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Around the World

Bangkok: The City Beyond Belief

Pariyapa Amornwanichsarn

I was born in Bangkok, was raised in Bangkok, was educated in Bangkok, but I have never really understood Bangkok. Not to mention foreigners, the people residing in Bangkok are surely amazed by its everyday sights, sounds, and scenery, which seem to change as if it were a big festival day after day. If Bangkok were human, it would be a woman who always has joy on her face, dances like crazy, and cares about nothing in the world. Sometimes she amazed us, shocked us, pleased us, and even put tears in our eyes with her dramatic, sad, softer sides. When we dare touch her, her mysterious, darkest, deepest secrets might make us scared of her and want to leave her alone and go far, far away. Any word cannot describe this woman – this city – to make anyone see the full picture of her as she wants us to explore more and more. Bangkok certainly is a city that is so unique, exotic, and even beyond such words—it is beyond belief.

First and foremost, Bangkok is a place where we can be fulfilled with amazing experiences through our five senses – tasting, hearing, seeing, touching, and smelling. When we stand on the ground, we can feel the unexpected heat, especially in summer when the temperature could reach 42 degrees Celsius in daytime. It may be heaven to foreigners who are in need of sunlight, but for



the residents of Bangkok, walking under the direct rays of sunlight, feeling it burn our skin, every inch of the body getting itchy through the day as we are covered with sweat, is not a pleasant thing. However, the heat and the light are not always something to be detested—in sunlight, we can see the reflection of the light over the Chao Phraya River, the grand river that runs through the center of Bangkok, and it looks like the river is dancing with the glow of diamonds and the water's color has turned to gold. Beside the river are situated the temples and the royal palace, where the rooftops are displaying a reflection of the sun as if they are all built from jewelry. On the other side of the river are sky-high buildings, which also reflect the heat and the light from their glass windows, performing a burst of lights and golden beams, which make it seem like Bangkok has thousands of suns. Through open-air markets and shopping centers, a ten-kilometer long traffic jam, uncountable food stalls, we can smell a million different odors in the air. The

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smell of live fish in the markets, the annoying smell of carbon monoxide from vehicles and industrial areas, the aromatic mixed odors of jasmine, and roses from the flower market, the sweet scent of newly ironed soft silk and satin loitering in the air, the smoke of joss sticks and yellow candles given to Buddha—these everyday scents and smells always remind me that I live here in Bangkok, a place like no other. In addition, an empty stomach can be filled at many thousands of food stalls, restaurants, and other food lofts along the roads—anytime and anywhere. The variety of food ranges from the traditional, spicy, herbal Thai food to international cuisines. What is it like to taste the hottest and spiciest dishes that make us want to suddenly dive straight into cool water? The tastes of different herbs and unexpected natural ingredients, such as insects and snakes, rats and frogs, and other wild animals can make us cry with both delight and shock. Moreover, Bangkok's nightlife is irresistible—the night is surrounded with neon lights and music echoing from thousands of discotheques, making everyone hearing it uncontrollably move their feet and forget any sorrow in their hearts. The noisy districts of Bangkok seem to need no sleep, just enjoying life with a drink in hand. Sometimes we can hear the noise of



an elephant walking through bars, waiting for someone to buy him some bananas. The fun is endless, even when the sun has risen over the rooftops of temples, saying that morning has

come and it's now time to enjoy life under the sun. Through the five senses, we can truly feel Bangkok to the fullest, and whatever experiences they will become, every second in Bangkok surely will not be forgotten.

Bangkok is also known for its cultural mix where East meets West, and China meets India. A vast area of old Chinatown situated in the center of Bangkok is full of shops selling gold, jewelry, shark fin, Chinese traditional medicine, and shrines. We can hear Mandarin spoken from people walking past us. An old man, sitting in front of his gold shop, fanning himself and eating noodles while having a conversation in Chinese with his customers, is such a familiar sight on this street. Chinese traditional costumes are still worn by today's Thai-Chinese generation, glittering with jade rings and gold necklaces. The other side of the street is an Indian community that sells Indian-style accessories and clothing, surrounded by young Indian businessmen with a sense of Sikhism flowing in the air. A chant in Hindi can be heard in the evening air, giving us chills with the relaxing aromatic scents of candles. The golden rays beam peacefully from Indian architectural buildings, making the atmosphere suited for a short walk in the cool, breezy wind. In the more nicely organized area situated the

Japanese town, where Japanese businessmen have brought their family and gathered here for a long, long time, making it a complete community for Japanese residents in Bangkok. Shop signs with *kanji* and *katakana*, *ramen-ya* along the street and Japanese-style *izakaya*, Japanese companies and offices also make us wonder whether this is Thailand or Japan.

