

The Temples of **Bangkok**



Introduction

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Bangkok's fantastic Buddhist temples — spread out like oases throughout the busy metropolis — inspire contemplation and wonder. They are yours to discover.

Crafted with an keen focus on art and architecture, this Approach Guide — drawn from our more comprehensive guidebook to the [The Temples of Thailand](#) — offers travelers valuable insights into Bangkok's most impressive temples.

What's in this guidebook

- **Art and architecture review.** We provide an overview of Thai art and architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again while touring. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images. Further, as context is critical, we differentiate the style of Bangkok's temples from those of the country's two earlier capitals, Sukhothai (1238-1368) and Ayutthaya (1350-1767).
- **Tour of the highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer a tour of Bangkok's greatest Buddhist monuments (itinerary below). For each, we reveal its most important architectural and decorative features and offer a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

Tour itinerary

To help with prioritization, must-see temple sites in each city are marked with asterisks (*).

- Buddhaisawan chapel*
- Wat Arun*
- Wat Benchamabophit
- Wat Bowornivet
- Wat Khrua Wan*
- Wat Pho aka Chetuphon*
- Wat Phra Kaeo*

- Wat Suthat*
- Wat Suwannaram*

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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Bangkok's fantastic art and architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Enjoy your trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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The Temples of Bangkok

Version 1.1

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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Approach Guides
New York, NY
www.approachguides.com

ISBN: 978-1-936614-31-8

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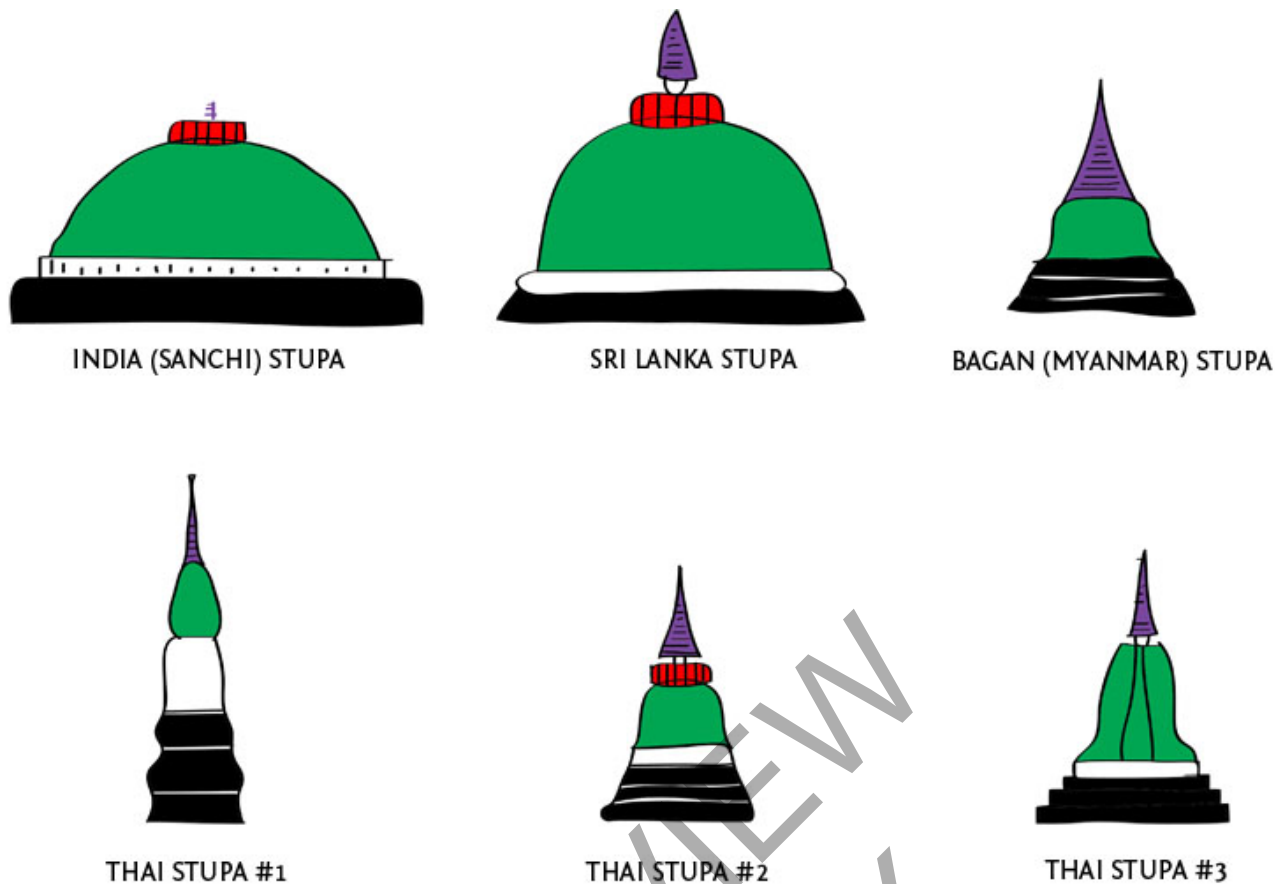


