

SPORTS & ACTIVITIES

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SPORTS & ACTIVITIES

Although the climate is not conducive to exercise, Bangkokians like to work up a sweat doing more than just climbing the stairs to the Skytrain station. All the popular Thai sports are represented in the capital city: from the top-tier *muay thai* (Thai boxing) to a pick-up game of *tákráw* (Siamese football).

Thais also consider traditional massage an integral component of health, so you can always pay someone else to do all the work. In tandem with the massage tradition, Bangkok is emerging as one of the world's spa capitals, with facilities to satisfy almost any whim or budget.

HEALTH & FITNESS

Whether you're looking to sweat out the toxins or have them pampered away, Bangkok should be able to satisfy.

SPAS & MASSAGE

According to traditional Thai healing, the use of herbs and massage should be part of a regular health and beauty regimen, not just an excuse for pampering. The variations on this theme range from storefront traditional Thai massage to an indulgent spa 'experience' with service and style. Bangkok's spas have begun to focus more on the medical than the sensory, and the growing number of plush resort-style spas offer a huge variety of treatments.

Although it sounds relaxing, traditional Thai massage (*núat phaen boraan*), will seem more closely related to *muay thai* than to shiatsu. It is based on yogic techniques for general health involving pulling, stretching, bending and manipulating pressure points. If done well, a traditional massage will leave you sore but revitalised.

Full-body massages will usually include camphor-scented balms or herbal compresses, or oil in cheaper establishments. Note that 'oil massage' is sometimes taken as code for 'sexy massage'; see the boxed text, **opposite**, for the lowdown. Sightseeing aches and pains can usually be treated effectively with a quick foot massage. Depending on the neighbourhood, prices for massages in small parlours are about 200B to 350B for a foot massage and 300B to 500B for a full-body massage. Spa experiences start at about 800B and climb like a Bangkok skyscraper. For a fuller idea of what's available see www.spasinbangkok.com.

BANYAN TREE SPA [Map p112](#)

☎ 0 2679 1052; banyantreespa.com/bangkok; Banyan Tree Hotel & Spa, 21/100 Th Sathon Tai; packages from 5800B; 📍 Lumpini

This hotel spa delivers modern elegance and world-class pampering. The womb-like spa rooms look out over a silent and peaceful vision of Bangkok from on high. Thai, Swedish and Balinese massages, body scrubs using aromatic oils and herbs with medicinal properties, and beauty treatments comprise the spa's offerings. 'Spa vacation' packages include accommodation.

BUATHIP THAI MASSAGE [Map pp118–19](#)

☎ 0 2251 2627; 4/13 Soi 5, Th Sukhumvit; 1hr massage 270B; 🕒 10am-midnight; 📍 Nana On a small sub-soi (lane) behind the Amari Boulevard Hotel, this tidy shopfront is in a decidedly sleazy part of town, but inside is a professional masseur whose focused concentration could melt metal.

NAKORNTHON THAI MEDICAL SPA

[Map pp124–5](#)
☎ 0 2416 5454; www.nakornthonhospital.com; 12th fl, Nakornthon Hospital, Th Phra Ram II; packages from 1000B; access by taxi

The wellness centre of this Bangkok hospital has a traditional Thai medicine wing, combining spa therapy with ancient Thai techniques. The primary practice is the use of *tamrub thong*, which uses the application of gold leaf and herbs to rejuvenate skin and restore collagen. Other treatments focus on nutritional evaluations and aromatherapy to ensure the balance of the body's essential elements: earth, wind, water and fire.

