

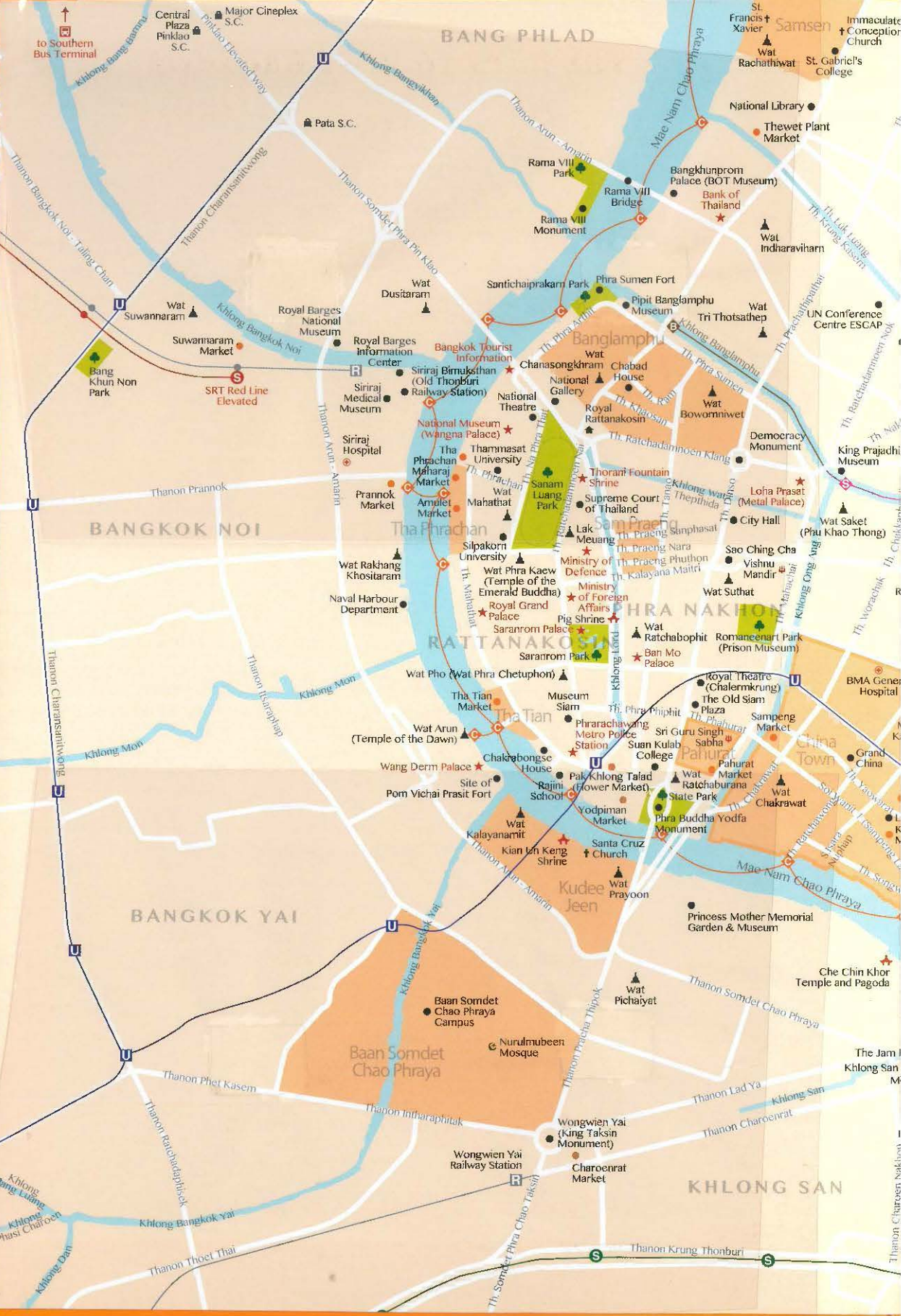


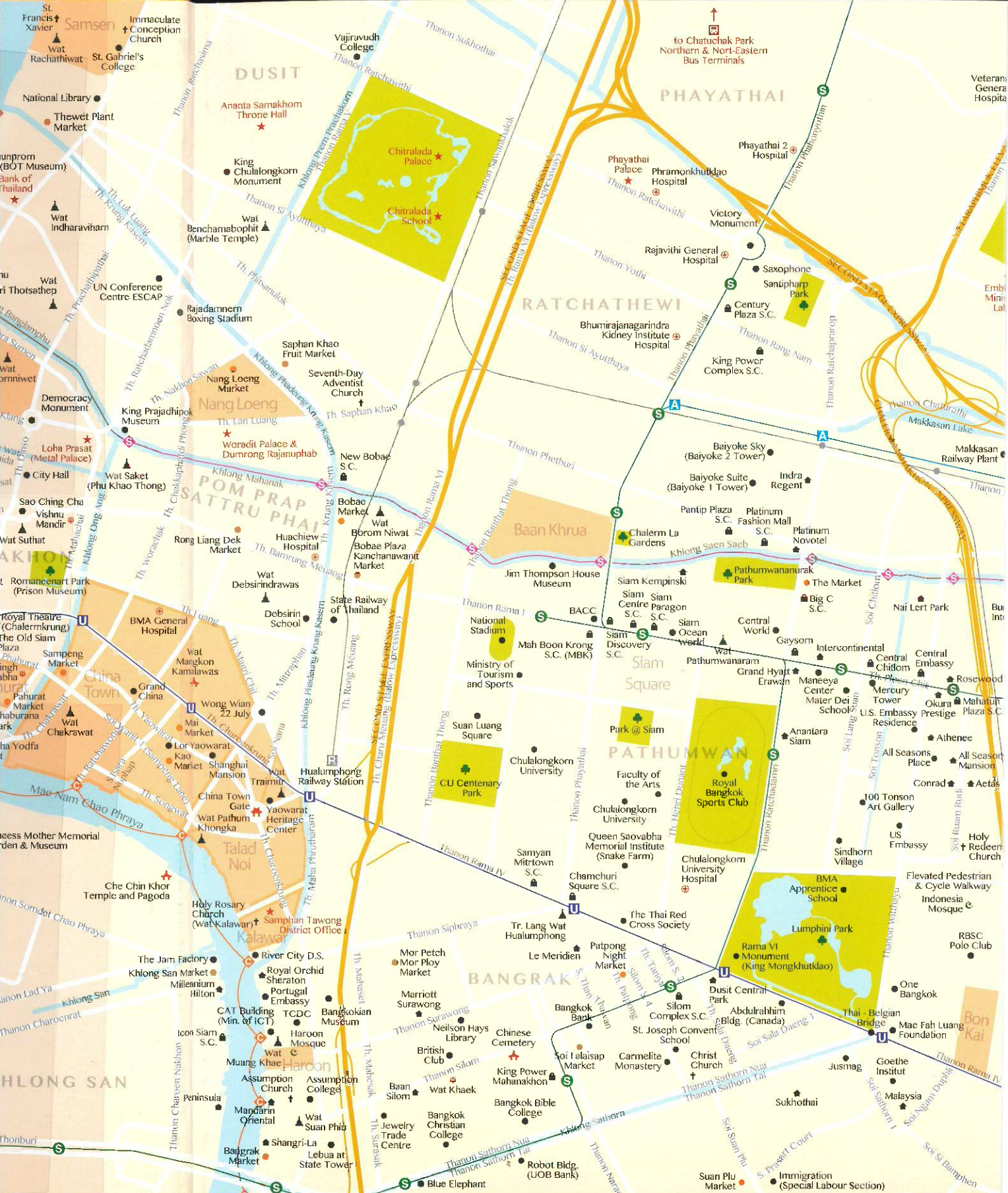
VERY BANGKOK

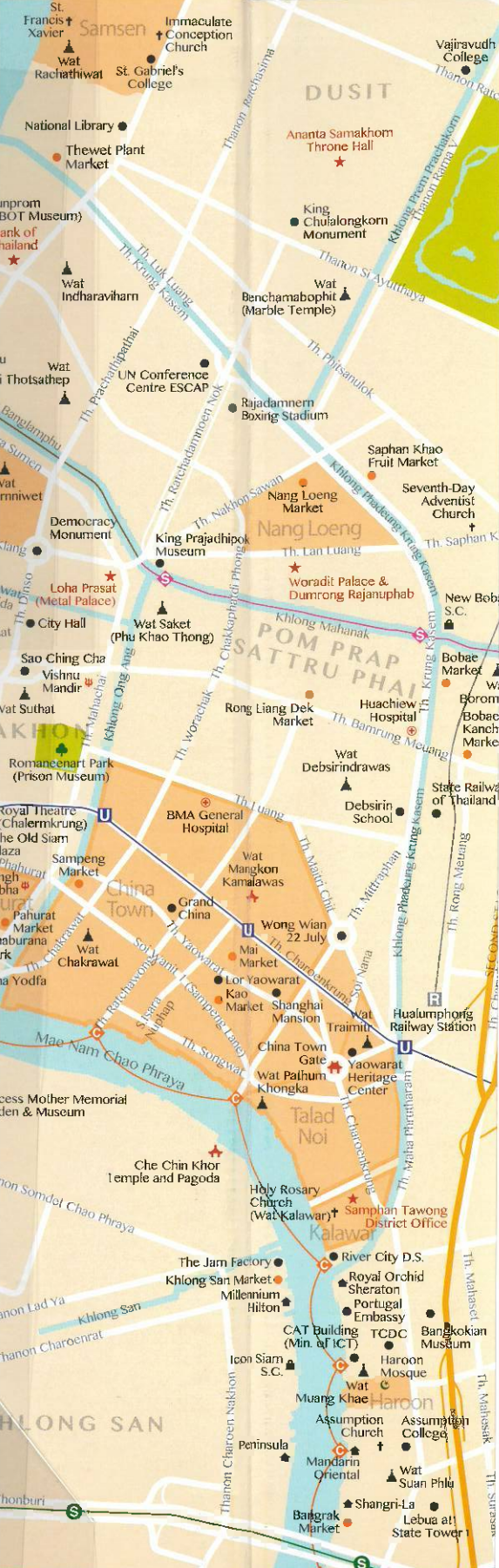
IN THE CITY OF
THE SENSES

By the author of *Very Thai*
PHILIP CORNWEL-SMITH

Foreword by **Lawrence Osborne**







THE KEYS TO VERY BANGKOK

This is a book of insights, rather than a guidebook, but it will help you navigate this friendly, but often baffling city. It is arranged in three parts, going ever deeper:

- **Senses** – Immediate experience of this stimulating metropolis.
- **Heart** – Exploring the subcultures, beliefs and values that explain why Bangkok is the way it is.
- **Face** – Reflecting on how the city sees and presents itself, and how people perceive and portray it.

All major data and quotations have been noted in the sources at the back. The index has almost 4,000 entries and many themed searches. Spellings have been matched where possible to digital mapping, for looking up listings online.

Events, talks and news postings relating to the book will be put online at verybangkok.net and via social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) with the hashtag #verybangkok

MAP KEY

Inside Front Cover : Central Bangkok

Inside Back Cover : Greater Bangkok

The maps are marked with landmarks and many of the places mentioned. Mass transit routes are shown as they meander in real life. The Greater Bangkok map has been swivelled so that north faces to the left, thereby looking at Bangkok from a fresh direction, snapping out of habits to see this place anew. It marks several of the communities covered in the book but omitted from commercial maps. There is a hidden Bangkok to explore.

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| ● Destination | ✈ Airport |
