

# JEWEL OF THE EAST

From her base in Bangkok Ashley Niedringhaus has explored every corner of Thailand, from luxurious suites to exclusive yoga retreats and gourmet food tours for *Travel+Leisure*, *Food & Wine* and *Tatler*. Here, exclusively for *Elite Traveler* readers, is her bespoke luxury itinerary of her adopted homeland

**With hot temperatures, dizzying traffic, a chaotic political system and waves of unwashed backpackers flocking to Thailand**, it would be easy for travelers in search of luxury to dismiss and avoid the so-called Land of Smiles. But ignore the Hollywood version of the city that might be in your mind (remember *The Hangover Part II*?) and consider the facts: Thailand is incredibly steeped in fascinating history, home to stunning beaches, a shopping gold mine and full of innovative chefs.

For example, take Bangkok. The city is ramping up its arts scene and recruiting top designers and culinary talents. And for the first time, the capital city is at a crossroads, distancing itself from Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City and Yangon in neighboring Myanmar,



and being seen by global travelers as an equal to Tokyo and Hong Kong, Asia's culinary and shopping bigwigs.

So you could wait for the Michelin judges to come and you could wait for the government to sort itself out, but why wait? It's that grit that gives the country a charming sheen that keeps visitors coming back for more. It's 2016 and it's never been a better time for a luxury traveler to head to Thailand.

**Right:** Grand Palace in Bangkok  
**Above:** Early morning sunrise over the streets of Bangkok  
**Left:** Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai



## A weekend in... Bangkok

Bangkok has two major airports that service private jets – Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang. Land at Suvarnabhumi, the bigger of the two that is used for long-haul flights, then head straight to the Oriental Suite at Bangkok's Mandarin Oriental. This sumptuous six-room suite is the city's largest and occupies the entire first floor of the 140-year-old original Oriental Hotel.

The hotel's prime location on the Chao Phraya River is helpful as boats are the best way of avoiding the traffic and accessing the best places of interest. For a full immersion into the vibrant Buddhist culture of Bangkok, start at the Grand Palace, one of Thailand's oldest and most impressive sights, and allow yourself a leisurely couple of hours to wander through 200

years of history. Afterwards, take refuge in the nearby air-conditioned Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles and browse the elegant attire of the Thai Royal Court, leaving time to shop for ready-made silk items or colorful bolts of Thailand's famous silk.

In the afternoon, retreat to your hotel's luxurious and award-winning spa for a traditional Thai massage to loosen your limbs and help eliminate any sluggishness. When the sun goes down, enjoy the *raison d'être* for visiting the city: dinner and drinks. The most sought-after table in the city is at Gaggan, the 2015 winner of Asia's Best Restaurant. It serves progressive Indian cuisine. Just make sure you reserve it two weeks in advance. On your second night, depending on your cuisine

preference, sample the talents of Michelin starred chefs at either Vogue Lounge, J'aime (both contemporary French) or Ginza Sushi Ichi for Japanese.

Your next order of business should be cocktails at a hi-so (local slang for high society) bar. Ashley Sutton, Bangkok's most applauded interior designer, has an excellent new establishment, Sing Sing Theater, which exudes a 1930s Shanghai chinoiserie vibe and Sutton's Iron Balls Gin is the liquor of choice behind the bar.

Spend your final day touring Thai silk magnate Jim Thompson's antique teak house and devising your own theory about his mysterious disappearance, or pick up custom threads from Tailor On Ten, a stylish establishment with a long list of ambassadors as clients.



## One week in... Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai



After your buzzy weekend in Bangkok, take refuge from the capital's heat and intense traffic in Chiang Mai, the so-called "rose of the north" and Thailand's second largest city.

Amid the verdant landscapes and easy to navigate streets is the best shopping in Thailand. Just south of the city center is the district of Hang Dong, home to two of the best antique stores in the country - De Siam and The Golden Triangle. Both stock formidable and well sourced collections of antiques from Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, China and Laos and shop owners can arrange international shipping and customs.

Or if you want something easier to transport home, head to Kachama, where Hmong tribal weavers have spun local silk into everything, from table runners to wall hangings.

When you've had your fill of shopping, check into the Four Seasons. The two-bedroom resort resident villa is one of the best places to stay in town and includes a live-in maid, plunge pool and picturesque views of the hotel's lavish surroundings. Housed among terraced rice fields in the Mae Rim Valley, the hotel's spa ranks among the best in Asia - no small feat in a land where massage is considered a regular necessity for holistic wellbeing. The cooking school is very highly rated and so time should be reserved for both during your stay.

Learn to whip up one of northern Thailand's most famous dishes: *khao soi*, a creamy curry with a topping of deep fried crispy egg noodles, shallots and lime. Locals take this dish as seriously as New Yorkers take their pizza or Tokyo takes its sushi; so if you miss it in cooking school (or can't get enough of it) go to Khao Soi Lam Duan, a local food shop that is beloved by most in town - their recipe hasn't changed in decades.

