

# **FOR ENGLAND AND ST. GEORGE! SPOOFING, BANGERS, AND A JAPANESE OFFICERS' MESS**

## **Review of the British Club of Bangkok**

by

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I visited the British Club of Bangkok (BCB), which is reciprocal with the Cosmos Club, in November 2013 and again in September 2016, and compiled a full report.

### **History**

The British Club of Bangkok was founded in 1903, when the town's population was only about 450,000 (compared to 9 million today), there were only a few roads, no bridges, almost all transport was by canals and the Chao Phraya River, and no local banks! So in a real sense the Club pre-dates the modern city, which is the ninth largest in Asia and is the financial and business hub of south-east Asia.

The BCB was created by British diplomats and businessmen, and was first housed in a small wooden building "on the edge of the town." By 1910 the membership had risen to 100, and the current clubhouse was built, making it one of oldest and most historic buildings in the city. Over the years, the BCB acquired land, and was graciously given additional land by King Rama VI, such that the Club now owns 14,000 square meters (about 3.45 acres). Since this is some of the only open space in one of the most desirable of Bangkok's nine different downtowns (!), the land alone is probably worth in excess of \$50 million USD.

The Club became a Japanese officers' mess during World War II, and some members were interned in local prison camps. After the war the Club's land was almost lost to an acquisitive YMCA chapter, but a former Club member found the original deeds and mortgages in a local bank, and was able to prove and recover the Club's ownership of the property.

In the 1970s membership was extended from British-only gentlemen to graciously include upstart colonials such as Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians. In 1985 women were allowed as members, and now men and women from 45 nations (including Thailand) are members.

## **Facilities, Membership and Accommodations**

The Club had 1,113 members as of February 2016. It had a remarkable 2015 profit margin of 86% on its operating income, and an even more remarkable cash reserve position of 42% compared to its 2015 operating income plus capital expenditure. This is all a major turnaround from just five years ago. From its annual report, it appears that the Club feels it must preserve a major cash position to defend itself from possible predatory, well-connected developers. Annual membership for a single person over 30 includes an entrance fee of \$617 USD and a yearly subscription of \$684.

According to the Club annual report, the BCB has a “reciprocal portfolio of 340 Premier Private Member Clubs all over the world – a truly fantastic achievement, especially when you understand the full benefits of the two-way agreements.” The BCB has 25 reciprocal clubs in China alone, including six in Beijing and ten in Hong Kong.

The BCB also has “associated groups” which are officially recognized local community organizations, chambers of commerce, Masonic Lodges and social groups which are allowed to use the Club’s facilities on a regular basis (e.g., the Society of Professional Engineers of Thailand, the Bangkok Mothers and Babies International (BAMBI), and the Bangkok Music Society). The Club has its own bagpipe band that plays regularly at British remembrance day events in the area, including at the famous Kanchanaburi “Bridge on the River Kwai” location. And it officially hosts chapters of the St. David’s Society, St. Andrew’s Society, and St. George’s Society (motto: “For England and St. George!”)

Sports are a major focus at the club, including tennis, squash, golf and swimming. Facilities on site include a 25 meter pool, four tennis courts, three squash courts, fitness center with trainers, cricket nets, and a multi-purpose court for netball, field hockey, rugby and soccer training.

Two unusual pastimes at the Club are Balut, a game of dice similar to Yahtzee, in which five dice are rolled in an attempt to get five-of-a-kind (a “Balut”), and also “Spoofing.” Spoofing is played in a bar by gentlemen only, usually on Tuesday evenings. Each man in a group holds up to three coins hidden in his hand, and everyone in the group must guess the total number of coins held. The loser must buy a round of drinks, and pay the winners and a local charity – and there is no charitable administrative overhead!

Club events include an annual Trafalgar Day dinner, Annual Ball, Christmas Dinner (sometimes without turkeys, since they may mysteriously fail to be imported), Quiz Nights, Car Boot Sales, and local festival events such as Songkran (marked by massive public water fights in the streets).

The menu is extensive and covers Thai, British and American food, and is the same in all four dining venues, including the bar. Prices are very reasonable, e.g., plain pizza or fish and chips (dory) for \$5 USD, bangers and mash for \$5.40 and large steaks for \$20. My chicken satay (\$3) was excellent, pork wontons (\$2.50) good, pork Pad Thai (\$4) very good, and Eton Mess (strawberries, meringue and cream) (\$5) was fair. Beer and spirits during happy hour are claimed to be the cheapest in town (e.g., a pint of Heineken at \$2.65) and soft drinks always cost \$1. The wine list is short, ranging from a Moet & Chandon Brut Imperial for \$176/bottle to a French Syrah for \$31. Almost all cocktails are \$4.25. Drink up!

The BCB is located at the end of narrow Soi (lane) 18 off Silom Road. Use this entrance for your first visit and bring passport, credit card, introduction letter and Cosmos Club membership card. (Do not use the Suriwongswe Road entrance.)

The Club does not have accommodations of its own now (but is thinking of building some), but has about a 20% discount (available for reciprocals) at numerous nearby hotels, such as the Narai, getting the price down to about \$71/day.

Dress code after 6 pm only requires long pants, polo shirt and closed toe shoes. Front desk and other staff were very helpful and amusing, as are most Thais in the “Land of Smiles.”

In summary, the British Club of Bangkok is a fascinating, enjoyable and cheap destination of its own in Bangkok, one of the world’s great cities.

Photos from Club documents are presented below.



The British Club of Bangkok, the 1910 Clubhouse



The Bangkok British Club Pipe Band



The pool at the BCB



The Verandah Bar