

*A Culinary Journey Through  
Thailand, Myanmar,  
Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia,  
Singapore, Indonesia, and  
the Philippines*

Gwenda L. Hyman

# CUISINES — of — SOUTHEAST ASIA

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GWENDA L. HYMAN



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# PREFACE



Although there are some excellent recipes in this book, this is not a recipe book. Rather, it is a gastronomical journey through Southeast Asia to acquaint you with cuisines that have been left largely unexplored in this country. Some of the most creative cuisines in the world are found here. You will learn how the history, geography, and religions of this region have all had an influence on this exciting food. Noodles and the wok, introduced by Chinese settlers, and the chili pepper grown in Mexico but brought to Southeast Asia by the Portuguese, have revolutionized their cooking. The basic food is rice. Very little meat is eaten, and a minimal amount of oil used. Assertive yet subtle seasonings flavor fish, poultry, and vegetable dishes, which combined with the region's luscious tropical fruits, produce some of the world's most healthful cuisines.

Southeast Asian cooking is neither difficult nor complicated. It is the simple cooking of largely rural people who are concerned with nutrition, economy, and ease of preparation. The intriguing taste lies in a blending of flavors that are clean, assertive, tart, and sweet. The basic ingredients for these flavors are lemongrass, tamarind, lime, sugar, and fish sauce. Though rudimentary, these ingredients are vital to Southeast Asian cuisine. The fresh taste evident in this food comes from an abundance of herbs, some as familiar as mint and basil, others more unusual, yet accessible to us through Asian markets. Local wild leaves, gathered daily from forest, field, and stream, add many different textures, and bursts of unexpected tangy flavor. The 2,500 species of fish flourishing in the surrounding seas provide the region's main source of protein. Twice as much fish is eaten here as anywhere else in the world. Bean curd, generally homemade, is an affordable source of protein for people living far from the sea, and a mainstay of vegetarian

cuisine. Most Southeast Asians are Buddhists, and many are strictly vegetarian. A plethora of exciting meatless dishes is a unique facet of these cuisines.

