Thailand, 2011, Day 1, The Best Buddha Images of Bangkok

It was the first day of our tour in Thailand and Elizabeth and I were off with our 39-member group to see 3 of the 4 best sites that Bangkok has to offer, the Golden Buddha, the Reclining Buddha and the Marble Temple. Ketsara, our tour escort (Photo 1), gave us a briefing about the sites on the way to the first one, the Marble Temple (Photo 2).

Photo 1. Ketsara, our tour escort (Note Mickey Mouse clock in the bus, upper left).

Photo 2. Wat Benchamabophit, or Marble Temple, one of the finest examples of Thai architecture in Bangkok.
The Marble Temple was built with Italian marble in 1899 by King Chulalongkorn, or King Rama V (of *The King and I* fame) and its name literally means the temple of the fifth king. King Chulalongkorn’s ashes are buried under the Buddha image (named Phra Buddhajinaraja) in the ordination hall (Photo 3). It was cast in 1920 in the style of the Sukhothai Dynasty (my personal favorite) and is a copy of the Phra Buddha Chinarat image in Phitsanulok, Thailand.

Photo 3. A single woman prays before the radiant Phra Buddhajinaraja in the ordination hall.

I have a penchant for stained glass windows brilliantly back-lighted by sunlight (Photo 4).

Photo 4. The two slightly different colors of the stained glass windows.
I especially liked the little guy in the middle of the window (Photo 5).

Photo 5. The image in the window.

The Marble Temple is known for the 52 Buddha images in the cloister of the Ubosoth which were taken from older temples throughout Thailand; they are magnificent (Photos 6 & 7).
Photo 6. Buddha images in different poses line the walls of the cloister.

Photo 7. Ketsara briefs our group on the significance of the different Buddha mudras.
The most common representation of the Buddha in Thailand is the subduing Mara mudra (pose or attitude), one of the four mudras that became popular during of the Sukhothai period (13th - 14th centuries) (Photo 8), along with the standing, walking and reclining Buddha mudras. According to legend, while the Buddha was seeking enlightenment by meditating under the Bodhi tree, Mara, evil incarnate, attacked him with demons and monsters and tempted him with his three seductive daughters, but the Buddha remained steadfast (imperturbable). Finally, the Buddha, by slyly moving his right hand from the meditation position and touching the ground, called upon the Earth Goddess, Thorani, to witness his goodness. The Earth Goddess responded by wringing water from her long black hair which caused a flood that drowned Mara. The image in Photo 7 was found in Chiang Saen in northern Thailand, one of the earliest Thai kingdoms (The Italian marble behind the Buddha image resembles the marble in our bathroom at the hotel.).

Photo 8. Phra Sakyasingh sitting cross-legged atop a lotus blossom (with the soles of his feet visible) in the subduing Mara mudra (right hand touching the ground) (Chiang Saen period).
One of the more interesting images in the Marble Temple and different from any other I’ve seen is the Buddha subduing himself by fasting mudra, a casting made from an original stone image in the Museum at Lahore, Pakistan (Photo 9). The image is clearly emaciated but the anatomy of the ribs leaves something to be desired; i.e., the sculptor is no Leonardo. Note also that the Buddha has a beard. (The number of this picture in my camera is 666!)


Another fine Buddha image in the temple is surrounded by nagas (sacred serpents) (Photo 10). This image of the Ayutthaya period was cast and enlarged from an ancient model.
I am a great fan of Buddha images so this visit to the Marble Temple was a special treat for me (I had not been there before). When I take such photographs and especially after I’ve prepared them to my satisfaction with Photoshop, I have the feeling they are truly mine; I have such an intimate knowledge of them, I possess their essence.

As we left the Marble Temple, I had a wonderful feeling of fulfillment. I smiled at the singhas (lions) on either side of the entrance (Photo 11) and they smiled back at me (Photo 12).
Photo 11. One of two splendid singhas positioned on either side of the entrance.
Photo 12. This face was made for smiling.

It was hot and steamy outside, something I’ve learned to enjoy when I’m in tropical conditions, the satisfaction of sweating without caring, without concern (as long as there’s a shower at the end of the day). Buddha images, photography and sweating; what could be better?

Once outside, I was brought out of my trance, brought back to another reality by a typical Thai street scene (Photo 13).

Photo 13. A man grilling tilapia on his portable kitchen grill (Colorful plastic clothespins are used to attach a plastic cover over the food).
Back in the bus, we were on our way to see the Golden Buddha, “officially titled Phra Phuttha Maha Suwan Patimakon,” the most valuable Buddha image in the world, now located in Wat Traimit (Photo 14 - 16).