ORIENTAL SPA [Map pp108–9](#)

☎ 0 2659 0444; www.mandarinoriental.com; Oriental Hotel, 48 Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung; half-day packages from 8400B; 📍 Saphan Taksin, 📍 from Oriental Hotel

This award-winning spa, set in a delightful riverside location opposite the Oriental

BANGKOK MASSAGE 101

Bangkok has hundreds of massage options, from tiny shops with a couple of masseuses to resort-style spas that have honed pampering down to a fine art, via venerable training institutions such as Wat Pho, where centuries of tradition are maintained and passed on. Parlours offering Thai traditional massage are the most prevalent, typically with massage beds in the front window, colourful reflexology charts on the walls and foot or full-body massages selling for very reasonable rates.

But the world of Bangkok massage parlours can sometimes throw up unexpected scenarios. If you're a woman you can rest easy in the knowledge that you'll get, with varying degrees of quality, the massage you asked for. For men, however, your full-body 'oil massage' might involve techniques you didn't have in mind and which are definitely not on the curriculum at Wat Pho.

The tough part about this is that you never really know when you walk into a studio whether the massage is going to extend further up your inner thigh than is normally considered proper. It's not as if the parlours actually advertise 'Happy Endings 200B extra'. Indeed, many parlours actively discourage the practice, but masseuses are poorly paid and the opportunity to earn a bigger tip is often too hard to ignore.

So what should you do? First, if you're not actually looking for a 'happy ending' then start by avoiding massage parlours in Bangkok's sleazier neighbourhoods – Nana, Sukhumvit near Soi Cowboy or around Patpong. You can also avoid trouble by walking past the shops with young, attractive women in miniskirts sitting outside and choring 'Hello sir, massage?' Look instead for the older, stronger-looking women, who normally give better massage. Parlours off the main path are often a good bet.

Once you've chosen your parlour, choosing not to undress completely – or wearing the unisex disposable knickers provided – will go some way toward deterring wandering hands. But it's no guarantee. If your masseuse's 'innocent' rubbing goes too far it will deliberately be left open to your interpretation; you'll need to either ignore it both physically and verbally, or deal with it verbally.

Hotel, offers a full range of massage and health treatments. Privacy is the spa's main strength, with individual and couples' suites (shower, massage tables and steam room) keeping camera-shy celebs happy. Bookings are essential.

RASAYANA RETREAT [Map pp118–19](#)

☎ 0 2662 4803; www.rasayanaretreat.com; 41/1 Soi Prommit off Soi 39, Th Sukhumvit; massage/packages from 500B/2800B; 📍 Phrom Phong Rasayana combines basic beauty and massage treatments with holistic healing techniques, such as detoxification, colonic irrigation and hypnotherapy, for reasonable prices.

RUEN-NUAD MASSAGE & YOGA

[Map pp108–9](#)
☎ 0 2632 2663; 42 Th Convent, Th Silom; 🕒 10am–10pm; 1hr traditional massage 350B; 📍 Sala Daeng, 📍 Silom

Just the right mix of old and new, Ruen-Nuad is set in a charming converted wooden house opposite BNH Hospital. It has partitioned massage stations, creating a mood of pampering and privacy typical of spa facilities, but at very reasonable parlour prices.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CENTER FOR THE BLIND [Map pp124–5](#)

☎ 0 2583 7327; 78/2 Soi 1, Th Tiwanon, Pak Kret; 1½-hr massage in fan/air-con room 120/160B; 🕒 7am–6pm; 📍 Tha Pak Kret

This outreach centre north of central Bangkok trains the blind in the ancient techniques of Thai traditional massage, developing what many people consider to be expert masseurs. Getting out here can be half the fun. Take the Chao Phraya Express (p253) north to Tha Nonthaburi, where you will connect to a Laem Thong boat (5.45am to 5.45pm) to Tha Pak Kret. From the pier, hire a motorcycle taxi to take you to the Skills Development Center (one way 10B). You'll need to speak a little Thai to pull this off (ask for *suun pháthánaa sámáthàphâap khon taa bàwt*), but Pak Kret villagers are pretty easy-going and willing to listen to foreigners massacre their language. The easier option is to just get in a taxi and get the driver to call the centre for directions.