| ● Market | 🚏 Express Bus |
| ★ Office | —S— BTS Sky Train |
| ⛪ Temple | —S— MRT Sky Train |
| ⛪ Shrine | —S— SRT Red Lines |
| 🏠 Hotel | —A— Airport Rail Link |
| 🛍 Shopping Center (SC) | —U— MRT Underground |
| 🕌 Mosque | —R— Railway |
| 🕉 Hindu Temple | —C— Chao Phraya Express Boat |
| ⊕ Hospital | —S— Saen Saeb Canal Boat |
| ✝ Church | —B— Banglamphu Canal Boat |
| 🌳 Park | |

**VERY
BANGKOK**
IN THE CITY OF
THE SENSES

Bib. b00006232
Item. j00008586
Barcode. 000010009337
Call no. DS589.B3
C67
2020
Date 14 October 2022



VERY BANGKOK

**IN THE CITY OF
THE SENSES**

PHILIP CORNWEL-SMITH

AUTHOR & PHOTOGRAPHER



Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to the two personal mentors who've edited this book, and taught me so much.

Consulting Editor: Marc Pachter
Editor: Alex Kerr

First published in Thailand in 2020 by
River Books Co., Ltd.
396 Maharaj Road, Tatien, Bangkok 10200
Tel 66 2 6221900, 2254963, 2246686
E-mail: order@riverbooksbk.com
www.riverbooksbk.com

Copyright collective work © River Books, 2020
Copyright text © Philip Cornwel-Smith, 2020
except preface © Lawrence Osborne, 2020
Photographic copyright as credited © Philip Cornwel-Smith
2020, or as indicated otherwise.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN : 978 616 451 043 2

Publisher: Narisa Chakrabongse
Consulting Editor: Marc Pachter
Editor: Alex Kerr
Researchers: Saran Mahasupap
Cover design: Xavier Comas of Cover Kitchen
Design : 1000 Ponies Co.,Ltd.; Ruetairat Nanta
Digital Image : DailyTouch
Production Supervision: Paisarn Piemmettawat

Printed and bound in Thailand by
Sirivatana Interprint Public Co., Ltd

page 2: An offering to monks
at Wat Wachiratham Sathit.

right: Pipes on a the street.