Fig. 4. Thai stupa predecessors and types. Highlights added.

The Thai Stupa

There are three basic forms of the Thai Stupa; each will be explored in turn. These forms — as well as those of India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar's Bagan (Burma) — are laid out in **Fig. 4**. Note that andas are highlighted in green, harmikas in red, chattras in purple, and bases or terraces in black. We will continue to refer to back to this three style framework as we review the stupas in specific temples in sections that follow.

Thai stupa type #1: Lotus bud-shaped anda

Where to see it: This chedi is unique to Sukhothai and its satellites cities: Si Satchanalai, Kamphaeng Phet, and Phitsanulok.

Unlike in later periods where vihans, ubosots, and prangs assumed fundamental importance, **stupas were the central and primary structure in Sukhothai period temples**. They are characterized by their extreme delicacy and spire-like, soaring verticality. See **Fig. 5**.

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Fig. 5. Thai stupa type #1. Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai. Highlights added.

Defining characteristics of Thai stupa type #1 include:

- **Stepped terraces and redented bases.** Two or three square terraces rise to support a deeply redented (that is, with cutout corners) and tower-shaped base; this base supports the anda. The stepped terraces are a distinctive element of the Thai stupa (shared with those of Myanmar's Bagan) and mark a clear push away from earlier Sri Lanka prototypes. Further, the tower-like bases, which afford these structures their elegance and vertical momentum, seem to borrow from earlier Khmer prangs (discussed in the next section). See yellow highlights in [Fig. 5](#).

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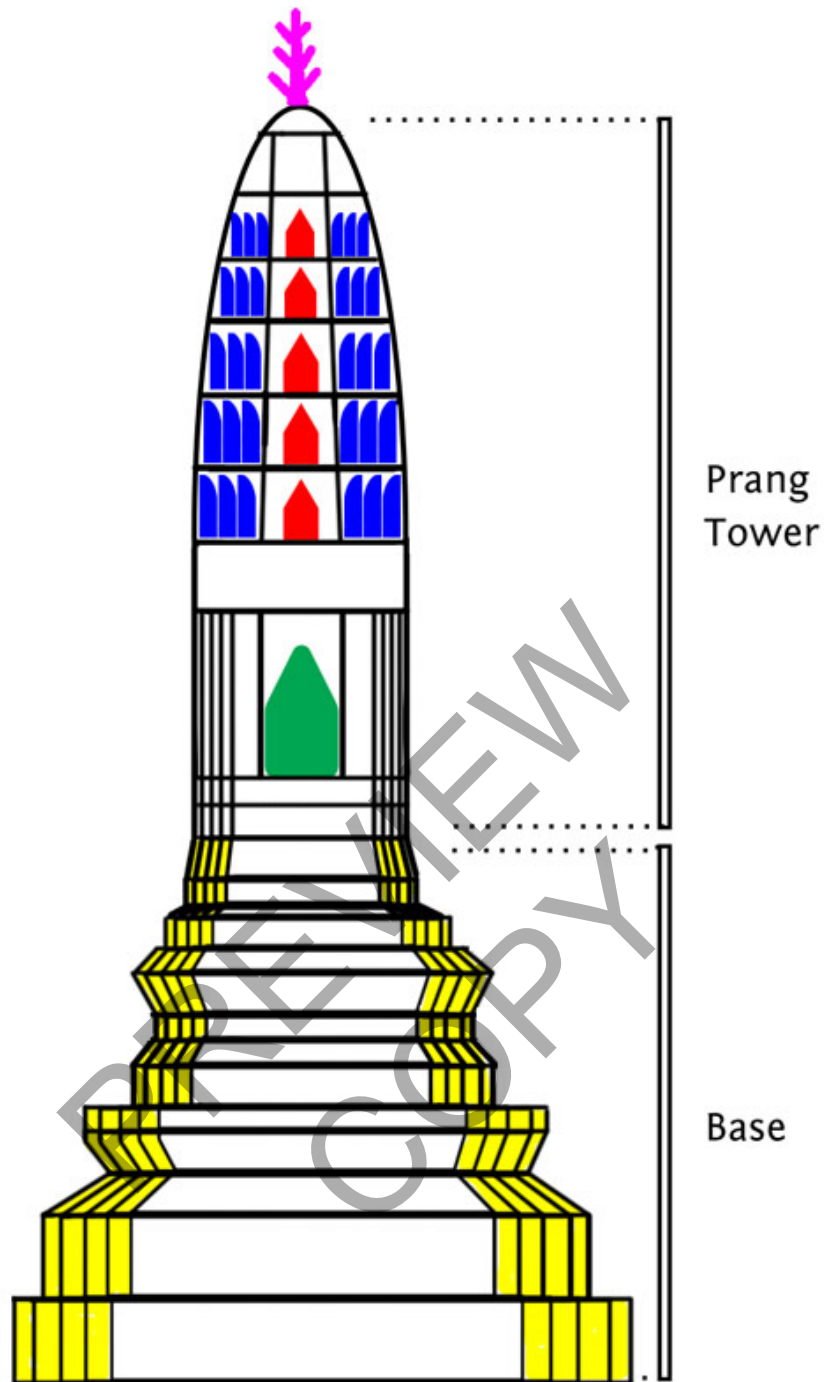


