

Royal Barge Procession

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The royal barge *Ananta Nakkharat* (1865)

Thailand's **Royal Barge Procession** (**Thai**: กระบวนพยุหยาตราราชฉัตร; **RTGS**: *Krabuan Phayuhayattra Chonlamak*) is a ceremony of both [religious](#) and [royal](#) significance which has been taking place for nearly 700 years. The exquisitely crafted Royal Barges are a blend of craftsmanship and traditional [Thai art](#). The Royal Barge Procession takes place rarely, typically coinciding with only the most significant [cultural](#) and religious events. During the reign of King [Bhumibol Adulyadej](#), spanning over 70 years, the Procession has only occurred 16 times.

The Royal Barge Procession, in the present, consists of 52 [barges](#): 51 historical Barges, and the Royal Barge, the Narai Song Suban, which King Rama IX built in 1994. It is the only Barge built during King Bhumibol's reign. These barges are manned by 2,082 [oarsmen](#). The Procession proceeds down the [Chao Phraya River](#), from the Wasukri Royal Landing Place in [Khet Dusit](#), [Bangkok](#), passes the [Temple of the Emerald Buddha](#), the [Grand Palace](#), [Wat Po](#) (**Thai**: วัดโพธิ์), and finally arrives at [Wat Arun](#) (**Thai**: วัดอรุณ, *Temple of the Dawn*).

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History



King [Chulalongkorn](#) on Royal Barge Suphannahong.

Thailand's Royal Barge Procession most likely began during the [Ayutthaya](#) period in the 14th century. Western visitors witnessed and wrote about the "immense procession with 200 boats" upon their arrival in Thailand in the 18th century. During the processions, the [oarsmen](#) were kept in rhythm by the beating of [drums](#), with accompanying music. This traditional boat song was written by Prince Dhamma Dibes of the late Ayutthaya period.

Most of the vessels in the procession doubled as warships, and when war erupted, the barges and boats would be used as instruments of battle.

In 1767, [Burma](#) invaded Thailand, and, for the second and last time were able to capture the capital, Ayuttaya. Amid the destruction, the entire fleet was burned and destroyed, after the Burmese found them at their hideaway. General [Taksin](#) rallied the [Thais](#) and established the new capital at [Thonburi](#). During his short 15-year reign, Taksin ordered the reconstruction of the barge fleet, and used a fleet of 115 barges to carry a revered figure of [Buddha](#) to his new capital.

Chao Phaya Chakri succeeded King Taksin, and moved the capital to the eastern side of the river to what is now known as Bangkok. Chao Phaya Chakri, founder of the [Chakri Dynasty](#), ruled as [King Buddha Yodfah](#) (Rama I) and began the Royal Kathin Ceremony Procession. The [Kathin Ceremony](#) is a presentation of Kathin robes and earns merit by honouring and supporting the [Buddhist Monks](#).

Soon after his [coronation](#) in 1782, King Rama I ordered construction of the Royal Barge *Si Suphannahong*. The *Si Suphannahong* was the principle Royal Barge for more than a century. In 1911 King [Rama VI](#) launched its successor, also named *Suphannahong*.

The [Prince of Nakhon Sawan](#), during the reign of [Rama V](#), regulated the formations, which became the standard "Major" and "Minor" formations used today.

Processions took place occasionally until the absolute monarchy ended in 1932. And most of royal barge are kept near Thonburi train station and was bombed in WWII destroy a large number of royal barges. They were not resumed until the celebration of the 25th century of the [Buddhist Era](#) in 1957. In 1959, Bhumibol Adulyadej revived the Royal Barge Procession as a method to present the Royal Kathin (Robes for monks) in dedicated ceremonies.^[4]

Modern Processions

Occurrences

In the reign of king Rama IX, Bhumibol Adulyadej (9 June 1946 – 13 October 2016), 16 royal barge processions have been conducted:

