

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Cummings first came to Thailand in 1977 and two years later began researching Southeast Asian art history for a master's degree at the University of California at Berkeley. He has written more than 30 guidebooks on countries in Asia and North America, and authored several books on Buddhist archaeology, Thai design and related topics. His works include *Buddhist Stupas in Asia*, *Lanna Renaissance*, *Burmese Design and Architecture* and *Chiang Mai Style*.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Dan White spent two decades capturing images and stories in South and Southeast Asia. Initially based in Paris and then London, he later made his home in Bangkok. He did pioneering work on India, particularly in revealing the complex world of Hindu ascetics, and also in Cambodia, celebrating the end of war. His work has appeared in *The Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Marie Claire*, *The Observer* and the *South China Morning Post*.

Joe Cummings and Dan White have also collaborated on *Sacred Tattoos of Thailand: Exploring the Magic, Masters and Mystery of Sak Yan* (published by Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2011).



Buddhist Temples of Thailand is the first book to bring together all the archetypal examples of this diverse architectural form from across the country's regions. More than 200 specially commissioned photographs bring the temples to life, shedding light on their key architectural features, regional styles, historic murals and prominent Buddha images. Famous temples in major cities are presented alongside little-known but historically significant *wats* located off the beaten path.

The *wat* plays a dynamic role in everyday life in Thailand, as both a spiritual centre and a social institution. This fascinating tour of 42 iconic examples vividly conveys their ubiquity and variety, and in tracing the historical development of Buddhism and temple-building, celebrates the enduring quality of these architectural and spiritual landmarks throughout the kingdom.

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JOE CUMMINGS
DAN WHITE

BUDDHIST TEMPLES OF THAILAND

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BUDDHIST TEMPLES OF THAILAND

A VISUAL JOURNEY
THROUGH THAILAND'S
42 MOST HISTORIC WATS

REVISED AND EXPANDED

TEXT
JOE CUMMINGS

PHOTOGRAPHY
DAN WHITE

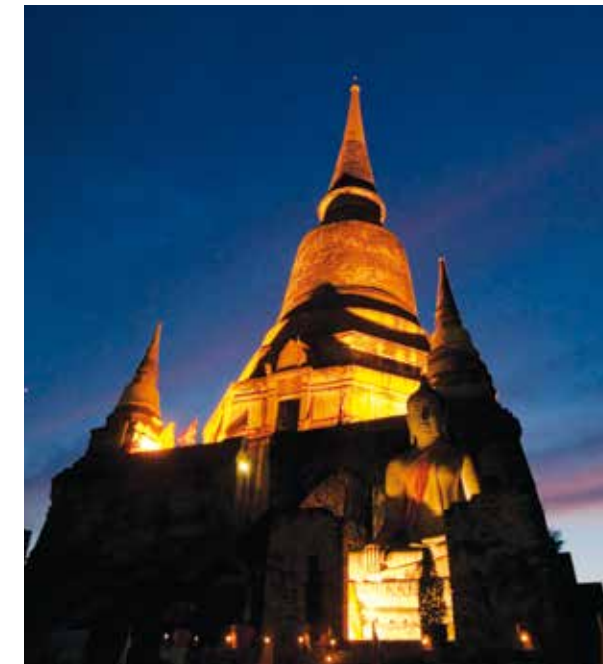
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BUDDHIST TEMPLES OF THAILAND

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A VISUAL JOURNEY THROUGH THAILAND'S 42 MOST HISTORIC WATS



THIRD EDITION

TEXT BY JOE CUMMINGS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN WHITE

For Rev

DAN WHITE
PHOTOGRAPHER AND FRIEND
26 APRIL 1965 — 20 SEPTEMBER 2012

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Published by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International



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Other Marshall Cavendish Offices
Marshall Cavendish Corporation. 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA •
Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd. 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road,
Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd,
Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor
Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Cummings, Joe, 1952- | White, Dan, 1965-2012 photographer.
Title: Buddhist temples of Thailand : a visual journey through Thailand's 42 most historic wats /
text by Joe Cummings ; photography by Dan White.
Description: Third edition. | Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, [2019]
Identifier(s): OCN 1066227171 | ISBN 978-981-4828-80-2
Subject(s): LCSH: Buddhist temples—Thailand. | Buddhist architecture—Thailand. | Buddhist art—
Thailand. | Thailand—Religious life and customs.
Classification: DDC 294.343509593—dc23

Project Editors: Greg Lowe (Thailand), Melvin Neo (Singapore). Designer: Mark Soo/Shy Designs
All photos by Dan White except pages 60 (Madison Images); 58–59, 61, 92–93 (Luca Tettoni);
66–69, 228–231 (Andy Zingo); 179 (Tourism Authority of Thailand).