Fig. 14. Thai prang. Highlights added.

Defining features

As with many architectural forms, the Thai civilization's chief modification to the Khmer prang was to make it more **delicate, thinner, and vertical in emphasis**. That said, the defining features of the Thai prang include:

- **More slender, vertical tower** (position marked on right side of **Fig. 14**). The round Thai tower is generally thinner than Khmer prototypes and its sides are more nearly vertical all

along its length.

- **Vajra** (pink highlights in Fig. 14). The prang is topped by Indra's weapon, the thunderbolt (vajra), symbolic of shattering illusion; when illusion is cast aside, the believer is able to achieve enlightenment and join the Buddha in his mountain residence at the top of Mount Meru. The use of a vajra is a Thai innovation, as Khmer prangs were topped with ribbed fruits and pot finials.
- **Rising tiers**. The rising, horizontally tiered terraces of the tower are less emphasized than on Khmer prototypes, in order to stress greater vertical, upward momentum.
- **Medial arched niches** (red highlights in Fig. 14). The cardinal points on each ascending level of the prang have medial arched niches that typically contain images of guardian figures or Buddhas. This is consistent with Khmer precedent.
- **Antefixes** (blue highlights in Fig. 14). Antefixes sit in the redented (cutout) corners of the tower and serve a dual purpose: (a) they smooth out the redentations, thereby affording the tower the appearance of a more perfectly round plan; and (b) they provide a simple decoration. These antefixes are generally simpler and less prominent than those of Khmer prototypes.
- **Internal shrine** (green highlights in Fig. 14). A Buddha shrine sits inside, directly underneath the tower.
- **Square, redented base** (redentations marked with yellow highlights in Fig. 14). The prang tower sits on a redented, square base, often consisting of several stepped terraces.
- **Quincunx arrangement**. The Khmer's quincunx arrangement — a central prang surrounded by four smaller prangs — was used frequently, especially in Ayutthaya.

The Thai Prang: Transformation over Time

While the prang is a persistent feature throughout all periods, its appearance changes quite meaningfully over time, moving progressively away from the earliest Khmer prototype.

Sukhothai period prang

Sukhothai prangs most closely resemble those of the Khmer. They sit on modest, simply redented bases, with prominent antefixes; a Buddha shrine sits under the prang, accessed by a single entrance. Good examples of this style are found at Wats Phra Phai Luang (see Fig. 15) and Si Sawai, both of which are profiled individually in this guidebook.

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Vihans and Ubosots

The vihan and ubosot (see Fig. 19) house sacred Buddha images and serve as the principal hall of worship for laity and the congregation-ordination hall for monks, respectively. First and foremost, these buildings were visited to **engage in direct and personal interaction with the Buddha**. At the same time, ritual associated with this interaction facilitated education on the fundamental tenets of Theravada Buddhism.