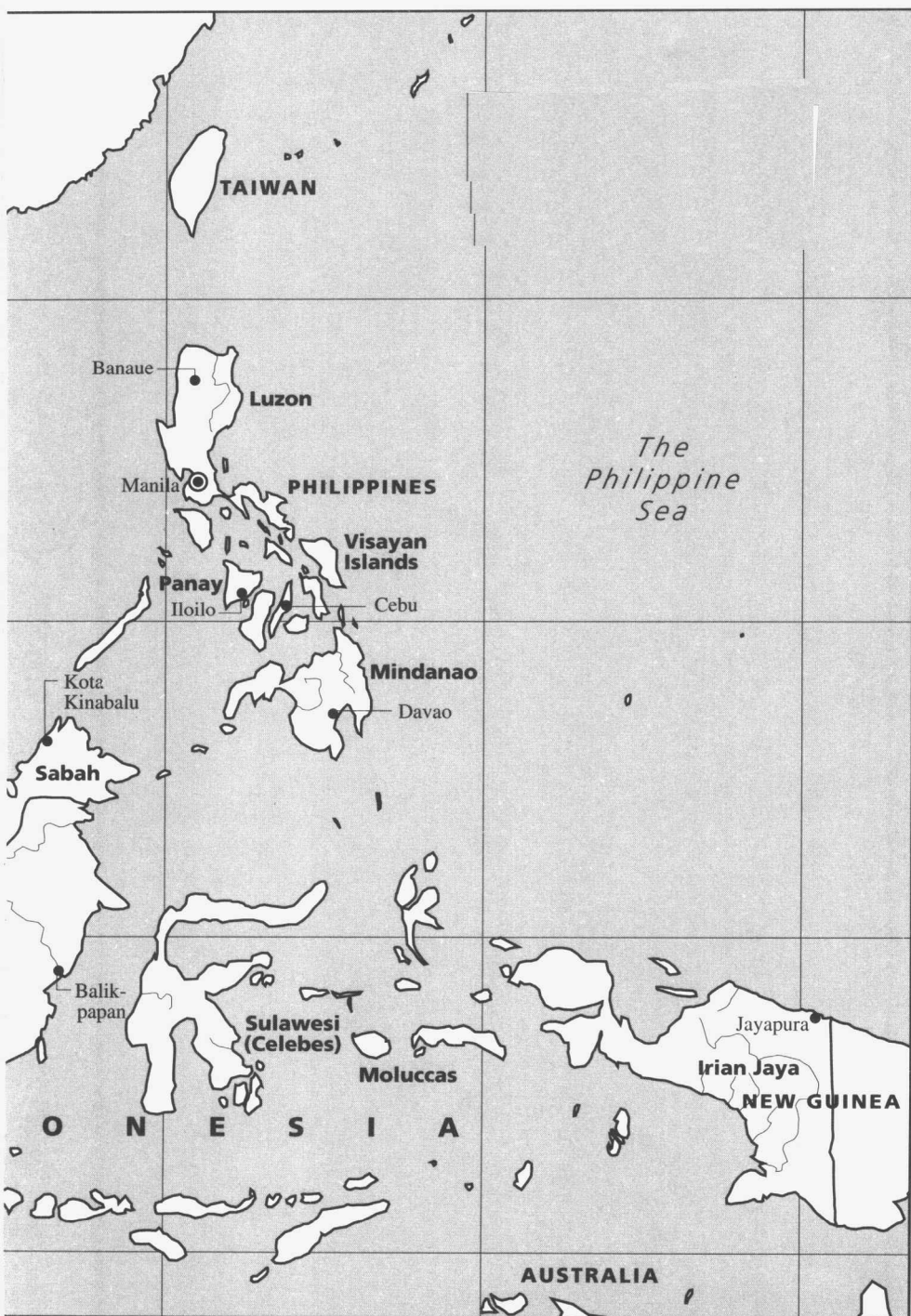
Asian cuisine is in vogue right now in all the large cities of Europe and America. The number of new restaurants increases daily. Los Angeles boasts at least 200 Thai restaurants, and they also continue to proliferate in London and Paris. Asian spices and herbs are invading traditional French cuisine. Innovative chefs, eschewing butter, cream, and egg yolks, infuse their dishes with the tantalizing aromas of ginger, lemongrass, and chilies. Complex spice mixtures and lively oriental herbs, used with gusto in Southeast Asia's silken curries and fragrant stir-fries, in discreet amounts are replacing tarragon and thyme. Young American chefs on both coasts have perfumed their foods with the bright, intense flavors of the Orient for many years. French chefs, bound by the rules of a centuries-old, formal cuisine, seem to have taken a more moderate approach to these assertive spices. Now the penetrating flavors of kaffir lime, Holy basil, fish and soy sauces are adding a spark to dishes on both sides of the Atlantic. Undeniably delicious though Asian food is, part of the reason for this trend is that the cooking is light, yet satisfies the appetite and the palate while concurring with the recent guidelines for a nutritious and healthful diet.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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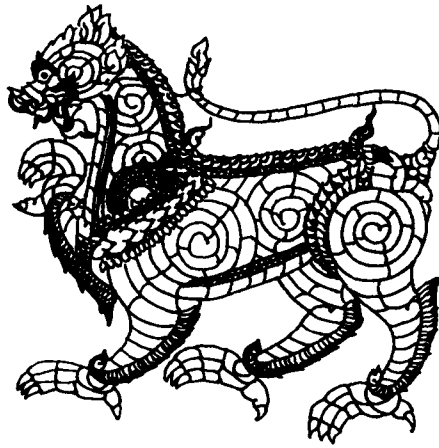
# THAILAND



Spicy, colorful Thai food, scented with an extraordinary range of herbs, roots, and seasonings, is a gastronomic delight, and possibly the most sophisticated cuisine in Southeast Asia. Thai food is always fresh. Cooked extremely quickly—the ingredients retain both their freshness and their nutrients. Meat, which plays a minor role in Thai meals, is customarily lean. Fish and shellfish, fresh daily from local waters, is less expensive than meat. Chicken is versatile and much loved whether roasted, deep-fried, curried, stir-fried, or grilled over charcoal. Meat, poultry, and seafood generally are highly seasoned with fragrant leaves, fiercely hot chilies, pungent fish sauce, and aromatic roots, such as ginger and turmeric. Influenced over the centuries by China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Portugal, Thais have integrated into their cuisine with care the foreign ideas that appealed to their tastes, and the result is a seamless cuisine, uniquely their own.