Major Sailings



Royal Barge Suphannahong arrived at Wat Arun for Royal Kathin Ceremony

- The 25th Century Celebrations of the Buddhist Era - 14 May 1957
- Royal Barge Procession in the Bangkok Bicentennial Celebrations, 5 April 1982
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 20 October 1982
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 16 October 1987 (King's 60th Birthday)
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 7 November 1996 (King's 50th anniversary on the throne)
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 4 November 1999 (King's 6th cycle, 72 years old)
- Royal Barge Procession for APEC Meeting 20 October 2003 ([video](#))^[2]
- King's 60th – Diamond Jubilee of the king's accession to the throne. 12 June 2006 (52 barges) ([video](#))
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 5 November 2007 (King's 80th Birthday) ([video](#))
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, scheduled for 22 October 2011 (King's 7th cycle, 84 years old), but postponed due to massive flooding and run on 9 November 2012

Additional sailings (Royal Kathin)

- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun 15 November 1959
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 2 November 1961
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 22 October 1962
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 15 November 1964
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 19 October 1965
- Royal Barge Procession for Royal Kathin Ceremony at Wat Arun, 27 October 1967
- Barge Procession to transport the Buddha Image, 12 April 1982

Organization

The Royal Barge Procession is conducted in one of two formations, the Major and the Minor. The Major formation, also known as the Major Battle Formation (Petch Phuang Major Battle Formation) dates from the time of [King Narai](#). This formation is used for the more significant events, such as The Royal Kathin Ceremony, the movement of the sacred image of Buddha, or important occasions of state. The Petch Phuang Formation is arranged into five columns, with the Royal Barges in the center, and two rows of war barges on each side. In the Minor formation, there are three columns, the Royal Barges in the middle, and a single row on each side.

Major Barge Procession

Arranged in five rows.

- 1 pair of lead barges carrying high-ranking officials with the position of permanent undersecretary.
- 1 pair of ancient Thai battle boats with cannons at the bow, carrying army conniellers.
- 2 pairs of plain outer barges
- 4 pairs of inner barges with decorated mastheads in the shape of the garuda, monkeys, and ogres.
- 1 outer drum boat, 1 inner drum boat, with six musicians each playing the [Pi](#) and the [klong khaek](#).
- 1 inner, 1 outer boat for the Royal Police.
- The Ekachai Barge with covered throne for monks' robes, the Buddha image or flower arrangements complete with regalia.
- The Ekachai Hern Hao Barge and the Ekachai Lao Thong Barge, carrying musicians from the [Traditional Band of the Royal Family of Thailand](#) and the [military bands](#) of the [Royal Thai Army](#) to lead the Royal Barge.
- The Royal Barge with covered throne and regalia
- Pavilion Barge for the king's change of robes
- Second Royal barge
- 1 pair of Police barges
- 2 pairs of Army barges
- 1 pair of plain rear barges

Minor Barge Procession

- 1 pair lead barges
- 1 pair attack barges
- 7 pairs plain barges
- 4 pairs animal masthead barges
- 1 left drum boat, 1 right drum boat
- 2 police boats—left and right
- The Ekachai Barge with a covered throne for the monks' robes, a Buddha figure or a flower arrangement complete with regalia
- The Ekachai Hern Hao Barge with musicians and the Ekachai Lao Thong Barge
- The Royal Barge with appropriate regalia
- The Second Royal barge
- 1 pair police Barges

The Barges

The Royal Barges



Crew of Sukrip Khrong Mueang performed the ritual wai to the Mae Ya Nang, the female spirit believed to be in every boat.

The Royal Barge *Suphannahong* ("the Golden Swan" or the "Phoenix") was built in 1911 during the reign of [Rama VI](#) with a bow resembling a mythical swan, or *hong*, adorned with gold [lacquer](#) and glass jewels, with a crystalline ball and tassel dangling from her mouth. This 46-meter craft was carved from a single trunk of [teakwood](#), and was launched 13 November 1911. There is a golden [pavilion](#) on board to house the king and his immediate royal family. ***Suphannahong*** is the regular royal barge, if a royal is travelling with the procession. ***Suphannahong***'s hull is painted black.




The World Ship Trust, in 1992, named the Royal Barge *Suphannahong* a Maritime World Heritage.