Both structures share the same basic architectural profile. This section covers their **defining architectural features** and points out the unique forms they assume in the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok periods.



Fig. 19. Ubosot, Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya.

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Fig. 21. Distinctive gable decoration: chofa, hang hong, and bai raka. Highlights added.

Garuda (called a *chofa*) — a mythological bird symbolic of the celestial realm — sits at the peak of the gabled temple roofs (red highlights in [Fig. 21](#); close-up in [Fig. 22](#)).

In Thai cosmology, Garuda serves as Vishnu's vehicle; Vishnu — one of the three main Hindu gods, responsible for preserving and maintaining the universe — was adopted as a defender of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. In Bangkok, in particular, the bird carries a political, as well as religious, significance: Bangkok's Chakri dynasty, rulers of the city since its founding in 1782, claims lineage from Vishnu. This explains why all Chakri rulers go by the name of Rama, the famous hero of the Ramayana epic, who is an incarnation of Vishnu. Garuda's presence, therefore, on the peak of gabled temple roofs serves as a reminder of the dynasty's link to this powerful god and its shared role in defending the city.

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Fig. 28. Kinnara and dvarapala. Highlights added.

Yaksha or Dvarapala

Yakshas or *dvarapalas* are **demon guardians** with snarling faces that greet the faithful at the entrance to Buddhist temple complexes (red highlights in [Fig. 28](#)). Their role is not, as one might first be inclined to believe, to scare away evil spirits. Rather, **their role is to inspire fear in the faithful**. In order enter the temple complex, the believer must face these figures and abandon his fear, which is derived from his attachment to worldly things and his physical body; in so doing, he has begun the process toward Buddhist enlightenment.

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Thai Painting

The murals created to decorate religious complexes are a highlight of the Thai artistic tradition. In an attempt to get to the core of what makes these paintings so impressive, this section **begins by laying out the defining characteristics of the Thai painting style**; it then describes **pre-vailing subject matter** and their typical positions on the walls of the temple; and finally, in subsequent sections, it concludes with a review of the **distinctive stylistic elements of paintings in the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok periods**.

Medium and Technique

Thai frescoes are made with **tempera paint**, consisting of mineral- and plant-derived colors; rather than using egg as a binder (as in Western technique), the Thai used animal glues or tree gum. Prior to the 18th century, when paints began to be imported from China in powdered form and the spectrum of colors expanded, they were based on a more limited range of natural colors drawn from riverbed clays, plants, and charcoal soot: red, yellow, green, white, and black.

These paints are **applied to a dry wall of plaster** that has been covered with slaked lime; this technique is known as *secco fresco* and contrasts with *buon fresco* technique in which paint is applied to wet plaster.

Secco fresco paintings are vulnerable to moisture and humidity; specifically, the crystallization of salt on the surface of the walls as a result of evaporated ground water rising through porous brick walls has destroyed many of Thailand's oldest frescoes. In fact, **no paintings from the Sukhothai period remain; and those from the Ayutthaya period are very limited**.

Thai Painting Aesthetic

While the Thai painting style does change over time (see the period style review in subsequent sections), there is a general aesthetic to which it adheres:

- **Linear painting style with gentle curves.** Thai painting employs an elegant, linear style. Thai paintbrushes contribute to this aesthetic, as their bristles are made from the roots and bark of trees; the hard quality of these bristles allows artists to **create precise, thin lines of consistent width**. Further, **lines are often smooth and gently curve**; there are virtually no straight lines. Designs are first outlined in ochre or black and then filled in with color; the outlines remain visible in the finished work, giving the lines prominence.
- **Small size of scenes and figures.** There is a striking relative difference between the large overall size of the wall space and the small size of the figures in the painted scenes. This small form factor was likely pursued in order to convey the maximum amount of didactic elements in a single scene.
- **Flat, two-dimensional representations.** Thai painting is characterized by a general absence of depth and perspective; images employ **flat color, with no shading**. This changed in the Late Bangkok period, however, beginning with Rama IV, as Western techniques were introduced.