The Publisher acknowledges the sponsorship of Bangkok Glass Industry Co., Ltd and Boon Rawd
Trading International Co., Ltd towards the publication of the first edition of this book (2010).



Printed in Singapore



For Review only





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FOREWORD

GREG LOWE

This book, in many ways, was born from frustration.

In 2008, after eight years living in Thailand, a fair portion of which had been spent working in the local publishing and bookselling industry, I still had not found a single title that covered both the history and regional diversity of one of the country's most iconic structures – the Buddhist temple.

There were books exploring temples (*wat* in Thai) in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and the ruins of Ayuthaya and Sukhothai. Some delved into Buddhism's role in Thai culture, while others cast light on temple traditions in a broader context. But there was no single offering that attempted to encapsulate the development of Buddhism in Thailand and its interplay with the rise and fall of empires and their temple-building programmes.

A conversation with Joe Cummings – a Southeast Asian art-history expert with 30 years' experience writing travel books on the region – confirmed that he too had found no such book, despite extensive research on the subject. He *would* like to write one, however, he said.

There was a gap in the market, a hole to be plugged. Frustration transformed into action. We were on.

The initial challenge was setting the criteria for temple selection. First, we decided that all the *wats* should be historically significant due to their distinctive art and architecture. Where possible, they should be active living temples – in Thailand a *wat* is only really a *wat* if occupied by five or more monks. But these rules could bend to avoid missing some of the country's best known and most significant sites such as Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok and Wat Mahathat in Sukhothai.

Fortunately, Joe has a near unfathomable knowledge of such things and he produced a list of 40 temples that fit the bill. No mean feat considering Thailand has more than 31,000 temples dotted across the country.

Logistics was the next challenge. There was a four-month window from late-November 2008 to early-April 2009 when the weather and light would be optimal. Photographer Dan White, a keen motorcyclist, set out on an epic 12,000-km road trip, a journey which would

make him one of a select few to have visited so many of these temples, let alone shoot them.

Dan's experience as a photojournalist and writer has enabled him to develop a repertoire of skills to face seemingly impossible challenges. These would prove useful: not only would he have to ride along treacherous roads half shutter-blind and fighting off the self-repeating Buddha images that were forever burned onto his retina, he would often arrive at a location to find the temple's doors locked and have to use his seven words of Thai and a host of gestures to gain entry. He succeeded on all occasions but one.

Next, it was down to designer Mark Soo to sift through more than 6,000 images and select the final cut and then structure and lay out the book.

Now we have the end result. The first book to cover Thailand's 40 most historic temples, and one that is comprised entirely of commissioned photography save for a handful of pictures. The book breaks ground by bringing together the history of temple development, the *wat's* continual role in daily life and a collection of popular temples and rare, hidden gems. It breaks ground again with Joe's original research, which for the first time sheds light on elements such as the intricate carvings on the eastern *gopura* at Phanom Rung.

This new edition has been updated to include two important temples, Wat Ratchanatdaram in Bangkok and Wat Phra Kaew in Chiang Rai, adding to an as yet unmatched body of work on this important component of Thai culture and architecture.

The team involved with the book are proud to see the publication of a new edition. It is, however, also a time for reflection. On 20 September 2012, Dan White passed away suddenly. He is sorely missed by his friends and colleagues, but his spirit lives on through his work, which includes *Sacred Tattoos of Thailand*, also written by Joe Cummings and published by Marshall Cavendish.

We hope this book inspires you on the fascinating subject of Thai temples as much as it did Dan and the rest of us.

FOREWORD

JOE CUMMINGS

From the gilt grandeur of Bangkok’s royal *wats* to the candied teak of northern Lanna temples and the virtual sermons carved in stone at northeastern Angkor-era *prasat hin*, Thailand’s Buddhist monasteries have, along with the celebrated cuisine, become part of the nation’s cultural legacy. For over three decades I’ve been privileged to contemplate the Buddhist art and architecture of Thailand, and beyond that, to experience a living temple culture. Along with learning about the *wat*’s varied forms and functions, I’ve been touched by the everyday wisdom of the *buddhadharma*.

