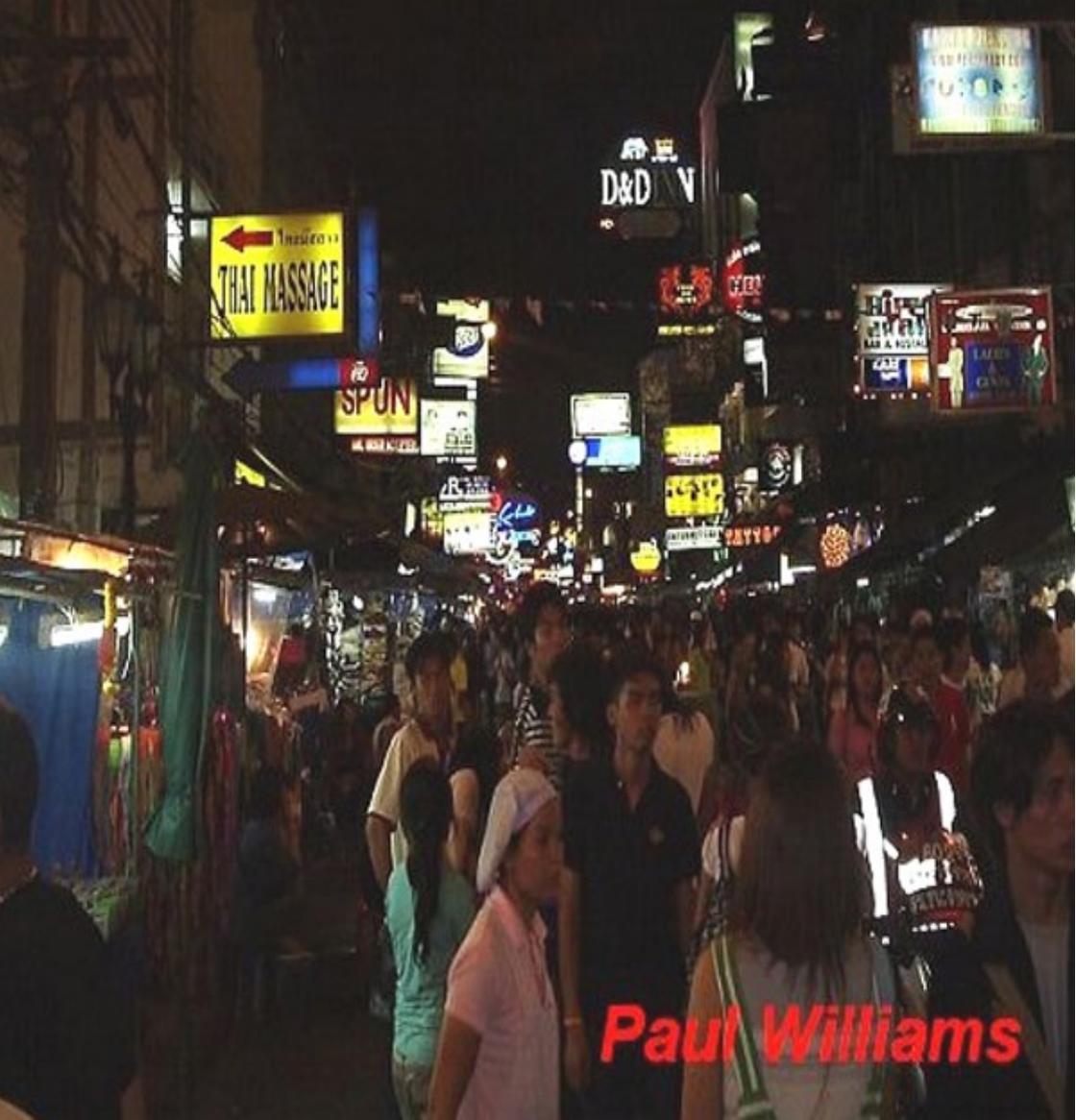


Bangkok A-Z.... On the cheap



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BANGKOK A-Z

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This book is an A-Z look at Bangkok, based on six months experience, from getting the right accommodation, visa runs, getting a visa for your girlfriend, where to eat and drink, plus lots more and doing it all within budget. I have also written short accounts on events that took place, from a military coup, taking in a world cup and a visit to the intriguing Phnom Penh in Cambodia. I hope this book will give prospective long stayers in Bangkok an insight to living there, whether it is with a partner, working, or just holidaying, with some helpful tips and advice that will make your trip a success...