Thais have intense feelings about food. Spirited discussions are held on the merits of a new restaurant, or the prowess of an old one with a new dish. The pros and cons are debated in loving detail, and with unabated enthusiasm. As it is not unusual for a city restaurant to have a minimum of 70 dishes on the menu, these considerations take time.

Thailand is very much a land of contrasts. Luxury hotels looming over squalid slums, a soaring ultramodern skyscraper proudly displaying its own ornate shrine, pungent with incense to appease the spirits; a peasant leading his water buffalo as he plows a rice paddy,



*Mythical Thai lion*

while a jet whines above his head; bustling markets selling simple noodle soups and imitation Patek Philippe watches. Thailand is fascinating, unique in culture, cuisine, and architecture. Its physical landscape, webbed with waterways and glittering with splendid palaces and golden temples, yields riches from rubies and sapphires to tin and rubber, and boasts the best beaches on the mainland. Thailand is one of the most highly developed nations in Southeast Asia. The country is shaped rather like the profile of an elephant head. The forehead abuts Myanmar, the outer edge of the wide ear borders Laos to the east, the trunk forms the long Malay peninsula, and the mouth is Bangkok, Thailand's capital city. At one time their flag depicted a red elephant on a white ground. The King changed it to three wide stripes of red, white, and blue after Thailand joined the League of Nations. Thailand is the heart of mainland Southeast Asia. Neighboring Myanmar to the northwest and Thailand share the upper strip of the Malay Peninsula. The central strip is Thai territory, and the lower Malaysian. The eastern coastline of the 600-mile-long peninsula is lapped by the waters of the Gulf of Thailand. Cambodia sits directly across the Gulf, and the southernmost tip of Vietnam's long coastline curves beneath Cambodia. Landlocked Laos stretches from the Myanmar border in the north to the Cambodian border in the south, along Thailand's northeastern region.

Most of the hilltribe people, originally from China, live in mountainous areas. Many of them hold animistic beliefs. Six main hilltribes live in the northern region, each with their own language, culture, and history. The six main groups are Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahn, Lisu, and Mien. The Christian Karen, descended from Tibeto-Burmans, are matrilineal. Karens only marry within their own tribe. Some own elephants and work in the teak forests as mahouts. The Akha tribe originated from Yunnan Province in China. Their villages, guarded by sacred gates erected to keep evil spirits at bay, are easily identified by the heavy thatching on the roofs of the houses. Akha women wear spectacular red and black tribal dress and a heavy helmet-shaped close-fitting headdress, every inch of which is decorated with silver coins, beads, and long ornaments. These women are well known for their weaving expertise. Some of the massive turbans worn by tribeswomen have silver ornaments suspended from the front, and brightly colored pom-poms piled on top. Silver ornaments brighten tunic hems, jacket edges, and the legs of baggy pants.

The hill people are very poor. Because their land is not suitable for wet rice growing, they practice the destructive slash-and-burn technique. At one time opium was the main cash crop grown in the Golden Triangle formed by the intersection of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. Recently, tea and tobacco planting is replacing opium.

Chiang Mai, one of the oldest towns in Northern Thailand, has become a thriving tourist attraction. Known as the Rose of the North, Chiang Mai is Bangkok's favorite escape from the heat. Situated in dense teak-forested mountains, this ancient city is filled with flowers in the winter months: Apples, grapes, strawberries, and dozens of different vegetables, which would perish in the steamy heat of the lowlands, bloom and thrive in its cool climate. Tourists flock to Chiang Mai in February every year for its huge Flower Festival. Northern people are strongly influenced by neighboring Myanmar in their art, their architecture, and their food. They follow the Myanmar people's fondness for pork. The best pork butchers in the kingdom are in Chiang Mai and charcuterie is their specialty. Ban Yon, the wife of one of these famed butchers, is known all over Thailand for her sausage, called *nam*. Made from a mixture of raw ground pork, ground pork rind, and heavily laced with salt, garlic, and chilies, *nam* is molded in a clay pot and left to mature for three days. Only then does it reach

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its peak of perfection. The salt, garlic, and chilies preserve the raw sausage meat. Some devotees insist on waiting five days before digging into Ban Yon's famous dish. With increasing demand, and more modern methods of packaging, *nam* is no longer encased in clay, but is rolled first in cellophane, and then in a banana leaf.

