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## Bangkok has you now

Bangkok surprises with luxury shopping, bargain hunting, spicy food and cultural offerings, whether your stay is one night, or several days  
by Elyse Glickman

THOUGH POP CULTURE TENDS to reference Bangkok's more dodgy side such as the '80s song *One Night in Bangkok* and the recent film, *Hangover 2*, a jaunt to Thailand's capital reveals that the city also has facets that rival the fashion and culture of New York, London or Hong Kong. It may even surprise some that in 2009, it was ranked the second most expensive city in southeast Asia, behind Singapore, thanks to the high-tech and business booms of the 1980s and 1990s. Its ascendance in the world is on firm display in the Siam Square area, but more on that later.

Most savvy travellers will be delighted to know that true to reputation, there are plenty of bargain-priced delights to be found. Cross-town cab fares as inexpensive as bus fares in most US cities, a plethora of night markets and bazaars, tempting street food and an exchange rate kind to the dollar reveal what the Bangkok of old is known for.

If you're going for the all-out luxury experience, the city offers that as well. The five-star Shangri-La Hotel scores high marks with its plush suites, million-dollar views of the river, nicely outfitted fitness centre with no shortage of elliptical machines and Chi spa. The impeccable service and a most impressive pan-Asian breakfast and brunch



Royal Palace Museum compound

REPLAY

TWO GREAT SCENTS. ONE UNEXPECTED MASHUP.

Downy MAKE YOUR MASHUP

buffet complete with breakfast ice cream, yoghurt and muesli and enormous chunks of fresh fruit as well as very respectable northern Indian fare highlight the Shangri-La Hotel as a world-class destination. The 2011 Thailand Rice Convention & World Rice Standard Summit, which I attended, played out like a well-planned hybrid of charity fashion show fundraiser and wedding. The layout and panoramic windows in the ballroom areas transport even business travelers like myself to an exotic universe.

Though not in the physical centre of town, the Shangri-La Hotel is still walking distance from river cruises, water taxis and the famed SkyTrain, which puts the best of new and old Bangkok right at your feet. Travellers coming for longer visits or with girlfriend groups or kids may want to look into the adorable, comfortable and reasonably priced Bossotel Inn Bangkok, a block down the hill from the Shangri-La. Said to be favourite second home for [celebrity](#) chef Tommy Tang, often in town to shoot his American Public Television series *Easy Thai Cooking*, the inn features a small but authentic Thai breakfast area, friendly staff, a cute, fitness room, pool, an attractive lobby, and simple and roomy suites.

As demonstrated by the continued production of the *Easy Thai Cooking* programme and endorsements of Thai Hom Mali rice, Bangkok is undisputedly one of Asia's great food cities. There are a plethora of street food stalls and interesting inexpensive places to eat, the MBK Centre, a mall that is essentially a multi-floor, air-conditioned bazaar popular with teenagers coming to mind. High-end cuisine is also abundant, expanding one's notion of how elegant Thai cuisine can be.

Thanying, a favourite of Mr Tang, is set in a charming colonial-style house, has delighted patrons since 1986 with spicy-but-sophisticated specialties like roasted duck, noodle, sun-dried beef and deep-fried sea bass dishes through just the right amount of sauce and heat. Restaurants and lounges in the Sukhumvit, Soi 24 area, include Lemon Grass, a touristy but worthwhile locale, as well as the Seafood Market, Sorn-Thong Ponchana and The Bed Supper Club.

Whether or not you do cocktails, Bangkok offers many sky bars, such as Sky Bar–Le Dome at the State Tower (a shooting location for *Hangover 2*) and RedSky at Centara World. In addition to wonderful selections of cocktails, both locations are also must-dos for luscious food menus, music and city views. The prices are on the high side, comparable to bar prices in Los Angeles or New York City, but well worth the cost with the unique flavours taking advantage of local fruits, spices and unusual combinations of ingredients. SkyBar–Le Dome's cocktail was even inspired by *Hangover 2* and is something to savour over a leisurely evening overlooking the city.

A more local scene can be found at the combination bar of Jameson's Irish Pub and the –5 Ice Bar in the Silom neighbourhood. British expat Ian Harriss is at the helm of this wonder-bar and performs the role of creator for some of the most interesting ice cream and sherbet drinks!

