

Bangkok



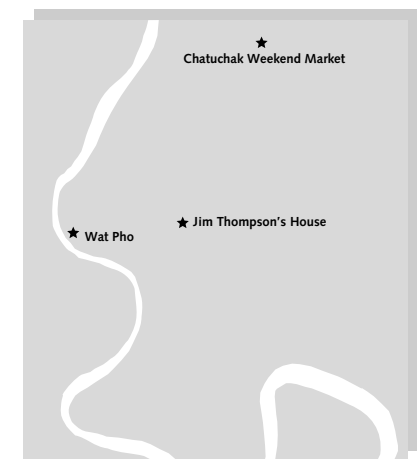
Unlike Thailand's famously chilled islands and beaches, there's something about Bangkok that never fails to get the blood pumping. This big, crowded, polluted and seemingly chaotic Asian mega-city is many things to many people, but you wouldn't call it boring.

For the visitor, the impact is immediate. Your first move is likely to be joining the cacophonous arteries of metal that pump – just barely – almost eight million people around the region's biggest city. Everywhere you look the streets and waterways are alive with commuters. Schoolkids run without sweating, smiling vendors create mouth-watering food in push-away kitchens, monks rub bare shoulders with fashionistas in air-conditioned malls... Whether it's in one of Bangkok's famous golden temples, riding in the back of its roguish tük-tük or just walking down the street, something odd and inexplicable will happen at the most unexpected time. Hey, was that an elephant with a tail light?

If all you want to do is kick back on a peaceful beach, at first glance Bangkok will seem like a transit burden full of concrete towers instead of palm trees. But once you tire of sea breezes, you'll better appreciate Bangkok's conveniences and breakneck pace. With its mix of the historic and contemporary, and some of the most delicious and best-value eating on earth, the City of Angels is surely one of the most invigorating in Asia.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Getting lost in quirky **Wat Pho** (p83), with its serene reclining Buddha, then finding yourself a massage
- Touring **Jim Thompson's House** (p87), one of the best-preserved examples of traditional Thai art and architecture
- Stocking up on exotic souvenirs at the vast **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (p108)
- Taking the lift to one of Bangkok's unique rooftop bars for a **sky-high sundowner** (p102) and unbeatable sunset views.
- Eating delicious **Thai cuisine** (p98) in what is one of Asia's best food cities.



■ DRY SEASON: NOVEMBER-APRIL

■ WET SEASON: MAY-OCTOBER

HISTORY

As capital cities go, Bangkok is a fairly recent invention. Following the sacking of Ayuthaya by the Burmese (p24), King Taksin established the Thai capital at Thonburi, on the west bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River). But in 1782 King Rama I founded the Chakri dynasty (p24) and promptly moved his capital across the river to the modest village of Bang Makok (current-day Bangkok).

Buddhist relics from Ayuthaya, Thonburi and Sukhothai were re-enshrined in towering new temples and the city expanded rapidly around the royal compound at Ko Ratanakosin. Under Rama IV (King Mongkut) and his son Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), Bangkok and the country began to modernise, adopting and integrating Western customs, styles and architecture. Europeans flocked to the city to negotiate trade contracts and increase their influence in the region.

In 1932 Bangkok saw the end of absolute monarchy and the beginnings of a turbulent political era. From 1932 to the present day, Bangkok has witnessed 19 coup attempts, half of which half have resulted in a change of government. The latest, in September 2006, saw Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra ousted without a shot being fired following months of protests in the capital. However, previous political ructions were not so peaceful and on several occasions mass demonstrations have ended in the military massacring student protesters.

During the 1970s, Bangkok became an R&R base for American troops fighting in Vietnam and its reputation as 'sin city' was born. During the 1980s and '90s Thailand's economy and Bangkok's skyline grew rapidly. But when the Bangkok stock market collapsed

WHAT'S YOUR NAME AGAIN?

The name Bangkok is derived from Bang Makok, meaning 'Place of Olive Plums', the name of a village that pre-dates the arrival of the capital in 1782. The full official title of the capital is 'Krungthep mahanakhon amon rattanakosin mahintara ayuthaya mahadilok popnopparat ratchathani burirom udomratchaniwet mahasathan amonpiman avatansathit sakkathattiya visunukamprasit'. Not surprisingly, most Thais abbreviate it to Krung Thep (City of Angels).

in 1997 the city, the country and indeed most of the region ground to an economic halt.

After some rocky years, Bangkok has bounced back and is now every bit the modern Asian metropolis, if not quite the 'world city' it so wants to be. Despite the uncertainty following the 2006 coup d'état and economic sluggishness, construction is progressing apace and cranes are prominent on the skyline. Large infrastructure projects, such as the Skytrain and Metro urban railways and the Suvarnabhumi International Airport, have all made the city a less-congested and more enjoyable place.

ORIENTATION

Bangkok is a vast sprawling mess of a city and the urban chaos can be pretty intimidating at first. Concrete towers as far as the eye can see make it difficult to discern any real centre. But the capital does have several distinctly different districts. For the sake of simplicity, however, it makes sense to divide the city into two areas: 'old Bangkok', which has most of the royal palaces and historic temples, and 'new Bangkok', which is dominated by towering skyscrapers, shopping malls and a growing number of luxury hotels.

Old Bangkok straddles the Mae Nam Chao Phraya, with the original royal centre of Ko Ratanakosin occupying a man-made island on the east bank and the former capital of Thonburi now serving as a suburb on the west bank. To the north of the royal district, still on Ko Ratanakosin, is Banglamphu. This is one of Bangkok's oldest neighbourhoods and was once a home to officials and members of the royal court. Today it's the main budget travellers' centre in Bangkok with an increasing local art and bar scene. Northeast of Ko Ratanakosin is Dusit, the new royal district. The riverside district south of Ko Ratanakosin is home to the Indian neighbourhood of Phahurat and Bangkok's Chinatown, near the main train station of Hualamphong.

