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Your Weekend in Bangkok



Adam Ferguson for The New York Times
Photos by Michael Greenwald

On the steps of the Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn) on the bank of the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok. [More Photos »](#)

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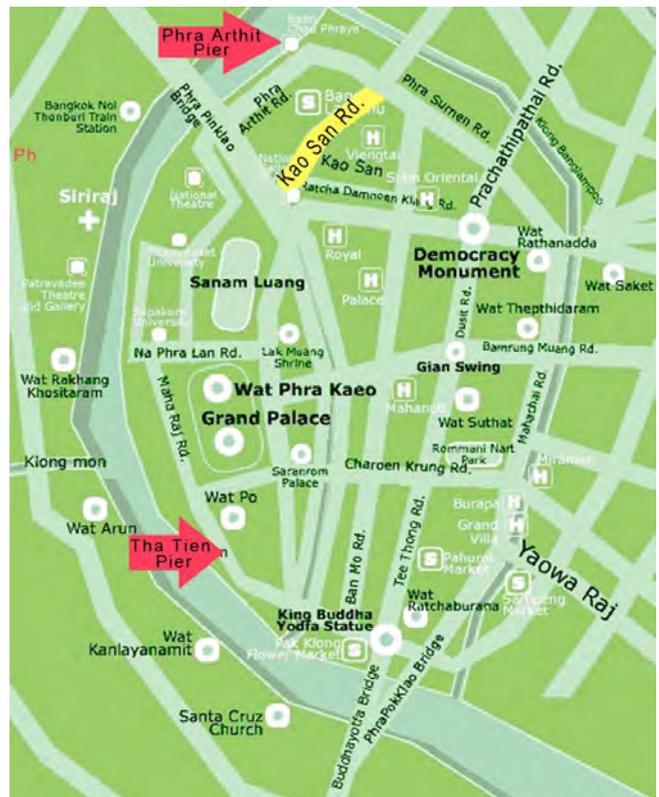
Bangkok has hit the sweet spot. It's modern but far from antiseptic, filled with luxuries, pampering and great food — but still affordable. In the glare of the tropical sun it can be an ugly sprawl of tangled wires and broken pavement. Yet amid the chaos, visitors find charm and, above all, character.

Somehow extremes coexist: skyscrapers and moldy tenements; high-end, cloth-napkin dining and tasty street food stalls;

five-star hotels and fleabag guesthouses overflowing with backpackers; libidinous hedonism and Buddhist meditation.

To travel across Bangkok is to see several worlds at once. Increasingly it is also convenient. The city of paralyzing traffic now has ample public transportation options ranging from boats to an expanding subway system.

But if there is one reason visitors return again and again to Bangkok, it is the people. The anonymity and daily grind of urban life is slowly wearing away at the legendary Thai smile. Yet Bangkok remains one of the friendliest cities on the planet, still infused with the Thai village traditions of hospitality and graciousness.



River Cruise



Bangkok's riverfront is undergoing a renaissance. Warehouses have been converted into a night market for tourists; restaurants and boutique hotels populate the riverside; and the Grand Palace and Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn) are both magnificently illuminated at night. Take your own private 1-2 hr boat ride, an alternative to a river cruise down the Chao Phraya River. It's free when you reserve a table at the riverside Chon Thai restaurant, in the elegant Siam Hotel. Ask for the shuttle boat to pick you up at the Saphan Taksin pier, at a skytrain stop of the same name. Have sunset drinks on the hotel pier before heading into the two-story teak house where dinner is served. Try the pomelo salad and pork ribs seasoned with longan honey and lime. The corridors of the hotel house the personal antiques collection of its Thai-American owners — massive teak apothecary cabinets and opium beds, among many other pieces. (Chon Thai restaurant, Siam Hotel, 3/2 Thanon Khao, Vachirapayabal, Dusit; thesiamhotel.com).

Evening on Kaho San Road



Take a stroll through Bangkok's foreign ghetto, the pulsing enclave around Khao San Road, Southeast Asia's largest backpacker district. For decades this warren of streets and alleyways was a haven of cheap food and lodging for the great tide of unwashed European and American budget travel-

ers. Now the area, parts of which are closed off to traffic at night, has become a hip destination for young Thais who stroll, gawk at the backpackers and gulp down cheap beer. Cap the night off with live music at a tiny sliver of a bar called Blues (13, Samsen Road; (66) 89-769-4613), a 10-minute walk from Khao San Road just after the bridge over the Samsen canal.

SATURDAY



Chatuchak Market Maze

Before air-conditioned shopping malls sprouted up across Bangkok, there was Chatuchak, a vast weekend flea market on the northern outskirts. Today vendors sell everything from knockoffs of designer shirts to aromatherapy oils, potted plants and reptiles. You can lose yourself in the alleyways of Chatuchak, half outdoors and half covered by leaky tarpaulins and roofs. If you're not a shopper, it will be an anthropological adventure, evidence of the entrepreneurial spirit and creativity that have helped lift this country out of poverty.

Noon 4. Som Tam Lunch

One of the oldest and most reliable food options is across the street from Chatuchak and called Or Tor Kor. In the front of this market are unusually tidy fruit stalls that draw Bangkok residents for its high-grade produce. Behind the market, near the parking lot, is a shop selling the specialty of northeastern Thailand, som tam (green papaya salad) and grilled chicken (140 baht, about \$4.85 at 29 baht to the dollar, for a whole bird). The nearby Sood Jai Kai Yang (its name is written only in Thai) has been open for 30 years and is a local legend. Order som tam Thai (50 baht), and unless you have a mouth made of steel, ask for less spicy. Next door is an air-conditioned restaurant selling traditional desserts, including mango and sticky rice (130 baht per dish). All the stalls in the market have a reputation for being acceptably clean.