Northern cuisine is heavier than southern. Oil is used in larger quantities. Sticky or glutinous rice is preferred to long-grain dry rice. It is easy to knead glutinous rice into balls to sop up the sauces and push food around the plate. Ripe mangoes, sliced over sticky rice and topped with rich sweet coconut cream, is a traditional Chiang Mai dessert. Fried noodles are another favorite. *Kow Soy*, a popular coconut milk curry, is accompanied by crispy noodles for dunking. Pickled cucumber is served with dishes of fried pork crackling, boiled cabbage, egg noodles, and also with all pork curries. Minced pork is an ingredient in a number of dishes. *Nam Prik Ong* mixes minced pork with tomatoes, chilies, garlic, and shrimp paste. Chilled, it is served with pork rind, cabbage, and cucumbers.

The northeastern area of Thailand has a wealth of ancient monuments, many of them built by the Khmers, who colonized the northeastern part of Thailand while they were building Angkor Wat in the twelfth century. Some of the dialects spoken in this region, and much of the cuisine, is more similar to those of Laos and Cambodia than to that of Thailand. One major site at Phimai, restored by the Thai government, has been dubbed the "Angkor Wat of Thailand." It is fast becoming a major tourist attraction.

Northeastern cuisine also favors minced pork. One famous dish, called *larb*, made with either minced pork, beef, chicken, or fish, is eaten raw accompanied by a searing hot condiment. This is followed by mint leaves to cool the palate. Closely resembling the cooking of Laos to the east, dried beef, grilled chicken, and an abundant use of herbs and hot chilies distinguish this region's cuisine. Green papaya salad seasoned with lime, chilies, and dried shrimp is a favorite throughout Southeast Asia.

A major archaeological site, near the small northeastern village of Ban Chiang, has proven the existence of a prehistoric culture more than 5,000 years old. The people who lived there were adept not only at weaving, rice cultivation, and animal husbandry, but also made tools and ornaments from bronze. Intricately designed and painted

pottery, unearthed at a road building site, initiated the dig. Thailand has now replaced China and Mesopotamia as the nation with the first bronze-using society in the world.

Religious statues indicate that Hindu people inhabited what is now southern Thailand in the fourth century A.D. In the ninth century, people from southern and central China, possibly fleeing the Mongol invasions, sought refuge in Thailand. Their first major city, Sukhothai, or "Dawn of Happiness," was built in the middle of the Central Plain. Thai written language, culture, architecture, and their Buddhist religion were well established when repeated attacks from marauders forced the Thais to flee farther south. In 1351, they founded the city of Ayutthaya. A splendid metropolis of lavish palaces and soaring temples with gold statues of the Buddha, Ayutthaya ruled over all the terrain that is now Thailand, and also parts of Burma, China, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia for 400 years. In the early 1500s, European emissaries from Portugal, Holland, and Britain came to Thailand and on their return to Europe they told wondrous tales of the fabulous city of the east. Inevitably calamity fell. In 1767, Burmese hordes, burning and looting, overran Ayutthaya, reduced the population of 1 million to 10,000, and left the city in ruins. Gathering together scholars and storytellers to restore the Siamese heritage, the first Chakri king in the present ruling Chakri Dynasty built another city on the shores of the Gulf of Thailand, near present-day Bangkok. He also extended the borders to include the northern mountains and the long southern neck of land between the Gulf and the Andaman Sea.

Succeeding monarchs, particularly King Mongkut (1851–1868) of Anna and "The King and I" fame, and his son King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), steered the state toward modernization, and established the country's infrastructure. King Chulalongkorn launched the vast canal-building project that today criss-crosses the fertile Central Plain, providing water for a sea of gently waving, emerald green rice shoots. By skillful diplomacy, and by relinquishing parts of the kingdom, Thailand evaded colonization by the French. As recently as the mid-1940s, Thailand was the only independent country on the mainland: Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam were French colonies and Malaysia, Burma, and the Indian continent were British. It was in 1932 that the name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand, meaning "the Land of the Free." At the same time, and without

bloodshed, the absolute rule of the king was changed to a constitutional monarchy.