WAT PHO THAI TRADITIONAL MASSAGE SCHOOL [Map p56](#)

☎ 0 2221 3686; www.watpomassage.com; Soi Penphat, Th Sanamchai; 1hr Thai massage 300B, foot massage 250B; 🕒 8am–5pm; 📍 Tha Tien The school affiliated with Wat Pho is the

country's primary training centre for Thai traditional massage. You can choose from the fan-conditioned *sālaa* (pavilions) in the southeast corner of the temple grounds and air-conditioned rooms in the massage training centre in Soi Penphat, the unsigned *soi* closer to the river.

YOGA & PILATES

You might think Thais don't need any extra relaxation, but the international yoga revolution has found many a believer in Bangkok. Yoga studios – and enormous accompanying billboards of smiling gurus – have popped up faster than mushrooms at a full-moon party.

ABSOLUTE YOGA Map pp98–9

☎ 0 2252 4400; www.absoluteyogabangkok.com; 4th fl, Amarin Plaza, Th Ploenchit, Pathumwan
The largest and most commercial yoga studio group, teaching Bikram hot yoga plus a host of other styles. Another popular branch is **Thong Lor** (Map pp118–19); ☎ 0 2381 0697; 2nd fl, 55th Plaza, Soi Thong Lor 2, Th Sukhumvit.

YOGA ELEMENTS STUDIO Map pp98–9

☎ 0 2655 5671; www.yogaelements.com; 29 Vanisa Bldg, 23rd fl, Th Chitlom
Run by American Adrian Cox, who trained at Om in New York and teaches vinyasa and ashtanga, this is probably the most respected studio in the city. The high-rise location helps you rise above it all, too.

PILATES STUDIO Map pp98–9

☎ 0 2650 7797; www.pilatesbangkok.com; 888/58-9 Mahatun Plaza, Th Ploenchit
One of three in this group, the name pretty much covers it.

GYMS

Bangkok is well stocked with gyms, ranging in style from the long-running open-air affairs in spaces such as Lumphini Park (p106), to ultra-modern mega-gyms complete with hi-tech equipment, bars selling exotic vegetable drinks and a roster of stunningly good-looking members and instructors. Most large hotels have gyms and swimming pools, as do a growing number of small hotels. If your hotel doesn't, or you prefer the fashion-gym experience, both **California Wow** (www.californiawowx.com) and **True Fitness** (www.truefitness.co.th) have several branches in the Sukhumvit, Silom and Siam Sq areas, and offer

pricey day memberships (about 700B). For something more old-school, the **Ambassador Hotel Fitness Centre** (Map pp118–19; ☎ 0 2254 0444; www.amtel.co.th; Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; per day 300B; ☎ 6am–10pm; ♿ Nana) isn't bad and has instructors who can give you a game of squash.

ACTIVITIES

If your hotel pool is more like a bathtub than a venue for lapping, the **National Stadium** (Map pp98–9; ☎ 0 2214 0120; Th Phra Ram I; ♿ National Stadium) has a public pool plus basketball and volleyball courts and other sports facilities. You might also pick up a game of basketball at the **Red Bull X Park** (Map pp108–9; ☎ 0 2670 8080; Th Sathon Tai, opposite Evergreen Laurel Hotel; ☎ 10am–9pm; ♿ Chong Nonsi, M Lumphini, Silom).

GOLF

Bangkok's outer suburbs are well stocked with golf courses with green fees ranging from 250B to 5000B, plus the customary 200B tip for caddies. The website **Thai Golfer** (www.thaigolfer.com) rates every course in Thailand. Rental equipment is available and some courses are closed on Monday, while others are open at night for cooler tee-off times.

