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By CNN Go staff 20 September, 2011

## The 7 best Bangkok temples

Some appear on coins, others contain priceless Buddha images. This is a look at the city's most wonderful wats.

Given that Thailand is 95 percent Buddhist, there are of course hundreds of Bangkok temples -- known in Thai as "wats." Some are small, located far down tiny sois and well out of the way of tourist traffic. Others are part of massive complexes filled with halls, schools and revered statues, earning them a place in all the Bangkok guidebooks.

Here are seven of the best Bangkok temples, a list compiled based on both historical significance and pure aesthetics.

Remember to dress appropriately -- keep your legs and shoulders covered -- or you may not be allowed inside.

### 1. Wat Arun



*Wat Arun's phra prang are covered in tiny pieces of Chinese ceramics.*

You know a Bangkok temple is special if its image is on Thai currency, in this case the 10-baht coin. Among Bangkok's most revered icons, Wat Arun -- the Temple of Dawn -- sits on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River.

Construction of the stunning "phra prang" (towers), which are covered in tiny pieces of colorful Chinese ceramics, was started by King Rama II (1809-1824) and completed by King Rama III (1824-1851).

Though Wat Arun's phra prang are the biggest attraction, they are actually only a small part of the complex, which also hosts lovely white buildings, shrines, ponds and tiny lanes.

From a snapper's point of view, the best place to get a shot of Wat Arun is actually from the other side of the river, particularly at sunset. The restaurant at Arun Residence has great views and good food.

*34 Arun Amarin Road, Kwang Wat Arun, Khet Bangkok Yai. To get there by boat, take a cross-river ferry at Tha Tien Pier. Open daily, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. [www.watarun.org](http://www.watarun.org).*

## 2. Wat Phra Kaew



*Be sure to buy a postcard of Wat Phra Kaew's Emerald Buddha, as visitors aren't allowed to take photos inside the temple.*

Tourists are likely more familiar with Wat Phra Kaew's home, the grounds of the legendary Grand Palace. Wat Phra Kaew -- Temple of the Emerald Buddha -- enshrines one of Thailand's most revered Buddha statues, which was carved out of a single block of jade.

This Buddha image is certainly well travelled. According to Thailand's official palace website, it was first discovered in Chiang Rai in 1464, brought down to Lampang where it remained till King Tilok of Lannathai brought it to Chiang Mai, his capital. Then it was brought to Luang Prabang, Laos, before heading to Vientiane.

Then, the King of Thonburi sent an expedition to bring it back. When King Rama I built the city of Bangkok, including the Grand Palace, the Emerald Buddha was installed in the chapel, where it remains today.

Also worth checking out in this Bangkok temple are the murals, which depict the traditional life-story of the Buddha, proverbs and episodes from the Ramakien -- the Thai version of the Ramayana.

*Located inside the Grand Palace, Na Phra Lan Road. Open daily, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. +66 (0)2 623 5500 Ext. 1124, 3100.*

### 3. Wat Pho



*It's a challenge to fit all 26 meters of Wat Pho's Reclining Buddha into a single photograph.*

Right next door to the Grand Palace, Wat Pho is home to Thailand's biggest reclining Buddha statue. The soles of the 46-meter-long statue's feet are inlaid with mother-of-pearl, depicting the 108 auspicious signs of the Buddha, while the statue itself is covered in gold leaf.

According to the Thai history books, after moving to the Grand Palace, King Rama I recognized the old temple as a site of religious significance and ordered his noblemen to restore it in 1788. This first restoration took seven years, five months and 28 days. During the reign of King Rama III another great restoration/expansion period took place, which took 16 years and seven months.

Wat Pho is also home to a highly respected massage school, where Thai masseurs have been training since 1955. Visitors can drop in for a full traditional Thai massage or enroll in short or long-term courses.

*Wat Pho is located on Sanam Chai Road and Maharaj Road, next to the Grand Palace. Open daily, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. +66 (0)2 225 9595.*

## 4. Wat Benchamabophitr



*The marble on Bangkok's Wat Benchamabophitr was imported from Carrara, Italy.*

Also known in English as "the Marble Temple," the beautiful Wat Benchamabophitr is a royal monastery highly revered as a Thai architectural masterpiece. Its main ordination hall was built with Italian marble and features European neo-classical influences.

Located in Bangkok's leafy green Dusit district near Chitralada Palace, it was founded by King Rama V in the year 1900. His ashes are buried inside the ordination hall under a Sukhothai-style Buddha statue.

If it looks familiar to you already, that's because its image is on Thailand's five-baht coin.

*69 Nakornpathom Road, Dusit. Open daily, 8:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.*

## 5. Wat Mahathat Yuwaratransarit



Wat Mahathat Yuwaratransarit is the home of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. Try saying that 10 times. Wat Mahathat Yuwarajarangsarit might not be one of the most beautiful Bangkok temples, but it's certainly one of the most religiously significant.

One of six royal wats, it was built during the Ayutthaya period. When Bangkok became the capital it was used as a temple for royal ceremonies due to its key location near the freshly built Grand Palace.

Today it's home to Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University -- which was founded in 1887, making it Thailand's oldest higher education institute for Buddhist monks -- and the Vipassana Meditation headquarters. Visitors can drop by for classes.

Also worth checking out nearby are the amulet market and the National Museum.

## 6. Wat Saket



If the hike to the top of Bangkok's Golden Mount doesn't slay you, the killer city views surely will. Wat Saket is another of those Bangkok temples that draws visitors to its grounds for its unique landmarks rather than the temple itself. In this case the main draw is the "Golden Mount," a man-made hill topped with a towering chedi that offers incredible views across Bangkok.

The temple, which really isn't that remarkable, dates back to the Ayutthaya era but was restored under King Rama I. The Golden Mount's hill was constructed under King Rama III but it was Rama IV who put up the golden chedi. Rama V added the chedi that's still there today. Inside is a revered Buddha image that was given to him by the British.

The walk to the top can be brutal on a hot day so bring water. If you can handle crowds, the temple puts on a great Loy Kratong fair every November.

*Ratchadamnoen Klang Road and Boripihat Road. Open daily, 9 a.m.-5p.m.*

## 7. Wat Traimit



The golden Buddha in Bangkok's Wat Traimit is worth millions of dollars. Another reason why you shouldn't judge a Bangkok temple by its exterior, Wat Traimit is actually home to one of world's largest solid gold Buddha statues.

Remarkably, the image sat ignored for centuries until workmen dropped what they thought was just a five-ton, 13th century image of Buddha in the 1950s, cracking the plaster to reveal the solid gold statue underneath. Apparently, it was covered to fool invading Burmese back in the day.

Outside temple on the right is giant red Royal Jubilee Gate -- in Thai called "Chalermphrakiat" -- built in 1999 to symbolize the prosperity of Thai and Chinese cultures under His Majesty the King.

*661 Tri Mit Road, Talat Noi, Samphanthawong, near the Hualumphong Train Station. Open*

*daily, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.+66 (0)2 509 9091*