Although such wisdom is not confined within monastery walls, for me the *wat* institution — part of a lineage dating back to India’s first Buddhist monasteries nearly 2000 years ago — serves as a tangible and ubiquitous reminder that I’m not alone in appreciating the teachings of Gautama Buddha. When I’m away from Thailand or its Buddhist neighbours in Southeast Asia for more than a few weeks, I miss the easy solace afforded by a stroll amid the stupas, open chapels and chanting monks.

One reason many of us have become so hooked on temple-hopping in Thailand no doubt springs from the fact that the monuments are simply so accessible. Like your neighbourhood 7-eleven, *wats* aren’t closed on weekends or full moon days. You don’t have to be Buddhist to enter, and in even the strictest religious settings they’re open to all, regardless of race, nationality, gender or social class.

Somerset Maugham, the English writer whose works spanned both the 19th and 20th centuries, published two famous comments on the Buddhist temples of Thailand. “They are unlike anything in the world, so that you are taken aback, and you cannot fit them into the scheme of the things you know,” he opined. “It makes you laugh with delight to think that anything so fantastic could exist on this sombre earth.” The other, less flattering

impression, written while he was coming down with malaria in Bangkok in 1923: “The *wats* oppressed me by their garish magnificence, making my head ache.”

The numbers alone put a strain on one’s imagination. According to Thailand’s Department of Religious Affairs, there were a total of 40,717 registered *wats* in the country as of 2004, of which roughly 34,000 were functioning monasteries, that is, occupied by Buddhist monks.

The 42 temples featured encapsulate the major styles and eras in terms of political history, art and architecture. A number of the selections are iconic, whether in terms of Thai nationhood or as attractions for foreign visitors. Most of them are the finest examples of their era, while the remainder boast noteworthy artistic innovation.

Many people have mentored and inspired me along the Thai temple trail, of which I’d like to single out three. Professor Joanna Williams gave me the basic skills for conducting original research in art history, and taught me how to cultivate the background knowledge to make use of those skills. His Serene Highness Prince Subhadris Diskul, the finest art historian Thailand has ever produced, offered encouraging words of advice and has inspired me more than any other Thai scholar. Finally without the writings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, I would never have come to Thailand in the first place.

Once you’re on the temple trail, you may find you can’t stop. At first you’re in awe of the history, the design and the details. In a short while, they may start to look all the same. But after you’ve walked inside 10, or 20, or 50, you begin to notice the myriad differences between even the most similar. You develop preferences and then, in a few years, abandon them. Along the way you pick up on the *wat*’s social dimension, which adds considerable depth to one’s appreciation.

I hope you enjoy the journey as much as we have.

FOREWORD

DAN WHITE

This book started for me with a list. Assignments often do. Greg Lowe, the initiator of this project, and Joe Cummings, the author and well-known Thailand expert, sent over the photographic shoot list for me to follow. Some of the names I knew — places I had worked before. Most I had never heard of.

I looked at the maps and worked out the routes and the roads. This was to become more than a series of photoshoots. Looking at the obscure and diverse nature of the locations I realised it was best to approach it as one long motorcycle trip. For those who enjoy motorcycle touring, Thailand is something special. With piles of camera kit strapped onto a smallish but very reliable locally assembled Kawasaki cruiser, I set off from Bangkok to Mae Hong Son via the stunning border road over the rugged hills from Mae Sot. Then from Chiang Mai to Nan, via Lampang, and on past the lake at Phayao. On again down huge eight-lane highways and up dusty tracks, past southern beaches of pristine tropical sand. From the furthest northern points where hill tribe people cultivate rice and tea on steeply stepped mountain paddies, to the deepest south where the fishermen of Songkhla speak harshly and quickly as they mend their nets in small, rough commercial ports on plastic-bag strewn beaches. Then on to Isan, the heart of the country in many ways, over sugar palm and rice-field covered flatlands. In all it took 12,000 km of motorcycling to cover every location on the list.

The list became a voyage of historical discovery. Starting with the first location, the well-known wonders of Wat Mahathat in Sukhothai, the second location I was sent to was 60 km from the main temple sites — Wat Chao Chan. It took some finding. I eventually found myself driving down a heavily wooded jungle path miles from the main temple complexes and historical parks. I arrived in a clearing. It was utterly Khmer. The bright afternoon sunshine flooded

through the trees, creating javelins of light silhouetting a structure that was unmistakably straight from the heart of Angkor — all these hundreds of miles north of Angkor Wat itself or the exquisite satellite temples of Phimai or Phanom Rung. A deserted outpost of a long-gone empire seemingly lost in the woods. All that history packed into this tiny, atmospheric, leafy and deserted place.

