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## LOVE & TRAVEL

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# BEST OF

Chaotic and hot, the city can be a challenge. But look deeper and you'll find a booming art

scene and top-notch food and drinks. Resident expert **Ashley Niedringhaus** leads the way

# BANGKOK



The Authors' Lounge at the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok. Clockwise from left: Isaan cuisine at Thai Lao Yeh at the Cabochon Hotel; a Chinese temple in Chinatown; the exterior of Chakrabongse Villas; the interiors of Siam Discovery; inside a traditional Chinese house in the Talat Noi neighbourhood; the entrance to Chinatown; a cocktail at Moon Bar

PHOTOGRAPHS: MICHAEL PAUL, CHRISTOPHER WISE, PETER NITSCH





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he true magic of Bangkok lies in the high-low mix: roadside noodles for lunch and fine dining for dinner; hole-in-the-wall bars as well as bespoke cocktails in an elegant speakeasy. For some, it's a pit stop to see gilded temples before flying south; for others, it is a hedonistic escape. But either way, there is always something new to learn, discover, eat or try.

**BEST PLACE TO BE AT 3AM** **Pak Khlong Talat** (116 Chakkaraphet Road) is Bangkok's bustling and beautiful 24-hour flower market and roses from the north and ice-packed lotus blossoms arrive in the middle of the night. The market is a kaleidoscope of colours and vendors weave marigolds and jasmine into garlands for temple offerings.

**BEST BOUTIQUE HOTELS** **Chakrabongse Villas** (chakrabongsevillas.com; doubles from THB5,620 or ₹11,780) was constructed in 1908 by HRH Prince Chakrabongse as a riverside retreat, and today, is an antique-laden, Siamese delight run by his granddaughter. **The Bhuthorn** (thebhuthorn.com; doubles from

THB4,500 or ₹9,300) is a trio of simple, expertly restored 20th-century shophouses decorated in a refined English colonial-style in Old Town. **Cabochon** (cabochonhotel.com; doubles from THB5,200 or ₹10,800) is steps away from buzzy Sukhumvit, but feels like a tranquil oasis thanks to the bric-a-bracs in the communal lounge rooms and a distinct 1920s Shanghai vibe.

**BEST FAMILY HOTELS** The spacious **Anantara Riverside Bangkok** (bangkok-riverside.anantara.com; doubles from THB3,700 or ₹7,780) has a resort-like feel thanks to its multiple dining options, large pool and riverside location. The hotel's free shuttle on the Chao Phraya River will make commuting a fun family adventure. And your little ones will love **The Sukosol** (thesukosol.com; doubles from THB2,465 or ₹5,170). Kids' gift bags arrive upon check-in and there are mini slippers and bathrobes in the rooms, while swimming lessons and kid-friendly meals are happy bonuses.

**BEST RIVERSIDE RETREAT** The family that owns **The Siam** (thesiamhotel.com; from THB18,900 or ₹39,645) has decorated

this sumptuous Bill Bensley-designed boutique with its collection of Asian antiques and curated artworks that complement the Art Deco design. Pool villas are spacious, private and luxurious, and they are the highlight of the 39 all-suite offerings. On-site facilities include a Muay Thai ring, a well-appointed spa and even a space for sak yant, a sacred Thai tattooing experience. The property's private boat will charter you along the Chao Phraya River, and personal butlers make the impossible possible.

**BEST GRAND DAME** Bangkok's oldest and greatest hotel dates back to 1876. A stay at the **Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok** (mandarinoriental.com; doubles from THB13,850 or ₹29,060) means unmatched service and a flower-filled lobby where fresh jasmine scents the air. Make time for an elegant high tea in the Authors' Lounge or enjoy live jazz at the famous Bamboo Bar. Learn to whip up local delights at the cooking school or sample haute French cuisine at Le Normandie, a two-Michelin star restaurant. When it is time to retire, rooms with Thai silks, riverside panoramas and deep soaking tubs await. →

