



Bangkok

by Andrew Matzner

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One of Asia's most cosmopolitan cities, Bangkok is perhaps the region's most progressive when it comes to glbtq issues. Besides holding a special place in the Western mind as a site for unparalleled sexual license, Thailand's national capital is also known as the "sex-change capital of the world," as it is home to a large number of surgeons noted for their skill and inexpensive fees.

The name Bangkok means "the place of olive plums," and refers to the city's original settlement, which was founded in 1782 by Rama I, the first ruler of the Chakri dynasty. Locals refer to the metropolis as Krung Thep ("The City of Angels"), the shortened form of a much longer official appellation. Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, and its throne is currently occupied by beloved figurehead Rama IX, who has been king since 1946.

"Gay" Bangkok

Although rumors surround the sexual preferences of King Rama VI (r. 1910-1925), currently little is known about the lives of people with alternative genders and sexualities in Bangkok prior to the mid-twentieth century. One area of debate concerns the applicability of Western terms such as "gay," "lesbian," and "transsexual" in the Thai context. That is, are such identities indigenous to Thai culture, or are they imports that arrived with other Western influences during the 1960s and 1970s?

Semantics and cultural differences aside, because of permissive Buddhist attitudes, corrupt officials willing to look the other way, and rampant capitalism, Bangkok has become the heart of "gay" Asia. The City of Angels, with a population of over seven million, has scores of hotels, apartments, guesthouses, bars, discos, restaurants, saunas, massage parlors, and escort services that cater to men. Commercial venues, and in particular a thriving go-go bar scene, are concentrated in the Patpong, Suriwong, and Silom districts, as well as along Sukhumvit Road.

Lesbian-friendly restaurants and clubs are located throughout Bangkok. Lacking a commercial bar scene, local lesbians generally socialize as small groups of friends on an informal basis. Formed in 1986, Anjaree, Thailand's sole lesbian support/social group, publishes a newsletter, plans regular meetings and special events, and engages in political activism.

Bangkok is also well-known for its cabarets, which feature cross-dressing and transgendered performers (known as *kathoey* or *sao braphet song*). Ranging from hole-in-the wall dives to large-scale theatrical productions, these cabarets are a huge tourist draw.

Diversity and Politics in Today's Bangkok

In recent years members of the Bangkok gay, lesbian, and transgender communities have worked towards



Top: A photograph of downtown Bangkok created in 2006.

Above: Kathoey working as go-go dancers in Bangkok's Nana Plaza entertainment area.

the twin goals of creating a sense of unity among themselves and raising the awareness of the general public. Since 1999 Bangkok has hosted an annual "Gay Festival and Parade," which draws tens of thousands of spectators to Silom Road. A Pride in the Park day and glbtq film festival also now take place every year.

Indicating the increasing strength and commitment of the local glbtq community, 2001 saw the creation of the Bangkok Pride Coalition, which consists of individuals, community-based organizations, and local businesses. By organizing and promoting glbtq-themed events, the group aims to present positive images of gay and lesbian people and to raise money for needs in the community.

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