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[ASIA]



Chasing the Sun in **Sukhothai** Thailand's Temple Wonderland



Mike Smith experienced ancient temples, dramatic sunsets and life on the farm in historic Sukhothai before spending a couple of days in vibrant Bangkok.

I love Thailand. I go there often and enjoy getting off the beaten track, hence my one hour flight on Bangkok Airways's ATR-72 twin-engine, turboprop aircraft from Bangkok to Sukhothai.

Spectacular Sunset

The Sukhothai Kingdom flourished in the 13th and 14th centuries and during that period many extravagant palaces and temples were built. What remains today are spectacular ruins in Sukhothai Historical Park and nearby Satchanalai Historical Park. You don't have to be a temple buff, a Buddhist or historian to enjoy these UNESCO world heritage sites; they are wonderful structures in a pleasant, rural environment.

After collecting our bags at the airport our driver raced to the Sukhothai Historical Park where we were promised a fantastic sunset. Would we make in time? The sun was gradually sinking and the sky getting darker. It was touch and go right up to the last minute. Finally we parked, sprinted across the grounds of Wat Mahathat and caught the last few minutes of a picture perfect sunset with the temple in the foreground.

Sunrise with Swifts

Sukhothai means "dawn of happiness" in Thai so it seemed appropriate to set the alarm clock for 6:00am and get up at dawn to see the sunrise. The Sukhothai Treasure Resort & Spa, where we had checked in the night before, is surrounded by rice

fields and is very peaceful in the morning.

The birds were out in abundance. Swifts were flying and eating on the go, open billed storks were enjoying fresh snails for breakfast and chirping sparrows provided the morning chorus as the sun made its appearance.

What a Lot of Wats

I had travelled to Sukhothai to see the famous temples and did so immediately after breakfast. First call was to Wat Si Chum standing in isolation at the end of its impressive driveway. Entering the temple through a narrow doorway I was greeted by a beautiful Buddha, sitting cross legged, with an enormous hand and long golden fingers resting on his knee. What a great start to the day!

The central part of Sukhothai Historical Park is flat, ideal for touring by bicycle. Our group started at Wat Mahathat, the largest and most impressive temple. Apparently it gets a little crowded when tour buses disgorge their passengers, but was quite empty when we arrived.

Photographers Paradise

The lighting was brilliant and the sky a deep blue, making it a photographer's paradise. The numerous large stupas, attractive Buddha statues and tall columns, many reflected in lily ponds, kept us lingering for well over an hour despite the increasing heat and humidity.

A five minute bike ride led to Wat Si Sawai with

its three imposing brick and stone pagodas, or prangs, from the Khmer era. This was once a Hindu shrine before being converted to a walled Buddhist monastery. On close inspection it was obvious that an enormous amount of work had gone into carving the intricate mythical creatures on the structures.

Continuing to ride around the park we reached Wat Sa Si, a small temple which stands on its own island. The elegant, bronze walking Buddha is outstanding and the view of the main seated Buddha, framed by pillars is equally stunning.

Follow the Elephants!

As we took pictures at Wat Sa Si I spotted three elephants, two of which had enormous tusks, ambling down the road opposite. Deciding that we could see the temple later we ran back to our bikes and followed the elephants. Their mahouts steered them towards the statue of King Ram Kamhaeng (who was reputedly the creator of the Thai alphabet and a major influence in making Sukhothai prosperous) where they bowed in homage and then stood on their hind legs before kneeling down to take a well earned rest. That was a classic “Kodak moment”.

Retail Therapy

It was too hot to cycle in the afternoon so a change of plan was needed. After a hearty lunch it was time to go for some retail therapy! The highlight was a gold factory where we watched the extreme concentration and skill of the craftsmen as they made their rings, bracelets and necklaces.

The designs and prices were both attractive and our group contributed substantially to the economy. Sukhothai isn't a city with a great night life so after an excellent dinner of spicy soup, fried fish and local fruit we returned to the hotel for an early night.

Down on the Farm

I don't like fancy dress parties but at the Organic Agriculture Project near Sukhothai Airport it made sense to change into blue farmers' suits, wellington boots and a straw hat because it was going to get hot, wet and dusty in the fields.