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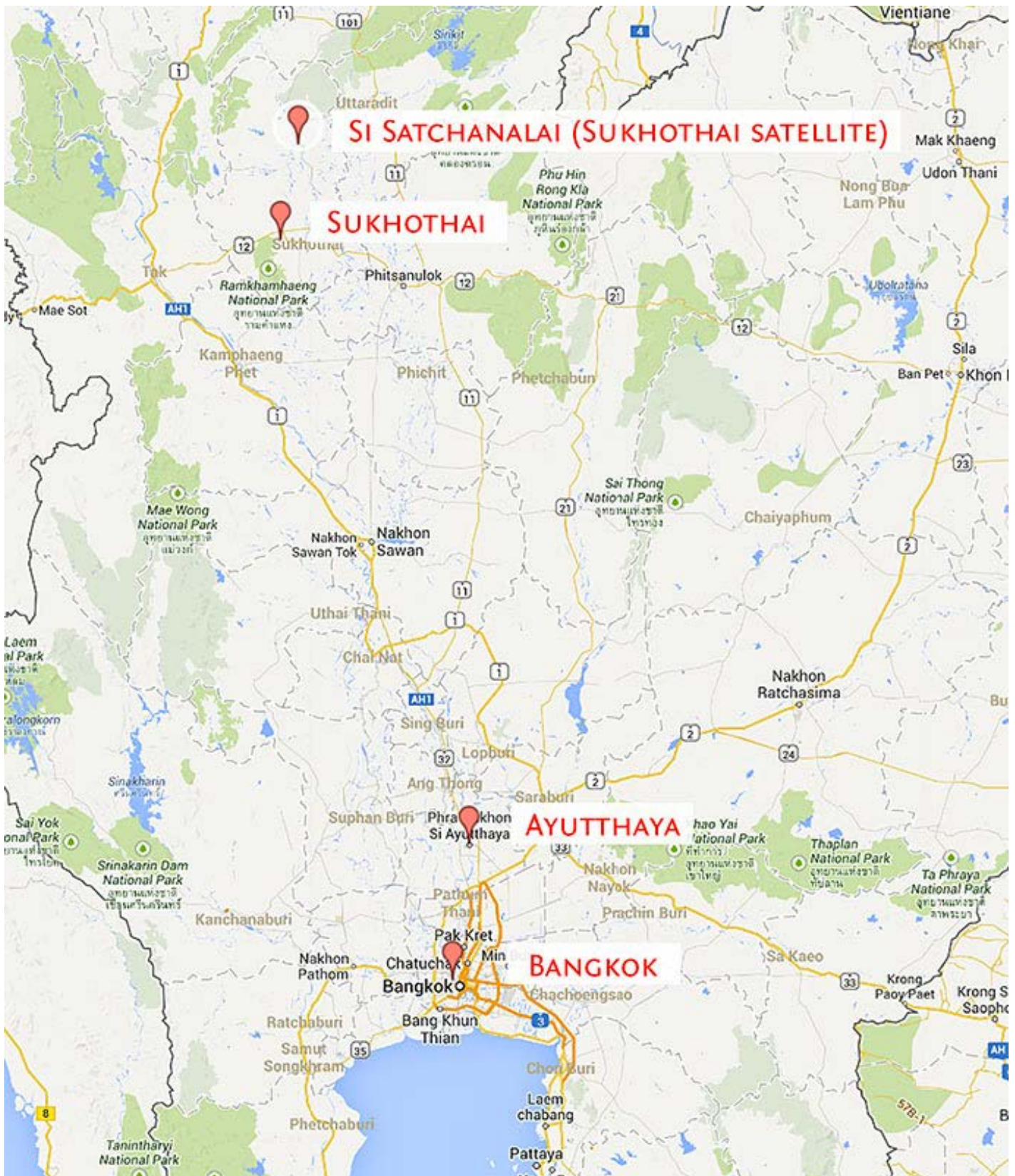
Buddha Images in Sukhothai Period



Fig. 44. Sukhothai period Buddha.

Sculpture is probably the highest art form of the Sukhothai civilization. The best works were completed in the High Classic period in the 14th century, before the sacking of the city in 1438 by Ayutthaya.

TOURING ITINERARY



Tour of historical Thai capitals. See in [Google Maps](#).

Our tour of Thailand follows a chronological progression through its three historical capital cities, where the top sites for art and architecture are concentrated.

