

THE BEST OF BANGKOK

Gilded temples, hospitable people, tempting cuisine and fantastic shopping venues are just a few of the many delights the city has to offer visitors, writes Ellen Boonstra.



That the "City of Angels" is one of the greatest places on the planet was once again confirmed when Bangkok was voted best tourist city - both in Asia and in the world - by readers of US-based publication *Travel + Leisure*. The survey was based on six criteria: culture, food, shopping, hospitality, location and value for money. After emerging victorious in 2008, it was the second time that Bangkok came out on top.

The award is a boost for the Thai capital that has suffered image problems in the wake of the political unrest in April and May. The governor of Bangkok, MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra, picked up the prestigious award in New York and, at the same time, received a few valuable pointers from his counterpart in

the Big Apple, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, on repairing the city's image. For local residents, the governor believes the award serves as a reminder to treasure one's city and not take its beauty for granted.

Like New York, Bangkok never truly slumbers, though it does take catnaps. This polyglot metropolis is home to 11 million people, often serving as a relay station for vacationers departing for other parts of Southeast Asia. The city's mass transit systems, both underground and the overhead skytrain, make it easy to negotiate the capital, with English-language signs, and clean, air-conditioned trains. The newly opened City Air Terminal (CAT) allows passengers to check in their baggage in central Bangkok while the new airport link whisks passengers to and

Clockwise:
Wat Phra
Kaew, the
heart of the
Thai people in
the heart of
Bangkok; Wat
Ratchanadda,
the rare
"Metal
Castle"; the
Reclining
Buddha of
Wat Pho, the
temple of
healing arts.



Images by: Photolibrary, Getty Images, Supplied and Chanok Thamarakkit

from Suvarnabhumi Airport in a mere 15 (express) to 30 minutes (commuter).

A Taste of Historic Siam

The capital is home to a number of must-see sites including the Grand Palace and the adjoining Wat Phra Kaew, an architectural wonder of gleaming gold, mosaic-encrusted pillars and sacred chedis that rise into the humid sky. The famed temple of healing arts, Wat Pho (also known as the Temple of the



The famed temple of healing arts, Wat Pho (also known as the Temple of the Reclining Buddha), is a sprawling complex rich in history and an excellent place to stop for a traditional Thai massage.



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Reclining Buddha), is a sprawling complex rich in history and an excellent place to stop for a traditional Thai massage. Another well-known landmark is Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn, situated on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River. Hiring a long-tail boat is an excellent way to experience what life must have been like in the olden days when the "Venice of the East" was filled with canals and rivers and people lived on boats. Also not to be missed is fascinating Chinatown and its maze of winding lanes, historic alleyways, markets and Chinese temples.

Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall

Completed in 1915, this palatial edifice on our September cover mixes Italian Renaissance and neoclassical features with distinctly Thai elements. In the center is the magnificent dome rising to a height of 50 metres, which is surrounded by six smaller domes. Inside the large dome visitors can marvel at frescoes by Professor Galileo Chini and Carlo Riguli depicting the history of the Chakri Dynasty from the first to the sixth reigns. The Throne of the mighty Chakri Dynasty still occupies pride of place, but the building is primarily used for state ceremonies and meetings with foreign dignitaries. Thanks to its stately and imposing elegance, the Anantasamakom Hall often draws comparisons to the Whitehouse.

Ananta Samakhom
Throne Hall



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Shopping Paradise: Bangkok offers a wide range of shopping experiences from high-end malls to weekend markets.

A Shopaholic's Paradise

Over the past few years, Bangkok has seen a wave of upscale mega-malls sprout up, each vying to outdo the other in glamour and magnitude. Siam Paragon (the so-called 'Pride of Bangkok') has every imaginable fashion and luxury brand available and also houses Southeast Asia's largest aquarium, Siam Ocean World, which kids will love. CentralWorld, Southeast Asia's biggest mall, is 550,000 square metres of retail heaven with two major department stores, more than 50 restaurants and 21 cinemas. Parts of this complex were damaged during the political violence in May but renovations are well underway and 80 percent of CentralWorld is set to reopen by the end of this month. For more niche-targeted malls try Gaysorn Plaza for ultra-exclusive brands and one-off designer boutiques, Siam Center and Siam Discovery Center for local Thai brands and young designers, and Mah Boon Khrong (MBK) for casual wear, furniture, electronic gadgetry and

software. These shopping centres are all conveniently located in close proximity to one another in the central Chidlom/Siam Square area, and easily accessible via Bangkok's ever-efficient skytrain system (BTS).

