

The National Museum Bangkok

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

As a result of understaffing and the guards' very elastic lunch and tea breaks, docents never knew which galleries would be open or closed when guiding at Bangkok's old National Museum (NM), so we never dared use verbal cues to link to the next gallery we were headed for until we could see the doors were open. Most of us accepted the situation, but we all had our favourite galleries and to find one or more of them closed was always frustrating. My favourites still are the Buddhaisawan Chapel and the Red House.

The museum's grounds are huge. It's located on the site of the former Wang Na Palace, built for the Thai Heir Apparent, not far from the Grand Palace. The NM has one of the largest collections of Southeast Asian art and sculpture in the region. Entire wings contain collections of Buddha images dedicated to specific periods of Thai history, but the Buddhaisawan Chapel and the Red House are both independent buildings.

The chapel is one of the first sites museum visitors see on arriving. It was, and still is, the best place to begin a visit as its murals feature the life of the Buddha—one of Thailand's favourite decorative motifs. It was built in the late 18th century for the younger brother of King Rama I as a private chapel and its murals, painted between 1795 and 1797, are amongst the oldest in Bangkok, which was founded in 1782. After leaving your shoes by the front steps, enter quietly.



The Wang Na Palace

The scenes, which are painted in the bays between the windows, are separated from one another by zigzag lines, landscapes, palace roofs and other architectural features. Given Bangkok's humid climate and the chapel's open windows, the murals' beautiful colours and gilt deteriorate quickly and need to be frequently restored. Amongst the most beautiful are those on the rear west wall, which include the wedding of King Suddhodana and Queen Mahamaya (the Buddha's parents). I love the detail in the scene where musicians are entertaining the numerous celestial and royal wedding guests while palace women and the general populace hover curiously at the mural's borders.

Close by is the elegant but tiny Red House, which was built for Princess Sudarak, King Rama I's sister. It has only four rooms, but is beautifully decorated with the tall, slim, tapering gilded wooden cabinets unique to Thailand. And despite Bangkok's moist heat, its interior is refreshingly cool.



A modern impression of the chapel

Surprisingly, the house is made entirely of interlocking teak panels and pegs, so it can be taken apart and moved at will.

Docents' hearts would sink when they saw the door to the Royal Funeral Chariots Gallery locked. Visitors were always awed by these incredible chariots and palanquins, still used in royal cremation processions. It was the perfect spot to introduce the topic of Thai and Buddhist funerary rites.

The National Museum Volunteers (NMV) are like our own FOM, with study groups, tours, and other educational and cultural activities as well as a docent programme. Some non-residents maintain their membership to use the excellent research library, attend meetings when in Bangkok and to participate in NMV study tours. For more information, visit their website at www.museumvolunteersbkk.net or write to them at PO Box 1305, Nana Post Office, Bangkok 10112, Thailand.

The National Museum Bangkok is open Wed-Sun 9:00–16:00 (closed Mon, Tues, except on public holidays). There are English, French, German and Japanese tours Wed & Thurs mornings at 9:30. Dress lightly, bring a bottle of water. There's also a small coffee shop and book/gift store in the premises.



Royal Cremation Chariot

Patricia Bjaaland Welch was a docent with the NMV in the early 1990s when she lived in Bangkok. She feels that the National Museum of Bangkok is one of the most interesting museums in Southeast Asia.

Photos courtesy of the author