

Gallery VB *The Grand Palace*

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While Bangkok was never colonised, it was the seat of a colonial empire that encompassed most of what we now know as Indochina, and parts of present-day Malaysia and Burma. Up until the early 20th century, the Kings of Siam ruled their Empire from within the walled compound of their Grand Palace on *Rattanakosin*, an island artificially created from the river by monumental canal. While the present day monarch, King Bhumibol, or Rama IX, no longer resides in the palace complex (even though the Palace is the *official* residence), the latter is still used today on state and ceremonial occasions, and its doors are cast wide open to devotees and visitors on every other day.

The Palace was built to recall *Ayutthaya*, the former, fabled capital of Siam, sacked ignominiously by the Burmese in the 1700s. Indeed, many of the stones from the ruined floating city – *Ayutthaya* too was a canal city built on an island in the river – were painstakingly towed downriver to form the foundations of the palace. The very first structures in the palace were erected by King Rama I in 1782. They still stand today. Later on, a dizzying variety of styles, including Khmer, Thai, Chinese and European, would be used in the design and construction of many other structures in the palace grounds, resulting in a whole that is schizophrenic but never boring.

The crowning glory of the complex is the *Wat Phra Kaew*, or the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Its namesake is one of the National Treasures of Thailand, taken from Laos in the 17th century when it was a vassal state, and brought here to the seat of empire. The Buddha is revered by all Thais and indelibly linked to the ruling Chakri Dynasty. The message appears to be this: whoever guards the Buddha has divine sanction to rule. Faith in the Buddha and the monarchy has proven to be well-placed. After all, Thailand is the only nation in Southeast Asia today that has never been colonised. And this was all due to one of the shrewdest, most progressive and far-sighted monarchies in the world. The Grand Palace is a symbol not of their power, but of their wisdom.



Fig. 1 – The Golden Stupa, which is a Buddhist reliquary (a store of sacred relics). It sits on the upper terrace of the Wat Phra Kaew Monastery.



Fig. 2 – Mural of the Grand Palace, on the walls of the Wat Phra Kaew Monastery.



Fig. 3 – The first thing one sees upon entering the complex: the Temple itself, fronted by the statue of a monk, who was the father of Thai medicine. The statue was installed by Rama III.



Fig. 4 – One of a few immense guardian figures from the *Ramakien*, the Thai retelling of the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*.



Fig. 5 – View along a side corridor of the Temple housing the Emerald Buddha. Note the endless row of gold Garudas to the left. And of course, the exquisite detail.



Fig. 6 – Detail of a Lion Relief on the doors of the Wat Phra Kaew.



Fig. 7 – Three of the monuments on the upper Terrace: the Golden Stupa, the Phra Mondop (a repository for Buddhist sacred scriptures inscribed on palm leaves, and the Khmer Style Royal Pantheon, where the statues of past sovereigns are enshrined.



Fig. 8 – Chinese tourists at the steps of the Royal Pantheon.



Fig. 9 – One of the many mythological half-man half-animal beings that often adorn Thai sacred art. This one is known as *Apsarasingha*, combination of a female celestial being and a lion.



Fig. 10 – A profusion of styles, Khmer, Thai, French that characterizes the Grand Palace complex.



Fig. 11 – Yet another golden stupa, borne by mythical guardian figures.



Fig. 12 – View towards the back of the *Wat Phra Kaew*.



Fig. 13 – Mural of a warrior from the *Ramakien*.



Fig. 14 – The Chakri Maha Prasat, built by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) in 1882. The Central Throne Hall of this building is used in receptions of foreign ambassadors, state banquets and other ceremonial purposes.



Fig. 15 – Palace Guard standing in front of statues of white elephants.



Fig. 16 – The Aphorn Phimok PRasat Pavilion, standing in front of the Dusit Maha Prasit Throne Hall, which is the oldest building in the complex. The Hall is used for the lying-in-state of members of the Royal Family, and is modeled after a similar throne hall that once stood in Ayutthaya.



Fig. 17 – Statue of a Chinese lion that stands by the exit from the palace compounds. It is testament to a significant Chinese influence in the architecture of parts of the palace complex.



Fig. 18 – The Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, in an Italianate building that was once the Crown's Ministry of Finance.



Fig. 19 – European style building beyond the ticketed area of the palace compounds, and Chinese tourists taking shelter from the sun.



Fig. 20 – Outside the palace complex is a large public bazaar housed in a turn of the 19th century European-style building.