- Sukhothai (1238-1368)
- Si Satchanalai, satellite capital of Sukhothai (1238-1368)
- Ayutthaya (1350-1767)
- Bangkok (1782-present)

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Profiled Sites in Summary

Author Tip: *To make things easier and allow you to focus on the real highlights, particularly if you only have limited time in this city, we have marked those sites that we believe are must-sees with asterisks (*) .*

Itinerary

- * **Buddhaisawan Chapel in the National Museum** (Ratanakosin). Notable for: an absolute highlight and the best example of the Early Bangkok painting style.
- * **Wat Arun** (Thonburi). Notable for: the enormous prang assumes its most refined form in Thailand, thinner and more vertical in orientation.
- **Wat Benchamabophit** (Dusit). Notable for: marble building material; paintings in Song Panuat Chapel; 53 Buddha images representing different periods of Buddhist art; stained glass windows.
- **Wat Bowornivet** (Dusit). Notable for: paintings by Khrua in Khong, representing the last stage of the Bangkok style that incorporates Western techniques (perspective) and subject matter into Thai painting; a Sukhothai seated Buddha statue.
- * **Wat Khrua Wan** (Thonburi). Notable for: the most complete and best preserved set of Jataka paintings in Thailand.
- * **Wat Pho aka Chetuphon** (Ratanakosin). Notable for: the ubosot has impressive sandstone Ramayana reliefs and a number of impressive Buddha images; four large stupas conforming to Thai stupa style #3; the vihan has an enormous reclining Buddha.
- * **Wat Phra Kaeo** (Ratanakosin). The most revered and famous monument in Bangkok, imbued with both religious and political significance. Notable for: Phra Si Ratana chedi (built to emulate those of Ayutthaya's Wat Si Sanphet); a grand ho trai (library); the best example of a prasat in Bangkok; Ramayana paintings from the Rama III period; the Emerald Buddha sculpture.
- * **Wat Suthat** (Phra Nakhon). Notable for: enormous scale ubosot and vihan; world-class paintings in the vihan, representing the high point of the Thai all-over aesthetic; bronze Sukhothai Buddha.
- * **Wat Suwannaram** (Thonburi). Notable for: unrivaled Rama III Bangkok style paintings that signal a stylistic break with the earlier, more traditional style.

Logistics

We suggest using a tuk-tuk or taxi for visiting the temples on the east side of the river. And for touring sites on the west side (Thonburi), we recommend taking the Tha Thien Ferry (near Wat Pho) across to Wat Arun. After Wat Arun, it is easy to take a tuk-tuk to Wat Khrua Wan and Wat Suwannaram.

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Wat Arun *

Background

Located in Bangkok (Thonburi neighborhood), Wat Arun (aka **Temple of the Dawn**) was originally built by King Taksin (ruled 1767-1782) to house the Emerald Buddha; it held this image from 1768 until it was relocated to Wat Phra Kaeo in 1785. The temple was expanded to its present size under Kings Rama II (ruled 1809-1824) and Rama III (ruled 1824-1851).

Author Tip: *Commanding a prime spot in Thonburi along the banks of the Chao Phraya river, Wat Arun is the Bangkok style prang par excellence.*