Contents

FOREWORD

by Lawrence Osborne 6

INTRODUCTION 8

Witness 16

Senses

SMELL 22

Flower Culture 24

TASTE 26

Streetfood 28

Gastrothai 33

HEAT & DAMP 36

Se-waen 40

SPACE 44

Sanam Luang 47

Background City 49

Third Places 51

Green Space 53

DIRECTION 56

Centre Points 57

Wayfinding 58

Feng Shui 60

FLOW 62

Walking 64

Cycling 68

Custom Transit 71

BALANCE 74

LOOKING 76

Vertical Living 78

Selfie City 82

Larkitecture 86

COLOUR 88

Blossom Season 93

SACRED 95

Brahmin 96

Rajprasong Shrines 100

All in One 105

Muslim-Thais 106

SIXTH SENSE 110

Animist Shrines 116

TRANCE 118

Neo-Hindu 122

TIME 124

Timeline 125

Destiny 127

NIGHT 128

Partying 132

SANUK 135

LIBIDO 138

The Bangkok Noir 142

An LGBT Paradise? 145

TOUCH 148

Massage 151

SUFFERING 152

Happy Accident 153

Healing Hub 154

Hell Park 157

SOUND 158

Birdsong 160

Bang-Pop 164

SENSORS 166

Heart

THAINESS & THE CITY 172

Royal Presence 174

Primate City 179

Krungthep or Bangkok? 182

BECOMING BANGKOKIAN 185

Mon 190

Indian-Thai 194

ROOTS 196

Isaan Travelogue 198

Regional Rites 203

STIR-FRY 206

From Jek to Thai-Jiin 210

Chinese Revival 215

COMMUNITY 218

Roofless 225

Subcultures 228

Tin Town 231

MARKET 234

Talad Nat 237

Monohoods 240

YOUTH 245

Siam Square 250

T-Rap 256

CREATIVE CITY 258

Graffiti 267

Bangkoklyn 274

Face

MEMORY 278

Mind the Gaps 285

Retro 288

Protukate 292

TOURIST TRAPPINGS 294

Slogans 297

Urban Explorers 299

Backpackers 302

PORTRAYALS 304

True Fiction 308

The Indecisive Moment 311

Cinematic Krungthep 312

Messy Aesthetic 314

Reality TV and Reality 318

Theories of Bangkok 321

TIDES 324

Project Singapore 326

Bladerunneresque 332

APPENDICES

Acknowledgements & Sources 336

Index 348

MAPS

Central Bangkok Map

front

Greater Bangkok Map

back



Foreword

by Lawrence Osborne

author of *Bangkok Days* and *The Kingdom*

"Bangkok looks like it's been Photoshopped," Philip Cornwel-Smith writes in a chapter devoted to the subject of 'Colour.' "No pink could be that shocking, no gold that yellow. The glare of the sun dials up the brilliance, and casts deep blinding shadows." It would have been an apposite opening for this entire book, a brilliant and polychromatic look at Bangkok done in a way that no other writer has attempted. Consider the multitude of chapters and themes. There is a section called 'Flow' devoted to walking, cycling and 'Custom Transit.' There is one devoted to 'Roots' which considers Isaan migrant art and regional rites, and one given over to 'Sound' in which our writer mulls the questions of birdsong and Bang-Pop. From the strangeness of panoramas and Kudi Jeen to the nature of suffering and its assuagement through Healing Tubs and

'Body Collectors,' he turns Bangkok into a vast tapestry of meditations on the nature of cities.

Since writing *Very Thai* in 2005 Cornwel-Smith has become the city's preeminent mythographer in the English language. Who else but an outsider would be able to muster such an eternally-bemused concentration when trying to unravel the meanings of things which he didn't absorb unconsciously as a child? "By night," he writes in the same chapter on Colour, "the white-balance must be set to 'fluorescent'." The city's signature hue, he tells us, is green, after the god Indra, while formal transit has "more jazzy stripes than Paul Smith socks." This makes for many a surprise.

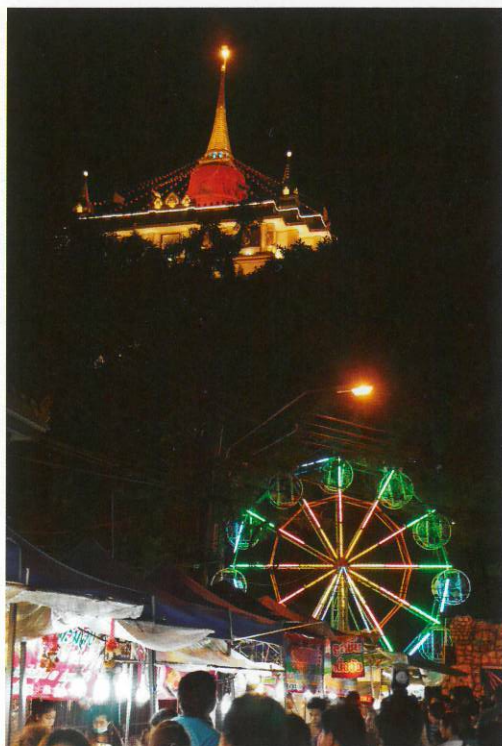
So begins a charming and unexpected detour into the mythology and symbolism of colour, an element which we long-time residents see every day but which we either

don't understand or cannot decode for ourselves. So it is with every chapter, whether it be on scent, taste, design, the nocturnal life, transport, flowers, the supernatural, or merely the perplexing enigmas of backpackers. The city is re-seen, re-imagined as a vast complex of signs which requires the informal encyclopedia which he has written.

I didn't know, for example, that Bangkok post-boxes are red because of the British, nor that coloured stacking chairs are an urban icon featured at the Thai pavilion of the 2017 Venice Biennale. I did know that black was the colour of Rahu, god of the eclipse, that the ubiquitous Bangkokian taste for "a yellowish alloy of gold" comes from the Chinese and that the days of week are associated with the colours of Vedic astrology. But I didn't know that Thais prefer the "mintier tones" of Fuji film over the "warmth of Kodak moments" or that in the late 20th century, "female officewear favoured synthetic dyes and dual-tone clashes as eye-popping as the chorus lines of folk music concerts." What one feels unconsciously, Cornwel-Smith puts into a fine and sensual prose that provides the reader with a little 'discovery.'

He is not afraid to speculate large. During the above-mentioned meditation on 'Flow,' he observes of the city's maddening movements in their constant (and confusing) ebb: "The commotion is not just on the surface. In an ancient creation myth, *thep* (angels) released the elixir of life by Churning the Sea of Milk. Krungthep's liveliness comes from constant churn; it reflects the fact that the city is structurally unstable at deeper levels. Things that most countries consider permanent, shift with surprising ease in Bangkok."

This is both fanciful and true, something again that one feels subconsciously, and yet it is not something that would occur to one automatically. *Very Bangkok* is filled with such bright gems, as if the writer had decided to deliberately imitate and evoke the glittering 'dragon-scale' ceramic armour of Wat Pho, with hundreds of little pieces assembled to form a whole. As it turns out, this is an ideal method for combining whimsy, erudition, a sensual precision of language and a deep



interest in Bangkok's almost-forgotten historical past. "Memory gaps," he writes in his section devoted to 'Memory,' "are one cause of Bangkok's many mysteries, which get glossed over or spawn multiple theories." And this same chapter, subtitled "Remembering to forget," begins with this marvelous mini-paragraph: "The last Lao flute maker of Thonburi folds his wrinkled limbs under an anglepoise lamp and drills into a bamboo tube gripped by his feet."

