

Number one

Temples, tiny – and giant – Buddhas and a magnetic street life, the world's premier destination city has it all

In 2017, Mastercard ranked Bangkok number one Global Destination City for international overnight visitors, hitting 19.41 million the previous year.

The growth forecast predicts Thailand's capital city will hold off London, Paris, Dubai, Singapore and New York for another year at least, with numbers expected to top 20 million in 2018.

And it's not just access to pristine beaches and lush rainforests that play major drawcards. Bangkok's art and culture is a world-class melting pot of colour and history.

The city has long played portal to Western concepts and material goods, which, in some cases, have been welcomed and blended with Thai values – elevating the lifestyles of the burgeoning middle

Below: Bangkok is famous for its ancient temples including Wat Arun Temple

class. From the famous Khaosan Road strip and Bangkok's vibrant street life, to traditional Thai theatre and Buddhist temples, there is a wealth of cultural landmarks, attractions and entertainment venues.

Historic wealth coupled with rapid modernisation makes for a dynamic cityscape and open-minded urban society.

The Grand Palace, located in the old city of Bangkok on the banks of the Chao Phraya river, is a complex of buildings constructed in the late eighteenth century when King Rama I decided to move the capital of Thailand from Thonburi to an area known as Rattanakosin island on the East side of the Chao Phraya river.

Wat Phra Kaew adjoins the Grand Palace and houses the tiny (60-75cm) Emerald Buddha, which is thought to have been made in the 15th century, causing several wars before arriving in

Bangkok in 1782. The image is considered a talisman and holds tremendous significance for the nation and its people. Its 'robe' is changed three times each year by the King himself; a diamond encrusted gold robe during the hot season, a solid gold robe in the cool season and a gilded monk's robe in the rainy season.

Wat Pho's gold-plated reclining Buddha is on the other end of the scale at 46 meters long and 15 meters high. The famous monument is designed to illustrate the passing of the Buddha into nirvana.

Across the river, the stunning Wat Arun temple consists of the enormous Khmer-style tower (104m high) and four smaller towers.

In other pursuits, modern Bangkok has developed a strong spectator sport culture, largely thanks to global interest in muay Thai kickboxing. Fights draw impressive crowds to Rajadamnern and Lumpini Stadiums, despite international television broadcasting. While football is now the number one sport, the ancient game of speak takraw (essentially volleyball using feet) can be witnessed in the city's open spaces.

The city celebrates the life and death of its hero King Chulalongkorn – who saved the nation from colonisation in the late nineteenth century – with Father's Day (5 December), and a wreath-laying ceremony at his equestrian statue in the Royal Plaza on Memorial Day (23 October). ■

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