JOGGING & CYCLING

Lumphini Park, Sanam Luang and Benjakiti Park all host early-morning and late-evening runners. Benjakiti has less shade and fewer people than the others, and also has bikes for rent. Several Hash groups meet for weekly runs, including the Bangkok Hash House Harriers (men only), Bangkok Monday Hash (mixed) and the Harriettes (mixed). The Bangkok Hash House Mountain Bikers meet monthly on Sunday afternoon for a 20km to 30km mountain-bike ride. See www.bangkokhkh.com for details.

SPECTATOR SPORTS

Thais have embraced an increasingly diverse range of sports in recent years – tennis, golf, diving and motor racing, among others – but it's football and home-grown *muay thai* that inspire the most devoted support.

FOOTBALL

Thais, and particularly Bangkokians, have been caught up in the rapid internationali-

sation of football in recent years. Thailand has a national league, but apart from a few stars of the underperforming national team (90th in the FIFA world rankings in April 2008), most Thais will be happier watching Ronaldo, Rooney, Torres and ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra's club, Manchester City, on TV than their own league. Still, if you want to see a match, nine of the 16 Thai Premier League teams are based in Bangkok; two play at the conveniently central Chulalongkorn University Sports Stadium (Map pp98–9).

MUAY THAI (THAI BOXING)

Quintessentially Thai, almost anything goes in *muay thai*, the martial art more commonly known elsewhere as Thai boxing or kick boxing (below). If you don't mind the violence, a Thai boxing match is well worth attending for the pure spectacle – the wild musical accompaniment, the ceremonial beginning of each match and the frenzied betting.

The best of the best fight at Bangkok's two boxing stadiums. Built on royal land at the end of WWII, the Art Deco-style **Ratchadamnoen Stadium** (Sanam Muay Ratchadamnoen; Map pp68–9;

☎ 0 2281 4205; 1 Th Ratchadamnoen Nok; ☎ bouts 5-8pm & 8.30-midnight Sun, 6.30-11.30pm Mon, Wed & Thu; ♿ air-con bus 503, ordinary 70) is the original and has a relatively formal atmosphere. **Lumphini Stadium** (Sanam Muay Lumphini; Map p112; ☎ 0 2252 8765; www.muaythailumphini.com; Th Rama IV; ☎ bouts 6.30-11pm Tue & Fri, 5-8pm & 8.30-11.30pm Sat; M Lumphini) was constructed by the Thai army in 1956 and has a looser and more populist atmosphere than at Ratchadamnoen. Lumphini is also more encouraging of non-Thai boxers. Plans to move Lumphini Stadium have apparently been shelved.

Admission fees are the same at both stadiums and vary according to seating. Ringside seats (2000B) are the most expensive and will be filled with VIPs; tourists usually opt for the 2nd-class seats (1500B); and die-hard *muay thai* fans bet and cheer from the fenced-off bleachers in 3rd class (1000B). If you're thinking these prices sound a bit steep for your average fight fan (taxi drivers are big fans and they make about 600B a day), then you're right. *Faràng* (Western) prices are more than double what Thais pay.

There is much debate about which seats are better. Ringside gives you the central action,

KICKING & SCREAMING

More formally known as Phahuyut (from the Pali-Sanskrit *bhahu* or 'arm' and *yodha* or 'combat'), Thailand's ancient martial art is arguably one of the kingdom's most striking national icons. Overflowing with colour and ceremony as well as exhilarating moments of clenched-teeth action, the best matches serve up a blend of such skill and tenacity that one is tempted to view the spectacle as emblematic of Thailand's centuries-old devotion to independence in a region where most other countries fell under the European colonial yoke.

Many martial arts aficionados agree that *muay thai* is the most efficient, effective and generally unbeatable form of ring-centred hand-to-hand combat practised today. And according to legend, it has been for a while.