A

Accommodation

Bangkok is home to many hotels for your short holiday, however, in this section I'm going to concentrate on your longer stay traveller. I knew I was coming out to Thailand for six months and decided that Bangkok was going to be my base for that period of time. Now there is some prep work you can do before coming out here. For long stay travellers your best bet is going to be renting a condo/apartment, unless you have got bags of money and want all the trappings of a good hotel. There are many serviced apartments in Bangkok that cater for all budgets, from the very basic, to your plush condo with all mod cons. Thanks to the Internet you can go to Bangkok with some of the hard work done and out of the way. The site that I used and provided me with the condo I ended up staying in was www.mrroomfinder.com, another you can try is www.bangkok-home.com. There are many others, a good place to get addresses from is www.thaivisa.com, under their accommodation section. So when you start your search, you need to think of the following things:

- **What is my monthly budget?**

You can pick up a standard apartment for as little as 6000bt a month, or live in luxury up around the 60000bt a month, there is a huge market out there. Dependent on how much savings you have available, plus any income you may have coming in, you need to think carefully how much you can commit each month on the rent. Remember most apartments, condos will have a minimum stay of at least three months, so it's important you do not overstretch yourself. Many of the websites you can use allow you to search on what amount you are prepared to pay, for example all properties in Bangkok up to 10000bt a month and so on.

- **Where to stay?**

Personally I could not tell you anything about Bangkok's districts before I came out here, so had no idea what would be a good place to reside in. Many will not surprisingly be drawn to the Sukhumvit area, which in many ways for a lot of us is home from home, a real touristy area that has everything you need all within a reasonably close vicinity. But what comes with that are generally high rental costs, so like me, you may have to look elsewhere. What district you decide on is pretty irrelevant but for one thing. How far the nearest BTS/MRT station is from your accommodation. As long as it is close, then location wise you cannot go wrong. Not surprisingly any accommodation on the rental market will be a bit pricier if near a station, but the prices are still very favourable. Most of the accommodation search sites will give a little information on where the nearest BTS/MRT station is to a property, sometimes this is useful, if they give you some sort of estimated distance or walking time, other times not so, it may just give the name of the nearest station, but it ends up actually being 15km away! So keep an open mind on this, as it will only be when you visit a lot of these apartments will you really know the proper distance.

- **Is a one room studio going to be enough for six months or do you need a separate bedroom?**

My first thought was get a standard one room apartment, as they are cheaper and that will do me, but then I put some thought into it, I was going to be staying with my girlfriend, and with both of us not working the likelihood was we would be spending a considerable amount of time with each other. So I looked at a condo with the extra room, this puts the price up compared to a one room apartment, but it's important your surroundings are right, and the extra room can give you some space when you need it. That said if I had been going out there on my own, then a single room apartment would suffice. So if there are two of you and your budget stretches to it, this is something you need to consider.

- **Is there a minimum length of stay on the apartment contract?**

Most of the apartments/condos you check out on the net hopefully will advise the minimum length of stay. Some will not though, so you need to contact them to find this out. There's no point considering a place if the minimum stay is a year when you are only there for six months.

- **Are you going to need kitchen facilities?**

Taking an apartment/condo that has kitchen facilities will increase the rent by some amount. But before you write off the idea, take into account eating costs based over the period of time you are going to be here, you possibly will eat mainly in restaurants, if in a tourist area, the cost will mount up. By taking a place with kitchen facilities you could end up with a considerable saving. Also consider that by having a kitchen area you can have plates, cups etc which means you do not always have

to eat out of cartons!

Plenty of the websites that are out there allow you to search on things such as, number of rooms, kitchen facilities, etc therefore making things easier.

As you search, you will no doubt find apartments/condos that you like, you may find one that you think is perfect, and think why bother looking for anymore? Well I would advise that you get as many possibles as you can, as you don't know what you will find when you get there, as they say do not put all your eggs in one basket! One last thing to do before heading out, contact any of your possibles, and find out if they have availability for your dates.