Surrounding the old city and stretching for at least 20km in every direction, 'new Bangkok' is a modern creation and quite unfathomable amounts of concrete, divided by massive congested highways and soaring flyovers. It's best to think of this part of the City of Angels in terms of its main streets. Th Charoen Krung runs south from Chinatown along the eastern edge of Mae Nam Chao Phraya. Running east from this road are Th

BANGKOK IN ...

Two Days

In two days you can explore Bangkok's famous sights: the **Grand Palace & Wat Phra Kaew** (p83); **Wat Pho** (p83), home to the largest reclining Buddha in Thailand; and missile-shaped **Wat Arun** (p84). If you are jet lagged on day two, get up early and head to **Lumphini Park** (p87) to see the locals practising t'ai chi. Then chase away the heatstroke with a visit to the shopping centres on Th Phra Ram I and Th Ploenchit. Don't forget to follow the Thai crowds to the busy **Erawan Shrine** (p86). In the afternoon, visit **Jim Thompson's House** (p87) for an introduction to traditional Thai architecture. Take in the sunset from one of the **sky-high bars** (p102), before finding somewhere with better food for a lot less money for dinner.

Four Days

With more time, factor in a visit to the **National Museum** (p84) then the **amulet market** (p86), and take the **Chinatown Walking Tour** (p88). Take a detour up to Dusit to see **Vimanmek Mansion Museum** (p85), built entirely from golden teak, and get out on the river in a long-tail or the ferry. After dark, head to Th Sukhumvit to experience modern Bangkok at one of the fashionable restaurants or clubs, such as **Bed Supperclub** (p103). If you're here on the weekend juggle this plan to fit in the **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (p108)

Surawong (Surwongse) and Th Silom, which are lined with hotels, restaurants, shopping centres and an eye-popping dose of sleaze, and then Th Sathon, which adds embassies and consulates to the hotel mix.

Head north of the Silom neighbourhood along Th Phayathai or Th Ratchadamri and you'll reach Th Phra Ram I and the Siam Square and Th Ploenchit shopping districts. East of here Th Sukhumvit hosts hotels, restaurants and a rather seedy reputation at its start, before becoming more sophisticated and expensive east of Soi 21 (Soi Asoke).

Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport is about 30km east of the centre, while the old Don Muang airport is about 25km north and has a lot of (but not all) domestic flights to island and beach destinations.

Maps

From the moment you enter Thailand – literally right after you've passed immigration – you'll see your first free maps. Get used to it – Thailand is full of them. Quality varies between useful and utter rubbish, but unless you're planning to explore off the beaten track they should be good enough.

There are also several maps for sale that are worth your money. One that is often imitated but never equalled is *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok* (www.nancychandler.net; 250B), a colourful hand-drawn map with useful inset panels for Chinatown, Th Sukhumvit and Chatuchak Weekend Market. To master

the city's bus system, purchase Roadway's *Bangkok Bus Map* (150B). For visitors who consider eating to be sightseeing, check out Ideal Map's *Good Eats* series, which has mapped mom-and-pop restaurants in three of Bangkok's noshing neighbourhoods.

If travelling to districts outside central Bangkok, Thinknet's *Bangkok City Atlas* is a wise investment for 250B.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Bangkok is well-stocked with bookshops selling new titles in English and, less often, other languages. Virtually every major mall has branches of **Asia Books** (www.asiabook.com), **Kinokuniya** (www.kinokuniya.com), **Bookazine** (www.bookazine.co.th) and/or **B2S** (www.b2s.co.th). Tourist areas also have second-hand bookstores, and those on Th Khao San have the most diverse range of titles in the country (though they're not all that cheap). Recommended bookshops include:

Asia Books (www.asiabook.com) Soi 15 (Map p82; 221 Th Sukhumvit, Soi 15); Siam Discovery Center (Map pp80-1; 4th fl, Th Phra Ram I)

Dasa Book Café (Map p82; ☎ 0 2661 2993; btwn Soi 26 & 28, Th Sukhumvit).

Kinokuniya (☎ 0 2255 9834) Emporium (Map p82; 3rd fl, 622 Th Sukhumvit); Siam Paragon (Map pp80-1; 4th fl, Siam Paragon, Th Phra Rama I)

Shaman Bookstore (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 0418; D&D Plaza, 68-70 Th Khao San & 127 Th Tanao, Banglamphu) Used books galore.

Emergency

For an ambulance, call one of the hospitals listed under Medical Services (right).

Fire (☎ 199)

Police (☎ 191) Ordinary Thai police don't usually speak English.

Tourist Police (☎ 1155; ☎ 24hr) An English-speaking unit that handles crime involving tourists, including gem scams. It can also act as a bilingual liaison with the regular police.

Immigration

For visa extensions or applications, visit the **Immigration Office** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2287 3101-10; Th Sathon Tai, 507 Soi Suan Phlu; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat). Most applications and extensions require two photos and a photocopy of the photo and visa pages on your passport. See p402 for details.

Internet Access

Bangkok has literally hundreds of internet cafés and plenty of wi-fi hotspots where you can get online free (or for the price of a coffee). Internet cafés come and go so we haven't recommended specific places. Rates are generally pretty cheap, and charges are similar within certain neighbourhoods. For example, Th Khao San and around have some of the cheapest rates in town, starting at about 40B an hour; 60B to 120B an hour is common elsewhere. Most internet cafés can also print and upload digital camera files, but fewer have CD-burning capabilities. You'll find independent internet cafés or guesthouse terminals along Th Sukhumvit and Th Silom, and in all the big shopping centres.

