



The Metropolis Observed

Fly the Friendly Sky Train transportation

What's good for tourists is good for Thailand.

Bangkok's long awaited *rót fai fáh* ("sky train") opened to much hoopla on December 5, 1999, the King of Thailand's birthday. Its stated objectives were to "alleviate the chronic traffic problem in Bangkok and to provide citizens with a fast and more efficient means of transportation within the central business district." On its third anniversary it's clear that the controversial system fails as the solution to the city's horrendous traffic and pollution problems but has transformed the lives of those who can afford to use it—making it an "elevated" train in more than one sense.

Financed through a private-public partnership between the Bangkok Mass Transit System Co. (BTS) and the government, the city's first mass-transit rail system was seven years in the making and comprises two lines. The 15-mile-long tracks avoid older sections of the city, where they would overwhelm the lower buildings and temples. The Sukhumvit line runs on a commercial path south from the famous Chatuchak weekend market, then along Sukhumvit Road, a modern area with a profusion of midrange hotels and tourist shops. The shorter Silom line goes from the National Stadium to the Saphan Taksin bridge, where passengers can take long-tailed taxi boats along the Chao Phraya river, the main waterway in a system of canals for which Bangkok earned the moniker "Venice of the East."

The Sky Train is fast, arrives frequently, and provides a clean and cool refuge from the tropical city's famously gridlocked streets. Yet most commuters have no incentive to take it or simply cannot afford to. The government-subsidized bus costs 4 baht (10 cents); the BTS ranges from 25 cents to a dollar. In this city of six million, where the per-capita income is \$8,000, there are only about 250,000 riders per day. But Anat Arbhabhira-rama, advisor to the board of directors and

founding president of BTS, says, "Lowering ticket prices is not an option, because the company has achieved only 60 percent of projected revenues."

Arbhabhira-rama admits that the Sky Train was designed mostly for tourists, Thailand's biggest source of income. He says it would have to be more than ten times as long, extending out into the suburbs, to have any effect on traffic volume. (Construction of a 12-mile subway is now nearing completion, and the government has approved three above-ground extensions, totaling 12 miles, into res-

idential areas. But, he adds, "it has changed the lifestyle of the people living near the stations. Instead of spending two hours commuting each way, they spend one-quarter of that." As a result people are relocating to station areas, and commercial buildings are being filled with tenants.

However, those living closest to the stations also bear the brunt of the system's unfortunate side effects. Environmentalists complain that it has caused irreversible damage to the city's landscape and has actually worsened the effects of pollution

by trapping fumes and traffic noise underneath stations. The BTS has reportedly neglected to install air ventilators required by an environmental-impact assessment. In addition, according to Bangkok-based writer Brian Mertens, the Sky Train is perpetuating noise pollution. "Managers are abusing the public-address system to blast announcements onto the platform and into surrounding neighborhoods—annoying theme music, promotions, and 'reminders,'" he says. "Some riders have gone back to using their cars to escape it."

But the Sky Train may have arrived just in time for the country's troubled tourism industry. In June the director of the Thai Tourism Authority was fired on corruption charges, and the national airline has been criticized for lack of efficiency. In an economy still rebounding from the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the train is part of an attempt to get tourists to see Bangkok as more than a gateway to Thailand's once picturesque but now overdeveloped islands. If publicity is any measure of success, the plan seems to be working. As the portly Arbhabhira-rama, who gets around in a chauffeur-driven limousine, says, "Now the Sky Train is a symbol of Bangkok. Whenever you see something written about the city there is a picture of the Sky Train." —Cathryn Drake



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