For the last two or three days of the week, hire Wanna Tours to escort you on a guided tour to Chiang Rai, a small town in the rolling hills of the Golden Triangle. A round-trip transfer from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai is possible in one day, but those who choose to meander through the misty mountains at a more leisurely pace will be greatly



rewarded with stunning backdrops and terraced fields. Stop along the way at the local coffee plantations, which rival the quality of South American varieties, and take in the landscapes from the lush gardens at Doi Inthanon National Park, the highest point in Thailand.

When you're in Chiang Rai, stay at Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort, where balconies with canopied daybeds overlook the Mekong River and neighboring Laos and Myanmar. The following day, cruise along the Mekong in the hotel's private longtail boat and visit Wat Rong Khun, more commonly known as the White Temple, which is the slightly kitsch opus of renowned Thai artist Chalermchai Kositpipat. Inside the temple Buddhist traditions are juxtaposed with characters from popular culture, including the likes of Harry Potter and Michael Jackson.

**Opposite page:** The Vogue Lounge at the Mandarin Oriental Bangkok

**Left:** The Mae Ping River that flows through Chiang Mai

**Above:** Indulge in a bowl of *khao soi*





## Longer in... Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Hua Hin and Phuket

Visitors without time constraints should build a dose of luxury seaside relaxation into their time in Bangkok and the north. Fly from Chiang Mai to the private Hua Hin International Airport. Hua Hin has enjoyed royal patronage since the 1920s when King Rama VI and King Rama VII built summer residences at this seaside town. The region still hosts the current monarchy. High society Thais also take advantage of Hua Hin's proximity to Bangkok and flock here at weekends.

For the ultimate romantic experience reserve La Residence, an elegant two-story, two-bedroom villa. Enjoy terraces overlooking the Gulf of Thailand, a private entrance, infinity pool and direct beach access.

The InterContinental is one of the finest hotels along the sugar white beaches. If you're feeling adventurous, the International Kiteboarding Association calls Hua Hin home and

chief concierge at the InterContinental, Panomdhep Aeurfeur, can arrange lessons. Alternatively charter a longtail boat to the beach in Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, where you can hike to the stunning Phraya Nakhon Cave. Unwind back at the hotel with a 24K gold facial, the spa's signature treatment, or head to the nearby Hua Hin Hills Vineyard.

Finally, fly to your final destination, Phuket. This hedonistic and diverse island is growing up thanks to a new wave of designer hotels and chefs that are settling on Thailand's largest island.

One of the key players is Iniala, with 10 rooms across three villas - all with three bedrooms - and a penthouse, ideal for renting for exclusive use. A week's rental of the entire property

**Above:** Phraya Nakhon Cave, where you can see saffron-robed Buddhist monks in the beautiful surroundings

tops six figures, but owner Mark Weingard gives 10 percent of room revenue and five percent of food and beverage revenue to Asian charities.

Service here is as smooth as Thai silk and each villa has a 24-hour entourage of concierge, driver, butler, chef, spa therapist and housekeeper, along with access to a professional Thai boxer for one-on-one lessons on the beach.

Iniala's restaurant, Aziamendi, is directed by Eneko Atxa, Spain's youngest chef to be awarded three Michelin stars, and the new chef de cuisine, Aisha Ibrahim, is from Tokyo's three Michelin star Nihonryori RyuGin. This duo makes dinner at Aziamendi reason enough to come to Phuket.

Spend the rest of your trip at sea. Charter a yacht from Simpson Yacht Charter and explore the Similan Islands, the gems of Phuket's north-west coast and the picturesque Coral Islands on the south coast.

### THE DETAILS A WEEKEND...



**SING SING THEATER**  
facebook.com/singsingtheater

**MANDARIN ORIENTAL, BANGKOK**  
mandarinoriental.com/bangkok

**QUEEN SIRIKIT MUSEUM OF TEXTILES**  
qsmthailand.org

**GAGGAN**  
eatatgaggan.com

**THE JIM THOMPSON HOUSE**  
jimthompsonhouse.com

### ONE WEEK...



**FOUR SEASONS RESORT CHIANG MAI**  
fourseasons.com/chiangmai

**ANANTARA GOLDEN TRIANGLE ELEPHANT CAMP & RESORT**  
goldentriangle.anantara.com

### LONGER...

**INTERCONTINENTAL HUA HIN RESORT**  
huahin.intercontinental.com

**INIALA BEACH HOUSE**  
iniala.com

**HUA HIN HILLS VINEYARD**  
facebook.com/huahinhills

**SIMPSON YACHT CHARTER**  
simpsonyachtcharter.com

### CONCIERGE SERVICES

**SMILING ALBINO**  
Co-founder and director Daniel Fraser is the man for anything you need in Bangkok, from big ticket requests to flower market tours with a famous botanist.  
**smilingalbino.com**

**WANNA TOURS**  
One of the most well connected concierges in Chiang Mai, it offers fully customized luxury tours as well as hot-air balloon flights at sunset.  
**wannatours.com**