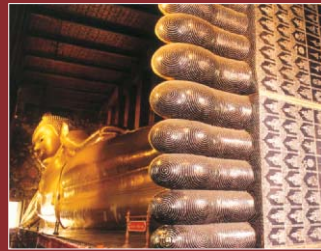


THAILAND AT A GLANCE





Historical Background

As revealed through archeological discoveries made in various locations in the territory of present-day Thailand, these are sites where during the evolution of *homo erectus* primordial hunters, trappers and gatherers had lived, and some of the first settlements evolved of people who had worked the soil, grown crops, created tools, utensils, and artifacts, and venerated guardian spirits, beginning several thousand years ago. Early in history, both Mon and Khmer speaking people occupied large areas of what is modern Thailand; the former established several city states known collectively as *Dvaravati*, the name given their culture and arts; the latter ruled over extensive territory from their capital of Angkor in present-day Cambodia. The Thai gradually migrated southward from river basins in present-day south-western China and settled in sufficient numbers to establish their small states in the north of present-day Thailand, well before the 13th century.¹

Until 1949 the country was known to the world as “Siam”. On May 11 of that year, by official proclamation its name was finally changed to “*Prathet Thai*,” or Thailand in English. The word “Thai” means free and therefore “Thailand” means “Land of the Free.”²

¹ Henceforth, all historical dates follow the A.D. based chronology of the Western Calendar.

² For detailed information, see the chapter entitled “Historical Setting”.



Geography

Situated in the heart of the South-east Asian mainland, the Kingdom of Thailand covers 513,115 sq.km, not including its maritime economic zone.³ Its extreme latitudinal co-ordinates are 20°28'N and 5°36'S, and its extreme longitudinal co-ordinates are 105° 38'E and 97°22'W. To the north Thailand borders the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and the Union of Myanmar; to the east it borders the Lao PDR and the Kingdom of Cambodia; to the south it borders Malaysia; and to the west it borders the Union of Myanmar. The country's land-based maximum north-south extent is approximately 1,600 km, and its maximum east-west extent measures approximately 870 km. The country's coastline along the Gulf of Thailand is 1, 875 km. long, compared to 740 km along the Andaman Sea; not included are the coastlines of some 400 islands, most of them in the Andaman Sea.

³ Thailand's maritime economic zone covers 72,200 sq.km in the Andaman Sea and 140,000 sq.km in the Gulf of Thailand, totalling 212,200 sq.km, of which 25,000 sq.km are claimed by Thailand as well as neighbouring countries.

Topography

By and large, four regions are distinguished: the North; the Central Plain with the Chao Phraya River Basin and some other, smaller river basins; the North-east, also known as the Khorat Plateau; and the South on the northern half of the Malay Peninsula.

The North is a mountainous region with narrow valleys. Hence, its landscape is dotted with forests, rivers, paddy fields and orchards. Located in its northern part are the historical centres of Chiang Saen, Phayao, Nan, Phrae, Lampang, Lamphun, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son. The centre of its southern part is the historical capital of Sukhothai, flanked by Si Satchanalai and Kamphaeng Phet.

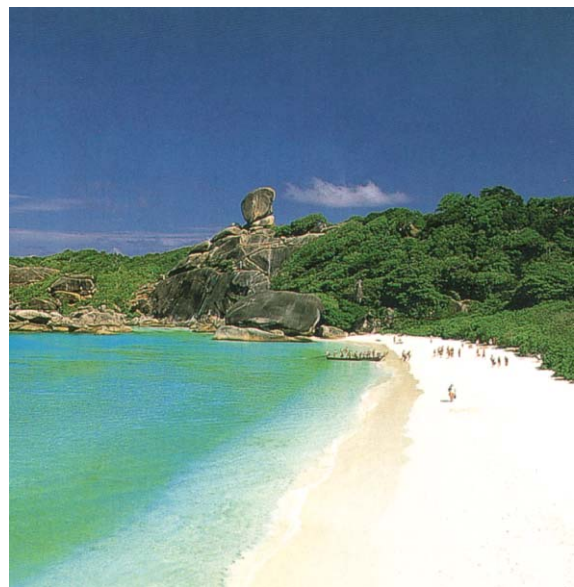
The Central Region is a vast area of alluvial, lush and fertile plains. It is the leading rice-producing area and has often been called the “Rice Bowl of Asia”. Siam’s historical capital Ayutthaya, as well as Lop Buri, the country’s official second capital since the middle of the 19th century, and Bangkok, the capital of Thailand since 1782, are located in this region. Its eastern and western flanks are covered by some of the country’s outstanding nature reserves.

The North-east or Khorat Plateau forms the largest region, covering one-third of the country. It is bordered by two high mountain ranges and has in its interior mountains and undulating hills. Harsh climatic conditions cause either floods or droughts, the latter frequently in the region’s southern semi-arid part. Yet the premium rice variety, *Khao Hom Mali* or Jasmine Rice, is grown there. Magnificent historical monuments dot the landscape.

The South is hilly to mountainous, with dense virgin forests and rich deposits of minerals and ores. In history, this was the Golden Chersonese, the peninsula where East and West met to trade at its thriving coastal entrepôts. Since long, this region is also known for the production of agricultural commodities such as rubber, palm oil, coffee and fruits. Owing to its fabulous beaches and reefs, it has become a tourism hub, in the recent past.