This educational visit offers the chance to learn how farmers live by participating in farm activities. We planted



rice, collected ducks' eggs, cut vegetables for lunch and watched the water buffalo head for their pastures before touring the rice processing factory.

Lunch consisted of food, grown or laid, at the farm, washed down with a refreshing rice grass drink. Durian isn't my favourite fruit, but with the delicious sticky rice it was surprisingly good! This was certainly a different way to spend a morning before the short drive to Phitsanulok.

Exotic Food at Phitsanulok

After checking in at the Ayara Hotel we headed by trishaw for the night markets and hawker stalls. The tour guide was obviously hoping to find out who was the most squeamish amongst us because the first stop was at a food cart selling exotic insects. We all gallantly tried the offerings. I didn't buy any to take home, but the deep fried bugs were quite palatable and supposedly high in protein.

I thought we were going fishing when we were told we had to catch our supper. Wrong! It was time for “flying kangkong” a green, spicy vegetable served in a very unique style. The shocked male customer who placed his order was dressed up in a bra, skirt and wig, handed a frying pan and positioned on a stage 10 meters above the chef. The latter cooked the dish with lots of showmanship and giant flames before tossing the piping hot sambal kangkong to the catcher above him!

We proceeded to the night market which had the usual selection of clothes and accessories plus an assortment of tasty snacks including chestnuts, ota, dumplings and squid.





The Most Beautiful Buddha in Thailand?

The primary tourist attraction in Phitsanulok is Wat Phr Si Rattana Mahathat, or “Big Temple”, built in 1357. It contains Phra Buddha Chinnarat, reputedly one of the most beautiful Buddha’s in Thailand. However, I preferred the huge, photogenic, walking Buddha in the open grounds at the rear.

Surrounding stalls selling snacks and fruit did a roaring trade with tourists taking boxes of them back to their coaches.

The nearby Buranathai Buddha Foundry specialises in bronze Buddha images. It looks completely disorganised, old fashioned and messy, but it manufactures great products. The factory is very laid back and management allowed us to walk about freely.

Day Trip to Satchanalai Historical Park

You need transport to get to Satchanalai Historical Park, which was Sukhothai’s sister city way back in the 14th century. There are fewer visitors here than at Sukhothai and the temples are spread further apart, but this adds atmosphere as it seems quite creepy and you really feel you are part of history.

Wat Phra Sri Rattana Mahathat (yes many temples have a similar name which is confusing!) is interesting, but the steep climb to the top of the stupa is rather dangerous. Wat Chang Lom, or elephant temple, was my favourite with its 39 standing elephant statues surrounding the base.

Returning to Sukhothai we headed straight to the airport and back to Bangkok.

Bangkok - Yet more Temples

Far from being “templed out” I decided to spend a day exploring Bangkok’s temples and palaces near to the Chao Phrya River. As usual, I started at the 18th century Grand Palace, the highlight of any tour of Bangkok, which was extremely crowded and lively. The golden stupas dazzled in the morning sun.

Escaping the crowds I grabbed a drink and headed for Wat Pho, the largest temple in Bangkok and home to the amazing, reclining Buddha which is over 40m long. Strange statues of tall, stone, giants guard the temple which contains numerous stupas and over 400 Buddha statues.

A Wicked Smile

Taking the short ferry ride across the river I landed at Wat Arun or Temple of Dawn. The details on the ornate spires are brilliant with glass, pottery and sculptured carvings present in abundance. It is a very steep climb up the 70m spire and I wickedly smiled at the base as I snapped away with my camera as others toiled. I was informed that the views over the river are fantastic from up high; next time maybe!

After a night on the town and a stroll around Siam Ocean World it was time to head back to Singapore.

I thoroughly enjoyed Sukhothai and recommend it for a two or three day break or an extension on to a trip to Bangkok, but only during the dry season as there is little in the way of entertainment if it rains. **A**

Accommodation

Sukhothai

Sukhothai Treasure Resort & Spa
www.sukhothaitreasure.com

Phitsanulok

Ayara Grand Palace Hotel
www.ayaragrandpalacehotel.com

Bangkok

Glow Pratunam
www.zinchospitality.com/glowbyzinc/pratunam

Airlines

Thai Airways flies from Singapore to Bangkok several times a day

Bangkok Airways

flies from Bangkok to Sukhothai