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRISTOPHER WISE

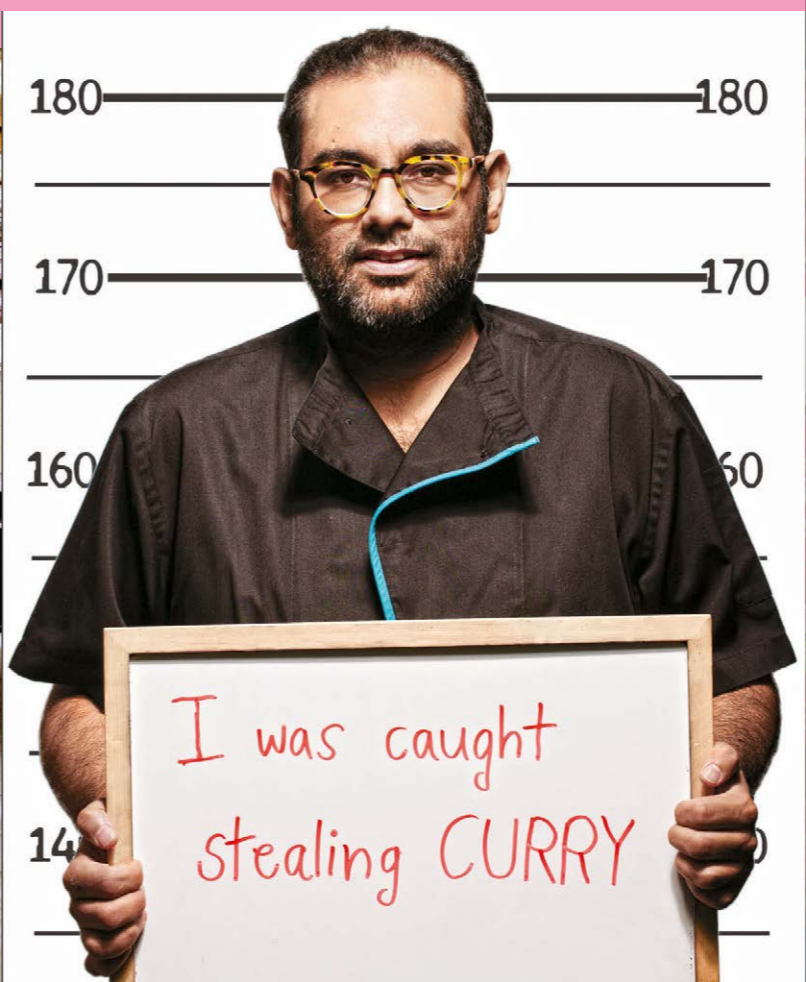
Thai Lao Yeh, a restaurant at Cabochon Hotel. Opposite page, from left: blooms at Pak Khlong Talat flower market; a ferry on the Chao Phraya River



PHOTOGRAPHS: STEFANO SCATA, CHRISTOPHER WISE, PETER NITSCH



The Jim Thompson House. Clockwise from right: Chinatown offers excellent food; fabrics at the Chatuchak weekend market; chef and restaurateur Gaggan Anand; a sitting room at Chakrabongse Villas



### BEST GAGGAN ANAND-BACKED

**RESTAURANT** Kolkata-born Gaggan Anand can't stop winning. His fourth consecutive title for Asia's Best Restaurant and two Michelin stars—all in the last six months—have made getting a table at **Gaggan** (eatatgaggan.com) nearly impossible. Instead, and this is by no means settling, head to **Sühring** (restaurantsuhring.com), an innovative and modern German restaurant run by twins Thomas and Mathias. They are successful in their own right—a Michelin star and a top 5 ranking in Asia's 50 Best Restaurants—so book in advance for a coveted seat in the kitchen.

### BEST ROOFTOP BAR

No visit to The Kingdom is complete without an ear-popping elevator ride to a great rooftop bar. The choices are endless, but **Moon Bar** (banyantree.com) atop the Banyan Tree Hotel boasts, hands down, the best views of the city. Arrive by 5pm to claim a prime spot and dress to impress the picky doorman.

### BEST ART EXPERIENCE

Bangkok's art scene is best described as fledgling, but a self-guided night of gallery hopping is a great way to discover up-and-coming artists and get a feel of the city's buzzing creative scene. Every few months, galleries in Bangkok host a city-wide **Galleries Night** (facebook/galleryhoppingbkk) in the riverside neighbourhood known as The Creative District. Download a high-res map from the group's Facebook page for a list of artistic hubs worth visiting—and make sure not to miss **Warehouse 30**, **Cho Why**, **TCDC**, **P Tendercool** and **Kathmandu Photo Gallery**.

### BEST NEIGHBOURHOOD FOR FOODIES

Atmospheric **Chinatown**, known locally as Yaowarat, is basically ground zero for Asia's best street food. As the sun sets and shops shutter their doors for the night, the street comes alive with the sights and sounds of street food vendors. In case the buzzing, chaotic scene is a bit much to handle, it's best to let the piquant lure of the food draw you in. **T & K Seafood** (at the intersection of Yaowarat Road and Soi Phadung Dao) is where mongers in green polos hawk crab curries (their speciality), all types of grilled seafood and piping hot bowls of tom yum koong. From there, one thing you must try is guay jub, a pepper broth soup with crispy pork, at **Guay Jub Ouan Pochana** (in front of the Chinatown Rama Cinema).

### BEST CHINESE FOOD

Warm your soul with pleated, soupy xiao long bao dumplings at one of the city's branches of the famed **Din Tai Fung** (dintaifung.com.sg) or try authentic Cantonese and all-day dim sum at **Hong Bao** (hongbaorestaurant.com). When the craving for the perfect Peking duck wrapped in flaky pancake hits, no place satisfies quite like the sumptuously decorated **The China House** (mandarinoriental.com).