Of all cities, Bangkok is perhaps the hardest to re-imagine in terms of its past, because so much of that past has been atomised by what Cornwel-Smith calls "auto-amnesia." We all know that old houses, sometimes beauties, are regularly demolished because they are thought to be inhabited by ghosts. But the malady is deeper even than that. Against this willful collective destruction of the past – which sits oddly with a professed love of "Thainess" – it is possible that at this point only the written word can serve as a bastion. *Very Bangkok*, I think, sets out to be just that. And as such, a future reader, living in his or her air-conditioned nightmares, might well turn to it to find out what hand-made flutes, mangosteen-coloured taxis, street food and spirit doctors were all about.

left: Polychromatic
chimeras at Bangkok's
most fantasmagorical
temple, Wat Pariwat.

right: Golden Mount
temple fair in Wat Saket at
the Loy Krathong festival.



Introduction

How does Bangkok sound, smell, taste, look, move and feel?

On the west bank of the river at Thonburi, the hubbub of Prannok Market funnels into a typical *soi* (lane) so tight its awnings almost touch. Motorbikes trundle through a path narrowed further by the shophouse residents putting out tables for selling portions of piquant curry or packets of sweet squidgy bread. Wending past seafood restaurants, cheap apartments and a communal washing machine, the *soi* opens into a rare public space at the pier of Wat Rakhang. This ancient royal temple is named for its bells, which tinkle in the riverside breeze. There you can take in the most historic panorama of the Chao Phraya River. It's the prime vantage point to ponder the metropolis explored in this book.

A quarter millennium ago, the founder of today's Thai capital enjoyed this same view. The teak stilt house where Chao Phraya Chakri once lived still stands at the side of the temple. Through its trapezoid windows, he gazed east across the river from the short-lived capital of Thonburi to the Teochiu Chinese settlement at Bangkok. There in 1782, Chakri would found his new dynastic capital and rename it Krungthep, the City of Angels.

In place of the Teochiu seafarers' shrine – shifted downstream to today's Chinatown at Sampeng – Chakri built his golden-spired Grand Palace. Its crenellated walls were for

two centuries fringed by the raft houses of an amphibious city pulsating with market trade. Today they're fringed by tourists, who make Bangkok the most visited city in the world.

The river is why this city exists. Silt-swollen waters deposited the alluvial delta on which it was built. Riverine trade was the reason it became a customs post and grew into a wealthy port. For centuries, Bangkokians lived above waterways that linked every citizen by boat and supported a water-based culture. It's an invented landscape, sculpted over eons. This stretch of river is actually a flood-widened canal, cut in 1542 to shorten the journey around the ear-shaped meanders of what are now Khlong's Bangkok Noi and Bangkok Yai – the canals of Little Bangkok and Big Bangkok.

The pontoon at Wat Rakhang Pier bobs in wash from the incessant boat traffic that ploughs back and forth. Cross-river ferries dodge commuter expressboats, hotel shuttles and longtail tour boats that dart down the remaining canals of this one-time 'water city.' After decades of car-biased planning had turned Bangkok's back on the waterways, the river is once again a fast way to move around this traffic-jammed city. Come nightfall, dinner cruisers bombard the old riverside with the bass of their open-air discos and their contours outlined in piped LEDs.



Upstream, cars shunt to a standstill along the Rama VIII Bridge, its suspension cables arrayed like a golden harp. Downstream looms the original Thonburi landmark, Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn, where King Taksin founded a new Siamese capital in 1767 after the fall of Ayutthaya. Near its five slender towers, the first tunnel under the river links the new and old capitals through mass rapid transit into a hi-tech megalopolis.

The Chao Phraya just about remains a natural habitat. At temple piers, thrashing catfish gulp the pellets sprinkled by sightseers. A rising tide returns vegetal islets of water hyacinth back upstream, with white storks perched on the buoyant weed. An eight-foot-long monitor lizard swims past, propelled by muscular tail-swishes. Its forked blue tongue darts out to taste the flavours of the mud-brown estuary.

These waters have witnessed the tides of history. In the 1893 Paknam Incident, French gunboats anchored here to threaten Siam, which narrowly averted colonisation. In 1951, the then prime minister swam to the riverbank from captivity aboard the navy's flagship, *RTNS Sri Ayudhya*, which was sunk by the army during one of Bangkok's many coups d'état. In 1976, demonstrators fled to this shore from a massacre at Thammasat University by swimming across its treacherous mainstream. This landscape of layered historic meaning is now being shorn of its diverse old communities and streamlined into a glorified monument park for mass tourism and national spectacle.

The river quietyens after 10pm, but in peak hours it takes a momentous event to quell this aquatic hubbub. In 2002, no boats were allowed on the river one rush hour, so that an audience on the terrace of the Oriental Hotel could hear José Carreras sing arias in the black velvet air. In 2003, all traffic in the city centre, including on the river, was stopped for the APEC inter-governmental summit.

The river goes uncannily silent in auspicious years for the occasional Royal Barge Processions and rehearsals, for which Wat Rakhang has the clearest view. Eerie chants of boat songs sung by the naval rowers precede the flotilla of 55 gilded barges, with prows carved into mythical beasts: the Supannahong swan, the *naga* serpent, Hanuman the monkey general astride a canon. Barge rehearsals are like a backstage reveal, minus the embroidered canopies, gold-piped scarlet tunics and the peacock feathers used by the cox to signal. With the oarsmen propelling the undecorated barges in sport-hued T-shirts, you can see the effort and structures that are obscured by costumed pageantry when the King rides the *Supannahong* to deliver robes to the monks of Wat Arun.

Surveying the scene from the Wat Rakhang pier is a giant statue of its legendary former abbot, Luang Phor Toh. Born when the city

above A historic bend in the Chao Phraya River, with Rattanakosin Island to the right side beyond Phra Pinklao Bridge.



was six, Toh is renowned for advising kings and making Thailand's most prized amulets. While the intent of Buddhism is to overcome sensory urges, the contrarian Toh taught that sensory knowledge can be a source of insight.

For Bangkokians, nothing matters more than to 'gain face' for the self, this city, or the nation. While a face mirror fuels the ego, Toh urged us to use a *krajok hok dan* – a six-panel mirror. As well as the front, it reflects less flatteringly from the back, the left, the right, below and above, so we get multi-faceted views of our true nature. Toh also paired each reflection to a sensory organ: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and heart-mind. To understand reality, we need all our faculties to perceive every angle. This book aims to be a *krajok hok dan* for Bangkok.