Photo 14. A store along the way with a stack of sandbags in front, prepared for the worst.

Photo 15. The gate at Wat Traimit, also prepared for flooding.
Photo 16. The gilded, multi-gabled exterior of Wat Traimit (with a portrait of the king in front).
When we saw the Golden Buddha on our last trip, it was located in a temple of much more modest dimensions (Photo 17).

This time at Wat Traimit, it was in much more glitzy surroundings and its hair, eyes and mouth were painted, though it was no less impressive (Photos 18 - 20).


The Golden Buddha is the largest solid gold statue in the world! It is 9 meters high and weighs about 5.5 metric tons [1 metric ton is equal to 1,000 kg (2,204.62 lb or approximately 35,280 ounces)]. The gold itself at current prices (approximately $1700 per ounce) is worth approximately $330,000,000, though the statue is considered priceless by the Thais (Given the state of the Thai economy today, I suspect they might give some thought to an offer of half a billion dollars). It sits in the subduing Mara mudra of the Sukhothai period with a flame emanating from the *ushnisha*, or topknot, representing “the splendour of spiritual energy.”

The story of the statue I heard some time ago is somewhat different from the one Ketsara told us, but the crucial part is much the same. In 1955, an old gilded stucco Buddha was being lifted by a crane prior to transporting it to a new location when it slipped out of the cables supporting it and fell to the ground. Upon hitting the ground, the stucco broke apart revealing the Golden Buddha inside. Apparently, the Golden Buddha in the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya, prior to the imminent conquest of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767, was covered in stucco by monks to prevent its detection and theft. Although the Burmese controlled the region for only a short time, Ayutthaya fell into chaos after the Burmese withdrawal and the monks, apparently fearful of telling anyone about the Golden Buddha, died off without revealing their secret. As a result, knowledge of what lay under the stucco was lost until the statue broke apart in 1955.
There was a plaque in the temple which caught my attention because of the demons and mythical beasts on it engaged in a great battle [(from the Ramakian epic, the Thai version of the Hindu Ramayana (??))](Photo 21).

Photo 21. A battle of epic dimensions commanded by a multi-armed demon on a war elephant.
When we left Wat Traimit, our SmarTours bus was waiting outside (Photo 22).

Photo 22. A tuk-tuk driver sleeps in the back seat of his “taxi” while waiting for his next fare.

We were on our way to Wat Pho, the largest and probably the oldest temple in Bangkok and the home of the largest number of Buddha images in Thailand (over 1,000, most from the ruins of Ayutthaya and Sukhothai). Wat Pho is best known, however, for its huge gold-plated Reclining Buddha, the largest reclining Buddha in Thailand (46m long by 15m high).

Because of the columns surrounding the Buddha, it is difficult to get an unobstructed photograph of the Buddha’s head (Photos 23 - 25), no so the body and feet (Photos 26 & 27).

Photo 23. A partial view of the head of the Reclining Buddha.
Photo 24. The image illustrates “the passing of the Buddha into Nirvana.”
Photo 25. The eyes of the Buddha “are engraved with mother-of-pearl” [The 3 wrinkles on the neck reflect the Buddha’s prior status as a prince (i.e., well fed?)].
Photo 26. The Reclining Buddha is 46 meters long.

Photo 27. The feet are decorated in mother-of-pearl showing “the 108 auspicious characteristics of the true Buddha.”
Buddhist visitors drop coins into the metal urns that line the walls of Wat Pho (Photo 28).

Photo 28. The clink of coins (likely 25 or 50 Satang coins; 100 Satang equal 1 Baht equals approximately 3.3 US cents) dropped into metal urns resound throughout the temple.

The gables of buildings at Wat Pho are adorned with gold-tiled nagas (Photo 29).

Photo 29. Golden nagas adorn the gables of the building and gates.
There are some 95 chedis (stupas, pagodas) of various sizes at Wat Pho, incredibly decorated with *millions* of colorful ceramic tiles of various sizes and shapes (Photos 30 - 33).

Photo 30. Millions (if not billions) of colored ceramic tiles create intricately designed flowers and other designs on the chedis.
Photo 31. Colorful ceramic tiles used to create *by hand* individually untold numbers of flowers (on upper portion of a chedi).
Photo 32. Lower portion of the same chedi shown in Photo 31.

