

BOAT RACING in Thailand

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Boat racing has a long history in Thailand as elsewhere in the world. There was no historical evidence of its origin. The earliest record shows that King Ekathotsarot (1605-1610) of the Ayutthaya Period once held a boat race manned with soldiers in order to train able oarsmen for use in war. His predecessor and brother Naresuan the Great is known to have the strongest marines in Thai history. He once used his speed rowing boats to chase a rebel and succeeded in catching him.



Decades later in 1685 when Narai the Great reigned, King Louis XIV of France dispatched his first embassy to Siam, as Thailand was known at that time. Among the ambassador's suite was a Catholic priest named Abbe de Choisy who wrote a series of newsletters about his sojourn in this country. Two paragraphs of one letter gave a vivid description of a boat race held by King Narai. They are roughly translated as follows:

"The Royal Barge was so majestic and exquisite that I can hardly describe it to you in detail. There were about 150 oarsmen on the boat, each holding a gold-plated oar. The King of Siam wore a ceremonial dress decorated with gems and diamonds. The oarsmen were in golden uniform with golden headgear and gold-plated adornments too..."

"... The King then ordered the boats of the noblemen of the same rank to stand side by side in pairs and race against each other towards the Royal Water Pavilion in Ayutthaya. The boat reaching there first would be handsomely awarded. The boat race was a spectacular event. Every rower of every boat was very strong and highly skilful with the oar. The race was against the current of the main river and so was very strenuous. It was the Royal Barge itself which won the race and each oarsman was bestowed with a catty (equal to 600 grammes) of silver as reward. The distance of the race was 2 leagues (6 miles)."

The above account serves to indicate the importance the ancient famous king attached to boat racing.



Sometimes it appears that boat races were held as a means of divination more than an entertainment. According to what King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) wrote in his ***Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months*** about the boat racing ceremony held in the 11th month as prescribed by the Palace Law, the race was between the Samatthachai, the boat of the king, and the Kraisonmuk, the boat of the queen. The race was held to foretell the future.



According to the belief, if the Kraisonmuk won, there would be abundant harvest of rice and the people would be happy and content. However, if the Kraisonmuk was defeated, there would be suffering.

But the race was not a real means of divination. Actually, the boat of the queen ended up the winner every time. The result was pre-arranged to please both the queen and the subjects.

As mentioned above, royal boat races were held in ancient Thailand in the 11th lunar month, i.e. about October. That was the month when the rainy season came to an end and the Chao Phraya River flooded annually in the Ayutthaya Region. After that the water level would subside and the harvest would begin. If the water level should remain high in the 12th month (November), the farmers would not be able to gather their crops in. That would be a big problem. To prevent this, the king in ancient times also performed a Brahmanic rite in the 11th month to drive away the floods in advance.



After the present Chakri Dynasty was established in Bangkok in 1782, the Royal House ceased to perform the boat racing ceremony regularly but only held it occasionally.

Later, boat racing gradually became a popular sports among the people with riverside Buddhist temples serving as centres of this activity. Now races are held annually in all parts of the country.

Here are some major boat races in Thailand taking place annually towards the end of the rainy season:

1. Phra Pradaeng Long-Boat Races (April)

Venue: Chao Phraya River, in front of Phra Pradaeng Town, Samut Prakan Province (29 km south of Bangkok)



This festival originated when Phra Pradaeng held the position of a province. At that time, it was accessible only by waterways and almost every family there had a boat. For the past few decades, the long-boat races have been organized on the 4th day of the 11th waning moon of every year when the river level peaks.



The event highlights several types of boat races, Thai musical performances, decorated boat processions, traditional merit-making ceremonies and Takraw competitions.

For more information, please contact: The Education Section, Phra Pradaeng Municipality Tel: 0 2463 4841

2. Ayutthaya Swan Boat Races and Long-Boat Races (September)

Venue: Chao Phraya River, the Bangsai Royal Folk Arts and Crafts Centre, Ayutthaya Province (76 km north of Bangkok)

The event features Thai traditional boat race, Thai traditional long-boat race and international boat race with 16 international teams participating in. Local entertainments are available throughout the festival.

For more information, please contact: TAT Central Office Region 6 Tel: 0 3524 6076 to 7 / Fax: 0 3524 6078

3. Phichit Long-Boat Races (September)

Venue: Nan River in front of Tha Luang Temple, Phichit (344 km north of Bangkok)

The Phichit Boat Races take place on the Nan River in Phichit, one of the most scenic regions in Thailand. The event features long boat competitions with great fervour amid enthusiastic cheers from crowds of spectators.



Preceding the King's Cup Long-Boat Race are decorative boat processions on the Nan River in front of the Tha Luang Pier. The event is celebrated with various kinds of cultural shows, music performances as well as OTOP Fair and local product sales.

*For more information, please contact: TAT Northern Office
Region 4 Tel: 0 5551 4341 to 3/ Fax: 0 5551 4344.*

4. Phitsanulok Boat Races (September)

Venue: Nan River in front of Phra Si Mahathat Woramahawihan Temple, Phitsanulok Province (377 km north of Bangkok)



Phitsanulok Boat Races are held on the Nan River following an important religious ceremony of the province, the annual offering of saffron robes to the highly revered Buddha image Phra Phuttha Chinnarat. This tradition has been carried through to the present day since ancient times. It is the biggest and most beautiful event of its kinds that attracts people from all over the country.

This annual event also features richly decorated boats and cheer squad competitions.

*For more information, please contact: TAT Northern Office
Region 3 Tel: 0 5525 2742 to 3/ Fax: 0 5525 2472*

5. Narathiwat International Ko-lae Boat Races (September)

Venue: Near the Tha Phraya Sai Dam, Narathiwat Province (1149 km south of Bangkok)



The Ko-lae boats are traditional fishing vessels commonly found in the Malay communities of southern Thailand. The Thai Ko-lae Boat Race was first held in 1976 in honour of Their Majesties the King and Queen, when the Royal Family travelled to Narathiwat on a visit. Since then, Ko-lae and long-boat races have been organised as an annual event and one of the main attractions of the province.

Highlights of the festival are Ko-lae boat races, traditional long-boat races, processions of decorated boats, cultural performances and local products sales.

For more information, please contact: TAT Southern Office Region 3 Tel: 0 7351 6144 / Fax: 0 7352 2412

Other boat races take place in Nan(October), Nakhon Sawan (October), Nakhon Ratchasima (November), Buriram (November), Chachoengsao (November) and in other provinces where there is a river running through. *For more information, please contact:* Tourism Authority of Thailand on tel: 1672 (hotline) or 0 2250 5500



For the correct pronunciation of romanized Thai words, see [Romanization System of the Thai Language](#).