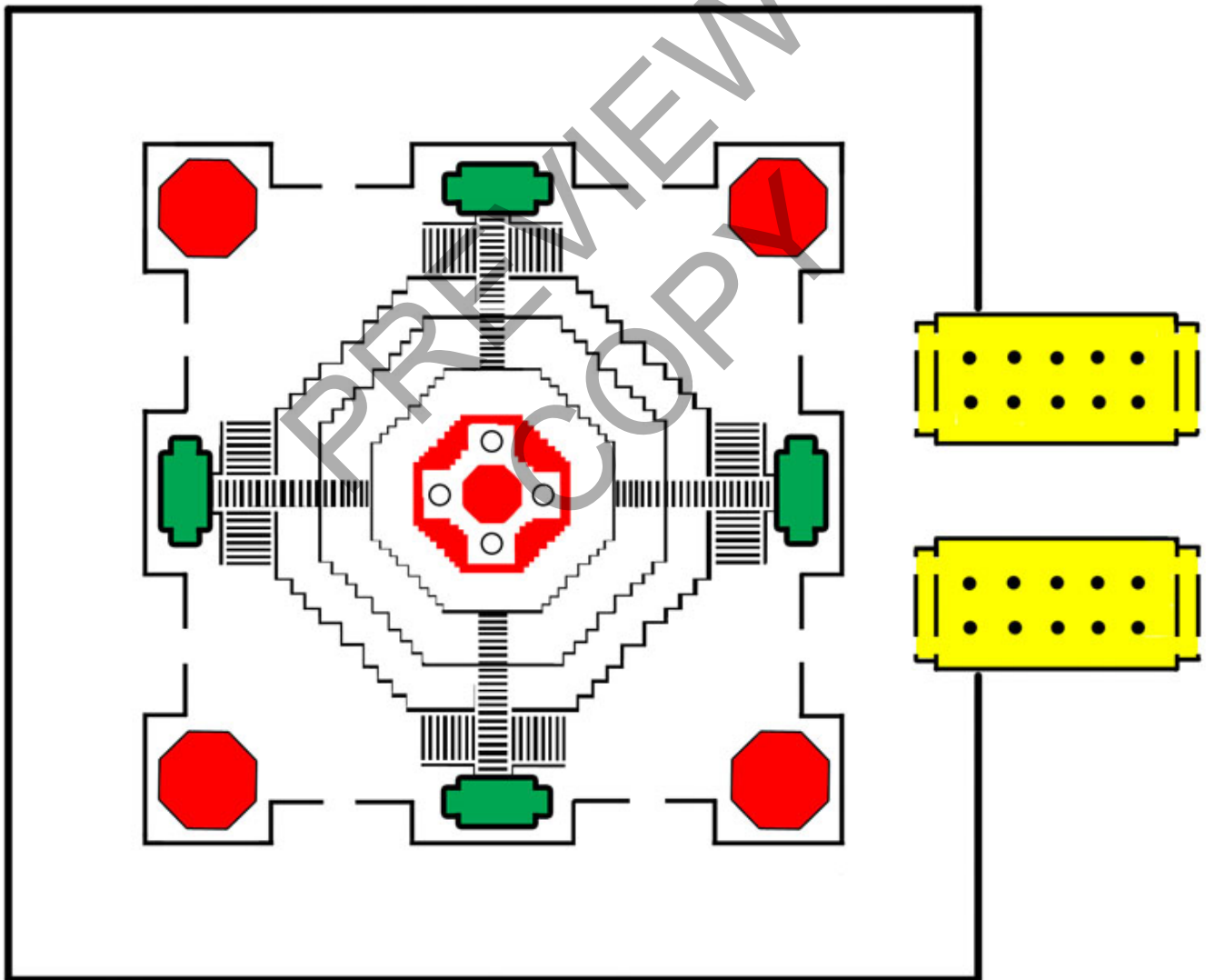


Fig. 56. Floorplan, Wat Arun. Highlights added.

Layout and Appearance

- **Dual vihans** (yellow highlights in Fig. 56) afford access from the east. Visitors enter the complex by walking between them.
- A **massive, central prang** (red highlights in Fig. 56; also see Fig. 57) sits atop three aggressively redented, octagonal terraces. The **prang is topped by Indra's weapon, the vajra** (thunderbolt); the vajra symbolically shatters illusion, thereby enabling the faithful to achieve enlightenment.
- **Four mandapa pavilions** (green highlights in Fig. 56), aligned with the cardinal points, sit at the base of staircases that rise to the upper terrace.
- The central prang is surrounded by **four smaller, similarly-shaped prangs** (also in red highlights in Fig. 56) on the intra-cardinal directions, forming a Khmer-inspired quincunx arrangement.

The Prang

While its general appearance and quincunx arrangement are tightly grounded in Late Ayutthaya architectural precedent, **Wat Arun's prang achieves a new level of refinement; it is the most distinctively Thai manifestation of this architectural form** (see Fig. 57). It has two defining features that separate it from all prangs that came before it:

- Wat Arun's **tower is markedly thinner** than those of all prior Ayutthaya prangs, which tended to assume more bulbous proportions, in line with Khmer prototypes.
- It also has an even **more pronounced vertical orientation**, as the square terraces on which it sits are taller and even more aggressively redented; in this manifestation, the base has seamlessly integrated with the prang tower it supports.

To contextualize the magnitude of these two changes, see the comparison in Fig. 57 of Wat Arun with the Late Ayutthaya period prang of Wat Chai Watthanaram (built 1630) in Ayutthaya.



Fig. 57. Prang comparison: Wat Chai Watthanaram, Ayutthaya (left) and Wat Arun, Bangkok (right).

Surface Decoration

All surfaces are decorated with shards of broken Chinese pottery that have been donated by the faithful, in lieu of the more typical glass mosaics. This Chinese-derived aesthetic became popular under Rama III.

Sculpture

The review of Wat Arun's extensive sculptural decoration is organized by location.

Bases of terraces and central prang

The bases of the terraces and central prang are supported by encircling lines of guardian figures — yakshas and kinnaras (half human-half bird figures), respectively — that stand shoulder-to-shoulder and appear to strain under the weight of the levels above. See **Fig. 58**.



