

The Diversity of Tourism and Urban Development in Bangkok

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Historical and Cultural Elements

Bangkok is a city of rich cultural diversity. Its historic core includes three important areas namely Inner Rattanakosin, Outer Rattanakosin on the eastern side of the Chao Phraya River, and Krung Thon Buri on the opposite side of the River. The areas were largely built during the pre-Rattanakosin or the reign of King Taksin (1767-1782) and early Rattanakosin or between the reigns of King Rama I and King Rama III (1822-1853).



Fig.1
Rattanakosin Grand Palace



Fig.2
Wat Arun, the Bangkok's Landmark

Pom Prap district was developed in the reign of King Rama IV (1853-1868). Responding to population growth, the King expanded the city east by constructing Padung Krung Kasem canal to mark the city's boundary. During the time, European style city planning effort for Bangkok was also initiated by constructing 3 wide western style streets, namely Chareon Krung, Bamrung Muang and Fuang Nakhon roads.

Dusit district at the north of Rattanakosin is of national and symbolic importance. The area has many ceremonial buildings such as the Throne Hall, grand tree-lined avenue and generous pedestrian walkways symbolized the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). Samphanthawong district at the southeast of Rattanakosin thrived as the center of the city's Chinese community. The area is distinguished from other commercial districts in the city by its ethnic character. Goods range from gold jewelry to Chinese foods and medicines continue to attract residents and tourists until nowadays.



Fig.3
Yaowarat, the Bangkok's China Town

On the western side of the Chao Phraya River, Thon Buri, Thailand's capital during the reign of King Taksin (1767-1782) offers a glimpse into the importance of the waterways in the development of Bangkok. An extensive network of canals were built and linked up with the city's water network. The distinctive physical and social character of the area still reflects a traditional way of life through a network of canals surrounded by old temples and communities in Bangkok Noi and Bangkok Yai districts.



Fig.4
Thon Buri's Canal Settlements

The historic core of Bangkok is not only the setting of historic artifacts and architecture, but is also filled with rich and diverse activities including specialized markets and traditional industries. Specialized markets range in activities from selling vegetables, flowers and fresh fruits at Pak Khlong Talad, to textiles at Sampheng. Traditional industries specializing in goods such as precious metals, lapidary and wood carving can also be found in the area. These activities continue to serve local residents and tourists and add a tremendous richness and liveliness to urban life in Bangkok.

Tourism Development

Bangkok is the most popular area among tourists. Its exceptional resources attract both domestic and international visitors. In 2003, the number of tourists in Bangkok was 19,524,010 Thai and 9,780,143 foreigners. The average growth rate during 1999-2003 rose to 10.48 and 5.74 percent per year respectively. The growth rate of the international visitors was below the set target rate of 8 percent due to the incident in the U.S. and the Middle East which affected world tourism.

Table 1 Number of Domestic Tourists in Bangkok

	Thai	Foreigners	Total
1999	13,758,524	7,953,877	21,712,401
2000	14,635,692	8,640,655	23,276,347
2001	15,596,826	8,916,986	24,513,812
2002	16,781,028	9,737,228	26,518,256
2003	19,524,010	9,780,143	29,304,153

source: Tourism Authority of Thailand

In 2003, Bangkok received the highest 55.30 percent of foreign tourists from Asia and 29.64, 6.71, 4.43, 3.43 and 0.49 percents from Europe, America, Oceania, Middle East and Africa respectively. The 15-44 age groups had the highest ratio. Males, the amount of which was 51.29 percent in 2003, consistently expanded at a lower level than that of females. The average length of stay increased from 2.83 days in 1999 to 3.16 days in 2003. The city in that

year received tourism income of 267,758.92 million Baht. Most of the amount of the income was circulated particularly in Bangkok.