Inspiration for the cover comes from a Western version of a six-sided mirror: the kaleidoscope. Each time you shake or turn a kaleidoscope tube, the translucent shapes inside form a fresh pattern, only illuminated from within rather than reflected out. Bangkok

is both a city of inward enlightenment, and of outward dazzle, but not straightforward reflection. That's why I've sought to provide a reflective guide.

Multiple perspectives are vital, because Bangkok is a story with an Official Version – plus many other versions that often lack voice. 'Thainess' is best understood as an ideology, a set of values about what should be, so using it as a description blurs distinctions between things considered proper to present, and improper things that should be hidden. This city's held in tenuous balance between its informal impulses and the forces of formality. But it's more nuanced than simply chaos versus order, for informal Bangkok has hidden order, while formal Bangkok is often a cause of the chaos.

This formal/informal juxtaposition is embodied by Luang Phor Toh. An advisor to kings, he's blessed with a memorial. To the public, he's a monk magician best known for exorcising Bangkok's infamously lovelorn ghost, Nang Nak, whose jealous

spirit Toh then sealed in a jar. She, and he, are worshipped at another temple downstream in what's now the suburb of Phrakhanong. The canalside shrine there is profuse with offerings of dresses and dolls, plus mechanical devices for making merit with donated coins. Conscripts flock there for Nak's blessing, while fortune tellers read the devotees' moles, and gamblers rub powder into wood to divine lucky numbers for the lottery. Which is Bangkok's real character?

Wat Rakhang stands in Wang Lang, an area named for a long vanished palace that's now associated with its restaurants of fiery Southern Thai food. Southerners live in one the neighbouring enclaves, nearby migrants from the north, Isaan (northeast) and China, who each maintain ethnic traditions as subcultures under the national identity of 'Thainess.' Morning and evening, the area buzzes with markets and streetlife in an expression of how Bangkok's informal and formal cultures coexist.

Central to this dilemma is to gauge how 'Bangkokness' differs from 'Thainess.' This is a city with a split personality, a past life, and hidden histories. The capital is the epitome of Thainess – which it imposes on the indigenous cultures of the regions – and its antithesis, with urban qualities of its own. So much of what people see as typical Thainess is actually the Bangkok version. In that sense Thainess is Bangkokness.

To deduce what's going on, it helps to be specific about labels. Thais use the formal term, Krungthep, which is loaded with allusions to sacredness under its Hinduised origin myth. Its former name Bangkok was kept for international use. I mostly refer to Bangkok due to that foreign familiarity – and for another reason. As 'Bangkok' is a word from the indigenous culture, it feels better suited to discussing the streetlife, subcultures and everyday ways. 'Krungthep,' being the prestigious title, makes it hard to differentiate the city's informal lifestyle. When I refer to Krungthep, it's to explain something about the formal culture. Likewise, I refer mostly to 'Thailand' and 'Thai,' but use 'Siam' and 'Siamese' when explaining the pre-modern era.

Bangkok can't shake off some very stubborn reputations, whether lurid or precious. Those clichés get hardened by the hyper ways the city gets portrayed through exoticism or hagiography or innuendo. Over 25 years of living here, I've encountered many Bangkoks: formal and informal, traditional and indie, high society and slum. In a land that micro-manages how it's seen, this book treats those multiple angles as valid. *Very Bangkok*, like the intensifier 'very' in its name, brings undercurrents to the fore. Bangkok is all these things, but with added sugar, plus extra chilli. Bangkok is extremely *very*.

You can dip into *Very Bangkok* at any point, as its chapters (marked in bold) deal with self-contained topics. In sequence, the book's three sections echo the stages of familiarity with a place. Upon first impression, Bangkok affects us on instinctual levels, so the first half of the book, **SENSES**, conveys our bodily experience of the city. Delving deeper reveals how the city works, so the core of the book, **HEART**, goes into the citizens' values, networks and lifestyles. In reflection upon the nature of this place, the closing section, **FACE**, unpacks how locals and outsiders interpret and represent Bangkok.

Senses

Bangkokians live with startling juxtapositions that outsiders struggle to process. Unpacking those contradictions is harder than re-stating clichéd judgments that Bangkok is chaotic, bizarre or inexplicably Oriental. Nor is all of it made clear by official Thainess, which is more a set of instructions on how to behave, rather



left: Garlands hang on a shophouse frontage near City Hall at Phra Nakhon.

right: An armada of tourist boats cruises towards their berth at River City.



left: The canalside shrine to the famous ghost Mae Nak at Wat Mahabut on Khlong Phrakhanong.

right: Graffiti with a cobra and a Chinese lion on a typical shophouse between Khlong Mahanak and Golden Mount.

than a 'secret decoder ring' for Bangkokness. To 'read' what makes Bangkok unique, we need to make sense of our senses.

We think first of the 'big five' senses that Aristotle listed: 'Sound,' 'Smell,' 'Touch,' 'Taste' and sight, the last of which I have recast as the more culturally engaged act of 'Looking.' Modernity, especially the 2-D online world, is overly visual and diminishes other senses. Thainess places heightened credence on wider sensory input, as we experience Bangkok through food, massage, herbalism and tonal language. Buddhists believe that the Dharma can be spread not just by scripture and murals, but also through sound by chiming bells, through scent by aromatic offering garlands, and through light by glinting mirror-tile mosaics.

Luang Phor Toh's six-panel mirror adds a sixth sense: 'mind,' which in Thai shares the word *jai* with 'heart.' Hundreds of words and phrases using *jai* show how Thais think with their 'heart-mind.' Out-of-body sensing is part of Bangkok's character, from kinship and face to karma and past lives, as featured in the 'Sacred' and 'Supernatural' chapters, as well as the surrender of the senses under 'Trance.' I also consider other spiritual outlooks, from 'Neo-Hindu' to 'Muslim-Thai.'

Our senses don't stop at six. Our bodies have 21 sensory receptors. Bangkok dramatises those such as 'Colour,' 'Balance,' 'Direction,' all of which are subject to particular Thai beliefs. I also touch on the topics of Bangkok's constricted 'Space' and constant 'Flow.' If it

seems like everything's going on at once; that's because when it comes to 'Time,' Bangkokians go by many clocks and calendars, as well as 'rubber time.' While the city's embrace of the 'Night' has much to do with climate, many feel pulled by Bangkok's most ecstatic sensibility: 'Libido.' All this is counterbalanced by an acute sense of pain, which locals consider through the Buddhist frame of 'Suffering.' Often Bangkok decisions boil down to one decider: 'Heat.'

Digital modernity is now imposing itself through many kinds of 'Sensors.' Meanwhile genteel elite Thais purge streetlife and nightlife in emulation of sensible, antiseptic Singapore, recoiling from activities that startle the senses: markets, mess, noise, sex, alcohol and staying up late. The rest of the city revels in that bounty of sensory pleasures.

Heart

Outsiders might see apparent chaos, but Thais order their capital by hidden cultural levers. There's no fixed set of rules, since even laws are subject to ingrained customs of the hierarchy: connections, beliefs and situational morality. Bangkokians tap a repertoire of mutually understood strategies that are appropriate to the given time and place to ensure 'social sensitivity.'

