



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | FIRST-TIMER'S BANGKOK



instant escapes

First-timer's Bangkok

Thailand's steamy capital is a thrill of a rollercoaster ride. Hold tight!

Bangkok can scald the uninitiated like a bowl of *tom yum* soup. It's an assault on your senses: noodle steam, temple chants, moped screeches and wafts of incense. But there's no other city like it — that's why people love it. If you have the inside track, its must-do moments become all the more manageable, too. Beginners, read on... **By Tristan Rutherford**



SEE & DO

● Steel yourself for a brightly coloured Thai history lesson at Wat Pho (watpho.com; ① on map; £5). Bangkok's biggest temple complex is a **kaleidoscope of saffron monks, jasmine bracelets and phallic stupas**. See dozens of smiling Buddhas, the largest of which (46 metres) reclines in its own salon. Escape the crowds with a 60-minute rubdown at the complex's Traditional Thai Massage School — it's been in business since 1955 (watpomassage.com; £12).

● Much more serene, **Jim Thompson's House Museum** (jimthompsonhouse.com; £5; ②) lends first-timers a vision of vintage Bangkok. In the '50s, the American resurrected Thailand's silk industry while collecting antiques from Cambodia and Burma. These six villas are the result, decked out with rattan furnishings and Ming porcelain. Aim to arrive at 5pm for a tranquil visit.

● Religion meets commercialism at Bangkok's downtown Erawan Shrine (bangkok.com/shrines; ③). Locals see little conflict between faith and wealth, with **shopping centres offering nail bars alongside prayer halls**. So send your wish skyward with an offering, then shop in the Erawan Mall. Other essential stops include the Siam Discovery Mall (siamdiscovery.co.th; ④), best for won't-find-at-home stores such as The Selected (for Thai gifts) and Aland (South Korea's Zara), or the MBK Center (mbk-center.co.th; ⑤) for its sixth-floor, £1-and-up food court.

WRITER'S TIP

Leave some time for an iced tea or a Thompson Mojito (made with lemongrass) in the cafe, which is situated beside a serene Asian carpool

Fast track: the busy Yaowarat Road; below, a reclining Buddha at Wat Pho; the glass SkyWalk on the top of King Power Mahanakhon skyscraper

● Bangkok's do-before-you-die sight is the Grand Palace (royalgrandpalace.th/en/home; £12; ⑥). Book a ticket online for 8.30am (it gets hotter and busier as the day goes on) and dress modestly — no Crocs or shorts. **Home to Thai kings from Rama I to V, it's still used for state visits**. Make for the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the most sacred in Thailand.

● Templed out? The Pak Khlong Talat flower market (Chak Phet Road; ⑦) is a fragrant feast. Cool and covered by day, it's even more photogenic at night (its peak time is 3am — which actually suits your jet lag just fine). **Delicate orchids are displayed on blocks of ice then shipped to the city's top hotels**, Michelin-rated restaurants and even into the royal palace itself.

● Crane your neck: the King Power Mahanakhon skyscraper landmarks Bangkok's edgily chic Silom Zone. It's also home to the city's latest thrill, the terrifying SkyWalk (£23; open 10am-midnight; kingpowermahanakhon.co.th; ⑧). An ear-poppingly fast elevator whisks punters 74 floors up for **augmented-reality views using interactive touchscreens**. Then it's up four more storeys to Shard-topping heights for strolls atop a glass-floored viewing platform. Gulp.

● Some 20% of the nation's 70m inhabitants are Thai-Chinese. Their spiritual home is Bangkok's Yaowarat Road ⑨, a red-flagged, barbecue-smoked neighbourhood. Here, **every backstreet houses a temple, a herbalist or a trestle-table stall** selling pork belly and shrimp soup. Dedicate at least an afternoon to wander around it — Sampeng Lane is best for hats, gems and phone covers.

● Recreate *The Man with the Golden Gun* with a long-tail boat zip through the *khlongs*. These **living waterways crisscross Bangkok like a feral Venice**, bisecting kitchen gardens and massage joints. Hire an eight-person cruiser (£25 an hour) from Tha Chang (Elephant Pier; ⑩), where Grand Palace beasts of burden once bathed. Bigger Chao Phraya Express boats blast up the river from the same pier from just 30p a ride, calling at more than 30 hop-off stations en route. >



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EAT

● **Asian street food**

YAOWARAT ROAD (From 50p)

Because: Here you can taste scores of regional Chinese and Thai flavours, some Michelin-rated, from sweet river prawns to red-bean desserts. **Travel's tip:** Take a three-hour street-food tour of the area with Bangkok Food Tours (bangkokfoodtours.com; £35), which includes about 10 tastings. Yaowarat Rd, Chinatown; @.