The original **Royal Barge *Anantanakkharat*** ("[Ananta](#), the King of Serpents") was built during the reign of [Rama III](#) (King Nangklao). It was used as the primary Royal Barge of [Rama IV](#) (King Mongkut). The current *Anantanakkharat* was built during the Reign of [Rama VI](#) (King Vajiravudh), and launched on 14 April 1914. The bow is carved into the 7-headed *Nakkharat*, the mystical snake-like creature, in gold lacquer and glass jewels. '***Anantanakkharat*** carries a smaller pagoda-like structure to carry holy objects, unlike the others royal barges, which are equipped with pavilions. Her hull is painted green.

The Royal Barge *Anekkachatphuchong* ("the Variety of Serpents") is the oldest of the four Royal Barges, being the actual barge built in the late 19th century during the reign of [Rama V](#) (King Chulalongkorn). While no mythical figure is readily visible on the bow, numerous small ornamental [Naga](#) figures are carved into the bow. The hull of ***Anekkachatphuchong*** is painted pink.

The Royal Barge *Narai Song Suban Ratchakan Thi Kao* or **The Royal Barge *Narai Song Suban HM King Rama IX*** ("[God Narayana](#) on his carrier, [Garuda](#)") is the only barge built during the reign of [Bhumibol Adulyadej](#), who laid the keel in 1994. It was built under commission by the [Royal Thai Navy](#) and the Thai Department of Fine Arts and was launched 6 May 1996 to coincide with the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne. Temporarily took over the role of the main royal barge from ***Suphannahong*** for one occasion and has a red hull. The original ***Narai Song Suban*** started life as ***Mongkol Suban***, and had only the *Garuda* as a figurehead, before having a statue of *Narayana* retrofitted to her by King Mongkut and being renamed ***Narai Song Suban***.

The names of the four Royal Barges are composed in a consistent rhyme: "Suphannahong", "Narai Song Suban", "Anantanakkharat" and "Anekkachatphuchong". The Royal Barges' arrangement in the Procession would have "Anantanakkharat" leading, with the "Suphannahong", "Narai Song Suban" and "Anekkachatphuchong" following respectively.

| | Suphannahong | Anantanakharat | Anekkachatphuchong | Narai Song Suban HM Rama IX |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|---|
| |  |  |  |  |
| |  |  |  |  |
| Length: | 46.15 m | 44.85 m | 45.67 m | 44.30 m |
| Width at Beam: | 3.17 m | 2.58 m | 2.91 m | 3.20 m |
| Hull Depth: | 94 cm | 87 cm | 91 cm | 1.10 cm |
| Draught: | 41 cm | 31 cm | 1.46 m | |
| Displacement: | 15 tons | 15.26 tons | 7.7 tons | 20 tons |
| Crew: | 50 oarsmen 2 steersmen 1 chanter 2 officers fore 2 officers aft 1 signalman 1 standard bearer 7 bearers of the Royal Insignia | 54 oarsmen 2 steersmen 1 chanter 1 signalman 1 standard bearer 7 bearers of the Royal Insignia | 61 oarsmen 2 steersmen 1 chanter 1 signalman 1 standard bearer 2 officers (one fore, one aft) 7 bearers of the Royal Insignia | 50 oarsmen 2 steersmen |

The Other Barges

Escort barges



The bow of barge Asura Paksi



The bow of barge Krut ([Garuda](#)) Tret Traichak.



The bow of barge Sukrip ([Sugriva](#)) Khrong Mueang.



The bow of barge Ekachai Lao Thong.

Escort barges consist of a few different classes of barges. Most of these boats' bows are decorated with either a painting or a figurehead of a mythical creature. Other types have less elaborate design. The barges with figureheads have their rowers dressed in decorated purple uniforms with pink trousers and red ancient-style helmets with a tall crown and wide brim, while the oarsmen on the *Ekachai* class are dressed in white uniforms with pink trousers and small red headgear resembling havelocks.

