

Thailand, the Kingdom of Siam in our history books, "The land of free men", Meuang Thai or Prathet Thai is a fascinating kingdom. Bordered to the north by high mountains, open to the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea to the south, it expands around large plains crossed by the Chao Phraya River. It receives the monsoon winds from the east and west. Cultural influences flow from India, the Malay world and China. Thailand echoes contemporary world trends in light of its historic ancient culture.

A 13th century stele erected by King Rama Khamheng commemorates the birth of the Thai Kingdom. It is transcribed in a new script inspired by the Khmer. "These letters exist because the king invented them in his heart. The Thai language has allowed the development of a refined culture of literature, poetry and theatre. Its rich traditions are constantly being renewed. Buddhist temples that are several centuries old are constantly being renovated. They are an expression of remarkable know-how and architectural art. Buddhism, which appeared in the region as early as the 3rd century BC, became a powerful link of social cohesion in the 13th century in the Theravada version that became the religion of the Kingdom.

Thailand was Asian power from the 17th century onward. It sent embassies to Versailles and traded with France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. In the age of the colonialism, it was one of the few countries in Southeast Asia to preserve its independence.

Today it is a tiger economy and a nascent democracy. It has achieved dazzling material successes but left many ordinary people on the margins, struggling to keep up with the speed of change. It remains a charming and baroque country where the serenity of the temples is hardly disturbed by the animation of the overcrowded and bottled streets, where skyscrapers overlook straw huts by the water's edge, where luxuriant gardens are next to bustling open markets. It is a kingdom that tries to preserve its authenticity despite the hordes of tourists who visit the country every year, from the high mountains of the north to the beautiful beaches of the Gulf of Thailand and its islands.

Martini takes us off the beaten track took us to the country where he has lived for so many years. From Chiang Mai to Chiang Dao, from Bangkok to the islands of Phuket or Koh Samui, he takes a new look at the country that takes a distance from far from postcard images of paradise. He invites us to discover a fabulous and engaging Thailand.