

Bangkok Rising

TALK | By PANKAJ MISHRA | MAY 15, 2012



Sky mall Bangkok's new shopping center Terminal 21 poses as an airport and offers simulacrum of Tokyo, London and Istanbul. *Christopher Wise*

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One morning in January, I watched as young Thai men and women emerged from the **Erawan Bangkok shopping mall**, put down their Comme des Garçons and Burberry bags, and bowed with folded hands to the Hindu creation deity Brahma at the Erawan shrine conveniently located just outside. In Bangkok, it seemed, retail therapy was not a secular substitute for religious healing, but rather went together with it. This was merely one contradiction in a city famous for them. Walking past the massage parlors and transvestite clubs of the red-light district Nana and into the packed temples and spirit houses, I marveled at how the city combines the promise of guilt-free sex with a profound faith in the Buddhist cycle of karma.

Paradoxes of course come cheap in Asia, where embattled tradition still dictates terms to a triumphant modernity. But Bangkok appears to possess more of them than Mumbai, Hong Kong or Taipei. Its architecture adds to the impression of a fundamental incoherence: Disneylandish for the most part, it mingles Doric columns with Thai country houses, rampant neon and the giant concrete pylons of the expressways and elevated Skytrain network.

Unlike its Asian neighbors, Thailand was never colonized by Europe, and its sense of continuity with the past has never been radically disrupted. The American war in Indochina, profoundly damaging on the other side of Thai borders, ushered Thailand into a profitable peace, as a whole industry of indulgence blossomed to cater to weary warriors. While Burma, Cambodia and Laos succumbed to civil war and genocide, Bangkok, bolstered by the American war chest, developed a modern economy.

Though military dictatorships maintained an artificial peace for decades, electoral democracy has stoked terrible social conflict in recent years. The military establishment

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resents the street power of populist politicians like Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand’s former prime minister. Since a 2006 military coup overthrew Thaksin and forced him into exile, protests and riots have repeatedly broken out on the streets of the capital. Still, the Thais’ reverence for their monarchy remains seemingly unshakeable.

Visiting Bangkok recently after many years, I found it hard not to be charmed, even seduced, by the city. A few weeks before I arrived, Thailand’s worst flooding in 70 years had inundated low-lying parts of Bangkok, killing 600 people, shutting down hundreds of factories and disrupting global supply chains of automobiles and computers. (If you are chafing at the increased prices of hard disk drives, blame the floods in Bangkok.)

Downtown Bangkok had mostly escaped the floods, but it had barely survived the intense rioting of 2010, when red-shirted supporters of Shinawatra, demanding early parliament elections, turned large parts of the financial district into a war zone. The violence left many buildings, including CentralWorld, one of Southeast Asia’s largest shopping malls, in smoldering ruins.

Feeling cautious during my first couple of days in town, I crisscrossed the city in the Skytrain, never venturing too far from its elevated arcades, the cluster of malls and food courts around its stations, and its many television monitors incessantly cajoling you to buy the latest weight-loss programs and shampoos.

My fears felt absurd when I ventured out to **Chatuchak**, apparently the world’s biggest weekend market, and saw the vast crowds moving serenely through stalls stocked with everything from jeans and DVDs to ceramics. Outside the CentralWorld Mall, where the red-shirted protesters had set up base camp, the traffic had been restored to gridlock. In 2011, Thais elected Thaksin’s sister, **Yingluck Shinawatra**, as prime minister; Thaksin himself is said to be plotting an early return to Thailand. Despite the political instability, life, it quickly became clear, was going on. Indeed, for some, it had never been seriously disrupted.

Soon after arriving, I met the American writer and restaurateur **Jarrett Wrisley** in his neighborhood of Thong Lor. Wrisley had moved to Bangkok from Shanghai in 2009 with plans to set up a restaurant. But the next April, when the fighting broke out, he was confined to his home, cooking for himself and his wife throughout the riots while men outside smashed telephone booths and turned energy drinks into bombs.

Wrisley’s restaurant, Soul Food Mahanakorn, opened to acclaim in late 2010. Then the floods came in the autumn of 2011, and he resignedly put up sandbags around the restaurant and left. He returned after five days to an unimpaired but seemingly unneeded business; news of the floods had driven away tourists and businessmen. Things were demoralizingly bad in the usually busy days of December. One night, he served only seven customers.



