the Chao Phraya. From this imperial heart, the rest of Bangkok radiates outwards in concentric circles, such that the Palace is always in view, but distant and unapproachable. That morning (to return to my initial narrative), I got to the Grand

Palace early, by taxi, and managed to get tickets just before the hordes of tourists, mostly Chinese, appeared with their loudspeakers. Once inside the Palace Complex, I was completely overwhelmed by the sheer number of monuments, and the range of architectural styles. A vast temple complex in the Siamese traditional style was flanked by a palace compound that reminded one of Versailles in France, which sat beside yet another temple complex that adopted a sacred Chinese vernacular. All of these complexes were topped by the actual Palace itself, essentially a European building, crowned by a Siamese roof.



Fig. 6 – Façade of the *Chakri Maha Prasat*, or the actual Grand Palace itself.

Here, in the Grand Palace complex, was the (hi)story of Thailand told in architecture: how its culture drew influence from two quintessentially Indian religions, Hinduism and Buddhism; how it prospered through the sheer hard work and entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese; how it had to modernize in a European fashion in order to hold its own against the Europeans; and finally, how its Kings were, if not the greatest, the shrewdest Kings in all of Asia. I could tell that my fellow tourists were similarly overwhelmed, not quite by epiphany, but rather from exhaustion and awe; which, I suppose, fulfilled the intention of the Kings who had the complex built in the first place.



*Here, they seemed to say, is our great Kingdom, unparalleled in all the world!  
Bow down, mere mortal, and pay it obeisance!*

### *Timeless Elegance*



Fig. 7 – The Mandarin Oriental Hotel (to the left), on the banks of the Chao Phraya River.

Bangkok is also known for another legendary and venerable institution in Southeast Asia – almost as old and venerable as the Grand Palace itself. This is the *Oriental Hotel*, versions of which has stood on the same site on the banks of the Chao Phraya River since at least 1865, when one of these versions burnt to the ground in a fire. The original hotel was a sort of boarding house popular with seamen and merchants. In her book, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870), Anna Leonowens mentions this establishment in passing when she describes her arrival to the city in 1862. The present hotel dates back to two decades later, however, when a Danish businessman, a Mr Hans Niels Andersen – who would subsequently establish the Danish East Asiatic Trading Company just next door – purchased a previously standing property and decided to completely rebuild and reposition it for an upscale clientele. The final product – a luxurious hotel in the European-style, with the latest amenities and comforts from the West, re-opened to great fanfare in 1887. However one considers it, *The Oriental, Bangkok* is quite likely the oldest institution of its kind

still standing and still functioning as it was originally intended to. It's also, judging from its published room rates and the number of mentions it has had in tourism and hospitality journals, quite possibly the best hotel in the region, giving the *Raffles Hotel* in Singapore a serious run for its money.

The present-day hotel is the flagship property of the Hong Kong-based Mandarin Oriental Group, which acquired it in the 1970s and subsequently renamed itself from “Mandarin” to “Mandarin Oriental.” The waterfront property is a mish-mash of buildings and styles from different eras of the hotel's evolution; all of which seem rather confusingly cast alongside each other from the outside, but are actually ingeniously and seamlessly linked on the inside. The best view of the Hotel is on the River in the evening, when the setting sun casts a rosy glow on the cream-coloured facades and the logo of the Hotel gleams a royal gold. Today, only the 14-storey, 350-room River Wing, built in the 1970s, and a somewhat shorter Garden Wing built in the 1950s can be seen from the River. The original hotel building opened in 1887 by Mr Andersen, is now the historic Author's Wing. It still stands proud but hidden behind a dense copse of trees and shrubbery.



Fig. 8 – The doorman at the main entrance to the hotel.



While guests in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would have arrived by river and docked right in front of the now-Author's Wing, today, guests arrive primarily by land at the Hotel's Main Lobby. There, the hotel doorman, dressed like a Thai imperial guard, opens the taxi door, and welcomes one with the utmost warmth and grace. The lobby of the hotel is a grand palatial space, with soaring double-volume ceilings and a bright airy interior. The best time to enter the hotel – according to its excellent Companion Guide – is in the evenings, when a string quartet plays in the lobby and the vast lounge area is abuzz with activity. While I unfortunately arrived in the morning, I did manage to snatch a feel of this magical and festive atmosphere the evening of my arrival, when I returned from a day of shooting in the European quarter.



Fig. 9 – The Grand Lobby of the Oriental Hotel, in the evening, with a string quartet playing at left.