I never knew what Joe had in store for me next. Nan in the far north of Thailand remains a treasure trove of the most beautiful architecture and fascinating traditional culture. More hidden gems around Chiang Mai and Lampang — places that even many locals have never heard of such as Wat Lai Hin or Wat Ton Kwen. Fading, elegant and exquisite testaments to craftsmen and priests from a distant era, the details were often spellbinding. The tiny delicate relief sculptures of a greedy cat tracking a clueless and possibly doomed bird on a gate to a place that initially seemed crumbling. A faded painting in a far corner of Buddha in his last moments.

Isan is a place of historical wonder and robustly welcoming hospitality. Thai, Lao, and Khmer all mixed up in a hotch-potch of architecture, rural kindness and fiery, fiery food. That Phanom, and the Angkor-style temples in Khorat and Buriram remain dramatic testaments to the flow of empire and the skill of ancient architects.

Bangkok is home to some of the world’s most spectacular religious buildings. The list, however, revealed other lesser-known treasures. In small crumbling structures down hidden lanes, locked ordination halls contain ancient murals, lost statues and amazing light.

Thailand is a country where people flock from all over the world to enjoy famously splendid historical treasures. Not everyone realises, however, what other riches are hidden or unknown — from north to south and east to west. Enjoy.

For Rev



ERAS AND EMPIRES

POWER, BUDDHISM AND THE EVOLUTION OF WATS IN THAILAND

Around the 1st century AD, according to Cambodian legend, an Indian noble called Kaundinya arrived on the shores of mainland Southeast Asia as commanded in a dream. Wielding a sacred lance, he conquered the new land and married Soma, a half-human, half-serpent Cambodian queen. Together, they are said to have established a kingdom along the southern reach of the Mekong River. Although the facts are obscured by myth, this story – of which there are several regional variations – symbolises a general truth accepted by scholars today, that Indian immigrants to Southeast Asia in the early centuries of the first Christian millennium intermarried with the natives and created a new culture.

This culture laid Indian religion and art over indigenous custom in a way that fused the two traditions into one. Perhaps much as ‘Westernisation’ – not to mention the influences of nearby Japan, China and Korea – affects Southeast Asia today, the ‘Indianisation’ of Asia west of the Annamite Mountains franchised Shiva and Buddha.

The Chinese, who were the first and only outsiders to write about this era in Southeast Asian history, knew the kingdom as Funan. Essentially no architecture from the Funan empire remains, but since Hinduism appears to have dominated Funan, it’s unlikely any Buddhist monuments were erected.

Thai chronicles assert that during the 3rd century BC, India’s King Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries east to a land called Suvarnabhumi (Golden Land). Suvarnabhumi was a loose collection of principalities based in an impressively fertile area stretching from southern Myanmar, across central Thailand, and into western Cambodia. If these early Buddhist visitors sponsored or inspired temple construction, none has ever been verifiably documented, despite regional

legends claiming that certain present-day architecture – such as Thailand’s Phra Pathom Chedi – were built over monuments dating to this period. However there seems little doubt that by the 1st century AD, Buddhism had accompanied Indian traders to mainland Southeast Asia. As the religion became accepted locally, shrines, stupas, temples and monasteries followed.

As an important commercial relay point between India and Cambodia to the west and east, and between China and the Malay-Indonesian archipelago to the south, the area now occupied by the Thai nation was criss-crossed with religious and cultural influences from many differing sources. Between the 6th and 11th centuries, the Mon of central Thailand adapted an array of Indian styles – principally Gupta – to produce Buddhist art, of which today remains a broad selection of portable art objects such as Buddha figures and votive tablets. Inscriptions left behind by this sophisticated Mon Buddhist kingdom called Buddhist art Dvaravati, a name borrowed from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*.

The Dvaravati Mon no doubt built temples, but none remain even partially standing today. Another Mon kingdom called Hariphunchai, however, flourished in northern Thailand from the 11th to 13th centuries and left behind several Buddhist monuments, including the unique, stepped-pyramid style Chedi Kukut. This stupa bears a striking resemblance to the Satmahal Prasada in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka.

