

Ayutthaya One Square Mile of Thailand



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WATCH: Ayutthaya's crumbling temples serve as a reminder of the city's majestic past

Lying just 70km north of the Thai capital Bangkok, Ayutthaya is often overlooked by tourists. If they want to see old, crumbling temples, then Sukhothai to the north offers a wilder, more atmospheric setting.

Those visitors who do go to Ayutthaya usually make a one-day trip from Bangkok, giving them only a few hours to explore, usually in the hottest hours of the day when temple fatigue quickly kicks in.

Ayutthaya, though, offers a vivid snapshot of Thailand today; a city that was the capital of a powerful Buddhist-Hindu empire for 400 years but also a modern-day manufacturing centre so crucial to the global economy that when Ayutthaya was badly flooded last year it disrupted the supply chain for some of the world's biggest companies.

The old city was founded in 1350, on a virtual island, surrounded by a loop of the great Chao Phraya River on one side, the smaller Pasak River to the east, and a canal cutting across the top. It was an ideal defensive position, and very good for trade too.

At the height of its power in the 16th Century, merchants from China, Japan, Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain built trading bases. The wealth accumulated from rice cultivation in the fertile flood plain was used to build dozens of elaborate temples and palaces.

But war with neighbouring Burma led its destruction in 1767, and all that is left today are the magnificent ruins, still a revered place of pilgrimage for Buddhists.

Protected site

Tim Curtis, chief of Unesco's culture department in Bangkok, gave me a picture of what the city was like. "It was very cosmopolitan, with all the overseas traders. The canals used to move around the city were always busy. In the 17th Century it was one of the world's largest cities, as big as Paris," he says.

The temples, he explains, were built both to enhance the prestige of kings but also to accumulate merit for the entire community.

What's left of the old kingdom is preserved as a Unesco World Heritage Site, but the UN body is engaged in constant negotiation with Thai authorities to improve the ruins.

"We came here because it was easy to find good workers," "

Nobuyuki Shibaïke Vice-president, Honda

"What we'd like to see is a greater sense of connection between the old and the modern city", says Tim Curtis, "Venice, another water city, is a good example".

The pressures of modern development have caused damage to historic sites: vibrations from traffic and inappropriate construction. Much of Ayutthaya resembles any other Thai provincial city - rows of unattractive, concrete shop-houses, built to a budget.

But the economic transformation of Ayutthaya has also raised living standards.

We went out at dawn to a major intersection, to watch thousands of uniformed workers lining up to take buses to industrial estates just outside the city. There are now more than 2,000 factories in Ayutthaya, employing around 200,000 people.

One of the factories is run by car-maker Honda. It's the company's sixth-largest in the world, and can produce up to 300,000 cars a year, Vice-president Nobuyuki Shibaïke told me.



Production at Honda's factory here was heavily affected by last year's floods

He says the quality of Ayutthaya vehicles rivals those made in Japan. But Honda's commitment to the city was severely tested last year, when the floods inundated the estate, stopping production for six months.

The company says it is not considering relocating for the moment, but may build additional factories in different parts of Thailand. Honda and its neighbours are carefully watching the construction of a 77km-long flood wall around the estate, and the government's plans to prevent a repeat of last year's disaster.

Boat museum

One of the great pleasures in visiting Ayutthaya is to see traditional Thai crafts, preserved and practised here. We went to a private boat museum, where Kanok Khaomala and his father Paithun keep examples of the wooden boats that used to be seen on the waterways in the old days.

Mr Khaomala senior started the museum when he retired as a teacher, in order to maintain the old skills of boat-building. These skills are dying out because Thailand no longer has the tropical hardwood trees used to make them.

It is a wonderful little museum; apart from the boats, there are stunning scale models of the glittering royal barges, each taking up to a year to make.

In the north-west corner of the old city, you can also visit the workshop of Ajarn Kob, a master in the art of Sak Yant, or sacred tattoos. Thais have adorned their bodies with these ancient tattoos for centuries, believing they can protect them.



The elephant sanctuary in Ayutthaya is a magnet for tourists

Soldiers in the armies of the kings of Ayutthaya would not go into battle without them. Mr Kob explains that it is not enough to learn how to inscribe the intricate designs on people's bodies. There are mystical forces you must absorb to make a potent Sak Yant.

A highlight of any visit to Ayutthaya should be a ride on an elephant. At the height of its power the kings of Ayutthaya kept thousands of them; they were the domesticated beasts of burden, used for heavy lifting, but also for war. Elephants were trained to charge into battle and to attack the opposing armies.

Those roles have been lost in the modern age, but the last remaining stable, or kraal as it's known in Thailand, is still being run in Ayutthaya to give working elephants a home, and a role.

This is where they train the elephants, and their mahouts, or drivers, to carry tourists. They also breed them. The baby elephants are delightful, wandering around the kraal, playfully wrapping their trunks around anything that interests them.

The kraal allows visitors to stay and help look after the elephants - but watch out. Even a two-month-old baby is heavy enough to sneak up and knock you over. This correspondent found himself toppling into the dust on several occasions.