Climate

Thailand is a warm and rather humid country situated across three climate zones. Its by far largest part with the North, North-east and Central Plain lies in the savannah climate zone with moderate rainfall and long dry periods. Its lower south-eastern part and almost the entire northern peninsula between Hua Hin and Satun, except for a stretch of its east coast from Nakhon Si Thammarat southward to Narathiwat, fall into the seasonal rainforest climate zone with frequent convection rainfall and short dry periods. The said stretch alongside the peninsular east coast belongs to the tropical rainforest



climate zone with steady convection rainfall throughout the year. The winds that bear on the climate are the summer monsoon from the south-west across the Indian Ocean, during May through October, resulting in a pronounced rainy season, and the winter monsoon from the north-north-east during November through May, commonly called the dry season. Countrywide averaged temperatures range between a minimum of 23.7° C and a maximum of 37.5° C.

Population

The population of Thailand is approximately 63 million, with an annual growth rate of about 0.3 per cent. In addition to Thai, it includes ethnic Chinese, Malay, Khmer, Lao, Vietnamese, and Indians, among others.⁴

Religions

Buddhism is the professed faith of 95 per cent of the population. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or other religions are embraced by minorities. The King of Thailand, under the constitution and in practice, is the patron of all major religions embraced by the people.⁵

Languages

The official national language is Thai. It is a tonal language, uninflected and predominantly monosyllabic. Many polysyllabic words are borrowed, mainly from Khmer, Pali, or Sanskrit. Dialects are spoken in rural regions. Other languages spoken include Chinese and Malay. English, a mandatory subject in public schools, is widely spoken and understood, particularly in Bangkok and other major cities.

Government

A constitutional monarchy with a bicameral legislature, the parliament and the senate, form the system of government. The country comprises 76 provinces, called *changwat* in Thai, which are subdivided into districts or *amphoe*, sub-districts or *tambon*, and villages or *mu ban*. Metropolitan Bangkok is administered by an elected governor; it is subdivided into 50 districts called *khet* in Thai.⁶

Royal Anthem

The royal anthem, whose lyrics acclaim the realm embodied in His Majesty the King, is played on occasions such as state ceremonies and functions graced by Their Majesties and Members of the Royal Family, as well as at events where people gather such as concerts, theatre performances,

⁴ For detailed information, see the chapter entitled “The Land and Its People”.

⁵ For detailed information, see the chapter entitled “Culture, Arts, Religions”.

⁶ For detailed information, see the chapter entitled “Government and Policy”.

cinema shows, and sports events. The sentiments expressed through the lyrical and musical rendition mirror the people's sentiments of adoration and respect for their monarch.⁷



National Flag

Thailand's national flag is composed of five horizontal bands of red, white and blue. The central blue band represents the monarchy and occupies one-third. It is flanked by two narrow bands of white which represent religion and *in toto* equal one-third. They are flanked by two narrow, outer bands in red which represent the nation and *in toto* equal one-third. This tricolour was introduced by royal command of King

Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910-1925) in 1917. It replaced a flag in which a white elephant was placed against a red background.

National Anthem

The national anthem is played on all ceremonial occasions of national importance, and also daily while the national flag is being hoisted at eight o'clock in the morning and lowered at six o'clock in the evening. The literal translation of its text reads as follows:

The nation is made up of the Thai.

It is a nation of Thai in every part of the land.

It has maintained its rule because the Thai have always been united.

The Thai people are peace-loving, but they are not cowards in times of war.

They shall not allow others to take away their freedom.

The Thai are ready to sacrifice every drop of their blood for the nation.

National Emblem

The royal and national emblem is the *Garuda*, a mythical figure, half bird, half human, that adorns many items associated with the monarchy. All government offices have the *Garuda* incorporated into their insignia. Moreover, the *Garuda* symbol is awarded at the personal discretion of His Majesty the King to business enterprises that rendered outstanding charitable services to the country's society and strengthened its economy. Such honorific award is rarely bestowed and, hence, held in high esteem.



⁷ For detailed information, see the chapter entitled "Modern Monarchy".


National Day

December 5, the date when His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej was born, is also celebrated as the Thai national day.

Economy

GNP (2006) at current prices was approximately 7,657 billion baht or US\$ 202.12 billion. Total merchandise exports in 2006 amounted to the approximate value of 4,838 billion baht or US\$ 127.72 billion, and merchandise imports were valued at approximately 4,804 billion baht or US\$ 126.81 billion.⁸

Traditional Dress

Although there is no official national dress, certain features of a traditional dress were adopted and can be seen on both formal and informal occasions. For women, it is a full-length *pha sin*, a rectangular piece of cloth worn like a skirt or sarong, mostly made of silk. The *pha sin* may be of any colour and usually has a contrasting, ornamental border above the hem. It is complemented by a long-sleeved silk blouse. On formal occasions a sash may be worn across the chest from the left shoulder to the right edge of the waist. For men, the traditional dress consists of trousers and a *suea phra ratchathan*, either a short-sleeved shirt as casual dress or a shirt with long sleeves for formal occasions, both with a stand-up collar. On formal occasions, a cummerbund is tied around the waist. 



⁸ For detailed information, see the chapters entitled “Agriculture”, “Industry on the Move”, “Trade and Services”, “Health Strategy and Policy”, and “Private-sector Role in the National Economy”.