Ekachai Class Barges are the two barges with a gold painting of a horned creature that is half-[nāga](#) half-[dragon](#), **Ekachai Hern How** and **Ekachai Lao Thong**. They might be used to tow Suphannahongse in case of a strong current or if the royal barge needed assistance. Unlike other escort barges, Ekachai class barges are not equipped with [cannon](#). The two barges can be distinguished by their slightly differing eyes. In the past, there have also been **Ekachai**-like royal barges, but none are in commission today.

Krut Class Barges are the two barges with [garuda](#) figureheads with nagas caught on their wings and feet. The garuda on **Krut Hern Het** (Flying Garuda) is red while the one on **Krut Tret Traichak** (Garuda travelling through the three worlds) is pink.

Krabi Class Barges consist of four barges with [Vanara](#) figureheads, **Pali Rang Thawip** ([Vali](#) rules the land), **Sukrip Khrong Mueang** (Sugriva rules the city), **Krabi Ran Ron Rap**, and **Krabi Prap Mueang Man**. The bow of Pali Rang Thawip depicts [Vali](#), the elder brother of [Sugriva](#) on Sukrip Khrong Mueang, rulers of the [Kishkindha](#) Kingdom. Both have crowns on their heads with the body color green and red respectively. Krabi Ran Ron Rap and Krabi Prap Mueang Man (Monkey defeats the city of evil) feature uncrowned warriors of Vanara [Nilaphat](#) (black body) and [Hanuman](#) (white body), respectively.

Asura Class Barges consists of two barges with half-bird, half-ogre figureheads. The bow on **Asura Vayuphak** has an indigo body in a purple coat, while **Asura Paksi** has a green body in a purple (front) and green (back) coat.

Suea Class Barges are the barges with the painting of a tiger, **Suea Thayan Chon** and **Suea Kamron Sin**. The names of the barges are clearly written on the bow in red lettering.

Thong barges are the twin barges in the extreme front of the procession, and lead the procession. They are shaped much like a smaller, much less elaborate version of *Anekkachatpuchong* and are painted with their names in white on their bow freeboard area; the tips of their bow and stern are painted in gold. The men on these boats are dressed in a similar manner to those on the royal barges, but are not entirely alike.

Lesser escort barges

The largest number of barges in the fleet is the Lesser Escorts and Attendants such as **Ruea Dang**, **Ruea Saeng**, **Police barges** and **Drum barges**. They have no figurehead and no cannon. They are painted mostly black, and their type, number and name (if they have one) is painted on their bows in white. They can be differentiated as follows:

- Police Barges have rowers dressed in black and have a relatively flat bow and stern, with the stern raised slightly higher than the bow.
- *Saeng* barges also have rather flat bow and stern, but the rowers are dressed in white and black headgear; there are also slightly more rowers on these boats. The boats number from 1-7
- *Dang* barges have a more pronounced bow and stern, with their shapes similar to those found on the *Anekkachatpuchong* and the *Thong* barges, but are smaller, painted black, and significantly less elaborate. These boats number from 1 to 22. Their oarsmen are dressed in black uniforms similar to those of the rowers on Royal barges, with a red trim on the uniform items.
- The *Tangmo* (Watermelon) and the *E. Leeung* barges is in front of the royal barges. They are shaped like the Police and *Saeng* barges, but is smaller and sits lower in the water than the aforementioned vessels. The oarsmen here are dressed like the ones on the *Saengs*

Preservation

The present fleet of barges was restored during the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, as some had suffered damage in bombing raids on Bangkok during [World War II](#). The dock that stored them, located in the [Bangkok Noi](#) district, became the National Museum of Royal Barge.^[1] Only eight important barges, including all four Royal Barges, are displayed in the museum due to limits of space. Displayed with the boats are a number of smaller historical artifacts related to the barge processions, such as old procession layout plans and some partial remains of the older decommissioned and/or damaged boats, including the bow and figurehead of the old *Narai Song Suban*.^[2] The remainder are kept at Wasukri Pier, next to the National Library of Thailand. All are stored out of the water to prevent deterioration. They return to Chao Phaya River only for a Royal Barge Procession.