Almost every hotel listed in this chapter offers some level of internet access, from in-room wi-fi to a lonely machine in the corner of the lobby. Prices are also diverse, ranging from free (in many midrange places) to outrageous in some top-end places; check rates before you make a booking. Free wi-fi is available in a growing number of cafés, including chains such as Gloria Jean and Starbucks.

Media

Bangkok has well-established English-language media. The *Bangkok Post* (www.bangkokpost.net) is the major daily broadsheet, with local and international news as well as articles on culture, entertainment, dining and events. The *Nation* (www.nationmultimedia.com) is now a business paper

published in conjunction with a free paper called *Daily Xpress*. The *International Herald Tribune* is widely available, as are all major international magazines.

Medical Services

Bangkok is the leading health-care centre in the region and the better hospitals have become major centres of elective 'medical tourism'. They can also handle medical and dental emergencies.

Bangkok Christian Hospital (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2235 1000-07; www.bkkchristianhosp.th.com; 124 Th Silom)

Bangkok Hospital (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2310 3000; www.bangkokhospital.com; 2 Soi 47, Th Phetburi Tat Mai, Bangkokpi)

BNH Hospital (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2686 2700; www.bnghospital.com; 9 Th Convent)

Bumrungrad International Hospital (Map p82; ☎ 0 2667 1000; www.bumrungrad.com; 33 Soi 3, Th Sukhumvit)

Money

You won't need a guide to find an ATM in Bangkok – they're everywhere. Bank ATMs accept major international credit cards and many will also cough up cash for accounts linked to the Cirrus and Plus networks. In tourist areas, such as the Siam Square shopping district and Th Khao San, you'll often find small money-exchange counters outside banks; these can change cash and cheques in major currencies and are typically open from about 9am or 10am to 8pm daily.

Post

Services at the huge **main post office** (Map pp78-9; Th Charoen Krung; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat & Sun) include poste restante and packaging within the main building. Do not send money or valuables via regular mail. The easiest way to get here is via Chao Phraya express boat to Tha Si Phraya.

There are convenient **post office branches** (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) on Th Rambutri, opposite Wat Bowonniwet (Map pp74-5), and on the alley immediately north of Th Ratchadamnoen Klang, just east of Th Tanao (Map pp74-5).

Telephone

Many Bangkok internet cafés have Skype and this or similar programs are easily the cheapest way to make international calls; see p399 for more details. Internet cafés often also have their

own phones with competitive rates, starting at about 10B a minute to Europe, North America and Australia. The online *Yellow Pages* (www.yellowpages.co.th) can be handy. For information on mobile phones, see p399. If you need a new mobile phone, **MBK** (Mahboonkrong Shopping Center; Map pp80-1; 4th fl, Th Phra Ram I) has millions of them. Staff can also 'unlock' phones here.

Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT; Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2614 1000; Th Charoen Krung; ☎ 8am-8pm) Small, quiet, air-conditioned international call centre outside the main post office.

Telephone Organization of Thailand (TOT; Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2251 1111; Th Ploenchit; Skytrain Chitlom) For long-distance calls.

Toilets

If you don't want to pee against a tree like the tük-tük (pronounced dúk dúk; three-wheeled motorcycle) drivers, use a public toilet in a shopping centre, hotel or fast-food restaurant. Shopping centres might charge 1B to 2B for a visit; some newer shopping centres have toilets for the disabled. In modern Bangkok squat toilets are positively difficult to find – expect to be greeted by a throne.

Tourist Information

Bangkok has two organisations that handle tourism matters: TAT for countrywide information, and Bangkok Tourist Division for city-specific information. Note that these offices do not make travel arrangements. Also be aware that travel agents in the train station and near tourist centres co-opt TAT as part of their name to lure in commissions.

Targeting the young ones, *Guru* is a lifestyle insert in the Friday edition of the *Bangkok Post*. For new restaurants, current happy hours, band dates and which DJs are in town, there are two good-quality independent publications: the free and irreverent weekly *BK Magazine* (www.bkmagazine.com), and the monthly *Bangkok 101* (www.bangkok101.com), which has photo features and handy reviews of sights, restaurants, nightclubs and theatres; it costs 100B.

Bangkok Tourist Division (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2225 7612-4; www.bangkoktourist.com; 17 Th Phra Athit; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Immediately south of Saphan Phra Pinklao, it's fantastically well organised with hundreds of brochures and free booklets. Green kiosks around town are less useful, but do have maps. Look for the symbol of a mahout on an elephant.

TAT (for assistance 8am-8pm ☎ 1672; www.tourismthailand.org) Head Office (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2250 5500; 1600 Phetburi Tat Mai; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm); Banglamphu (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2283 1555; cnr Th Ratchadamnoen Nok & Th Chakrapatdipong; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) opposite the boxing stadium; Suvarnabhumi International Airport (☎ 0 2134 4077; 2nd fl, btwn Gate 2 & 5; ☎ 8am-4pm).

Travel Agencies

Travel agents along Th Khao San and other streets where tourists gather often offer heavily discounted plane tickets, but there are plenty of sharks out there so be careful. Flight tickets will usually be OK, but unbelievably cheap tickets to the islands will often prove to be scams; see the boxed text, p83 for more scams information. Generally, it's best to buy long-distance bus and train tickets directly at stations instead of travel agents.

Reliable agents include:

Diethelm Travel (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2255 9150; www.diethelm-travel.com; 140/1 Th Witthayu, Kian Gwan Bldg)
STA Travel (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2236 0262; www.statravel.com; 14th fl, Wall Street Tower, 33/70 Th Surawong; Silom)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

As you might expect for a city of seven million, Bangkok has its fair share of con artists, many of whom specifically target foreigners. Most of the scams involve touts who try to lure foreigners into jewellery and tailor shops in exchange for a commission, the cost of which will be tacked on to your bill. For more information, see the boxed text, p83.