Furthermore, there is a burst of western culture rooted firmly, and it is mixed with the eastern one. We can see the menu at MacDonalds having a Thai Som-tam salad,

Thai spicy burgers, and the MacDonalds' mascot presses its hands together at the chest in Thai style. The same is true at Kentucky Fried Chicken. The famous Khaosan Road, which is a heaven for young hippy tourists, is lined with English bars, German beer halls, and American fast food shops, and also unexpected shops such as tattoo shops, shops specially for braiding hair, shops for making fake student ID cards for tourists, illegal shops for iPhone application, and a lot more. We can feel so 'international' and are able to make friends with people from every part of the world, drink together and have a memorable conversation with foreigners here on this street. I've fallen in love with this place, with its scent of craziness mixed with youthful, teenage enthusiasm and vigor. Seeing how people want to travel and explore the world makes it such a charming street with its own uniqueness. Pop art graffiti and traditional mural painting in temples, noisy, flamboyant clubbers and peaceful, quiet prayers, a head-to-toe fashionably dressed young woman and a monk walking barefoot, small spirit houses built in front of luxurious shopping malls, two angry mobs with red and yellow shirts confronting each other for political power with the guns of tanks pointing directly at them—together are cultural ingredients that make Bangkok an exotic dish that requires a lot of boldness to taste.

I once heard that the real heart of a city is not buildings or places, but the people living, working, and struggling in the city is a true core. Bangkok, like most of the cities around the world, is a place where people of different races, classes, likes, beliefs, occupations and more, gather and live together like living in a very big house. Each day, everyone would do their roles to achieve millions of different purposes; some fail to achieve them and some reach their goals and sleep the night with pride. Everyone means people from the poorest beggars to the richest businessmen, politicians, artists, international students, illegal alien workers, and the royal family's members. Bangkok is also known as the



biggest home for transgenders, homosexuals, and other sexual orientations although there is no law supporting any of them. We can watch cabarets in which all the performers are transvestites, listen to their good jokes at the bar, and enjoy freedom that allows us to be different. Behind luxurious skyscrapers and condominiums made for the culture vultures are slums, living in there are the people who work to death for money, mostly are suburbanites and alien workers. I was surprised by their happiness that has nothing to do with money, their kind hearts in economically handicapped bodies, their hopes for a brighter future, and, most unexpectedly, their love for the city. I used to live in a slum due to an economic necessity. Although it was not safe and not clean, and the surrounding is not something to remember, I noticed the warm smiles that I often received from strangers. In daytime, the sounds of Thai-style country music can be heard from the radio, with housewives singing along while taking care of their little children. Lyrics that remind them of their homes in the country are beautifully sad, but with contrasting joyful melodies. The smell of bodies covered with sweat and the smell of soups nicely boiled in their untidy kitchens—such smells fill the air. I cannot say I like that place, but I like the people and their struggling.

Some say they hate Bangkok like it is a disease and also say that Bangkok is only their offices that when the work is over, they will return to their countryside homes—the thing is, the work is never done, and they still

live here. People with a variety of moral standards, heartaches, backgrounds, and mental situations, along with people with different religious and political beliefs and those who believe nothing, live together in this big city, on the same ground. Bangkok is like a house that, with consent or not, people who came to live or were born here have been a part of and make Bangkok ‘Bangkok’ as it is. Whether they would win or lose, get something or get nothing, stay or leave and never come back, they are all the house’s members who spent a period of life living in the city and their memories about Bangkok will never fade away.

With the city being the place where we can fully explore through the five senses, the diversity of cultures and various kinds of people, we can never find any place in the world like Bangkok. For me, as much as I am unable to understand and describe Bangkok, I

know that I love this city. Bangkok fulfills my love of adventurous and sometimes risky living and changes that happen daily. I think that the people living here in Bangkok at least have the same fondness—living their lives to the fullest and never stand still. The city of Bangkok absolutely adds spice to my life, yet it has also made me get bored living far away from it. I want to live in a place where everything is beyond belief—I want to live nowhere but Bangkok.

About the author: Pariyapa Amornwanichsarn is a 2nd-year student in the Department of Comparative Culture at the University of Tsukuba. As much as she loves her hometown, she likes to be surrounded and embraced by foreign culture and places. Her dreams are to explore, discover, and be able to find inspiration, or just something new to write about.

Photos are courtesy of Takuya Nagata.