In 'Thainess and the City,' I explore the awkward position of gritty Thai urban realness within an official ideology that is courtly, religious and rural. Residents show much ambivalence about their hometown, but it's

so tolerant of outsiders that even Western expatriates and Asian diasporas delight in 'Becoming Bangkokian.' Its sprawling patchwork of urban villages often juxtapose several ethnic and religious groups, *tanaka*-powdered Burmese cheek by bearded Indian jowl. Many cities have ghettos, but Bangkok packs in four Little Indias, three Portuguese barrios, two Tiny Tokyos, at least five Mon villages, umpteen Muslim medinas, and so many Chinatowns in a hybrid Sino-Thai culture that they get their own chapter, 'Stir-fry.' Meanwhile, 'Roots' shows how internal migrants maintain dual identities.

The heart of the Heart section is 'Community.' I consider what's home for each level of status, from mansion, *moo ban* (housing estate) and condominium down to shophouse, slum and the homeless. While the elite get the most attention in the media, it's the middle classes that shape today's shift from traditional 'way of life' to modern lifestyle. This plays out in the stalls and malls covered in 'Market,' which shows the drift from informal shopping to global online consumerism.

Within Bangkok's seniority system, any subculture struggles to find space, whether the highly restricted 'Youth,' or the worlds of art, music, design and creativity. Bangkok's aspiration to be a 'Creative City' struggles with older impulses towards patronage and tradition.

Face

In this status city, being alert to 'saving face' almost qualifies as a sense. Saving Bangkok's face is a duty of all Thais, which makes the city receptive to Orientalist exoticism, but averse to its notoriety for sleaze. Visitors arrive with preconceived notions and marketed fantasies that don't match the reality – a disjoint I explore in 'Tourist Trappings.' There is also a disconnect between that reality and the Thais' image of themselves. As the chapter 'Memory' relates, highly selective nostalgia, monuments and notions of heritage are contested by efforts to revive hidden local histories.

Bangkok had been a word-of-mouth city; in 'Portrayals,' I consider how it's becoming a known city. Global attention can be flattering, but when the gaze turns critical, some claim that "foreigners can't understand Thainess." All the above makes Bangkok a great subject for art, film, songs and books, with its own genre of 'Bangkok Noir' and dystopian science

fiction that imagines a flooded future. In conclusion, 'Tides' reviews the overarching themes of order and chaos, formal and informal, through the city's main physical feature: the river.

Though each of these senses, Bangkok remains full of surprises. The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority brands this the 'City of Life,' while striving to remove too much unruly life from the streets. Bangkok's DNA is both to celebrate and subdue the sensory spark that gives it life.

A Book About Cities

This is also a book about cities, in which Bangkok is the subject. Thailand became majority urban the same year, 2012, that the world did, so cities are a hot topic. So many people have an interest in understanding how cities work, whether for architecture or design, business or tourism, services or security. Most cities are planned to functional need from 'objective' data, or are subject to ideology. Yet Bangkok feels like a mostly happy accident. It seems oblivious to Western aesthetics or systems you can measure – yet it became a world city anyway.



It may seem unlikely, but some urbanists see in Bangkok's accommodation of chaos a prototype of a larger world issue about how megacities might develop a 'messy urbanism.' Its unplanned sprawl appalls planners, but its gift for flexibility, and ability to morph offers potential coping mechanisms to intractable problems. Despite itself, somehow Bangkok works.

This is the first comprehensive book on contemporary Bangkok. It took a decade to write and the city has changed radically even during that period. Witnessing this constant change, I have sought to future-proof the book by focusing on the underlying reasons Bangkok is this way. Even as the examples change, Bangkok's internal dynamics stay consistent as it has morphed from backwater to ASEAN hub to the world's most visited city. Whatever upheavals occur, it will remain the ultimate city of the senses.

Translations

To interpret a foreign civilisation I must bridge chasms in custom and language. In the most forensic review of *Very Thai*, Mingkwan Charoenitniyom wrote her linguistics MA thesis on the myriad ways I'd transliterated 341 Thai terms. As an author, I was flattered;

as an editor, I was mortified. It turns out that being inconsistent was helpful; one rigid methodology can't convey the context and intent, so in this book I've given Mingkwan more grist for her mill and gone with whatever works.

In transliterating Thai spellings, I've largely repeated the *Very Thai* style, which favours flatter British/European sounds over twangier American vowels. However, I have tried to spell peoples' names as they do, and to spell place names the most common way found in online maps and search engines.

Where Things Are

The book has two maps. In the era of online mapping, there's no point to include listings details, but it's helpful to point out where mentioned places are located. The maps also note some areas and communities that have an identity, but which aren't labelled as such on mainstream maps. The front cover fold covers the city centre, while the back cover fold spans the wider metropolis within the outer ringroad. The Greater Bangkok map is tilted with east at the top. That's for the practical reason that the places mentioned happened to be in a north-south swathe and the cover fold is wide not tall. We aren't used to seeing the city in that orientation, which jolts us from conventional perceptions.

Quotations and data come either from interviews with me, or publications that are listed under Sources. I also include a Bibliography and Acknowledgements of those who've helped this book come to fruition.

Sorting the city by sense and theme means that many generic topics don't have dedicated chapters. Some crop up in boxed text, such as markets, nightlife, art, film, music, fashion, gays, design, Chinatown, transit, backpackers, and many of Bangkok's ethnicities.

The index also serves as a glossary of Thai terms, and contains some reference data, like dates of reigns and eras. For further information, reviews, and news of talks and events, visit the website www.verybangkok.com.



left: A contemporary bamboo installation for a stage at EmQuartier mall.

right: A shadow puppet of the Kalapapruek 'tree of life' made to show today's lifestyle by artist Chusak Srikwan, shown at BACC.



Witness

This book draws from a quarter-century of living in this city and studying it as my job. I'd arrived in Thailand in 1994 as a listing journalist on my way back to England, with a vague plan to move to Australia, where I'd spent the previous year. Yet within four days of visiting Bangkok, I was hired to set up its first city magazine, *Bangkok Metro*. Ever since, Bangkok has been my home and my subject.

Some expatriates come to Thailand to find a new identity. I was inadvertently reinvented by Bangkok. The Philip hired to start *Metro* was a different Philip than the sabbatical traveller who'd entered overland at Sungai Kolok. In the analogue era before Trip Advisor and social media, travellers trusted the visitor books of guesthouses. Well-thumbed, ball-pointed reviews portrayed Thailand and its notorious capital as "over touristy," "too Westernised," and "all trekked out," with nothing authentic left to discover. So rather than sightseeing, I tapped the country's fame for courses to learn life skills. These contributed to the 'cultural filter' I apply to my writing.

My first revelation was to study Vipassana meditation on a ten-day silent retreat at Wat Suan Mokkh, founded in the South by the reformist monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. Its 4 am–9 pm regimen reformatted habitual patterns to open a space for change – and I made breakthrough decisions in its wake. Not allowed to speak, I felt other senses intensify. I became present to each breath and footfall. I can't call myself a Buddhist, but the insights opened my senses and aligned my mind to Thailand.