Fig. 58. Yakshas supporting the terraces, Wat Arun.

Central prang

Midrise on the central prang are double-arched niches (aligned to the cardinal points) that contain images of the **Hindu god Indra, depicted riding his three-headed elephant, Airavata** (see [Fig. 59](#)). Indra, as Lord and defender of heaven (specifically, Tavatisma heaven in Buddhist belief), holds a position of reverence in Bangkok; it is he who bestowed salvation upon the Thai people after the sacking of Ayutthaya, affording the city of Bangkok the status of heaven on earth. Here, from his position in Tavatisma heaven, he stands as the ultimate guardian of the temple's peak and the Buddha shrines that reside behind him in the niche; in this role, he is protector of enlightenment itself.



Fig. 59. Indra sculpture on central prang, Wat Arun.

Mandapa pavilions

Each of the mandapa pavilions houses a sculpture depicting a key event in the life of the Buddha:

- **North mandapa:** The Birth of the Buddha.
- **East mandapa:** The Buddha, in meditation after having achieved enlightenment, is provided with cover by a naga (a serpent named Mucalinda) during a fierce rainstorm.

- **South mandapa:** The First Sermon at Sarnath.
- **West mandapa:** The Death of the Buddha (mahaparinirvana).

Smaller prangs

On each of the four smaller prangs, four double-arched niches (also aligned to the cardinal points), mirroring those that sit midrise on the central prang, enclose depictions of **Phra Phi**, god of the wind, portrayed atop his winged horse.

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- **"How to Survive 10 Coups: Lessons from the King of Thailand"** Bhumibol Adulyadej managed to stay on top of one of the most coup-prone countries. How? *By Kathy Gilsinan for The Atlantic.*
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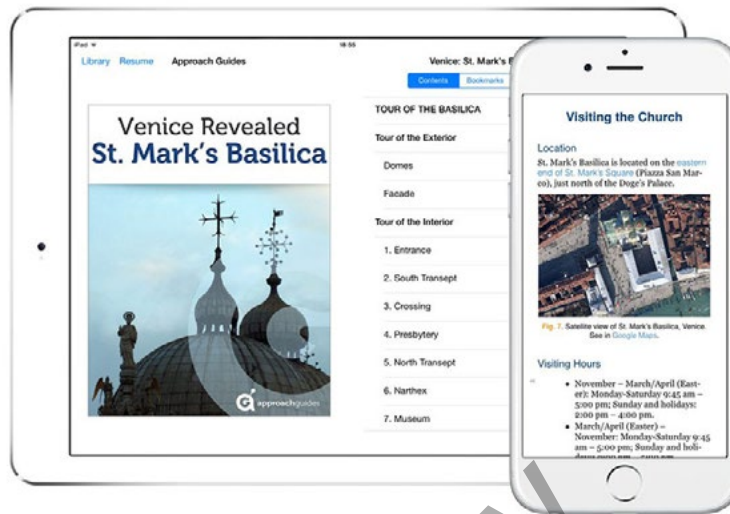
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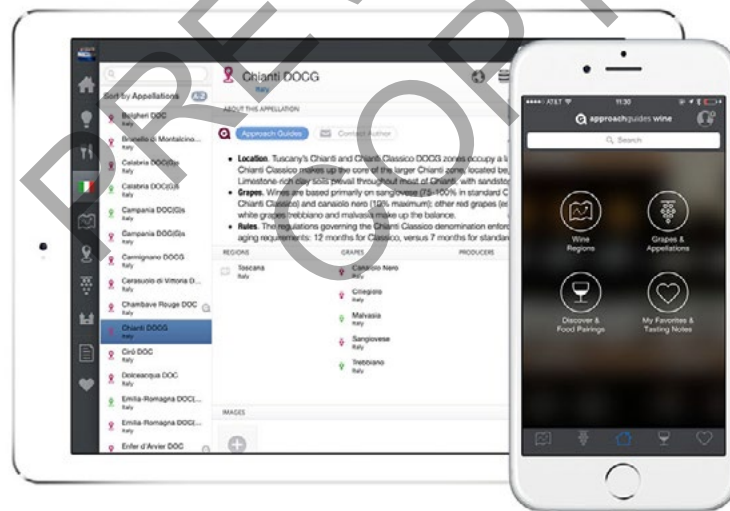
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