- **On arrival in Bangkok**

Once you arrive in Bangkok, it is time to go and see the properties that you short-listed. Allow yourself plenty of time to go and see them, I initially booked a hotel for a couple of nights, then booked an extra night as I was still undecided. I had several places short listed, all very different, the first was a more expensive condo, probably above what I was looking for, but had some great advantages of being right by a BTS station, and having full kitchen facilities. Their site on the web was impressive, the rooms looked spacious, and the furniture looked as good as new. I really went there expecting to sign on the dotted line, but it turned out to be my first lesson. The taxi pulled up outside the apartment block, I told my girlfriend that I thought the driver had taken us to the wrong place, but no it was right. I didn't jump to any conclusions though and thought wait and see the rooms. Well I could just about make the room out based on the photos they had on the website, but other than that, it was a huge disappointment, the furniture was old, the kitchen area was less than impressive, and in all honesty I couldn't wait to get out of there. First lesson, do not take the photos on any website at face value! Some fancy camera work can make anything look good.

Slightly deflated it was onto property number two in the Sathorn area. Now this one did not have many photos, so did not really know what to expect, it was cheap though, around the 7000bt per month, though only one room. When we got there, again it was disappointment, the room was tiny, and I really could not see us lasting there for six months. They did have much bigger apartments, which had potential, but unfortunately there were none available.

The next day followed a similar pattern, seeing a couple of other places, but the rooms were so small, it was at this point I realised that a two roomed condo was going to be a better option. So it was another night's stay at the hotel, with only one more place I had made a note of back home that we could go and see.

P.Thana Tower was located in the Lad Prao district, the website for this place again looked impressive, it seemed to be a building that had been totally renovated, and had just opened. Certainly the photos of the rooms looked good, with new furniture, but I was not getting my hopes up. On arrival to the sales office, we were met by a member of staff who took us round to the building, again the building didn't look as impressive as on the website and on entrance my gut feeling was this was going to be another let down. However I was pleasantly surprised. First we went to the two-roomed condo, it was just like on the photos, looked as though it was brand

new and all the furniture looked fresh out of the box. Indeed they were still finishing up on a few things. The complex also had an impressive swimming pool and a gym that had some dated equipment but was to be updated a few months later. The two roomed condos were 15000bt pm. They also showed us a one roomed apartment, these were also good, and looked good value at 8000bt pm. We decided though our heart was set on the two roomed one and went for that. So it's a case of being patient, the right place is out there, do not be afraid to stay in a hotel a few extra days if it means getting things right. Once you say, "yes ill take it" its paperwork time, which can be fun!

- **The Contract**

I think I am now qualified to tell you the do's and don'ts when it comes to the apartment contract. I have to hold my hands up and admit to a catalogue of errors when it came to signing the paperwork, and I do look back in disbelief in how neglectful I was, but as they say you learn from your mistakes, and I feel that I can pass on this advice with some authority!

When you get the contract, take time out and read it!!! Your first problem may arise here, if you are in a non-tourist area, the contract will more than likely be in Thai. I think I was a little unlucky in that my contract was in Thai and all the sales staff didn't speak a word of English, however I did have my Thai girlfriend with me, which should have helped. I think I was a little too eager to put pen to paper, I knew it was 15000bt a month, and that they needed three months advance, so what else was there too know?

- **What you information you need**

1. What is the monthly rent?
2. Do you pay anything else, like maintenance fees, security etc?
3. The money you give up front, what is the breakdown? two months bond, one month rent? one month's bond, two months rent?
4. What is the minimum length of stay?
5. What day do I pay the rent and are there penalties for being late?
6. When do I get my deposit back? Specific date necessary in case you return home.
7. What do you take out of the deposit? any redecorating fees, cleaning etc?

If you get a contract in English, you should get all these answers, if not, ask them, so you do not get any nasty surprises as the months go by, and get a copy of the contract for yourself so you can refer to it during your stay. If it is in Thai and say for here sake the staff do not speak good English, then do not rush into anything. If you can take a Thai person along with you this should help, but clearly give the questions you want asking prior to going, if you just think up questions there and then, you will more than likely have misunderstandings and miss vital questions, like I did. If you do not have a Thai person to go with you, get a copy of the contract and take it to a place that you can get it translated before signing anything. Ok it will cost you some money, but in the long run it may save you lots more.

In my case, the first thing that cropped up was at the end of my first month. I

had thought I'd paid three months rent in advance, however I had not, I had paid the first month, and two months deposit. No real problem here, but threw me a bit in terms of how I was managing my money. Next up was the water bill at the end of the first month. On the same bill we had a charge of 1400bt, which my girlfriend advised me was to do with the maintenance and security upkeep. So it was a call to the office and my girlfriend got it sorted, there had been a mistake, only owners and not people that were renting had to pay this. If I had been on my own I probably would have paid it not knowing any better. This was not any fault of ours, more the sales office not informing the staff at the apartment block, but again if you are clear about what exactly you pay for at the contract stage, you would know it was an error.