Expanding Khmer influence in the region partially absorbed Mon culture, and the Angkor Empire eventually annexed central Thailand’s Mon homelands. Between the 9th and 13th centuries, the empire’s emissaries built Angkor-style Hindu monuments in what is now northeastern Thailand and as far west as Lopburi and Kanchanaburi.



WAT ARUN

BANGKOK

German architect Karl Döhring, in his seminal 1920 study of Thai temples, noted that Wat Arun, with its lofty and richly decorated stupa, had an effect on Bangkok's cityscape that was not unlike that of monumental church towers in Europe. Nearly a century later his comment still rings true. Even though the capital has become packed with skyscrapers, the 82-metre high stupa still dominates the banks of the Chao Phraya River opposite the city's royal district, Ko Ratanakosin.

King Taksin the Great, who had moved Siam's capital to Thonburi after the 500-year reign of Ayuthaya was brought to an end by a Burmese invasion in 1767, chose the spot where Wat Arun now stands for his palace and royal temple. These were built on the ruins of an earlier temple known as Wat Makok (Monastery of the Hog Plums, whence 'Bangkok' also derived its name). Taksin called his new royal temple Wat Jaeng.

After Taksin's own court executed him in 1782 because he had allegedly gone mad, a new dynasty established its capital across the river from Wat Jaeng, abandoning the temple to the elements. Under the second and third Chakri monarchs it was built anew during the first half of the 19th century and was renamed Wat Arun, after Aruna, the Hindu god of the dawn, commemorating the fact that Taksin had originally come upon the site at dawn.

As was once traditional for most Thai temples, a stupa was built first. One of the most emblematic of Buddhist structures anywhere in the country, Wat Arun's stunning stupa was built in the form of a *prang*, a term the Thais use for stupas that feature the Khmer-influenced 'corncob' shape with a smoothly curving, reticulated superstructure. The stupa's brick core was decorated with a multi-hued mosaic of Chinese porcelain shards embedded in plaster, a common technique used in the early Ratanakosin period.





Pages 78-79: The iconic
prang at Wat Arun,
illuminated at night.

Left: These murals in the bot
at Wat Arun depict court
attendants resting inside
the walls of Ko Ratanakosin,
while a royal procession takes
place outside.



A steep, narrow maze of stairways climbs about halfway up the stupa. Projecting skyward from the stupa pinnacle is an iron *vajra* (thunderbolt), a symbolic weapon belonging to Indra, the king of the Hindu pantheon. This is yet another testimony to the monument's Khmer antecedents, most of which were Khmer Hindu temples. The stupa's four main niches hold green-hued images of Indra and his three-headed white elephant Airvata (Erawan to the Thais). Meanwhile sculptures of angels, monkey deities and guardian giants 'support' each of the stupa's three terraces.

At each of four cardinal points around the *prang*

stands a richly ornamented *mondop* (open shrine hall), containing Buddha images representing the sage's birth (north *mondop*), enlightenment (east), first sermon (south), and final passing into nirvana (west). Four smaller stupas, holding Buddha images that face the central stupa, stand at the subcardinal points.

Wat Arun's *bot* holds a Buddha image designed by Rama II himself, whose ashes are buried in the base. Murals inside were painted in a typical Ratanakosin format by order of Rama V. Standing to the south of the *bot*, the *wihan* is the largest building in the monastery compound.

Above: *Thewada* (celestial beings) sculptures 'support' various levels of the *prang* at Wat Arun.

Right: A very steep and narrow stairway leads up the side of the great *prang* to the last terrace before the spire.





For Review only

WAT BENCHAMABOPHIT

BANGKOK

An earlier monastery on this site, called Wat Laem or Wat Saithong and dating to the Ayuthaya era (1350–1767), was replaced in 1826 after a prince and his four siblings established a line of defence at the old temple against an invading army from Laos. The army never reached Bangkok, having been halted in Nakhon Ratchasima, and in gratitude, Rama III ordered the reconstruction of the temple as Wat Benchabophit, ‘Five Princes Monastery.’

Rama V, while building a new royal palace nearby at the end of the 19th century, restored the temple further in 1899. His half-brother Prince Naris designed a new *bot* with an unusual cruciform floor plan, possibly inspired by European church architecture, covering the walls and floors with imported white Carrara marble at considerable expense. The *wat* was re-christened Wat Benchamabophit, meaning ‘Monastery of the Fifth King,’ in deference to Rama V. The king ordained as monk here for 15 days in 1873 after having already served as king for five years. It was his second time in Buddhist robes, having earlier taken novice ordination at Wat Bowonniwet in 1866.