Part of the shopping fun is finding items which are rare or cannot be bought in one's home country. Make sure you check out Jim Thompson, with uniquely Thai brands like quality silk products, Lotus Arts de Vivre (exquisitely handcrafted *objets d'art* and jewelry), Tango (luxury handbags and accessories) and the Kingdom's many fashion labels such as Sretsis, FlyNow and Greyhound.

If you're longing for the more old-school markets make a beeline for Chatuchak Weekend Market, Asia's largest outdoor bazaar. As the saying goes, 'If they don't sell it there, it's not in Thailand.' Crowded markets can get very hot during the day, even for those acclimatized to the heat, making Suan Lum Night Bazaar (open daily from 6pm to midnight) a pleasant alternative. This market





Left: Siam Paragon, in the CBD, is easily accessible by the skytrain. Below: The lobby of the Renaissance Bangkok Ratchaprasong Hotel. Right: The Erawan Tearoom at the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel.

is ideal for picking up last-minute souvenirs such as silk cushion covers and scarves, funky locally designed clothing and jewelry, as well as a large variety of home décor, handicrafts and gift items.

Royal Retreats

When it comes to selecting a place to bed down for the night in Bangkok, travelers are spoilt for choice. There's something for every budget, from no-nonsense business hotels like Sacha's Hotel UNO and Citadines, to five-star abodes fit for an aristocrat. The grand old dame of hotels remains the Mandarin Oriental, a must-visit if only for its famous Author's Lounge (the illustrious alumni include Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham and John le Carré). For old-world charm melded with a few accents of adventure, check into the Eugenia. Founded by a designer and traveler best described as a "Taiwanese Indiana Jones", some 300-plus antiques from his travels through colonial Indochina, Burma and India adorn the interiors of this neo-colonial mansion. Another hotel conjuring up images of a bygone era is the Arun Residence. Housed in a former warehouse, the Sino-Portuguese style boutique hotel has magnificent views of Wat Arun. The latest establishment about to open its doors is the ritzy, five-star Siam Kempinsky which promises to bring European grandeur to Bangkok.

On the modern end of the spectrum, there's no lack of creatively designed, uber-trendy or downright quirky hotels. Take the Dream Hotel for example - this edgy hotel in the heart of Sukhumvit blends eclectic design with high-tech comforts. Maduzi Hotel, also located in this bustling district, has been designed according to the principles of feng shui, while Siam@Siam Design Hotel & Spa is sure to wow visitors with its striking, artistic interior.

"This 64th-floor, open-air rooftop restaurant offers spectacular views of the Bangkok city skyline and the Chao Phraya River."

MISSING LINKS

Accommodation

Sacha's Hotel UNO 28/9 Sukhumvit Soi 19; tel +66 (0) 2651 2180 www.sachas.hotel-uno.com

Citadines Sukhumvit Sois 8, 11, 17 and 23; tel (toll free) 1800 888 272 www.citadines.com

The Mandarin Oriental 48 Oriental Avenue; tel +66 (0) 2659 9000 www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok

The Eugenia 267 Soi Sukhumvit 31; tel: +66-2-259-9011-7 www.theeugenia.com

Arun Residence 36-38 Soi Pratoonok Yoong, Maharat Road, Rattanakosin Island; tel +66 (0) 2221 9158-9 www.arunresidence.com

Siam Kempinsky 991/9 Rama 1 Road (behind Siam Paragon shopping mall); tel +66 (0) 2162 9000 www.kempinsky.com