Although the city may seem entirely lawless, the police discriminately enforce certain rules on those who can pay the fine. That means you. Don't litter (even cigarette butts), jaywalk (at least in front of the brown-suits) or cut down trees (tempting as it may seem).

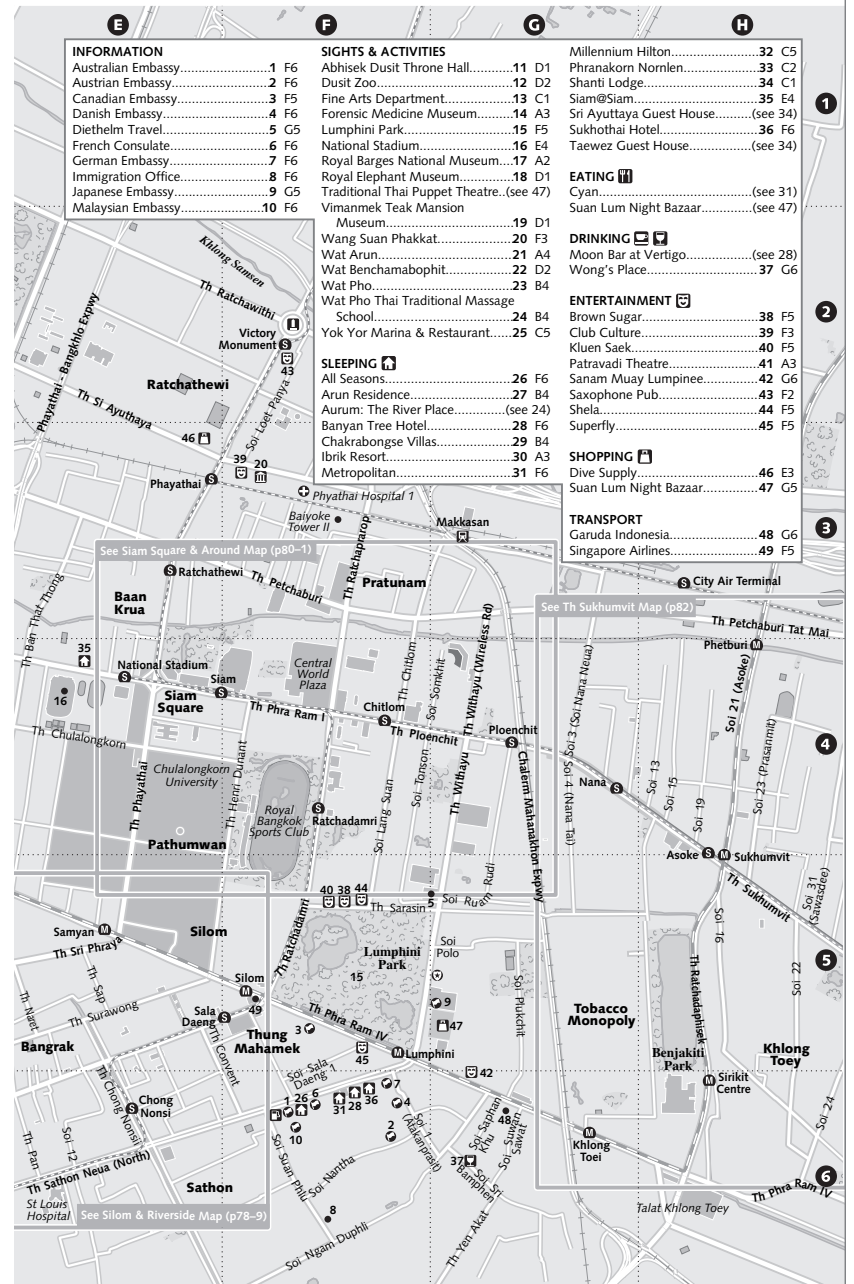
Scams

The most common con artists are the taxi and tük-tük drivers who steer foreigners towards 'gem sales' or promotions at souvenir shops. The offer of a cheap ride with a short stop at a gem shop will always result in a drawn-out attempt to separate you from your money – see p108 for more on buying gems.

Be wary of smartly dressed men who approach you asking where you're from and where you're going. Rather than becoming your new and exotic Thai friend, they will almost certainly be trying to con you. Don't

(Continued on page 83)

CENTRAL BANGKOK



INFORMATION

| | | |
|--------------------|----|----|
| Australian Embassy | 1 | F6 |
| Austrian Embassy | 2 | F6 |
| Canadian Embassy | 3 | F5 |
| Danish Embassy | 4 | F6 |
| Diethelm Travel | 5 | C5 |
| French Consulate | 6 | F6 |
| German Embassy | 7 | F6 |
| Immigration Office | 8 | F6 |
| Japanese Embassy | 9 | C5 |
| Malaysian Embassy | 10 | F6 |

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

| | | |
|---|----------|----|
| Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall | 11 | D1 |
| Dusit Zoo | 12 | D2 |
| Fine Arts Department | 13 | C1 |
| Forensic Medicine Museum | 14 | A3 |
| Lumphini Park | 15 | F5 |
| National Stadium | 16 | E4 |
| Royal Barges National Museum | 17 | A2 |
| Royal Elephant Museum | 18 | D1 |
| Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre | (see 47) | |
| Vimannek Teak Mansion | 19 | D1 |
| Wang Suan Phakkat | 20 | F3 |
| Wat Arun | 21 | A4 |
| Wat Benchamabophit | 22 | D2 |
| Wat Pho | 23 | B4 |
| Wat Pho Thai Traditional Massage School | 24 | B4 |
| Yok Yor Marina & Restaurant | 25 | C5 |

| | | |
|---------------------------|----------|----|
| Millennium Hilton | 32 | C5 |
| Phranakorn Normlen | 33 | C2 |
| Shanti Lodge | 34 | C1 |
| Siam Siam | 35 | E4 |
| Sri Ayutthaya Guest House | (see 34) | |
| Sukhothai Hotel | 36 | F6 |
| Taezew Guest House | (see 34) | |

