

City of Angels

IN BANGKOK, HISTORIC TEMPLES AND CROWDED NIGHT MARKETS ARE JUXTAPOSED WITH NEWFOUND COSMOPOLITAN FLAVOR BY AMBER GIBSON

When you inevitably get lost in Bangkok, Thailand's capital, look for the Chao Phraya River. This landmark can help reorient confused visitors and is a major reason why the city was a strategic trading location in the Ayutthaya and Siamese kingdoms as early as the 15th century.

The 20th century brought a variety of challenges to a nation still nominally presided over by the Chakri dynasty. During World War II, it was bombed first by the Japanese, then by Allied forces, and looked to be in a state of permanent unrest (thanks in part to a sequence of military dictatorship) until a surge in Asian investment starting in the mid-1980s led to a number of multinational corporations relocating to the city. Today this metropolis is a vital regional seat of creativity and entrepreneurship, and the resulting relative prosperity has been for the most part unaffected by yet another governmental takeover at the hands of the Royal Thai Armed Forces in 2014. In fact, traveler safety has improved since then to the point that Thailand is now ranked among the safest destinations in Southeast Asia.

Thai people are some of the most friendly and laid-back you'll meet. Hospitality is ingrained in the culture here and Western visitors have nicknamed the nation "Land of the Smiles." Last year, Bangkok was the subject of a Michelin guide for the first time, highlighting the diversity of the city's modern culinary scene, from haute French dining at Le Normandie to Raan Jay Fai's crab omelets at a street food stand in Old Town.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Winter, between November and March, is the best time to visit if you're worried about heat and humidity. From New York, there are, almost inexplicably, no direct flights to Bangkok, but one-stop options include Thai Airways, Korean Air, EVA Air, and Air France (total travel time will be between 20 and 25 hours).

When greeting new Thai friends, place your hands in prayer position in front of the heart and bow forward slightly. Learning this traditional greeting is a simple way to show respect, even if you can't remember how to say "hello" in Thai (*Sawasdi*, pronounced "sah-wah-dee").

Be *very careful* crossing the street; traffic in Bangkok is insane, and even

pedestrian crosswalks aren't particularly safe. It seems counterintuitive, but just dive headfirst into the traffic and don't stop walking. Cars, trucks, and motorbikes will magically maneuver around you. Also, taxi drivers generally won't speak English and often try to cheat tourists; it's better to take Uber, which has an option to pay in cash built into its Thailand app.

ATTRACTIONS

FLOATING MARKETS

Farmers markets are great, but hopping in a boat and buying fresh tropical fruit, mango sticky rice, and pork satay from wooden row boats floating down a canal will be a new experience entirely. There are several such floating markets to con-



Above: Garden Suite at the Mandarin Oriental

sider, from Damnoen Saduak (the largest and among the oldest) to Amphawa, famous for its seafood, proximity to hidden temples, and later hours. Taling Chan is the closest to central Bangkok, just eight miles away, and small enough to explore without a tour.

MUAY THAI BOXING

This artfully designed nonprofit community center supports the children of San Pancho with a bilingual library, recycled playground, a sports center, scholarships, and entrepreneurship training. Volunteers are encouraged, even if only for a day, and visiting children are always welcome to play. The primary source of income is a robust recycling program, including upcycled toys made from plastic containers that make for quirky souvenirs. A visit here is an excellent way to meet the local community and make new friends. **Av. Tercer Mundo 24, San Pancho. entreamigos.org.mx**

WHERE TO STAY

THE SIAM

With just 39 suites and pool villas, The Siam does not feel like a hotel, but rather a sprawling royal summer home resplendent with French, Chinese, and

Thai antiques and artwork. Book a pool villa with a private courtyard and lofted sunbathing deck and you may never leave the property. Your gracious butler is happy to arrange spa treatments at the sexy Opium Spa, private Muay Thai lessons, cooking and yoga classes, or even a sacred Sak Yant tattoo session. From \$599 per night. **Khao Rd, Khwaeng Wachira Phayaban. thesiamhotel.com**

