Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaeo

In 1782, Rama I (r.1782–1809) established the capital in Bangkok, where he built Wat Phra Kaeo to house the country’s most precious Buddha image. In 1784, he had the Grand Palace built, which became the home of the royal family. No king has resided here since the early 20th century, but the complex is a stunning display of Thai art and architecture and a truly memorable sight.

Top 10 Features

1. Wat Phra Kaeo
2. Siwalai Gardens
3. Amarin Winichai Hall
4. Phaisan Thaksin Hall
5. Chakraphat Phiman Hall
6. Inner Palace
7. Chakri Maha Prasat
8. Aphonphimok Pavilion
9. Dusit Throne Hall
10. Wat Phra Kaeo Museum

Wat Phra Kaeo
Serving as the royal chapel of the Grand Palace, this dazzling complex (right) never fails to impress first-time visitors with its slender chedi (stupas), glittering mosaics, and other-worldly creatures, such as the fearsome yaksha (giants) that stand guard by the gates. The wat (temple) is Thailand’s holiest shrine, but unlike other Thai temples, there are no resident monks here (see pp10–11).

Amarin Winichai Hall
This was one of the first buildings of the palace complex to be completed, and was originally used as an audience hall for foreign guests. Inside, the hall has colorful murals and Rama I’s boat-shaped Busabok Mala Throne surmounted by a nine-tiered white canopy. Today the hall is used for state ceremonies and is open to the public on weekdays.

Siwalai Gardens
These well-kept, picturesque gardens (below) were once used for official receptions. Within the gardens are two buildings. The Neo-Classical Boromphiman Mansion, was built by Rama V (see p34) for the Crown Prince (later Rama VI), and now serves as a guesthouse for visiting dignitaries. The Phra Buddha Ratana Sathan was built as a personal chapel by Rama IV (see p34).
This hall (left) is not open to the public and is used only for coronations. It contains the Coronation Chair and the tutelary deity, Phra Siam Thewathirat.

Closed to the public, this hall was the residence of the first three kings of the Chakri dynasty (see p.34). It consists of a royal bedchamber and a reception chamber housing the regalia and accoutrements of kingship.

Until the time of Rama VII (r.1925–35), the Inner Palace was inhabited solely by women. All males except the king were forbidden entry. Still closed to the public, it is now a school for girls from prominent families.

Occupying center stage in the Grand Palace is the Chakri throne hall (right). Built by Rama V in 1882, it is a fusion of Western and Thai architectural styles. The ashes of Chakri kings are housed here.

This small but attractive pavilion was built by Rama IV as a royal changing room prior to audiences in the adjacent Dusit Throne Hall. Its multi-tiered roof and elaborate decoration are hallmarks of classic Thai design.

For many, this building (below) is the site’s crowning glory, featuring a four-tiered roof and Rama I’s teak throne.

This museum displays a treasure trove of artifacts salvaged from restoration of the palace, including costumes of the Emerald Buddha (see p.11).

Entering and Getting Around the Complex
All visitors enter by the gate on Na Phra Lan Road, where anyone inappropriately dressed is required to hire clothes. At the ticket office it is possible to rent an audio-tape or hire a guide to explain the significance of the sights. Visitors usually walk clockwise around Wat Phra Kaeo before exploring the rest of the Grand Palace. It takes at least two hours to walk around the site.

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Ramakien Murals
Stretching over half a mile (1 km) along the cloister walls of the temple, the Ramakien murals portray scenes from the Hindu epic, Ramayana, in 178 panels of intricate detail and vibrant color.

Phra Si Rattana Chedi
This glittering, cone-shaped chedi (stupa) is one of the most photographed features of Wat Phra Kaeo. Built of gold tiles in the Sri Lankan style, it stands majestically on the upper terrace beside the Phra Mondop.

Phra Mondop
This building towers almost as high as the Phra Si Rattana Chedi and is a repository for sacred Buddhist texts. Its deep-green mosaics are the perfect backdrop for the seated stone Buddhas at each corner.

Royal Pantheon
The pantheon enshrines life-size statues of the past rulers of the Chakri dynasty (see p34) and completes the trio of tall buildings on the upper terrace.

Model of Angkor Wat
Tucked away behind the Phra Mondop, this model of Angkor Wat was installed by Rama IV (see p34), when Cambodia was under Thai rule.

Wihan Yot
Often called “the porcelain wihan”, this delicately adorned prayer hall stands in the center of the north terrace and contains a number of Buddha images.

Hor Phra Nak and Ho Phra Monthien Tham
Flanking the Wihan Yot on the north terrace are the Hor Phra Nak, a royal mausoleum with urns that hold the ashes of members of the royal family, and the Ho Phra Monthien Tham, a library that has particularly fine doors inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

The Bot
The most-visited building in the temple grounds is the bot (ordination hall), which contains the much-venerated Emerald Buddha. The interior walls are smothered with murals, the altar is richly decorated, and the scent of incense is thick as Thais pay respect to the image that is the country’s talisman.
Before visitors get to see the beautifully crafted Buddha images that adorn the wihan and bot of any Thai temple compound, including Wat Phra Kaeo, they have to pass a panoply of fearsome creatures that act as temple guardians. Most of these beings are from the legendary Himaphan Forest, a kind of Buddhist Shangri-La somewhere in the Himalayan Mountains. These include singha, lion-like figures that sit atop gateposts, and yaksha, grimacing giants with brightly colored faces that tower above entrances to the compound. The steps leading up to the wihan and bot are usually flanked by multi-headed naga, serpents that according to legend sheltered the Buddha from a storm while he was meditating. Some temple balustrades depict makara, aquatic monsters that symbolize rainfall, devouring the naga. The hongsa, a swan-like entity, is often seen perched on the apex of a temple roof. The kinnari – half-woman, half-bird – is seen in wall niches or skipping down temple eaves.

**The Emerald Buddha**
Made of jadeite rather than emerald, the most sacred image in the kingdom is just 26 inches (66 cm) tall. Thought to have been crafted in Sri Lanka, it was housed in Chiang Rai, Lampang, and Laos before Rama I (r.1782–1809) brought it to Bangkok.

**Chapel of Gandahara Buddha**
In the southeast corner of the temple compound stands a small chapel with beautifully painted doors. Usually locked, it contains an image, used in the Royal Ploughing Ceremony (see p48) of the Buddha calling down the rains.

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**Top 10 Thai Mythical Creatures**

1. Naga – serpent-like protector of the Buddha
2. Singha – lion-like temple guardian
3. Yaksha – giant
4. Garuda – half-man, half-bird
5. Erawan – three-headed elephant
6. Kinnari – half-woman, half-bird
7. Aponsi – half-woman, half-lion
8. Hongsa – swan-like figure
9. Makara – part crocodile, part elephant, part serpent
10. Mom – dragon-like temple guardian

**Mythical Creatures in Thai Temples**

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