Third up was the minimum length of stay, I cannot believe we did not clarify this at the time we signed up, anyway, I went on a website relating to the property that we were staying in, to email the details to a friend, when low and behold I spot the words, "minimum length of stay 1 year"

Blind panic set in here, what about my deposit!!! Now I wasn't in a totally hopeless position, as I had the fall back of an email I had sent to the sales department prior to arriving to Bangkok, in which I enquired the monthly cost for a six-month stay. Nowhere in there reply did they say that the minimum contract was for a year, so I had a bit of hope. So girlfriend on the phone again to explain the situation, in which we were advised it probably would not be a problem, but a couple of days before we go, contact the owner and discuss it with them to see if you can get all or some of your deposit back. I was not happy with that, as it would mean not knowing until the last moment, and all the worry to go with it. I emailed them, as I knew someone, somewhere new some English as the previous email reply from them was in English. I copied in the old email showing that I had said a six-month stay and so on. To be fair they replied and asked us to go into the office and a new contract could be signed for six months. Phew!

A quite few months passed with no more surprises, when I decided to get a copy of the contract for visa purposes. This time I got my girlfriend to go through it meticulously which I should have done originally. It brought to light the following:

- **Monthly rent must be paid between 23-28 of the month**

Well, one month I missed those dates as away, so it was a 100bt penalty for each day, so totalled 300bt. Thankfully I had been on time all the other months. On reading some web forums regarding similar issues I became aware that there are plenty of places that will financially penalise you far more, in some cases 1000bt a day.

The next thing I found out about is the set charge you get when leaving. You pay a fee for the redecoration for the two rooms and a fee for the cleaning of the apartment, it came to about 3000bt.

That seemed to be that, though there was a sting in the tail. Whilst paying the last month's rent, the staff enquired what time we would leave on our final day, so they could come round and do their checks and deduct any monies as necessary, no problem, gave them a time and asked if we get the deposit back then? No. We would have to wait possibly 2 weeks! This was a problem as we were both flying to the UK two days later!

Back on the phone to the boss, to explain the situation, again we managed to get it resolved, with us having to pop back and pick up the deposit the following day.

There had been a few stressful moments along the way, but by and large things worked out in the end. But be warned you may not be so lucky under different management, as the bottom line is you signed the contract so tough luck. So be careful, take your time, and make sure you are totally happy with everything before signing.

Air Asia

If you want to travel around Thailand, or visit the neighbouring countries, look no further than the budget airline Air Asia. They without doubt tend to have the cheapest fares of all the budget airlines in Asia. If there's a place you fancy going, look sometime in advance and you can get a really good fare. Nearly always the taxes are higher than the actual fare. Air Asia does a lot of promotions and advertising, so you will probably be alerted to any up and coming deals, remember though the fares you hear will not include taxes. Whilst in Bangkok, I took return flights to Phuket for 2235bt (approx £42, 47€, 69\$) and Phnom Penh in Cambodia for 2400bt (£42, 51€, 75\$). You can normally get fares around the 3000bt (£56, 63€, 93\$) for Hanoi in Vietnam. Like most budget airlines there is no meal, but you can buy some refreshments on board. All the flights I have taken with them have been good. To check there website go to www.airasia.com If you book flights with them you will have to register online first.

Airport

Bangkok is served by the new Suvarnabhumi Airport, which opened its doors in October 2006, replacing Don Muang. There was a lot of speculation on whether the airport would be ready for the opening, and more so how many problems would surface. By and large it was a success, yes there were teething problems, but it would be a surprise if any new major airport does not experience these. The airport itself is impressive to look at and has everything you would expect. It has a silver look throughout, resembling a kind of space station, it gives a very new and clean feel, however it can give a visitor a rather cold feeling due to the lack of colour.

On arrival, like at the old airport, you will be met by limousine workers touting to try and take you into the city centre. These are pricey, though you do get immediate transport, but if you want to save some money avoid them and get a normal taxi. There has also been issues with taxi's, with them being more expensive than at first expected, as there are fees that you have to pay, firstly, for the driver and secondly, an airport charge. You can though get a taxi where you do not have to pay the airport charge, but it means taking a shuttle bus a couple of kilometres away where there is a dedicated taxi rank. Whether your traveller that may have just endured a long flight can be bothered to go through that is debatable. That said, the taxi will always be considerably cheaper than the limousine service.

For all the talk of its design and facilities, what matters is the passenger's