



Spirited city

Prior to the global pandemic, Bangkok was considered the world's most popular tourist destination, with 23 million visitors staying overnight every year – here's why

Culture in Bangkok in 2021 is steeped in modern art, architecture and behaviours, but it still retains very proud historical bonds, and a largely Buddhist spirituality. You don't have to travel far in the metropolis' centre to come across traditionally Thai food, language, music, dance, arts and Buddhist temples.

The people of Bangkok are warm and friendly, with a generous and welcoming nature, showing modest, but great pride towards their beautiful nation.

Buddhism is the predominant religion in Bangkok and monks, spirit houses, Buddha images and statues are integral to the everyday activities and scenery of the city. Many homes and businesses have spirit houses on the property

to allow the placement of alms, flowers and foodstuffs, such as sticky rice and rice whiskey. The purpose of the spirit house is to provide an appealing shelter for the spirits, or celestial beings, who would otherwise reside in spaces occupied by human dwellings, large trees, caves, cliffs or waterfalls. It is believed that the spirits are finicky and mischievous, demanding respect from humans, and capable of doing great harm if they are not afforded proper respect. One of the most famous spirit houses is the Erawan Shrine at the side of the

Above: The mythological golden Kinara – half-bird-half-man – outside the Temple of the Emerald Buddha at the stunning 18th-century Grand Palace

Hyatt Erawan Hotel on Ratchadamri Road in the Pathum Wan District.

The Bangkok Art and Culture Centre is a quite unique institution, opposite the Siam Discovery Centre and MBK (Bangkok's legendary eight-storey shopping mall). Aside from the fascinating architecture, a large range of paintings, sculptures, music and dance performances are on show. The centre is designed as a working educational art space and holds exhibitions of art from Bangkok, Thailand, and the rest of Asia.

Among Bangkok's other well-known sights are the Grand Palace and major Buddhist temples, including Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Pho, and Wat Arun. Vimanmek Mansion in Dusit Palace is famous as the world's largest teak building, while

the Jim Thompson House provides a splendid example of traditional Thai architecture. Other major museums include the Bangkok National Museum and the Royal Barge National Museum. Cruises and boat trips on the Chao Phraya and Thonburi's canals offer views of some of the city's traditional architecture and ways of life on the waterfront.

Modern Thai society may have fully immersed itself in western music, but strong links remain to more traditional music which is in keeping with its geographic location at the intersection of China, India, Cambodia, with additional influences from the historical trade routes including Persia, Africa, Greece and Rome.

Muay Thai (Thai Boxing) plays the King's Anthem at every fight, and the city comes to a standstill at 8am and 6pm every day when the National Anthem is played over speakers in public spaces. This rhythmic music accompanies the Ram Muay ritual dance, as well as the contest itself, and is a sound recognised as a symbol of deference and respect. ■