EATING

| | | |
|---|----------|----|
| Cyan | (see 31) | |
| Suan Lum Night Bazaar | (see 47) | |
| Wang Suan Phakkat | 19 | D1 |
| Wat Arun | 21 | A4 |
| Wat Benchamabophit | 22 | D2 |
| Wat Pho | 23 | B4 |
| Wat Pho Thai Traditional Massage School | 24 | B4 |
| Yok Yor Marina & Restaurant | 25 | C5 |

DRINKING

| | | |
|---------------------|----------|----|
| Moon Bar at Vertigo | (see 28) | |
| Wong's Place | 37 | G6 |

ENTERTAINMENT

| | | |
|---------------------|----|----|
| Brown Sugar | 38 | F5 |
| Club Culture | 39 | F3 |
| Kluen Saek | 40 | F5 |
| Patravadi Theatre | 41 | A3 |
| Sanam Muay Lumpinee | 42 | G6 |
| Saxophone Pub | 43 | F2 |
| Shela | 44 | F5 |
| Superfly | 45 | F5 |

SLEEPING

| | | |
|------------------------|----------|----|
| All Seasons | 26 | F6 |
| Arun Residence | 27 | B4 |
| Aurum: The River Place | (see 24) | |
| Banyan Tree Hotel | 28 | F6 |
| Chakrabongse Villas | 29 | A3 |
| Ibrik Resort | 30 | B4 |
| Metropolitan | 31 | F6 |

SHOPPING

| | | |
|-----------------------|----|----|
| Dive Supply | 46 | E3 |
| Suan Lum Night Bazaar | 47 | G5 |

TRANSPORT

| | | |
|--------------------|----|----|
| Garuda Indonesia | 48 | G6 |
| Singapore Airlines | 49 | F5 |

See Siam Square & Around Map (p80-1)

See Th Sukhumvit Map (p82)

See Silom & Riverside Map (p78-9)

See Th Sukhumvit Map (p82)

See Silom & Riverside Map (p78-9)

See Th Sukhumvit Map (p82)

See Silom & Riverside Map (p78-9)

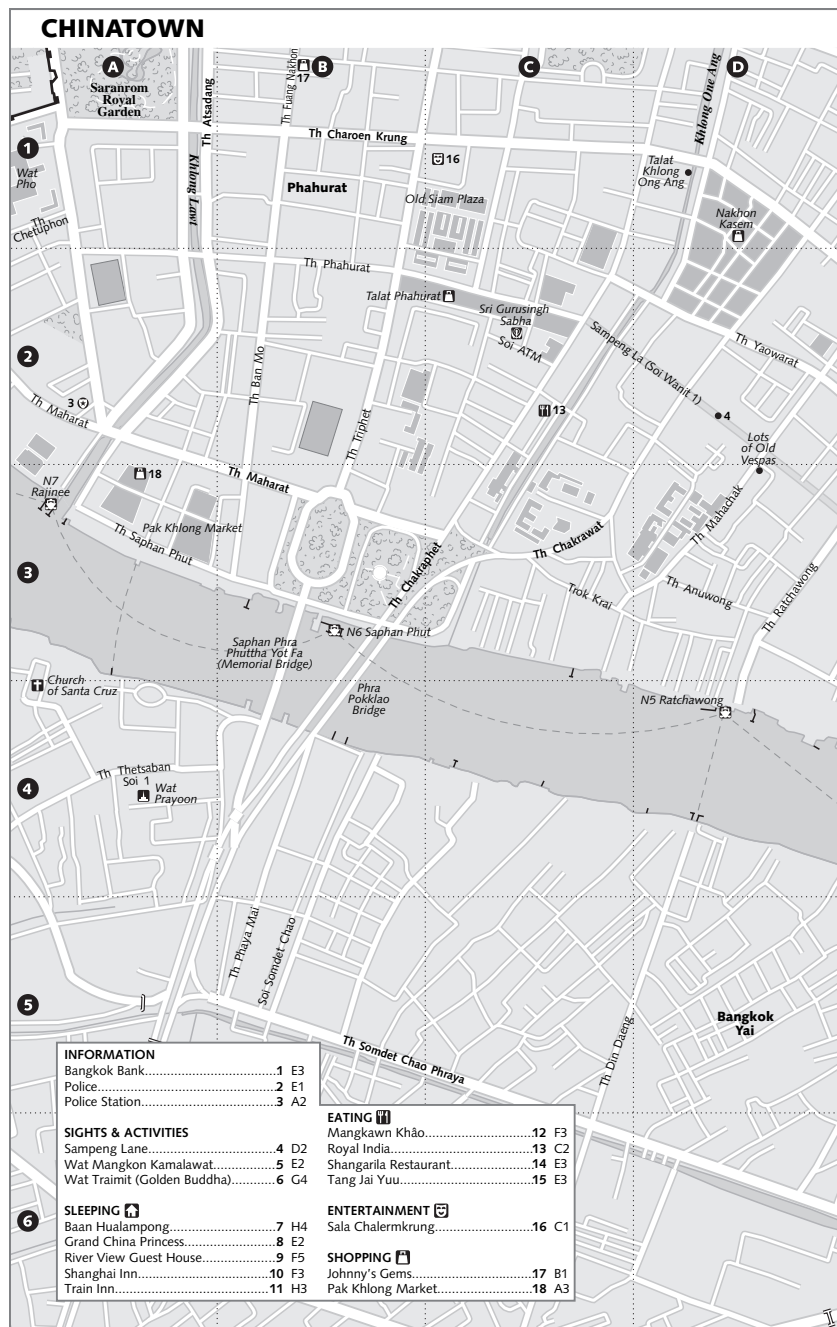
See Th Sukhumvit Map (p82)