Table 2 Nationality of Foreign Visitors

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
America	476,939	518,049	635,712	576,281	656,723
Europe	2,476,183	2,686,227	2,684,727	2,752,289	2,899,058
Oceania	201,542	219,047	398,019	363,300	433,269
Asia	4,495,484	4,886,954	4,859,890	5,094,307	5,407,953
Middle East	263,972	287,272	293,592	288,571	335,243
Africa	39,757	43,106	45,046	45,571	47,867
Total	7,953,877	8,640,655	8,916,986	9,120,319	9,780,143

source: Tourism Authority of Thailand

Table 3 Revenue from Domestic Tourism in Bangkok (million Baht)

	Thai	Foreigners	Total
1999	85,362.03	91,757.69	177,119.72
2000	93,706.55	101,693.37	195,399.92
2001	101,909.29	103,080.47	204,989.76
2002	109,812.63	113,041.47	222,854.10
2003	139,465.60	128,293.32	267,758.92

source: Tourism Authority of Thailand

Table 4 Expenditure Items (million Baht)

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Shopping	65,679.96	74,153.46	77,617.19	84,312.75	65,553.30
Accommodation	35,720.03	38,832.39	40,669.31	44,162.52	53,215.00
Food & Beverage	23,826.22	26,894.03	28,670.86	31,059.89	44,053.51
Entertainment	28,466.88	27,812.38	29,322.40	31,782.70	66,162.02
Local Transport	15,623.52	20,547.03	21,298.64	23,434.89	33,764.88
Miscellaneous	7,803.11	7,160.51	7,411.36	8,101.35	5,010.21
Total	177,119.72	195,399.92	204,989.76	222,854.10	267,758.92

source: Tourism Authority of Thailand

Implications to Urban Development

The implications of tourism development are dramatically reflected in the physical growth and spatial dispersion of Bangkok. Behind Charoen Krung Road on the bank of the Chao Phraya River is the row of Bangkok's famous riverside hotels namely the Oriental Hotel, the royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel, the Shangri-la Hotel, and the Maenam Hotel. Sukhumvit, Phloen Chit and Ratchaprasong Roads epitomize modern Bangkok. The areas are characterized by five-star hotels, high rise apartments, shopping centers, stylish restaurants and a wide selection of entertainment venues. The "skytrain" or elevated rail system passing through the areas also provides a good base for exploring main tourist and commercial areas of the city. On the other end, Khao San Road in Rattanakosin area is the center of backpackers in Thailand and it has now become the most popular tourist attraction

in Bangkok. The area provides guest houses, bars and restaurants, travel agencies, used books stores and the booming internet cafes. It is likely the most popular destination for Bangkok residents and tourists in Songkran (Thai New Year) festival nowadays.



Fig.5
Riverside Hotels in Bang Rak Area



Fig.6
Hotels on Sukhumvit Road



Fig.7
Guest Houses on Khao San Road

Shopping in Bangkok is also a delightful experience for international visitors. Ratchaprasong area is a major concentration of department stores and shopping malls selling quality boutiques and high-end goods. Chatuchak flea market is the favorite weekend gathering ground for tourists and Bangkok's bargain shoppers. For the souvenir shoppers, Thai handicrafts mostly are hand made articles by traditional tools. There are fine handwoven brocades, leatherwares, silverwares, jewelries, celadon stonewares, wood carving, lacquerwares, etc. For foreign visitors, the soft Thai currency offers them more value for their money for purchases of goods and services here in Thailand than elsewhere.



Fig.8
Ratchaprasong Shopping Area



Fig.9
Chatuchak Flea Market

At night, Si Lom Road turns into Bangkok's entertainment quarters with cocktail bars, pubs, dancing halls and night clubs along its entire length. For new visitors who wish to sample the local evening entertainments may start at a Thai dinner with classical dance shows. After dinner, the more active ones can explore the many Bangkok night clubs and discotheques. Patpong area on Si Lom Road is the most famous night spot. The area is lined with go-go bars, with hostesses ready to join guests for drinks at the tables or for the hereafter inclination. A new spot that is giving the pleasure business is Soi Cowboy, off Sukhumvit 23. Bangkok also has its own kind of massage for those who are weary. The area where these entertainments are congregated is Ratchadaphisek Road.



Fig.10
Night Life in Soi Cowboy

Recommendations

Bangkok has exceptional unparalleled resources to attract visitors. The city, however, should offer the numerous visitors a well organized introduction to different cultural aspects of the city. As the city is rapidly emerging as the most important tourist center of South East Asia, its rich cultural heritage must be protected. It is important to elevate an awareness of the historical and cultural context of the city among residents and visitors before irreplaceable treasures are lost. In order to ensure that the development is appropriate to the historic areas of the city, special development control must be enforced for designated conservation areas. In addition, it is important to have specific plans indicating public intention for improvements to each of the areas.

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