The spectacular bicentennial celebration of the reigning Chakri dynasty was held in October 1982. All monarchs bear the name "Rama" after their own names and titles. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, and his beautiful wife, Queen Sirikit, though immensely popular, are regarded with awe and reverence. At court, people approach the King on their knees. Protocol dictates that no one be allowed to have his head higher than that of His Majesty. When the Royal cars appear on Bangkok's streets, construction workers slide down their bamboo scaffolding with dispatch to avoid having their heads higher than the King's!

The King and Queen have earned the people's high regard. King Bhumibol has been untiring in his efforts to better the lives of his 55 million subjects. He has introduced scores of new crops, especially to the Golden Triangle area where he hopes to replace opium growing. At King Bhumibol's urging, the government provides seeds, fertilizers, and other technical assistance to the farmers. The 3 square miles (4.5 square kilometers) of grounds around the royal residence, Chitralada Palace, in Bangkok, are used for experimental farming. King Bhumibol travels tirelessly around his kingdom, talking to his subjects and offering solutions to their problems. Queen Sirikit travels with him, working to improve the lot of the impoverished hilltribes people by having them instructed in craft making, to increase their income. A project of Queen Sirikit's is the development of silkworm nurseries. The increased silk yield goes to the making of export-quality silk fabrics, hand woven by the hilltribes.

## ***Rice—the Wealth of the Kingdom***

Each year the King presides over an ancient, solemn rice ceremony as plowing time draws near, on the Pramane Ground outside the walls of the Grand Palace. The ceremony begins with the priests offering special delicacies to the Gods. Then two oxen, splendidly draped with cloth of gold, pulling the ceremonial plough, are led before the King. Women scatter rice from silver and gold ceremonial dishes, and Brahmins sprinkle holy water. The oxen are presented



with grains, beans, and alcohol. Their choice symbolizes the success or failure of the year's rice crop. Alcohol would not augur well.

For 700 years, rice, the wealth of the kingdom, has fed the people of Thailand. Every Thai is acutely aware that the rice farmer is the backbone of the nation. Children are taught never to sweep up spilled rice with a broom, but to bend their backs to pick up each precious grain as homage to the rice farmer who labors so hard to feed them. Rice is vital to the people of the kingdom, and, as their principal export crop, to the economy of Thailand. The heart of Thailand, and where most of the people live, is the milewide Central Plain. Extremely fertile alluvial soils, deposited by the Chao Phraya River which bisects the Plain, form this vast rice bowl. Water buffalo still plow the rice paddies at the end of the dry season, though mechanized plows, called iron buffaloes, are in use in some areas. In May when the monsoon rains come, the whole community works to plant the fragile shoots. Men and women, wearing large straw hats shaped rather like lamp shades, may be seen bending double, calf-deep in the gleaming water. Scallions are planted along the edges of the rice paddies.

When the rains come and flood the fields, young taliapin, a delicate white-fleshed fish, are slipped into the flooded paddies to mature alongside the rice. The floodwaters bring nutrients from the highland forest floors which nourish the rice. Irrigation systems or well-maintained dikes control the water at exactly the right level for the lengthening shoots. Being able to control the water of major rivers and their tributaries enables the farmers to grow more than one crop a year. If the river system flows year round, then the farmers, working together on digging, plowing, and planting, can produce three or more crops. After the harvest in November, huge woven baskets are used to winnow the ripened grain. Surplus rice is taken down the narrow waterways to waiting barges on the Chao Phraya River. Resuming its journey, the rice is later transferred to cargo ships, to be exported from the port of Bangkok.

Wooden farmhouses, some low and roofed in bamboo matting, others elegantly built on stilts, cluster along the banks of the waterways. Each dwelling houses the entire extended family with room for the water buffalo. The day starts early for farming families, usually before dawn. The first meal of the day is cooked in a wok, over a charcoal stove placed on the little jetty beside the *klong* (waterway).