See Silom & Riverside Map (p78-9)

See Th Sukhumvit Map (p82)

See Silom & Riverside Map (p78-9)

See Th Sukhumvit Map (p82)



TH SUKHUMVIT

0 300 m
0 0.2 miles

INFORMATION

| | | |
|--|----------|----|
| Asia Books..... | 1 | B3 |
| Bumrungrad International Hospital..... | 2 | A1 |
| Dasa Book Cafe..... | 3 | D5 |
| Indian Consulate (Visa Office)..... | 4 | C3 |
| Indian Embassy..... | 5 | C2 |
| Israeli Embassy..... | 6 | B2 |
| Kinokuniya..... | (see 43) | |
| Swedish Embassy..... | 7 | A2 |
| TAT Main Office..... | 8 | B1 |

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

| | | |
|------------------------------------|----|----|
| Ban Kamhieng..... | 9 | B3 |
| Buathip Thai Massage..... | 10 | A2 |
| Gallery F-Stop..... | 11 | C4 |
| Marble House..... | 12 | B3 |
| World Fellowship of Buddhists..... | 13 | D5 |

SLEEPING

| | | |
|----------------------------------|----|----|
| Atlanta Hotel..... | 14 | A3 |
| Bangkok Boutique Hotel..... | 15 | C1 |
| Bangkok Centre Sukhumvit 25..... | 16 | C3 |
| Citichic..... | 17 | B2 |
| Dream..... | 18 | B2 |
| Eugenia..... | 19 | D3 |
| Grand Millennium Sukhumvit..... | 20 | C3 |
| Le Fenix..... | 21 | A2 |
| Ma Du Zi..... | 22 | B4 |
| S15..... | 23 | B3 |
| Seven..... | 24 | C4 |
| Suk 11..... | 25 | A2 |

DRINKING

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|----|----|
| Black Swan..... | 34 | B3 |
| Bull's Head & Angus Steakhouse..... | 35 | D4 |
| Cheap Charlie's..... | 36 | A2 |
| Opera Riserva Winetheque..... | 37 | D3 |
| Rang Mahal..... | 38 | C4 |

ENTERTAINMENT

| | | |
|--------------------|----------|----|
| Living Room..... | 39 | B3 |
| Mambo Cabaret..... | 40 | C4 |
| SFX Cinema..... | (see 43) | |

EATING

| | | |
|---------------------|----------|----|
| Bed Supperclub..... | 26 | B2 |
| Crêpes & Co..... | 27 | B3 |
| Imoya..... | 28 | D5 |
| Je Ngor..... | 29 | C5 |
| Komala's..... | 30 | C4 |
| La Piola..... | 31 | B2 |
| Little Arabia..... | 32 | A2 |
| Park Food Hall..... | (see 43) | |
| Thonglee..... | 33 | C4 |

SHOPPING

| | | |
|-------------------------------|----|----|
| Dive Indeed..... | 41 | C3 |
| Dive Master..... | 42 | C3 |
| Emporium Shopping Centre..... | 43 | D4 |
| Larry's Dive Center..... | 44 | C4 |
| Planet Scuba..... | 45 | D4 |
| Rasi Sayam..... | 46 | D3 |

TRANSPORT

| | | |
|-------------------------|----------|----|
| Air India..... | (see 7) | |
| Lao Airlines..... | (see 47) | |
| Lufthansa Airlines..... | 47 | C2 |
| PB Air..... | 48 | D4 |

(Continued from page 69)

automatically assume that female Thais are trustworthy – Bangkok has plenty of con women! Popular hunting grounds for scammers include around the Erawan Shrine, Th Khao San, the Grand Palace and Wat Pho.

SIGHTS

Thailand's islands and beaches are not particularly well-stocked with traditional Thai 'sights', so it's well worth taking in a few while you're in Bangkok. Fortunately, the capital is home to some of the most impressive wát (temples) and palaces in the country. Many are conveniently concentrated on Ko Ratanakosin, Thonburi and nearby Dusit, all of which abut the Banglamphu hotel district.

Ko Ratanakosin & Thonburi

These two districts are in the old part of Bangkok and are filled with historic wát, atmospheric shophouses and fine views of the river.

WAT PHRA KAEW & GRAND PALACE

วัดพระแก้ว/พระมหาราชวัง
Thailand's most famous attractions are **Wat Phra Kaew** (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) and the **Grand Palace** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2222 6889; Th Na Phra Lan; admission to both & Dusit Park 250B; 🕒 8.30am-

3.30pm), occupying the same expansive walled compound south of Sanam Luang. The temple buildings are extravagant, with golden *chedi* (Thai-style stupas), ornate statues of mythical beings and incredible amounts of gold inlay. Only the exterior façades of the Grand Palace structures are open to the public.

Housed in the main *bôht* (chapel), the so-called Emerald Buddha (Phra Kaew) – actually made of nephrite jade – dates back to at least the 15th century. The image is only 66cm high but has repeatedly been a high-profile spoil of war. It spent more than 200 years in Laos before it was won back in 1778 and has been in Bangkok ever since. The image has three sets of robes, which are ceremonially changed by the King (or the crown prince) to mark the changing seasons.