THE MANDARIN ORIENTAL

Thailand's first luxury hotel, an icon for more than 140 years, and favorite of authors, diplomats, and expats. With 24/7 butler service and 10 world-class dining outlets, including two-star Michelin Le Normandie for French fine dining, it's still the city's grand dame. Take the hotel ferry across the river for a signature massage with Thai stretching and herbal compresses at the five-star spa. From \$625 per night. **48 Oriental Ave, Khwaeng Bang Rak. mandarinoriental.com/bangkok**

137 PILLARS SUITES

Bangkok's newest luxury hotel feels very New York City chic, only with far more space; broad balconies and roomy marble bathrooms are included in all 34 suites. The rooftop infinity pool, Leonowens Club lounge, and complimentary



London cab to nearby luxury shopping centers are signature amenities. Nimitr offers a sexy, contemporary take on fine Asian dining, with Thai, Indonesian, and Japanese flavors. From \$500 per night. **59/1 Soi Sukhumvit 39, Khwaeng Khlong Tan Nuea. 137Pillarshotels.com/hotels/bangkok**

DAY TRIPS AND TOURS

GRAND PALACE PRIVATE TOUR

The majestic Grand Palace complex is easily Bangkok's top tourist attraction—a must-see introduction to Thai architecture and tradition. The Emerald Buddha

in Wat Phra Kaew temple is the most revered religious artifact in the country and the miniature replica of Angkor Wat and Coronation Throne Hall are equally impressive. Book a private tour to make the most of your visit. **1 Maha Rat Road, Khet Phra Nakhon. trikayatours.com**

CHEF DAMRI COOKING CLASS

At The Siam, take a private cooking class with Executive Chef Damri Muksombat. Begin the morning with a tour of the local market, then return to the hotel's historic teakwood Thai restaurant to make green papaya salad, spicy lemongrass soup, and jungle curry while overlooking the Chao Phraya River. Chef Damri is a kind and patient

teacher with a predilection for spicy fare, and many of the recipes he shares are treasured family recipes. **thesiamhotel.com/cooking-school**

DINE AND DRINK

UPSTAIRS AT MIKKELLER

This 20-seat gem above the Mikkeller Bangkok brewery is a paragon of casual fine dining. American Chef Dan Bark pairs innovative flavor combinations like salmon roe, blueberries, and thyme with craft beer from around the world, while diners watch him working in the tiny open kitchen. Thai ingredients and dishes inspire Bark's new repertoire,



Facing page: Connie's Cottage at the The Siam
This page: Nahm's Grilled Prawns with Peanut Relish

from shredded pork tortellini with shades of Tom Kha Gai coconut soup to a longan dessert with mulberry and pistachio. **26 Ekkamai 10 Alley, Lane 2, Khwaeng Phra Khanong Nuea. mikkeller.dk/location/upstairs-at-mikkeller-bangkok**

MEZZALUNA

The presentation here is so artful that you almost ignore the sweeping city views from the 65th floor of the Lebua Hotel. Chef Ryuki Kawasaki sources only the finest ingredients from around the world (including Niigata black wagyu beef and Mediterranean Dover Sole), served in the most romantic of settings. Request a song from the talented string quartet to pair with exquisitely plated scallop carpaccio with horseradish ice cream and chocolate wasabi lollipops. Each course leaves you longing for one more bite. **State Tower, 1055 Silom Road, Bangrak. lebua.com/mezzaluna**

NAHM

The preeminent example of Thai fine dining in Bangkok, and a favorite of Portland-based Pok Pok Chef Andy Ricker. Begin with a series of funky finger foods to whet your appetite for the flavors to come. The set menu is served family style, including a wide sampling of authentic Thai dishes, from curries and relishes to spicy salads, sweet-and-sour soups, and whole fried fish. Blue swimmer crab coconut and turmeric curry is a highlight. **27 S Sathorn Road, Khwaeng Thung Maha Mek. comohotels.com/metropolitanbangkok/dining/nahm** ■