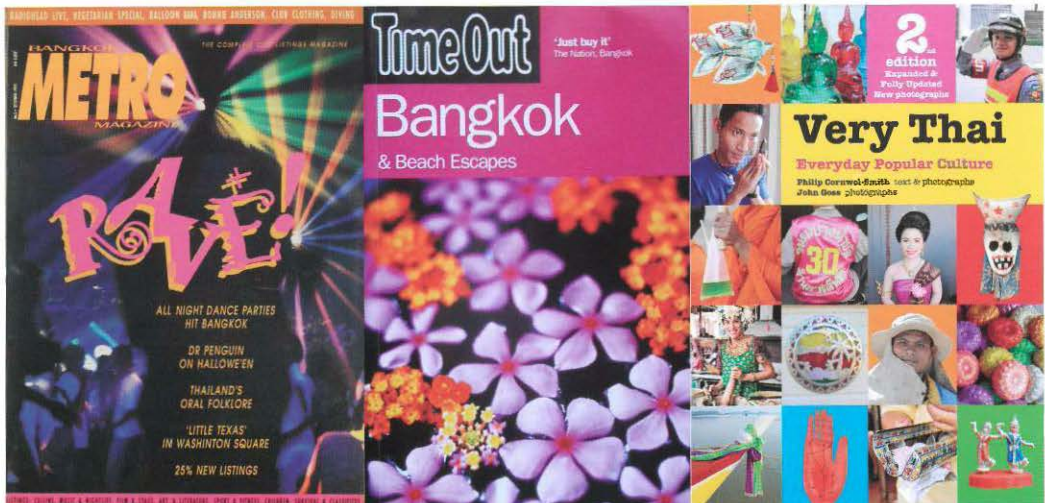
My second revelation was to study traditional Thai massage at ITM in Chiang Mai. As with meditation, this everyday Thai skill reinforces sensory perception: touch, posture, breathing, intuition, temperature, pain, herbal scent. These two courses taught me that things with exotic Oriental mystique are knowable



parts of the Thai mental furniture. By the time I reached Bangkok after seven weeks upcountry, I was beginning to 'read' Thai culture.

"Don't waste your time in Bangkok," advised fellow travellers. "Give it two days max." Back then, Bangkok was seen as the archetypal city gone wild: pollution, corruption, traffic, prostitution, piracy. Unplanned sprawl had squandered its 'Venice of the East' allure. Yet another massacre of protesters in 1992 was still a raw wound. Given low expectations, I found in Bangkok's popular culture a juicy, low-hanging fruit that was ripe for tasting.

"There's not enough going on in Bangkok," some mocked of the effort to compile *Metro* at a time when it was extremely difficult to find out information,





when venue owners guarded their drink prices like state secrets. Yet within 15 weeks we launched a 100-page monthly magazine with over 1,000 listings. At one of our regular parties – having fun is the way to get things done in Bangkok – a reader quipped that such a project wouldn't have been possible by an Old Hand familiar with the cultural and practical obstacles: "You didn't know it couldn't be done."

I'd learned listing journalism in London at *Time Out*, where I was deputy editor of the first *Time Out London* guidebook. It's a style of writing that demands getting every last detail, with a responsibility to the reader as a consumer. After eight years editing *Metro*, I rejoined *Time Out* as editor of its first *Time Out Bangkok City Guide*. What set *Time Out* apart from mainstream and backpacker guides, was their focus on young, creative urbanites who sought to engage with local scenes. Subcultures had been largely missing from guidebooks and not even considered by tourism promoters. Half the listings in *Time Out Bangkok* had never been in a guidebook, though those scenes are now staples for guides and tours.

As an editor, I got asked questions. I'd gained a knowledge of both pop and high culture, but was flummoxed by queries like: why do schoolgirls wear sailor suits and Chulalongkorn University footballers play in pink? Finding out became my next mission in writing the book *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture*. That, too, was the first book to cover many of its topics on the informal sector. By treating 'low' streetlife as culture, it became a cult sourcebook among a generation of young indie creatives, influencing many genres from art and design to events and advertising.

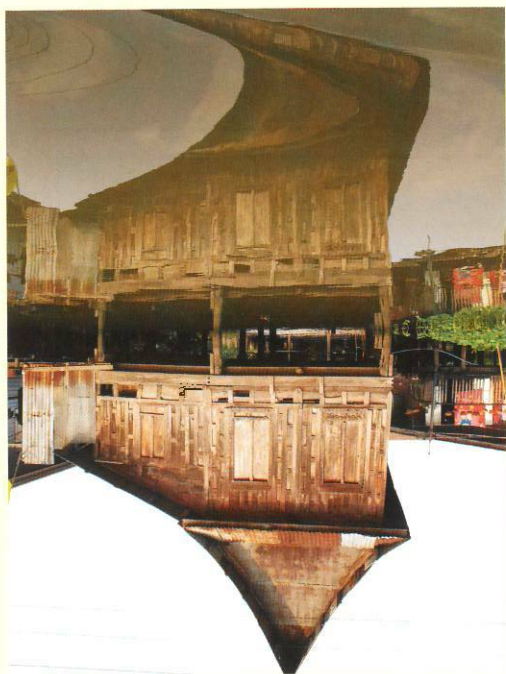
Very Thai took on a life of its own beyond my control. The physical book itself was curated by others as an exhibit in at least six exhibitions, and performed as a puppet in the performance piece *Wayang Buku*. Some creatives and academics have adopted 'VeryThai' as a term for that genre of informal, improvised pop, to differentiate it from formal Thainess. As one Thai artist put it: "*Very Thai* coined the category."

It became apparent that as a documenter of Bangkok, and a longtime resident, I had to write about my adoptive hometown. Despite a plethora of guidebooks, these have dwindled into top-ten listicle format. Books on the city tackled either specific angles, or repeated predictable landmarks, without explaining the city's urbanism, with the focus always more about things 'Thai'. Instead, I'd come to view Bangkok as an urban organism with contradictory impulses: formal and informal. My approach is to accept that ambiguity, and to interpret what's going on beneath the orderliness and the chaos. In a link with *Very Thai*, its cousin *Very Bangkok* also presents many topics that haven't previously been covered for the general reader. My aim is to present a comprehensive portrait of contemporary Bangkok.

top left: The author studying Thai massage in 1994, before deciding to settle in Bangkok.

left: I edited *Metro* magazine, and *Time Out Bangkok* guide; and wrote *Very Thai*.

above: The author photographing the still-burning wreckage of Zen department store after the raid on the Red Shirt occupation at Ratchaprasong. Photo by Darkle



This book isn't a memoir, although it's mostly about the era I've experienced. I've drawn upon the unique access I've had as a correspondent, across the status thresholds, from slums via shophouses and subcultures through to high culture and royal audiences. I've attended events both famous and obscure. This book's widely ranging coverage comes from the good fortune of my breadth of exposure. My time here feels contemporary to me, like a 'long now.'