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But on the January night when I met Wrisley, his restaurant, which specializes in northeastern Thai comfort food, was full. I was introduced to Pierre Metz, a French businessman who was off to Myanmar to set up a chocolate shop. As that country, one of the world's most isolated and potentially rich, rapidly opened up earlier this year, Bangkok's hotel lobbies and restaurants were awash with the anticipation of a new frontier town in Yangon. Wrisley himself was getting ready to go to Myanmar to write about that country's answer to Jay-Z, but he seemed in no hurry to open up a restaurant there; Bangkok was still the main place of opportunity.

Indeed, as I discovered, the city's sense of possibility barely seemed to have been dented by the floods and the riots. In the royal district of Dusit, the Thai pop star and actor Krissada Sukosol Clapp has, with the help of the architect Bill Bensley, turned his family's property into what promises to be Bangkok's leading resort hotel. The floods had postponed the opening of the hotel from autumn 2011 to June 2012, and when I visited the property, the ground around it was still soggy. But the setbacks had made Kriss, as he is called, and his wife, Melanie, more determined.

Proudly, they showed me around the hotel, which overlooks the Chao Praya River and has 39 spacious rooms, all furnished with the Sukosol Clapp family's collection of antiques and artwork. There are bits of history, too, in its restaurant, which comprises three traditional teak houses originally built in 1959 by Jim Thompson, a legendary American resident who after arriving in Bangkok as a spy for the O.S.S., the C.I.A.'s predecessor, went native.

Kriss, who is half American, had himself gone a bit native, having recently returned to Bangkok from New York. There was no place he'd rather be, he said. And in this he seemed to be like many other Thais — at ease anywhere in the world but drawn inescapably to their old city.

At the **Serindia Gallery** off Charoen Krung Road, Bangkok's oldest street, I met Shane Suvikapakornkul, a curator and publisher. Born and brought up in Bangkok, Suvikapakornkul had also returned from a long residence in the United States to set up the gallery, from scratch, in 2009. He said he was happy to be in close proximity to his elderly parents. But the hopelessly congested and polluted city of his youth had also become more habitable, largely thanks to the Skytrain, he said, which made it possible to travel painlessly around the city.

I confided to him that I had become addicted to the Skytrain. The garrulous TV screens inside the train and on the platforms no longer annoyed me; I was transfixed by the scenes on view out the windows — vacant parking lots, children bent over homework in tiny apartments.

The elevated train was giving me an attractive new perspective on a city that many people describe as shapeless and unprepossessing. Bangkok's pleasures, it seems, lie behind its gritty surfaces, and not only in the city's many fancy hotels and malls, its world-class aquarium or the much-visited temples to the Buddha, **Wat Arun** and Wat Pho.

There are lesser-known sites, like the temple of Wat Ratchanadda, with its "Iron Palace" built in the Burmese style. And few hotels in the world match the Art Deco Atlanta for sheer eccentricity. The floating markets, especially Taling Chan, remind you of the canals that once ran through the city. Wandering deeper into the sois (alleys) off Sukhumvit,

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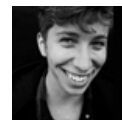
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you can still imagine the dreamy landscape of palm groves, rice paddies and gardens the city has supplanted.

Bangkok’s street life has an effortless cosmopolitanism: Chinese jewelers mingling with bespoke tailors from the Punjab; Thai women in hot pants in Soi 4 coexisting easily with their compatriots in chador in the Arab quarter across the street. It is never quite clear what the next street junction might bring — men smoking shishas on the sidewalks or more sushi and karaoke bars, designed for the tens of thousands of Japanese residents in the city. The city heaves with young people, casually but elegantly dressed, and possessed of a natural grace. And even the numerous shopping malls are rescued from the tedium of brand-sameness by their playful quality. The newly constructed Terminal 21 poses as an airport, with the floors offering simulacrums of Tokyo, London, Istanbul and San Francisco.



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I made the unavoidable literary pilgrimage to the **Mandarin Oriental** and spent an idle hour on a veranda strewn with white wicker seats, sipping beer and wondering how the riverscape appeared across the decades to Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, John Le Carré and Gore Vidal. I grew to like the sound of the riverboats' tires crashing into the pier's rotten wood and developed favorites among the organic fruit juice vendors at the Skytrain arcades. I ate mostly at the Indian eateries scattered around the city and noted, with the fascination of a lifelong vegetarian, the taxonomy of Bangkok's street food. For instance, small motorbikes with attached trays on the back turned out to be selling waterbugs and fried worms, grasshoppers and cicadas. Then there were fried fish, egg noodles, rice porridge, stir-fries, barbecued fatty pork skewers, sausages (sai krok Isaan) and grilled chicken with sticky rice and som tam. In Chinatown, the most popular dishes to my half-averted eyes seemed to be Cantonese-style roast duck and pork, and crispy pork belly (moo krob).