To work up an appetite again, visitors can explore Thailand's most important and impressive historical venues including the Grand Palace, Wat Pho, Wat Arun and Lumpini Park. The museums that fill out the Rattanakosin Island and river districts are just as intriguing and should not be



Thai temple



View from the Shangri-La Hotel



Cheese platter



Cocktail at Centara

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Top Locket by Sophie Lewis-Smith. Above Jewellery by Steph Lusted. Below left Textile designs at Unscripted. Bottom Locket by Sophie Lewis-Smith. Starting on Saturday, September 3 and running until the following Friday, the Unscripted exhib..

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missed. The active temples you may encounter along the way are just as worth visiting, effectively acting as a living form of history, defined by the same distinctively Thai architectural hallmarks as the more historical buildings. With the lively tourist areas, however, caution serves visitors well as some clever touts lie in wait outside the Grand Palace gate to rope tourists into paid guided tour of the compound. Once inside the compound, there are many signs in plain view clearly indicating tours are offered in English, free of charge, by paid museum docents.

Mobile touts on bike taxis also adeptly lure visitors on 'a cultural ride' to visit one of the major Buddha monuments, for example, only to bring their charges to tailors and jewellery shops where drivers get a cut of purchases made. Some of those stores actually do offer high-quality items at good prices and if you take your time and have good negotiating skills, the hassle may prove worthwhile. If you are adventurous, enjoy the inexpensive, open-air ride through the city, but also know when to say 'No,' and be adamant about talking down the price. The same advice rings true for the Chatuchak Weekend Market, an endless bargain hunting sprawl north of the city in the north of the city that, by sheer size and variety, puts night markets in other Asian cities to shame.

Culture blends seamlessly into fashion and home design, and nowhere is this more evident than with Jim Thompson, credited for transforming Thai silk into a global industry. The Jim Thompson House, an exquisite residence-turned museum, is also the anchor for the many retail boutiques and outlets who offer 30–50 per cent discounted merchandise, their designs paying homage to the lost design great who disappeared in Myanmar in 1967.

Fashionistas who want to play it safe but want something uniquely Thai to take home will find the Ratchaprasong neighbourhood and the megalithic "mall neighbourhood" of Siam Square seductive and overwhelming. The best way to make the most of your time, therefore, is to select a destination mall or block compatible with the way you [shop](#). Siam Paragon is a domestic and international chain stores presented in a format similar to American malls; Gaysorn Centre is Bangkok's answer to Fifth Avenue and Rodeo Drive; edgy Thailand [clothing](#), accessories and decorator goods can be found Siam Discovery.

Siam Centre, a diminutive mall credited with starting the whole Siam Square explosion a few decades back, is now is the spot to find clothing and accessories from Thailand-based designers on the rise. Labels and haunts worth obsessing over include [gorgeous](#) hand-crafted leather handbags from Tango, Mob. F, carrying some 42 emergent Thai fashion labels, and signature boutiques from Thailand's young designers now making an international impact including 27 November, Rebecca, Jaspal and Klostet.

Greyhound, a clothing line regarded as the Armani of Thailand with its sleek, geometric, simple styles proves that the country cannot be defined merely by brightly coloured silk attire and beachwear alone. Like Armani in the west, the brand also has offers its own respected Thai Nouveau haute-cuisine at its Greyhound Café.

Despite the sheer abundance of gastronomical fare and great variety for the fashion-minded, it is important not to forget to explore all aspects of Bangkok in order to fully appreciate the vibrancy of



Dinner at Thanying Restaurant



For information on flights to Bangkok, visit [www.thaiairwaysusa.com](http://www.thaiairwaysusa.com).

For more info on Bangkok highlights, visit [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org) and [www.bangkoktourist.com](http://www.bangkoktourist.com).

Thanying: No. 10 Thanon Pramuang on Silom 17-19

Greyhound Café: [www.greyhoundcafe.co.th](http://www.greyhoundcafe.co.th)

Tango: [www.tango.co.th](http://www.tango.co.th)

Bossotel Inn Bangkok: [www.bossotelinn.com](http://www.bossotelinn.com)

*Elyse Glickman is US west coast editor of Lucire.*

Top Hylonome by Mary Wing To (United Kingdom), the Supreme Winner at the Brancott Estate World of Wearable Art 2011 show. Above Runner-up, Hide in My Bone Shadow, by Marjolein [van](#) der Wal (Netherlands). Walking into the TSB Arena in Welling..

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this Thai capital.

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