The hotel's list of guests far outshines any other grand hotels' guestlist. One counts A-list celebrities like the late Elizabeth Taylor, Michael Jackson and Marlon Brando, alongside A-list Heads of State such as Queen Elizabeth II, Crown Prince Naruhito of Japan, and French President Jacques Chirac. The hotel's most famous guest, however – claimed equally by many other grand hotels in the region – was the writer, Somerset Maugham, who very famously almost died of malaria on the premises when he passed by the city in 1923, en route to Singapore. The General Manager at the time, a Mme Maria Maire, had threatened to throw him out for fear his

death would sully the reputation of the hotel. Thankfully for him, he recovered and went on to complete his travels across Asia and the South Pacific, returning to recount his experiences in a series of books, of which one, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, provides an account of his time in Siam. Maugham is commemorated in an excellently appointed Suite named after him, and located where his original suite of rooms used to be, in the historic Author's Wing.



Fig. 10 – The façade of the Author's Wing, the original building of the hotel.

Unfortunately, the Somerset Maugham Suite was far beyond what my budget could allow. Instead, I chose a Colonial Deluxe Room in the Garden Wing, situated right behind the Author's Wing and somewhat detached from the massive, hulking River Wing. Each of these rooms was laid out in a duplex, with a living and small dining area on one floor, and the bedroom and bathrooms on a mezzanine, accessible by a short flight of stairs. One side of the room had large windows that looked out onto the river, providing stunning views particularly in the evenings. The other side of the room looked out onto the colonial quarter of the city, *Bang Rak*, and had a small little reading area where one could curl up with a good book and a cup of coffee. The style of the furnishings was entirely contemporary, and there was none of the period *feel* of most of the other grand colonial hotels I've been to in the year thus



far. I was reminded rather keenly of the Manila Hotel, which had also pretty much forgone its once quaint colonial air, for something a lot more Hollywood opulent.

### *Night and Day*



Fig. 11 – The Author's Lounge, where I had a most scrumptious Afternoon Tea.

I soon discovered that the Hotel in the daytime and the hotel at night were like two completely different creatures, both of which were equally magnificent. The day we arrived (for the first time on my Grand Tour, I travelled with a friend and fellow photographer), we decided to try out the hotel's famous Afternoon Tea in its historic Author's Lounge, the oldest part of the hotel and one of the city's most atmospheric spots, in high demand for weddings and banquets. The Lounge that afternoon was populated largely by two genres of tourists – elderly retirees from America and Australia, young courting couples from Japan and Korea – and Thai ladies. Despite my initial misgivings about authenticity, Tea was absolutely exquisite. The scones were pitch perfect; the pastries and sandwiches were made from the freshest ingredients, and the tea I sipped at – a Darjeeling from Assam – was quite simply the most fragrant and smooth beverage I had ever had. My fellow traveller agreed. She had opted for the Lemongrass and Ginger Tea – a specialty of the hotel's. Afterwards, she never had another meal without having a pot of that same tea.



After tea, it was time for a short dip in the pool. The Hotel had two pools – a larger lap pool, which we could take in from our hotel room and along which European tourists and their children sprawled indolently in the sun; and another, smaller and more intimate wading pool cradled between two rows of tropical trees and daybeds. It was to the second that I took my swimming things and my notebook, intent on making notes of my experience so far. As I have now realised inevitably happens on each of my Grand Tour stops, I fell asleep almost immediately after I got out of the lukewarm water and lay down onto my towel. Tea weighing heavily on my stomach, I slept through the entire rest of the afternoon, despite a French family with their rather boisterous children splashing around within earshot. In my mind's eye, I contemplated the timeless view of the river, and myself cruising along it on one of the many river shuttles.



Fig. 12 – The Hotel's second, smaller pool.

When I awoke, it was already dusk, and I hastily gathered up my things and headed back up to the room for a change of clothes. Dinner that evening was at the hotel's *River Terrace* restaurant, along the banks of the Chao Phraya. The place that evening was bustling with guests and not having reservations, we were unable to secure a table right by the water. While the food itself was passable, the clientele at the restaurant – or some of them at least – proved to be rather more intriguing. Right

across from us, on a reserved table by the water, sat a trio of ladyboys, dressed like princesses: beehive hairdos, glittering jewellery around their necks, wrists and arms, and low cut evening dresses that showed off their bosoms. As we observed, they were in the midst of choosing a bottle of champagne, which, while ogling and flirting with the French sommelier, they insisted had to be “the best champagne from France.” After a long drawn-out session of flirting and ordering, the waiter, flushed with embarrassment and amusement, finally floated off, leaving the trio giggling and gossiping loudly to themselves, attracting attention from the rest of the tables around them. We were done with dinner, at that point, and so we got up, leaving the girls chatting, plotting and laughing, as though it was an episode of *Sex And The City*, halfway around the world here in Bangkok.