Photo 33. One section of Photo 32 showing the incredible number of tiles hand-placed individually into this small part of the design.
It is mind-boggling to imagine the amount of human effort that went into the construction and decoration of the 95 chedis at Wat Pho. But the chedis are only part of the story (Photo 34).

Photo 34. Two decorative arches (above and below) over gates at Wat Pho.
Our time at Wat Pho was drawing to a close, but there were still more than 1,000 Buddha images housed there that I hadn’t seen. We stopped at one room filled with them Photo 35).

Photo 35. A room of Buddha images.

I thought I should definitely see more; there were over 1,000, after all, but I didn’t know where the others were kept and most people in our group appeared to be leaving. On my way out, I stopped along with a few others to watch some monks leave a temple (Photo 36).

Photo 36. Several members of our group watch a saffron-robed monk leave a temple.
I’d been keeping an eye on Elizabeth because I knew she would dutifully keep track of our group and saw her leave through one of the gates (Photo 37). I would follow her out.

Photo 37. Elizabeth on her way out of Wat Pho and onto the bus.

I knew if I hurried, I could squeeze in a few more Buddha images, so I hurried (Photo 38).

Photo 38. Another room of Buddha images with some Thai students as well.
As I emerged from my final stop and headed for the gate, I realized I was not the only one bringing up the rear. Elliot was following me. Certainly they wouldn’t leave without Elliot. I warned him that it wasn’t a good idea, in principle, to follow me. My sense of direction is so bad I sometimes get lost at home going from the bedroom to the bathroom and I didn’t want to be responsible for someone else. When we went through the gate, I could see three buses to the left and headed in that direction, Elliot following along. We walked rapidly to the buses and as we got close I could see none of them was ours. Of course, I thought, if my first idea was to go left, we should have gone right. We walked rapidly back to the gate and onward to the right. Before going very far, I could see there were no buses in that direction and it was a long way to the next corner. Of course, I thought, we should have continued past those three buses and turned the corner. Back we went to the gate and then back toward the three buses. When we reached the buses, I asked someone for the massage center, which I remembered had been supposedly near where the bus would be. Some young guy indicated he knew where it was and started to take us to some massage parlor away from the Wat. I decided that wasn’t right and turned back and walked down the street that ran along one side of the Wat, Elliot following behind. I decided he had no sense at all, but I persevered. I asked some more guys about the massage center and one guy directed us back into the Wat. That seemed right so I continued into the Wat, across to the other side and out a gate. Lo and behold, unbelievably, there was the bus still waiting for us. When I climbed on the bus, someone asked me where Elizabeth was. I couldn’t believe it. I had managed to find the bus and it was Elizabeth who wasn’t there.

Beside myself, I left the bus and ran back into the Wat where I saw Ketsara. She told me to go one way and she went the other. I hurried along until I realized how large Wat Pho was, the largest wat in Bangkok, 20 acres large. It would be impossible for me to find her unless it was pure luck and it didn’t appear that I should depend on luck on this day. I started walking back toward the gate when I saw our bus driver who called me over. I decided to take his advice and we both headed back in the direction that Ketsara had gone. After following him for a while, I realized he had a cell phone and asked him to call Ketsara and ask if she had had any luck. He called her and talked for a while and then directed me back to the bus. Elizabeth had shown up.

When I got back to the bus, Elizabeth was indeed on board. Perspiring profusely from the exertion, I apologized to our group and sank into the seat beside her. What a turn of events. In any event, we would soon be back at the hotel and in our room. I was greatly relieved and ready to assume the reclining Buddha mudra, but with eyes completely closed.

Ronald D. Nadler
November 18, 2011

Addendum

Elizabeth and I crashed as soon as we got into our room, but had the good sense to set the alarm because we didn’t want to miss the International Buffet Dinner at Café at the Park in our hotel, the Century Park. We saw Elliot in the Café before dinner and we all had a good laugh about our earlier fiasco at Wat Pho (Photo 39). Then we ate (Photos 40 – 43).
Photo 39. Elliot and Elizabeth before the feast.

Photo 40. Two ham hocks standing tall awaiting realization of their destiny.
Photo 41. Starters of ham and vegetables for my International Buffet Dinner (i.e., Western food).

Photo 42. A second course of salad and seafood.
Photo 43. Dessert of pineapple, apple, a pear-like thing and dragon fruit.

It was all we could do to finish dinner before heading back to our room for further bedtime.

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Ronald D. Nadler
November 20, 2011