Thai Culture Spotlight :
Songkran, the New Year & Water Festival

Songkran is the celebration of Thai traditional New Year, and an occasion for family reunions and celebrations. At this time, people from rural areas who work in the capital usually return home to celebrate the festival. Very often, the streets of Bangkok are empty during Songkran, but this is not the case in Chiang Mai. Although several days before and after are dedicated to relaxation, the actual holiday falls on April 13, when annual festivities are held throughout the kingdom. "Songkran" means to "move" or "change place" in Thai, as it is the day when the sun changes position in the zodiac. It is also known as the "Water Festival", as people believe that water is an agent for washing away bad luck.

This Thai traditional New Year begins with early morning merit-making, offering food to Buddhist monks and releasing caged birds to fly freely into the sky. During this auspicious occasion, many caged animals will also be set free. Praying to the ancestor spirits is also an important part of the day. People also show respect to elders by pouring scented water *(nap op Thai)* over the palms of their hands. Older people, in return, wish the youngsters good luck and prosperity.

In the afternoon, after performing a bathing rite for Buddha images and for the monks, all participants, young and old, playfully splash water all over each other. In Bangkok, the Buddha image "Buddhasihing" is brought out from the National Museum so people can sprinkle holy water at Sanam Luang, opposite the Grand Palace.

The most talked-about regional celebration takes place in Chiang Mai, where Songkran is celebrated from April 13-15. During this period, people from all parts of the country flock there to enjoy the water festival, to watch the Miss Songkran contest, to view and participate in the beautiful parades, and to throw water on anyone you might happen to see in the streets.