● **Home-grown hero**

KRUA KHUNKUNG (Mains about £3)

Because: This bargain restaurant at the Royal Thai Navy Club, near the Grand Palace, serves up the likes of steamed crab beneath dusty portraits of naval greats. **Travel's tip:** Hail a waitress, then point at your order on the printed English menu and wait, patiently, for lunch or dinner to sail in. 77 Maharaj Rd; 00 66 2222 0081; @.

● **Offbeat eats**

THAI LAO YEH (Mains about £6)

Because: This glam resto resides in the Cabochon, a colonial-style mansion-hotel; bargain dishes distil the herby-citrus flavours and curious meats (pig's ear salad) of Thailand's little-known Isan province. **Travel's tip:** After dinner, hit Sing Sing Theater on the same soi (alley). Think anything-goes Shanghai with live orchestras and burlesque. Cabochon Hotel, 14/29 Sukhumvit Soi 45; 00 66 2259 28713, cabochonhotel.com; @.

● **Princes' trust**

FUNKY LAM (Mains about £8)

Because: Two Laotian princes have teamed up with an avant-garde Aussie chef to reinvent contemporary Lao cuisine. **Travel's tip:** Try dishes such as *kaipen* (£5), a crispy Mekong sesame-seaweed served with relishes — never served in Bangkok before now. The Taste Thonglor, 235 Soi 11, Soi Sukhumvit 55; 00 66 2050 0469; @.

● **Michelin-starry**

SUHRING (Mains about £24)

Because: In 2019, Michelin upgraded Sühring's cuisine to two stars. Expect Euro dishes, such as smoked eel. **Travel's tip:** The £100 set menu is great value: 12 dishes equal about £8 each. 10 Yen Akat Soi 3, Chongnonsi; 00 66 22871799, restaurantsuhring.com; @.

EATING PLAN

Each vendor is ultra-specialised (think fish balls in one, matcha bubble tea in another). Visit five stalls to complete a full meal

IN THE SAME VENUE

Hit the Indochina library bar for cocktails — it's snug and intimate, like a colonial gentlemen's club. And the hotel's rooms are elegantly chic, with doubles from £145

LOCAL'S TIP

The Rod Fai night market is well off the tourist trail. You'll need to hop on the Skytrain to Bang Chak, then take a 30-minute taxi

SPEAKEASY BARS

● **Booze bunny**

RABBIT HOLE

Because: Bangkok's hot trend now is speakeasies. This joint is hidden behind a wooden wall next to a ramen joint. Knock hard, then head on up. **Travel's tip:** Try the likes of white-truffle oil-infused gin cocktails, created by the Diageo World Class bartenders. 125 Thonglor Sukhumvit Soi 55; rabbitholebkk.com; @.

● **Au naturel**

KANGKAO

Because: It's one of the region's top bars for natural wine, with Georgian, Japanese and French vintages. **Travel's tip:** Find mixologist hangout Ku Bar, then open a door that leads down badly lit stairs to this itsy drinking hole. 2/F, 469 Pra Sumen Rd; @.

● **Snap happy**

FIND THE PHOTO BOOTH

Because: This speakeasy du jour looks like a '70s First Class airline lounge. **Travel's tip:** It's not on any maps. Find gastrobar 8 On Eleven, snap a portrait in the photo booth, then it's open sesame. Sukhumvit Soi 11; @.



ASK THE LOCAL

Former columnist Etty Liu blogs about Bangkok's hidden corners at ricepotato.co

“Thai culture means street food and cafe-hopping as well as temples. The alley of Soi Nana, in Chinatown, is a great place to start. Its best bar is Tep @. Expect **Thai tapas, cocktails made from scorpion tails and Ya Dong moonshine**, plus a live xylophone band. Ten minutes south is Talat Noi district @, a **mishmash of Portuguese churches, Chinese bakeries and junk shops**. The hippest night market is Rod Fai @, a photogenic dream of **vintage cameras, Japanese kitsch and fashion start-ups**. If you see only one temple, try Wat Pariwat @. **Its stupa is decked with modern icons, including Albert Einstein, and Obama taking a selfie**.