2 p.m. 5. Knots Out

After the trek through Chatuchak and a meal outdoors, you've earned relaxation. There are hundreds of massage places in Bangkok, ranging from five-star-spa pampering to the cheaper local foot massage place. In the good-value-for-money category is the Touch (11/2 Soi Ruamrudee, Ploenchit; thetouch1.com), where an hourlong foot massage goes for 300 baht and includes a shoulder, back and head rub. There are two branches, clean, friendly and open till midnight, on Soi Ruamrudee in the central business district. The closest skytrain stop is Ploenchit; call the Touch if you want a tuk-tuk to pick you up there.

4 p.m. 6. Riverside Classic



In a city where the old is so often torn down to make way for the new, the Mandarin Oriental hotel (48 Oriental Avenue; mandarinoriental.com/bangkok) retains a sense of history and is famous for lodging authors like Joseph Conrad and Somerset Maugham. These days a stay at the Oriental is so dear you may have to liquidate your retirement savings or sell a kidney to pay the bill. But the hotel can be enjoyed even by those who don't spend the night. Afternoon tea amid the wicker furniture of the bright and cheerful Authors' Lounge runs from 2:30 to 6 p.m. and costs 1,471 baht for a set, which can be shared by two people. Also possible: sunset drinks on the banks of the Chao Phraya or a meal at the Sala Rim Naam, accessible by the hotel's ferryboat across the river. At the Spa, also across the river, a Thai massage goes for 2,900 baht. Prices climb upward from there.

This might be the most stunning rooftop bar you'll ever see. Beat the crowds to the appropriately named Sky Bar Atop State Tower (in the Lebua Hotel, Silom Road; lebua.com/sky-bar). The highlight here is the vertiginous outdoor staircase that leads down to the bar. The bar — a compact and open-air turret on the side of the skyscraper — is open from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. Don't be caught out by the annoying "smart casual" dress code: it means no flip-flops or shorts or ripped clothing. The clientele is almost exclusively foreign and tilts toward the well-heeled. Have a look at the drinks menu before you order. Expect to pay 320 baht for a Singha beer — or 2,900 baht for a glass of vintage Champagne. You pay for the view: an eye-popping sweep of downtown Bangkok,

the Chao Phraya River and beyond.

Spice Is Nice

When David Thompson opened Nahm at the Metropolitan hotel (27 South Sathorn Road; comohotels.com/metropolitanbangkok/dining/nahm) in 2010, Bangkok was abuzz with the idea that an Australian chef would cook “authentic” Thai cuisine. Two years of steady crowds at Nahm, with its modern, Scandinavia-meets-Bali décor, have confirmed Mr. Thompson’s place in the firmament of Thai cuisine. One bite of the signature appetizer, ma hor — a sweet and savory mix of minced pork, palm sugar, shallots, garlic and peanuts and pineapple — and you’ll know you’re in for a delectable (and, yes, authentic) Thai meal. Try the salad of grilled chicken with chili jam and the durian and sticky rice for dessert, a masterpiece. Warning: many dishes are no-holds-barred spicy. About 2,000 baht per person without wine.



Durian Hunting

Walk the neon streets of Chinatown (Yaowarat) and follow your nose. Street vendors hawk pungent spiky durian. Don’t be deterred by those who deride the fruit as smelling like garbage or gym socks. It’s known as the king of fruits because its creamy texture is unique to the plant kingdom. The fruit is available year-round in Thailand, but the more delectable varieties hit the streets April to September.

SUNDAY

8:30 a.m. 10. Golden View

Glimpse the fading charms of old Bangkok, wooden shophouses and tree-lined boulevards crisscrossed by canals. Walk up the steps of the Pukhao Tong (Golden Mount) to the sounds of a monk’s incantations. The temple looks out onto the oldest neighborhoods of Bangkok and the Grand Palace. Have a bowl of noodles at one of the family restaurants or food stalls at the exit of the Golden Mount.

11 a.m. 11. Shopping Madness

Walk five minutes from the Golden Mount to the starting point of the Saen Saeb canal boat service. Boarding requires agility, but the price is right: less than 20 baht for a ride to Pratunam (Water Gate), the center of Bangkok’s shopping district. Ask fellow travelers to alert you when you arrive at the stop because there are no announcements. From Pratunam head toward the Ratchaprasong Skywalk, an elevated walkway that connects some of the city’s largest shopping centers and runs for more than half a mile. At street level there’s also the Erawan Shrine, billowing with incense and filled with people seeking good fortune from the resident deity, Phra Phrom.

1 p.m. 12. Recline and Watch

Catch the matinee at the vast Cineplex of Siam Paragon (Rama 1 Road, Pathumwan; majorcineplex.com/en/cinema/paragon-cineplex). Ask for the “blue ribbon seats” — they go for 1,500 baht a pair and come with snacks, drinks and something resembling a first-class airline seat. Don’t forget to stand for the Thai royal anthem before the showing. Showtimes are on the Web site.

LODGING

Serviced apartments like the **Centre Point** chain (centrepoin.com), with locations across the city, begin at around \$120 a night.

The recently opened **Praya Palazzo** (prayapalazzo.com), where rooms start at 4,200 baht, about \$147, is a former mansion accessible by boat from the Phra Arthit pier.