After the Siamese were defeated at Ayuthaya in 1767, several expert *muay boran* (from which *muay thai* is derived) fighters were among prisoners hauled off to Burma. A few years later a festival was held and one of the Thai fighters, Nai Khanom Tom, was ordered to take on prominent Burmese boxers for the entertainment of the king, and to determine which martial art was most effective. He promptly dispatched nine in a row and, as legend has it, was offered money or beautiful women as a reward; he promptly took two new wives. Today a *muay thai* festival (p12) in Ayuthaya is named after Nai Khanom Tom.

Unlike some martial disciplines, such as kung fu or qi gong, *muay thai* doesn't entertain the idea that esoteric martial-arts techniques can be passed only from master to disciple in secret. Thus the *muay thai* knowledge base hasn't fossilised and in fact remains ever open to innovation, refinement and revision. Thai champion Dieselnoi, for example, created a new approach to knee strikes that was so difficult to defend that he retired at 23 because no-one dared to fight him anymore.

Another famous *muay thai* champion is Parinya Kiatbusaba, aka Nong Thoom, a transvestite from Chiang Mai who arrived for weigh-ins wearing lipstick and rouge. After a 1998 triumph at Lumphini, Parinya used the purse to pay for sex-change surgery and in 2003 the movie *Beautiful Boxer* was made about her life. While Bangkok has long attracted foreign fighters, it wasn't until 1999 that French fighter Mourad Sari became the first non-Thai fighter to take home a weight-class championship belt from a Bangkok stadium.

Several Thai *nák muay* (fighters) have gone on to triumph in world championships in international-style boxing. Khaosai Galaxy, the greatest Asian boxer of all time, successfully defended his World Boxing Association super flyweight world title 19 times before retiring in 1991.

but gambling is prohibited and the crowd is comprised of subdued VIPs. The 2nd-class seats are filled with numbers-runners who take bets from the die-hard fans in 3rd class. Akin to being in a stock-exchange pit, hand signals communicating bets and odds fly between the 2nd- and 3rd-class areas. The 3rd-class area is the rowdiest section. Fenced off from the rest of the stadium, most of the die-hard fans follow the match (or their bets) too closely to sit down. If you need more entertainment than two men punching each other, then the crowd in the 3rd-class seats will keep you amused.

Most programs have eight to 10 fights of five rounds each. English-speaking 'staff' outside the stadium, who will practically tackle you upon arrival, hand you a fight roster and steer you to the foreigners' ticket windows; they can also be helpful in telling you which fights are the best match-ups (some say that welterweights, between 61.2kg and 66.7kg, are the best.). To keep everyone honest, however, remember to purchase tickets from the ticket window, not from a person outside the stadium (you don't need help to buy a ticket, no matter what you're told). For more on the fighters and upcoming programs, see www.muaythai2000.com.

The Isan restaurants on the north side of Ratchadamnoen stadium are well known for their *kài yâang* (grilled chicken) and other

northeastern dishes, something of a fight-night tradition.

TÀKRĀW

Sometimes called 'Siamese football' in old English texts, *tàkrāw* refers to a game in which a woven rattan (or sometimes plastic) ball about 12cm in diameter is kicked around. *Tàkrāw* is also popular in several neighbouring countries and is a hotly contested sport in the Southeast Asian Games.

Traditionally *tàkrāw* is played by men standing in a circle (the size of which depends on the number of players) and simply trying to keep the ball airborne by kicking it soccer style. Points are scored for style, difficulty and variety of kicking manoeuvres. Like watching someone juggling a football, there is something quite mesmerizing about watching the best players stand about 8m apart and volley the *lúuk tàkrāw* back and forth, sometimes hitting it with their heel while completely unsighted after it has sailed over their heads. Modern competitive *tàkrāw* is played with a volleyball net, using feet and head instead of hands.

Pick-up games are played throughout the city, most commonly in [Lumphini Park](#) (Map p112; Th Phra Ram IV; 📍 Ratchadamri, Saladaeng, 🚇 M Lumphini) and [National Stadium](#) (Map pp52–3; 📞 0 2214 0120; Th Phra Ram I; 📍 National Stadium).