Guides can be hired at the ticket kiosk; ignore anyone outside. Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace are best reached either by a short walk south from Banglamphu, via Sanam Luang, or by Chao Phraya express boat to Tha Chang. From the Siam Sq area (in front of MBK, Th Phra Ram I) take bus 47.

WAT PHO

วัดโพธิ์
Bangkok's largest and oldest temple, **Wat Pho** (Wat Phra Chetuphon; Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2622 3533; www.watpho.com; Th Sanam Chai; Th Tharawat; admission 50B;

JUST SAY NO: BANGKOK SCAMS

If your travel funds are ample, it might seem like a bother to resist the various scams that siphon off negligible sums. But diligence to fair and honest business benefits the travellers who follow in your footsteps. As a gift to future visitors, stop the scam cycle by just saying 'no'. For details of gem scams, see p390.

- **Closed today** – Ignore any 'friendly' local who tells you that an attraction is closed for a Buddhist holiday or for cleaning. These are set-ups for trips to a bogus gem sale.
- **Túk-túk rides for 10B** – Say goodbye to your day's itinerary if you climb aboard this ubiquitous scam. These alleged 'tours' bypass all the sights and instead cruise to all the fly-by-night gem and tailor shops that pay commissions.
- **Flat-fare taxi ride** – Flatly refuse any driver who quotes a flat fare (usually between 100B and 150B for in-town destinations), which will usually be three times more expensive than the very, very reasonable meter rate. Walking beyond the tourist area will usually help in finding an honest driver. If the driver has 'forgotten' to put the meter on, just say 'meter, *kráp/ká*'.
- **Tourist buses to the south** – On the long journey south, well-organised and connected thieves have hours to comb through your bags, breaking into (and later re-sealing) locked bags, searching through hiding places and stealing credit cards, electronics and even toiletries. One traveller reported that his stolen credit card was used to pay for the trip's petrol. How generous. This scam has been running for years but is easy to avoid simply by carrying valuables with you on the bus.

TEMPLE DRESS RULES

Temples in Bangkok have dress codes and those with royal credentials enforce them with some gusto. Especially at Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace and in Dusit Park, you won't be allowed to enter unless you're well covered. Shorts, sleeveless shirts or spaghetti strap tops, capri pants – basically anything that reveals more than your arms (not shoulders) and head – are not allowed. This applies to men and women. If you're flashing too much skin expect to be shown into a dressing room and issued with a sarong before being allowed in. For walking in the courtyard areas you are supposed to wear shoes with closed heels and toes. Sandals and flip-flops are not permitted. Also remember to take your shoes off whenever you enter a temple building and be sure point your feet away from sacred Buddha images.

(☎ 8am-5pm) was founded in the 16th century and is quieter, less touristy and thus more enjoyable than Wat Phra Kaew. The most famous sight at Wat Pho is the **Reclining Buddha**. Thailand's largest, this 46m-long and 15m-high golden figure includes 3m-high feet bearing fantastic mother-of-pearl inlays.

The surrounding compound has a number of temples with huge golden Buddha images and dozens of colourful mosaic *chedi* (brick stupa). The interior of the main chapel, **Phra Uposatha**, is just as impressive as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Towering statues of Chinese mythical heroes guard the doorways within the compound, including figures in European dress said to represent Marco Polo.

Wat Pho is also the national headquarters for the teaching and preservation of traditional Thai medicine, particularly Thai massage. For more information, see p87. The nearest Chao Phraya Express pier is Tha Tien.

NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติ

The **National Museum** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2224 1402; www.thailandmuseum.com; Th Na Phra That; admission 50B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) is one of the largest in Southeast Asia and has a vast collection of Thai antiquities and ceremonial objects. Don't miss the incredible ornate golden chariots used in the funeral parades of royal family members. The museum runs highly recommended free tours in English and French on Wednesday and Thursday, Japanese on Wednesday and German on Thursday; all start from the ticket pavilion at 9.30am.

WAT ARUN

วัดอรุณฯ

This striking **wát** (Temple of Dawn; Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2891 1149; www.watarun.org; Th Arun Amarin; admission 20B; ☎ 8am-6pm) consists of four stupas around an

elongated Khmer *Brahm* (tower), all covered with broken Chinese ceramics and seashells. Visit early in the morning or late in the afternoon to avoid the crowds. Cross-river ferries run over to Wat Arun every few minutes (3.50B per person) from Tha Tien (N8) to Tha Thai Wang.

ROYAL BARGES NATIONAL MUSEUM

เรือพระที่นั่ง

Over in Thonburi, on the west side of the Chao Phraya River, this interesting **museum** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2424 0004; Khlong Bangkok Noi; admission 30B, still/video camera fee 100/200B; ☎ 9am-5pm) is the dry dock for Thai royal barges, which are still used by the royal family for important ceremonies of state. The ornately decorated *Suphannahong*, or 'Golden Swan', is the king's personal barge. At 45m long and made from a single piece of timber, it is the largest dugout in the world. To get here, take the tourist boat from Tha Phra Athit (Banglamphu, N13), which stops at the pier for the museum.

Banglamphu & Dusit

The old residential neighbourhood of Banglamphu that sits just north of the royal Ko Ratanakosin district has a more local feel in some parts, and an almost unfeasibly cosmopolitan atmosphere around the Th Khao San area of guesthouses, hotels, restaurants and bars. If your trip to Thailand is more about partying than sightseeing, then this is the place for you. Further north, Dusit is the current royal district and has several Victorian-era attractions.