The principal Buddha image inside the *bot* was forged in Phitsanulok in 1920 and is an exact copy

of the famous flame-haloed Phra Jinnarat from the same city. After Rama V passed away, his ashes were interred in the base of the image. Backed by an unorthodox, illuminated blue wall, the image altar is considered one of the most beautiful in Thailand. Stained glass windows with Buddhist designs offer another architectural innovation.

The cloistered courtyard behind the *bot* contains 53 Buddha images representing famous styles from all over Thailand and other Buddhist countries. There is also a large banyan tree grown from a cutting taken from a tree in Bodh Gaya, India, beneath which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment.

To the east of the *bot* stands a dhamma lecture hall built in 1902 by Queen Sawang Vadhana, the paternal grandmother of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. It commemorates her son, Crown Prince Maha Vajirunhis, who had succumbed to typhoid in 1895 at the age of 17. The two-storey brick building, with its elaborately carved gables, was used on Buddhist holy days by Rama V when he wanted to hear dhamma sermons. A canal crossed by three arched bridges made from red-painted steel separates the main temple area from the monastic living quarters.



Pages 92-93: The late-19th century *bot* at Wat Benchamabophit has one of the most immediately recognisable profiles of any temple in the capital.

Above: A curved bridge over a canal in the vast temple compound.

Right: The principal Buddha image at Wat Benchamabophit, inspired by Phitsanulok's Phra Chinnarat, is displayed against a striking blue background.



For Review only

WAT PHRA SI RATANA MAHATHAT

SUKHOTHAI HISTORICAL PARK

Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, which translates as Monastery of the Great Sacred Royal Gem Relic, is one of the oldest and most significant Buddhist monastery ruins in Thailand. Once a far-flung Angkor satellite state, as the Angkor Empire's power waned in the early-13th century, the principality declared its independence under Thai chieftain Phaya Si Intharathit in 1238. Si Intharathit called the new Thai kingdom 'Sukhothai,' the Dawn of Happiness.

Sukhothai's third king, Ram Khamhaeng (Rama the Brave, 1279–1317), forged an important alliance with Lanna to the north, enabling him to expand the kingdom's influence to include most of present-day Thailand, western Cambodia, the entire Malayan Peninsula and Laos. The learned monarch also sponsored the codification of the Thai alphabet, and left behind the

oldest known piece of Thai writing – a stone slab inscription dating to 1292.

Before Sukhothai was annexed to the Ayuthaya kingdom (Siam) in central Thailand in 1376, its scholars and artists had helped forge key components of the Thai national identity, including literature and architecture. Sukhothai temple art and architecture combined Khmer, Thai, Sinhalese and Mon influences to forge a distinct Sukhothai flavour. Unfortunately the kingdom's grand architecture was nearly forgotten as the centre of power moved to Ayuthaya and later to Bangkok and the neglected ancient site fell into ruin until a government restoration project was approved in 1976. In 1988, the old city site was opened to the public as Sukhothai Historical Park, and in 1991 UNESCO added the site to its World Heritage list.

For Review only

Pages 190–191: The principal Buddha image, illuminated just after sunset.

Right: A series of restored Buddha sculptures line the base of the main stupa.





Above: Travelling Buddhist monks admire the partially restored temple.

Right: A sitting Buddha, a stupa and a pediment are all that remain of this *wihan*.

Pages 196-197: A collection of classic Sukhothai stupas.

The 70-sq. km park contains 193 ruin sites, including the remains of the royal palace and 26 monasteries, of which the largest is Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat. Surrounded by laterite walls and a moat roughly 200 metres on each side, the monastery features 198 stupas, a principal *wihan*, 10 secondary *wihan* and a *bot*. The main stupa, believed to contain Buddha relics, exhibits Sukhothai's characteristic lotus-bud finial, relic box, dome and three-tiered base. Some original stucco reliefs of animals, angels and demons remain visible.

Huge columns standing in front of the stupa, and their base, are the only remains of a large *wihan* which once contained a bronze sitting Buddha image cast in 1362 and now installed at Wat Suthat in Bangkok. A smaller brick *wihan* nearby contains an eight-metre high sitting Buddha.