STAY

● **Local legend**

BAAN PRA NOND BED & BREAKFAST

(Doubles from £45, B&B) **Because:** The former advertising-exec owner channelled her hip granny's style into a handful of vintage rooms. Expect a hidden gem situated between a handy Skytrain station and a riverboat pier. **Travel's tip:** Pack ear plugs as this is a living, breathing locale (plus a swimsuit for dips in the little pool). 18/1 Charoen Rat Rd, Sathorn; baanpranond.com; @.

● **Urban flashpack**

ONEDAY PAUSE HOSTEL (En-suite doubles from £46, B&B)

Because: This is Brooklyn-meets-backpackers with reclaimed-wood bunk beds. Envisage private double rooms plus four-bed family dorms with shared power-shower wetrooms. **Travel's tip:** There's a belting craft-ale bar downstairs. For post-beer snacks, hit the point-and-order satay stalls around Soi 26. 51 Sukhumvit Soi 26; onedaybkk.com; @.

● **Meet the neighbours**

1905 HERITAGE CORNER (Doubles from £106, B&B)

Because: Anglo-Thai Mark and luxe-handicrafts buyer Nan curate Bangkok's smallest hotel: a three-room charmer in an early 1900s shophouse. **Travel's tip:** Ask Mark for his pre-brekkie neighbourhood tour: this is a non-touristy zone, with Buddha carvers, Thai-cream makers and lemongrass soup vendors. 66/68 Phraeng Phuton Rd; 1905heritagecorner.com; @.

● **Contemporary cool**

SO SOFITEL (Doubles from £140, room-only)

Because: This French-owned hotel encapsulates Bangkok's joie de vivre, with a chocolate workshop, skyscraping boozier and panoramic pool with loungers in the shallows. **Travel's tip:** Don't skip breakfast (£25 for two if you opt for B&B when booking). The spread is Bangkok's most belly-busting, with Japanese, seafood and smoothie stations. 2 North Sathorn Rd; so-sofitel-bangkok.com; @.

● **History lovers**

CHAKRABONGSE VILLAS (Doubles from £162, B&B)

Because: This handful of villas, rooms and a stilt house, in a tropical riverside oasis with private pool, are the romantic legacy of a Thai prince and his English wife. **Travel's tip:** Capitalise on your location — five minutes from both the Grand Palace and Wat Pho — to make 8.30am visits to the otherwise hectic sights. Chef can serve a 10am breakfast when you get back. 396 Maharaj Rd; chakrabongsevillas.com; @.

● **Sky-high luxury**

WALDORF ASTORIA (Doubles from £227, B&B)

Because: Bangkok's brand-new grande dame comes with mind-bending panoramas over 21st-century Bangkok, from the bedrooms and sky-high pool alike. **Travel's tip:** Non-guests can still pretend they're minted with £9 Astoria cocktails at the '30s-glam Loft bar on the 56th floor, or the Champagne Bar on the 57th — accessed via ornate sliding doors operated by a secret button.

Ratchadamri Rd; waldorf-astoria3.hilton.com; @.

GET ME THERE GO INDEPENDENT

Thai Airways has two daily direct flights from Heathrow to Bangkok from £551 return. Or try **BA** — it flies from Heathrow from £399 return.

GO PACKAGED

Yonder (yonder.co.uk) combines local guides with offbeat sights in its 10-day Boutique Bangkok and Beach package, from £2,350pp, B&B, including flights, chauffeur transfers and a post-urban retreat on tropical Ko Samui. **Explore** (explore.co.uk) has an 11-day Old Siam and River Kwai tour, from £1,775pp, B&B, including flights and some meals.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Bangkok Transit System (bts.co.th) manages the futuristic Skytrains that glide about the city. A day pass (£3.50) grants unlimited passage; ticket machines sell tickets for the separate airport link and metro lines. ■

MAKE A GIFT OF IT

Don't miss the couple's Heritage Craft & Cafe store next door, where they sell cute objets d'art that make great presents: bamboo spoons, for instance, and funky Thai ceramics

Pool with a view: clockwise from top left, So Sofitel's rooftop pool; bargain food at the glam Cabochon hotel; a Chakrabongse Villa; mixing cocktails at Find the Photo Booth; stylish dining at Sühring restaurant

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY, AWLIMAGES, GETTY MAP: MAIDENHEAD CARTOGRAPHIC