Dream Bangkok 10 Sukhumvit Soi 15; tel +66 (0) 2254 8500 www.dreambkk.com

Maduzi Hotel 9/1 Ratchadapisek, Sukhumvit Road; tel +66 (0) 2615 6400 www.maduzihotel.com

Siam@Siam Design Hotel & Spa 865 Rama 1 Road, Wang Mai; tel +66 (0) 2217 3000 www.siamatsiam.com

Restaurants & Nightlife

Sirocco State Tower, 1055 Silom Road; tel: +66 (0) 2624 9999 www.lebua.com

Vertigo Grill & Moon Bar Banyan Tree Bangkok, 21/100 South Sathorn Road; tel: +66 (0) 2679 1200 www.banyantree.com

Face Bar 29 Sukhumvit Soi 38; tel +66 (0) 2713 6048 www.facebars.com

Cabbages & Condoms Sukhumvit Soi 12; tel +66 (0) 2229 4610 www.pda.or.th/restaurant/

Erawan Tearoom Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok; tel +66 (0) 254 1234 www.erawanangkok.com

Hyde & Seek Gastro Bar Soi Ru-amrudee; tel +66 (0) 2168 5152-3 www.hydeandseek.com

Long Table Sukhumvit Soi 16; tel +66 (0) 2302 2557-9 www.longtablebangkok.com

Bed Supperclub Sukhumvit Soi 11; tel +66 (0)2651 3537 www.bedsupperclub.com

The Met Bar Metropolitan Bangkok hotel; 27 South Sathorn Road; tel +66 (0)2 625 3333 www.metropolitan.bangkok.como.bz

BarSu Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit Bangkok; 250 Sukhumvit Road between Soi 12-14; tel +66 (0) 2649 8358 www.barsubangkok.com

Tapas Room Silom Soi 4 www.tapasroom.net

To Die For H1 Place, 998 Thong Lo; tel +66 (0) 2381 4714

Club Nove Thong Lo Soi 9; tel +66 (0) 2712 9991

Ice Bar 58/21 Thong Lo; tel: (66) 2381 6844



One Night in Bangkok

If you've spent the afternoon enjoying high tea at the Mandarin Oriental hotel, it's only a short hop to catch the sunset at Sirocco. This 64th-floor, open-air rooftop restaurant offers spectacular views of the Bangkok city skyline and the Chao Phraya River. Vertigo at the Banyan Tree is another wonderful place to go for drinks (and dinner) overlooking Bangkok at night.

The Sukhumvit area is a veritable treasure trove of interesting eateries. Face Bar offers its guests the choice of contemporary Thai or Indian cuisine in the enchanting ambiance of a traditional Thai teak wooden house. More Thai cuisine, and easy on the wallet, can be found at Cabbages & Condoms where dinner - as the name suggests - includes a free condom (proceeds of the restaurant's meals go towards a non-profit organization for family planning). Some may find this restaurant a little touristy while others will delight in the extensive menu and beautiful, tropical garden setting. If you need to rest your weary feet from shopping around Chidlom, Erawan Tearoom is a good place for traditional Thai favourites like tom yam krung and

mango with sticky rice whilst enjoying views of the revered Erawan Shrine nearby.

The newest talk of the town is Hyde & Seek Gastro Bar, created by a group of local event planners and caterers famous for their cocktails. Besides a range of signature drinks, this trendy venue also offers fine dining. Another favourite among the in-crowd is Long Table, featuring a 25-metre-long dining table with stunning views to match from its 25th-floor vantage point.

This restaurant-cum-nightspot was conceived by the creative team behind Bed Supperclub, another Bangkok institution. Characterised by a spaceship-like exterior, inside an alternate universe awaits, with a stark white dining/lounge area on one side and a club area where top DJs spin their tunes. Other popular night haunts include the Met Bar, BarSu, Tapas Room and the many new bars popping up in Bangkok's new hip district Thong Lor such as To Die For, Club Nove and Ice Bar.

With all these options, from glitzy shopping to ritzy clubs and ancient temples to cutting-edge hotels, it's easy to see why Bangkok is back on top again. ☘