Venturing into the red-light alleys off Sukhumvit, I came across scenes that had appalled me when I first encountered them 15 years ago: the single men from rich countries looking for quick and cheap gratification with financially needy migrants from Thailand's poor north. I had seen these men, and their easy power over the locals, as the beneficiaries of large political and economic imbalances. This still seemed true, but my vision had shifted somewhat. Patpong, where women spat out Ping-Pong balls from between their legs, now seemed pure kitsch. And the buffoonish solicitations were more amusing than annoying.

The vicious class warfare on Bangkok's streets has dimmed the old image of Thailand as the "Land of the Smiles," and of the Thais as an exquisitely mannered and hospitable people. Though Thailand escaped colonialism, it does not appear immune to the perils of globalization — uneven growth, extreme inequality — and Bangkok is now the main theater of the country's socioeconomic conflicts. The floods, damaging mostly poorer parts of the city and largely leaving the affluent bits alone, reinforced the city's bitter class divisions. But there are also many redemptive stories of solidarity, sometimes in unexpected places.

As the waters rose in late 2011, the Four Seasons Hotel, its grand lobby reminiscent of the Peninsula in Hong Kong, threw open its empty rooms to its staff and their families, the last of whom left in early January. For many staff members, it had been a strange experience to work so close to their families. And the hotel managers faced unfamiliar challenges: how to occupy the scores of children running around the hotel. (The schools were closed.) Meanwhile, a manhole near the hotel disgorged a python, a detail one Four Seasons executive reluctantly divulged, fearing it would deter people from visiting Bangkok.

She need not have been worried: occupancy rates are bouncing back — Bangkok is simply too irresistible a destination to tourists and businessmen. Though confronted with serious losses, manufacturers appear unlikely to relocate their factories to Vietnam or Indonesia. And the economy, which contracted in the last quarter of 2011, is now picking up again.

One unusually cool evening in Lumpini Park, listening to a free concert by the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra, I wondered if the clichés about Bangkok needed to be updated. (All cities have them, these short and necessary guides to their character.) The musical fare varied from "Love Me Tender" to Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" to Thai pop songs. And the

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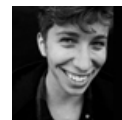
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crowd — trendy youth on casual dates, enviably svelte grandmothers resting from a bout of tai chi — lapped it up. Then, when the national anthem was played, all arose in unison and stood patriotically solemn. Lying on the grass, watching the lights of the business district come on, I began to think that Bangkok, battered but unbowed by natural disasters and political violence, was revealing a new inner essence, and providing another useful cliché about itself — that it is, above all, resilient.

HOTELS

The Four Seasons Thirty years old next year, this is still one of the best places to stay in Bangkok. 011-66-2-126-8866; doubles from about \$190. **The Siam Hotel** Opening in June at the riverfront, this deluxe property has 39 individually decorated rooms. 011-66-2-206-6999; doubles from \$519.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS

Soul Food Mahanakorn Burmese-inflected variations on regional Thai cuisine. 56/10 Sukhumvit Soi 55; 011-66-85-904-2691. **Viva Aviv** New riverside bar with good music, great cocktails and even better people watching. Unit 118, 23 Trok Rongnamkhaeng, Yota Road, Talad Noi; 011-66-2-639-6305. **Taling Pling** Good, honest Thai food. Try the southern Thai massaman curry with roti. 60 Pan Silom, Bang Rak; 011-66-2-234-4872. **Cafe de Laos** Lao and Isaan specialties served in an charming old wooden house. 16 Soi Silom, 19 Silom Road, Bangrak; 011-66-2-635-2338.

SHOPPING

Bangkok's innumerable shopping malls offer all the major international brands. If you're looking for local products, head to the new **Terminal 21** (Sukhumvit Road; 011-66-2-108-0888). Modeled on an airport, it offers great (and cheap) clothing and accessories by young Thai designers. The third floor of **Siam Centre** (Rama 1 Road; 011-66-2-2658-1000) is another showcase for Thai fashion designers — cutting-edge, high quality and reasonably priced.



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