I've witnessed five phases. I arrived while Thailand was swaggering as one of the Asian Tiger economies. When Bangkok's bad debts ignited the 1997 Asian Economic Crash, it was a time of hardship, but also of fruitful experiment with local resources. The third phase from 2000 saw those fresh ideas flourish through commercial design during the upbeat early years of Thaksin Shinawatra's premiership.

Opposition to Thaksin's willful rule split the city, and country. Friends, families, communities and workplaces all divided between Yellow Shirts wearing the King's colour, and Red Shirts in the stripe of the flag that represents the 'people.' The protests often expressed the inventiveness of Bangkokians, but that expression became ever more fraught through the 2006 coup and the massacre and arson of 2010. In a fifth phase, the 2014 coup then imposed authoritarian repression and censorship. The social divisions have darkened the public mood of a city that was so carefree and optimistic when I arrived.

In those days a quarter-century ago, the economic boom had been racing non-stop since the mid-1980s and traditions were being tossed aside for modern imports – or rather, pirated fashions. Style

was lurid, with office ladies in neon-hued polyester outfits, business owners in shiny Versace shirts and *hi-so* (high society) dames in giant hair.

Architecture was just as loud and novelty-styled like a spaceship, castle or school bus. Malls were like theme parks, with cartoon-like attractions and rooftop waterparks with a volcano that 'erupted.' In the days when Ramkhamhaeng Road petered out into a rural lane, new highways were lined with boxlike soap-massage brothels, comedy cafés and all-in-one 'party houses' with multiple venues, as traffic prevented bar-hopping. The wild nights of Patpong and partying till dawn were still in full swing. International-style bars were confined to Silom and few other spots, until a hundred theme-bars proliferated along RCA.

Before the BTS, and the empty first expressway viewed as too pricy, the infamous traffic jams deterred trying places far from home or work. No one would spend two hours going to Ekamai for fun. Lots of things couldn't be done here in 1994, like find a decent coffee, or bread and cheese. Bars only sold by the bottle; just beer, whisky and a few other spirits, with almost no cocktails or other drinks widely available before the arrival of Q Bar in 2000. Foreign films were dubbed into Thai and Thai films weren't subtitled in the stand-alone theatres, before the first multiplex opened. There was far less air-conditioning, with restaurants mainly in houses with garden seating. Around the corner of my downtown house, a canal-side village held cockfights, and arrayed fish to sun-dry on the side of the bridge. Elephants were a frequent site, begging on the street or foraging in empty lots off Ratchadaphisek Road.

Despite the construction, most streets looked alike, lined by shophouses. Buildings went up anywhere without much planning. Unfenced sites spewed cement dust and truck tyres shed clods of soil that dried and recirculated so that every day you could draw a finger through dust on an indoor table. The air was further fouled by leaded petrol, open burning, and continuing industry downtown. But it was an exciting time to witness a city being remodelled and a culture being remade. A democratic cultural opening since the 1992 massacre spurred a sense of progress, and enabled an Indie youth movement to flourish, though it has since retreated.

The country went into shock in 1997, when the collapse of the baht set off the 'Tom Yum Kung' Asian economic crisis. Firms shuttered, finance houses went bankrupt and unfinished ghost towers littered the landscape. The unemployed were absorbed by the informal sector. Many turned to driving an oversupply of taxis, just as traffic thinned and the BMA started building the BTS Skytrain. Middle classes flocked to buy and sell at 'car booth' sales, while at the Market of the Former Rich in a former Benz showroom in Soi Thonglor, nouveau pauvres sold Rolexes by weight.

It was a time of reflection and rethinking. Bangkok's most accomplished governor, Bhichit Rattakul, sealed

construction sites, promoted community walking streets, and improved the environment. As imports couldn't be afforded, unemployed designers rediscovered indigenous assets like herbalism and weaving with water hyacinth from the river. As the economy recovered and Bangkok joined global trends in consumerism, tourism, and cultural commodification, Bangkok became renowned as a 'Design City.'

Experimental arts venues like About Cafe, Tadu, Project 304 and Patravadi Theatre spawned a new generation of creatives who are still cultural leaders. This flourishing of creative industries spurred government to get more open-minded, founding TCDC, BACC, Bangkok Fashion City, TK Park, Museum Siam and Creative Thailand. Though the seniority system's fear of critical thinking combats such initiatives, Bangkok lifestyle has continued globalising, with every label, foodstuff, trend and brand available. As the city trends towards international norms, corporate modernity reshapes the city's layout in exclusionary ways. A clean-up mentality is formalising the informal sector and removing much of the 'surprise' that had been a hallmark of the Bangkok street.

After witnessing and recording Bangkok's urban character so long, I realised that I was effectively compiling contemporary history. My background is studying history. At Sheffield University, I took World History. Instead of recounting the past through conventional ways of rulers and dates, or even economic and social history, this course probed far beyond, to the impacts from phenomena like inventions, disease, beliefs or crops that shape civilisations more profoundly in the long run. *Very Bangkok* is like applying that multi-disciplinary approach to a city.

History is not nostalgia. The past was messier than its edited highlights. So I see Thainess as one thread of historical thought among a tapestry of possible narratives. Pull an ideological thread and that tapestry may keep its shape, or it may unravel. Now the internet enables us to find missing threads. So it brings earlier narratives of the past into question. Instead of history being restricted under labels like 'Great Men,' dates, politics or economics, I grasped that history is shaped by subtler trends that include popular culture and social circles.

Mentors matter. I developed this book's perspective through two mentor-editors. I was fortunate that Marc Pachter, a longtime director at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, was so committed to this project. Marc was introduced by Charles Landry, the guru of the Creative Cities movement, who spoke here at TCDC. As consultant

editor, Marc kept questioning my concepts until I'd distilled my ideas on each topic.

I learned much about the delicacy of writing about Asia from Alex Kerr, a Japanologist and fellow writer on Bangkok. He edited both *Very Thai* and *Very Bangkok*, helping me pare the drafts down to the core threads within. Back at *Time Out* in 1989, my editor Hayden Williams, a trained criminologist, imparted ways of mulling evidence and motive in the making of cities, and the importance of ordinary people to culture and history. In many ways I'm a freelance contemporary historian. *Bangkok Metro*, *Time Out Bangkok*, *Very Thai* and now *Very Bangkok* have formed an eye-witness archive.

My status as an outsider is somewhat moot after 25 years of experience. Ironically, being so steeped in my adoptive city makes me almost as close to an insider as the citizens. This redraft benefitted from detachment by being written partly outside the city, especially in Bali, which is close enough to Thai culture to see the Thainess of Bangkok more sharply.

Over the course of living in Bangkok and writing this portrait, time has changed me, and so has the involved process of writing it. By weighing Bangkok's place in the world I've come to ponder how Bangkok has changed me and how I sense the world.

left: Bangkok still had many wooden buildings lining canals when the author arrived in 1994. Here seen on Khlong Om.

right: Bangkok design house Propaganda is famed for its 'sanuk' character Mr P.