### BEST FOR VEGETARIANS

While exact dates vary, the annual October vegetarian festival is a must-visit for meat-eaters and vegetarians alike. The nine-day festival is country-wide, and Chinatown is the epicentre of the action in the capital. During the festival, restaurants and street carts hang a yellow flag to indicate their temporary vegetarian status. The rest of the year, try the broccoli-quinoa burger at **Broccoli Revolution** (broccolirevolution.com).

### BEST FRIED CHICKEN

The undisputed champion of this beloved dish is **Polo Fried Chicken** (137/1-2 Soi Polo). Its double-fried chicken with crispy garlic draws crowds to its standalone shop near leafy Lumpini Park.

### BEST THAI FOOD

At **Le Du's** (ledubkk.com), in the more than capable hands of Chef Thitid 'Ton' Thassanakajohn, who cut his teeth at New York City strongholds like Eleven Madison Park and The Modern, experience a journey of modern Thai cuisine that respects the origin of the recipes and the produce. Ton is affable, confident and engaging, and his beautifully plated dishes reflect that. Plus, the relaxed setting makes you feel you're at the home of a good friend.

### BEST PLACE TO HONE YOUR

**COOKING SKILLS** Head to **Blue Elephant** (blueelephant.com) for a hands-on lesson on how to master ancient royal recipes under the careful guidance of Nooror Somany Steppe, a Thai food ambassador who brought the joys of the cuisine to Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Enjoy the fruit of your labour in the gorgeous dining room.

### BEST ALTERNATIVE TO JAY FAI

When 72-year-old **Jay Fai** (327 Samran Rat Intersection) was the only street food vendor to win a Michelin star in December 2017, the long queues for her famous crab omelettes rocketed to four-plus hours. For equally delicious dishes without the lines, head to

**Krua Aporn** (303/305 Sam Sen Road) for stir-fried crab curry with yellow chilli or a perfectly made crab omelette.

### BEST DINNER CRUISE

Once known as the Venice of the East, Bangkok has a vast network of waterways that are crucial to its storied history and a great way to sightsee the capital. Join the **Supanniga Cruise** (supannigacruise.com; from THB1,250 or ₹2,600), a watery outpost of the beloved Thai restaurant brand, for a night on the Chao Phraya River. Nosh on crab curry and pomelo salad while floating past Wat Arun at sunset and enjoy high-end cocktails from the bartenders at Vesper.

### BEST DAY TRIP FROM BANGKOK

Journey 90 minutes outside of Bangkok to **Ayutthaya**, an ancient Thai capital dating back to 1350, and spend the day exploring UNESCO-protected Khmer ruins. Contact **Smiling Albino** (smilingalbino.com) for a private tour with an expert guide.

### BEST LOCAL DESIGNER

Designer duo Jesse Dorsey, from Montreal, and Wannasiri Kongman, from Bangkok, co-founded a line of structural and chic accessories for women. Handbags, shoes and accessories from **BOYY** (boybag.com) play with masculine touches, like hard lines and oversized buckles, mixed with muted colours to create a brand that's wildly popular among Bangkok's elite.

### BEST TAILOR IN TOWN

Tailors on Sukhumvit Road are as prolific as tuk-tuks, but the dapper Canadians behind **Tailor on Ten** (tailoronten.com) are a sharp cut above the rest. With an impressive stock of fine Italian wools and lightweight cottons, they can customise everything from buttons to lapel shapes, and complete the look with a punchy interior lining, monogram cuff or mother-of-pearl stays.

### BEST MALL FOR ONE-OF-A-KIND

**SHOPPING** Bangkok has miles and miles of glittery mega malls, but bypass Prada for something homegrown at the futuristic **Siam Discovery** (siamdiscovery.co.th). **Object of Desire** stockpiles a meticulously curated collection of wares from award-winning local artists and designers and fun Japanese stationery, knick-knacks and cosmetics are sold at **Loft**. Local fashion designers are here as well, and **Cazh** stocks uber-cool streetwear for men and women. →



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTOPHER WISE

Moon Bar at Banyan Tree Hotel



**BEST (NOT SO) SECRET BARS** At the back of Sukhumvit Soi 11, slip into Castro's pre-revolution Cuba via a broken phone booth at **Havana Social** ([sohohospitality.com](http://sohohospitality.com)) and sip an absinthe-based Sazerac or a classic Cuban Libre while dancing the night away. On nightlife-centric Thonglor, there is **Rabbit Hole** ([rabbitholebkk.com](http://rabbitholebkk.com)), behind an unmarked wooden door between Soi 5 and Soi 7 near a ramen shop. Slide the door to the left and enter the narrow drinking establishment and order a Truffle Martini made with white truffle oil-infused gin. Next, turn left and make an immediate left down an unmarked lane to find **J Boroski Mixology** ([facebook.com/jboroskibangkok](https://facebook.com/jboroskibangkok)) at the back. There is no menu, but if you discuss the spirits and

flavours of your choice with the erudite bar staff, they'll create something memorable just the way you like it.