Fig. 13 – New York on the Chao Phraya: the resident live music ensemble at The Bamboo Bar.

Speaking of New York, we finally stumbled into the hotel bar about half an hour before 9 p.m., when the resident live jazz ensemble was due to perform. The *Bamboo Bar* (as the hotel bar is called) is one of the most famous bars in Bangkok. Opened in the 1950s, it has always played host to a live jazz bar, and has also seen a remarkable number of celebrities pass through its doors. Although the bar was relocated to the River Wing in the 1970s, its style is still consciously colonial, with a “tropical jungle” theme played out in animal print fabrics and deep mahogany tones.

We settled down to a few of the Bar's original creations, and were pleasantly lost in time, lulled as it were, by an excellent duo on piano and violin, playing a rendition of some early 19<sup>th</sup> century chamber piece as part of their rehearsal. Later on, the full jazz band would play, and a jazz singer from somewhere in the Caribbean would regale us with rather sub-standard smooth jazz numbers... But just then, it seemed as though I was in Carnegie Hall, witnessing a violin virtuoso perform the Violin Concerto by Tchaikovsky, or something to that effect. It was wonderful.

### *Sensual Retreat*



Fig. 14 – Ginger Tea, at the Oriental Spa.

My final day in Bangkok was spent leisurely exploring the Hotel's grounds on the West Bank of the River, across from where its main residential blocks are situated. Having initially planned on checking out the extensive health club facilities that morning, I was convinced instead into taking up a spa treatment at the hotel's resident spa. I couldn't have made a better choice. I had always acknowledged that the best spas and massages to be had in Southeast Asia were in Bangkok. Something about the Thais' attention to detail and their naturally hospitable disposition ensured a level of impeccable service that extended to the spa and wellness industry. In my previous trips to the city, I had always made it a point to check myself in for



minimally a massage, and I suppose I didn't really have any reason not to do the same this time, particularly since my task was to evaluate *all* the hotel had to offer.

The Oriental Spa, like everything else related to the Oriental, was renowned as being one of the best and most luxurious in Southeast Asia. I opted for the *Oriental Signature Treatment*, a one and a half hour affair comprising a massage with essential oils, and a traditional herbal compress for the shoulders and back. The object: total rest, absolute relaxation and utter reinvigoration – food for the soul, and for another week back at the workplace. My masseuse was a dulcet-toned young Thai lady, who, with remarkably firm, professional and reassuring hands, worked me into a deep slumber. Waking me occasionally to ask if the pressure was not too oppressive, she treated me like a Prince, pampering me with her oils that smelled of lavender and sage; rubbing deep heat into my joints with her compress of lemongrass and turmeric, and finally reducing me to a vulnerable, child-like state with a very welcome head and hair massage. It was too much, and just right.



Fig. 15 – The Grounds of the Spa.

After that regenerating experience, there wasn't much else to do, except wait patiently for the flight that would take us back to Singapore. We boarded the Hotel's River Shuttle south towards a nearby waterfront mall and then back again to the hotel,

only so we could admire the River and its shifting tides. I wondered what Joseph Conrad would say today, if he were miraculously able to ride down the river like he did some 150 years ago. Would he have found the skyscrapers confusing, disorienting, out-of-place? Or would he have simply shrugged off all this towering development as the natural evolution of a proud city never once conquered by Europeans?



Fig. 16 – The River Terrace, at dusk.

One thing's for certain: alighting at the Oriental Hotel's pier, and walking up the garden towards the Author's Wing, he would have recognised the spirit of the original hotel within what it had become today, and remarked on how little this historic place had changed over the course of more than a century.

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## **Essential Reading**

Andreas Augustin and Andrew Williamson, 1996 - 2006. *The Oriental Bangkok*. The Most Famous Hotels in the World.

Chris Burslem, 2012. *Tales of Old Bangkok: Rich Stories From the Land of the White Elephant*. Malaysia: Earnshaw Books.

Margaret Landon, 1944. *Anna and the King of Siam*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Maryvelma O'Neil, 2008. *Bangkok: A Cultural and Literary History*. Oxford: Signal Books.

Alec Waugh, 1970. *Bangkok: The Story of a City*. London: Eland.





Fig. 17 – Bamboo-lined walkway leading from the Spa to the Health Club, at the Hotel's grounds on the west bank of the river.