Fishing nets, with umbrella-like spokes, hang from the jetty to catch any unwary fish. Beside the house a small garden plot grows vegetables, herbs, and usually a banana plant. Inside the house a small shrine holds an offering of fruit or flowers. Above the housetops may be glimpsed the glittering red and gold spire of a temple. They seem to be floating on an emerald green sea. Farmers produce not only rice but fruits, vegetables, betel nut, poultry, and livestock. Usually the women in the family, their boats loaded with produce, spices, pickled garlic, curry pastes, and dewy fresh noodles, make the journey by water to the markets in Bangkok.

Bangkok—known as Krung Thep, or City of Angels to the Thais—was modeled originally on Ayutthaya, the ancient city whose thoroughfares were not roads but canals, encircling the city. The canals acted as moats, affording protection in time of need. Rivers and canals were Thailand's thoroughfares for centuries. Eventually Bangkok's circular canals were connected by smaller canals to form a vast web of waterways. Man-made and natural waterways, within and between villages, are still the main means of travel today. Many villagers use their boats to commute. Small round sampans and the long-tailed slender motorboats skim the surface of the water. Possibly originating in Thailand, the propeller and motor are designed for use in shallow water. They are indispensable in both *klongs* and rice paddies. Building roads that would only flood during the monsoon rains seemed imprudent. Even so, the new roads have made it much easier for people in once remote villages to bring goods to market. In Bangkok, canals that have been paved over to accommodate the increasing four-wheeled transportation overflow during the monsoon rains, inundating whole neighborhoods. Bangkok today is a thriving, up-to-date city, sprawled over an area of 930 square miles (1,500 square kilometers), and rapidly changing as it adapts to the latest in modern technology, and to the unending influx of foreign ideas. Traffic is an enormous problem in Bangkok. Cars, buses, and small trucks overflowing with produce clog streets, creating pollution and gridlock. Motorcycles, decorated with a kaleidoscope of gaudy designs, are everywhere. Motorized taxis, called tuk tuks, have replaced the pedicabs. Vendors dart fearlessly into the stalled traffic, hawking garlands of jasmine blossoms for placing at shrines or revitalizing snacks for the frustrated motorists.

The architecture of Bangkok is eclectic: contemporary office blocks, such as Baiyoke Tower at Pratunam, tower 490 feet (150 meters) over tiny family-owned shop-houses, their living quarters on the second floor, which at one time made up the greater part of the structures lining the city streets. The new architecture exists happily alongside the gorgeously decorative, classical architecture of palaces, state buildings, and numerous *wats* or temples built by earlier generations. Gilded ornaments embellish multiple-tiered roofs of dark green and red tiles. Golden *chedi*, or spires, glitter in the sunlight. Fierce lions and guardian warriors of gold guard the outside of the temples, while within gilded statues of Buddha, wreathed in incense, sit before flickering candles and heaps of flowers.

An extraordinary legend surrounds a solid gold Buddha weighing five and a half tons, with sapphire and mother-of-pearl eyes which sits in *wat* Traimitr in Bangkok. Apparently this huge, gold Buddha was plastered over by a monk to conceal its worth from invading Burmese hoards in Ayutthaya. Enshrined in a temple on the riverbank, it was discovered in 1950 by a construction company, when the enormous statue had to be moved. The chain from which the statue was suspended broke, and the fall cracked the plaster coating, revealing the gleaming gold Buddha.

*Wat Phra Keo* houses the Emerald Buddha—the most revered Buddha image in Thailand. It was discovered in 1434 in the city of Chiang Rai. For centuries the Emerald Buddha was moved from temple to temple, both in Laos and Thailand, finally coming to rest, at the behest of Rama I, in the Royal Chapel in the Grand Palace enclosure, where it is on display.

Thais love color with a passion. Huge, hand-painted advertising billboards promoting shows, movies, discos, and commercial products embellish the sides of buildings. They are painted a section at a time by teams of artists, watched from below by enthusiastic crowds. Discos are big business. The stage sets created for well-loved pop singers are often incredibly imaginative, with gorgeous costumes, laser lighting, and blaring music. Bangkok is crowded and nowhere more so than the famous Weekend Market. Canvas-covered stalls sell quantities of foodstuffs, and also herbal medicines, caged songbirds, and tropical fish. The Floating Market outside Bangkok, called Damnoen Saduak, is even more popular, especially with camera-toting tour-