**BEST SHOPS FOR THAI SILK** Most tourists make a beeline for the **Jim Thompson House** ([jimthompsonhouse.com](http://jimthompsonhouse.com)), a canal-side teak home with lush gardens and Thompson's collections of antiques. (Fun trivia: the house was made entirely without nails.) While you're there, browse the colourful selection of ready-made pieces in the gift shop, like pillowcases, neckties and napkins. For something custom, head to **Almeta Silk** ([almeta.com](http://almeta.com)) to order curtains and clothing in over 1,000 colours and varying weights. Tip: the silk robes make great gifts. →



**BEST DRAG QUEEN** What is a trip to Bangkok without a playful, slightly raunchy drag show? Pangina Heels' over-the-top shows are famous and her best-known gig is hosting Sunday gay night at **Maggie Choo's** ([maggiechoos.com](http://maggiechoos.com)).

**BEST LOCAL COCKTAILS** **Tep Bar** ([facebook.com/TEPBARTH](http://facebook.com/TEPBARTH)) is a key player in reviving Chinatown's nightlife. Neighbouring **Teens of Thailand** ([facebook.com/teensofthailand](http://facebook.com/teensofthailand)) gets the Insta buzz, but we love Tep Bar for its cocktails made with ya dong, a white spirit infused with local herbs. Thai music on traditional instruments and Thai tapas complete the experience.

**BEST PLACE TO PARTY THE NIGHT AWAY** Hollywood sci-fi meets 1930s Shanghai at **Sing Sing Theater** ([singsingbangkok.com](http://singsingbangkok.com)), the boisterous, exhilarating brainchild of Australian designer Ashley Sutton. Order bottle service and watch the crowds on the dance floor, or enjoy a bird's-eye view from private balconies accessible by hidden staircases. The bar's spirit-forward drinks are innovative and well-known DJs spin the tunes.

**BEST UNDER-THE-RADAR MUSEUM** Easily missed by tourists quick to exit the Grand Palace, the **Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles** ([qsmthailand.org](http://qsmthailand.org)) showcases a stunning collection of royal gowns. The museum's air-conditioning is a welcome respite after a hot day of being a tourist, and the on-site gift shop is an ace spot if you're looking for textiles and crafts.

**BEST MARKET IN THE WORLD** **Chatuchak** ([chatuchak.org](http://chatuchak.org)), known as JJ to the locals, is the world's largest weekend market, spanning more than 27 acres. You can buy—quite literally—anything, from Buddha statues, handmade furniture and homeware to silks, pets, locally made spa products and clothing. As you shop, hydrate with fresh coconut water and hit the food market for plates of pad see ew noodles, spring rolls and fresh fruit. Arrive by 9am to beat the heat and crowds and snap a photo of the market's layout at the entrance before getting lost in the lanes of goods.

**BEST SUSHI** Thanks to a large Japanese expat population, the city takes its sushi very seriously, and crates of fresh fish, rice,

barrels of sake and wasabi are flown from Tokyo daily. For a memorable experience, head to **Ginza Sushi Ichi** ([ginza-sushiiichi.jp](http://ginza-sushiiichi.jp)) for an intimate omakase-style meal that will delight sushi lovers.

**BEST USE OF LOCAL INGREDIENTS** **80/20** ([facebook.com/8020bkk](http://facebook.com/8020bkk)) sources 80 percent of its ingredients locally and sustainably from a nearby market, and offers up contemporary dishes with age-old Thai techniques in an unpretentious atmosphere. Located in the very of-the-moment Charoen Krung neighbourhood, **SoulBar** ([facebook.com/livesoulbarbangkok](http://facebook.com/livesoulbarbangkok)) is a fantastic place to make your way to after dinner for some live music and a nightcap.

**BEST INDIAN FOOD IN BANGKOK** **Charcoal** ([charcoalbkk.com](http://charcoalbkk.com)) combines high-end kababs and the best dal in Bangkok with innovative cocktails, like the New Delhi Duty Free, which comes in a duty-free bag complete with an Indian passport. The weekend brunches are famous and you're just a short elevator ride from **Above Eleven** ([www.aboveeleven.com](http://www.aboveeleven.com)), a well-known rooftop bar run by Charcoal's owners. 📍

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRISTOPHER WISE



The interiors of Sing Sing Theater. Opposite page from left: a bartender at Maggie Choo's; the interiors of Teens of Thailand