



This magnificent seated Buddha at Wat Mahathat, the largest temple of Sukhothai, radiates an other-worldly sense of serenity and detachment

## WONDERS OF THE WORLD

# SUKHOTHAI HISTORICAL PARK, THAILAND

The peaceful plains of central Thailand, dominated by rice fields fanning out from the Chao Phraya river estuary, make for an unlikely cradle of the modern Thai nation. Yet it was here, in one glorious burst of achievement spanning a century, that the first Siamese capital gave birth to a cultural richness that endures today.

The story of Sukhothai is basically the story of one man – King Ramkhamhaeng, or Rama the Strong. When he acceded to the throne in 1279 the embattled city had only recently wrenched its independence from the Khmer empire. But Sukhothai's fortunes would be dramatically improved by this dynamic ruler with a vision of a just and opulent land.

Rama quickly gained popularity by granting freedom of trade and exemption from tax. The prize of a peaceful kingdom was elusive at first and the 19-year-old king was forced to defend the embryonic capital on the battlefield, but the king's fresh impetus steadily rolled back the borders of the realm almost to where they stand today.

What set the young warrior king apart was his concern for spiritual as well as material wellbeing. Ceylonese monks brought Buddhism to the kingdom and scores of temples sprang up. A bronze bell was installed at the palace gate, which any aggrieved subject had only to ring for his case to receive the king's attention. Rama

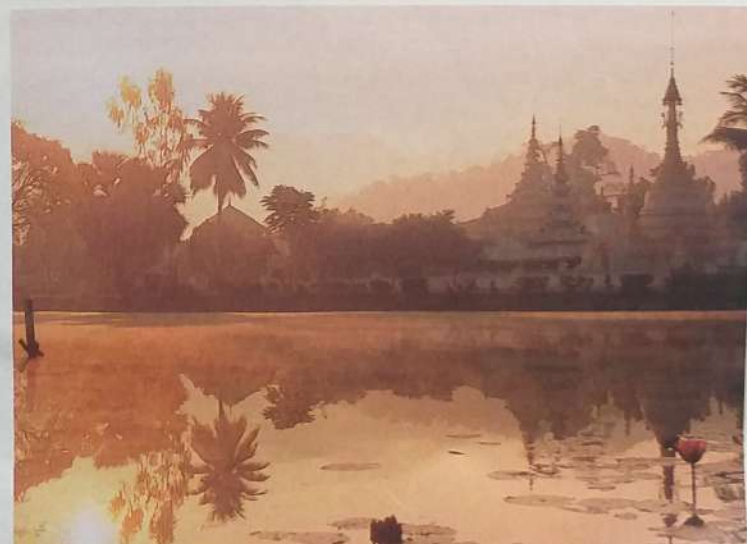
matured into a paternalistic and far-sighted monarch, and he even invented the first Thai alphabet. Within 20 years he had led a besieged city into a warmly remembered golden age.

Today, Sukhothai Historical Park preserves the atmospheric remains of 126 exclusively religious monuments in five zones, with most of these situated within zone one, the triple-fortified square mile of the old city walls. This area, navigated comfortably on foot, benefits hugely from the conservation of its original surroundings. Not for Sukhothai the fate of so

many treasures swallowed by urban sprawl. Here, the modern world is held so far distant as to seem meaningless.

Standing among sugar palms is the largest temple, Wat Mahathat, which comprises a central lotus-bud *chedi* (pagoda) amid eight smaller Sinhalese-style *chedis* made from laterite blocks. Stucco lions and elephants gambol close by, angels riding on their backs. The *vihara*, or assembly hall, houses a seated Buddha radiating an other-worldly sense of detachment, amplified by its perfect reflection in the still moat encircling the whole edifice.

Wat Mahathat (below) stands among sugar palms and is surrounded by a moat



To the north, Wat Sa Si enjoys splendid isolation, its bell-shaped tower dominating an island rising from a square lake. The lake was constructed not merely to provide a beautiful setting but because water – a symbol of purity to Buddhists – is meant to enclose a holy area. Nearby, Wat Si Sawai features three corn-cob-style *prangs* (towers).

The most imposing Buddha image, its long earlobes symbolising longevity, patiently awaits visitors at Wat Si Chum, just beyond the northeast corner of the old city. The high-walled enclosure, hollow with tunnels, betrays little hint of the humbling 40-foot effigy within. Voices echoing round the tunnels once sparked rumours that the image could speak, and even today those seeking divine intervention daub gold leaf onto the elegant hand of the divinity. Battered by time and plundered by treasure-hunters, the ruined stones of Sukhothai bear silent and powerful testament to the spiritual quest of Rama's people.

Early in the 14th century, the long decline began for Sukhothai as its influence ebbed away. By then, King Ramkhamhaeng had long since established language, industry and religious observance as permanent features of the Thai kingdom. The ancients knew why Sukhothai translates as "the dawn of happiness", and modern-day visitors will surely agree.