WAT SAKET & GOLDEN MOUNT

วัดสระเกศ

The man-made **Golden Mount** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2223 4561; off Th Boriphat; admission to summit 10B; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm) and adjoining **Wat Saket** offer fine views

over the old city. If you're a sunset buff, a walk up here before it closes will make you fall in love with Bangkok. Wat Saket is walkable from Banglamphu along Th Ratchadamnoen Klang. From eastern parts of the city, take the *klong* (often spelt as *khlong*; canal) boat to its western terminus at Tha Saphan Phan Fah.

WAT RATCHANATDA

วัดราชนาคดา

A mix of every imaginable temple style, **Wat Ratchanatda** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2224 8807; 2 Th Mahachai; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm) is most stunning at night when the 37 spires of the all metal Loha Prasat (Metal Palace) are lit up like a medieval birthday cake; at night, though, you'll have to look from outside. This temple is near Wat Saket and worth a detour for its quiet amulet market with more Hindu religious paraphernalia than the amulet market at Wat Mahathat.

WAT SUTHAT

วัดสุทัศน

The truly remarkable Buddha image, colourful floor-to-ceiling murals and relative tranquility make **Wat Suthat** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2224 9845; Th Bamrung Meuang; admission 20B; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) arguably the most attractive of Bangkok's Buddhist wats. The main attraction is Thailand's largest *wi-hahn*, or main chapel, housing the 8m-high Phra Si Sakayamuni, Thailand's largest surviving Sukhothai-period bronze. Opposite the north entrance is **Sao Ching-Cha**, the Giant Swing, a tall, red swing formerly used in a death-defying (or sometimes not) Brahmin religious ritual. Wat Suthat is an easy walk from Banglamphu, or take the *klong* boat to Tha Saphan Phan Fah and walk from there.

THANŌN KHAO SAN

Almost 30 years after locals on the Khao San Rd, as it's known, first started converting their homes into guesthouses for smelly backpackers – known jokingly in Thai as *faràng kée ngók* ('stingy foreigners') – Banglamphu has evolved into a clearing house of travellers unlike anywhere else on earth. At any time of day or night, Th Khao San is mobbed by travellers from across the globe, mingling with beggars, hawkers, transvestites and street performers, and surrounded by stallholders offering hair-braiding, body-piercing, pirated CDs, hippy jewellery, handicrafts, fake brand-name clothes, Thai fast food, cold beers and croaking wooden frogs, among other things. Think of it as a backpacker cabaret in which you are both a spectator and a participant.

Critics claim Th Khao San cocoons travellers from the real Thailand. It's true that many people leave Bangkok having seen just this short stretch of road, but it's not really fair. Today, Banglamphu has become a major entertainment district for young Bangkokians, who add the Thai spice long missing from this dish.

DUSIT PARK

สวนดุสิต

Dusit Park (Map pp72-3) is a former palace estate of King Chulalongkorn, who took great inspiration from his turn-of-the-century tour of Europe. On the grounds, **Vimanmek Teak Mansion Museum** (Phra Thii Nang Wimanmek; ☎ 0 2628 6300-9; Th Ratchawithi; admission 100B or free with Grand Palace ticket; ☎ 9.30am-4pm) is said to be the world's largest golden teak building and is full of royal treasures. It was reportedly built without a single nail, held together by tiny wooden pegs. Compulsory tours (in English) leave every half-hour between 9.30am and 3pm and last about an hour. Free performances of Thai classical dances are staged in a pavilion on the side of the mansion at 10am and 2pm.

Nearby is the **Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall** (Phra Thii Nang Aphisek Dusit), a smaller but even more ornate structure with a strong Moorish influence. The façade is amazing, and the museum behind it contains regional handicrafts. Several other buildings have royal treasures on display and the **Royal Elephant Museum**, near the Th U Thong Nai gate, showcases two large stables that once housed three white elephants.

This is royal property so you must dress appropriately; see the boxed text, opposite. To get here from Banglamphu, take bus 70 from Th Ratchadamnoen Klang.

WAT BENCHAMABOPHIT

วัดเบญจมบพิตร

Built of shimmering white marble from Carrara in Italy, this renowned **wát** (Marble Temple; Map pp72-3; cnr Th Sri Ayuthaya & Th Phra Ram V; admission 20B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) is grand if not as intimate as some of Bangkok's older wats. The courtyard behind the *bòht* has 53 Buddha

FREAKY BANGKOK

Bangkok can be a weird and wonderful place without even trying. But if you need to go beyond the ordinary strangeness, here is a list of its more unusual sights (see p85 for the weirdness of Th Khao San).

The **amulet market** (Map pp74-5; Th Phra Chan) is the commercial side of Thai Buddhism, part animistic and part antiquities. The most common amulets are small ceramic plaques, produced by important Buddhist monasteries, but there are also tiny Buddha images, phallic symbols, bone fragments and other potent objects. If you fancy buying an amulet, several stalls can fit it into a metal pendant case for about 30B.

Perhaps Bangkok's strangest religious site is the **Lingam shrine** (Saen Jao Mae Thap Thim; Map pp80-1; Soi Somkhit, Th Withayu) hidden away behind the Nai Lert Park Hotel. Scattered around a spirit house and a 3m-high phallus statue are hundreds of wooden and stone representations of the male organ. Women pray here when they hope to become pregnant (hold on to your daughters).

For a creepy exploration of human mortality, the **Forensic Medicine Museum** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2419 7000; 2nd fl, Forensic Medicine Bldg, Siriraj Hospital; admission 40B; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) features evidence from many of Bangkok's most heinous murder cases, including the preserved body of serial child-killer and cannibal Si Ouey. To get here, take the cross-river ferry from Tha Chang (N9) or Tha Phra Chan to Tha Wang Lang (Siriraj, N10).

images representing every mudra (gesture) and style from Thai history, making this the ideal place to compare Buddhist iconography. The surrounding grounds are a pleasant place for a wander.

Chinatown

Bangkok's Chinatown (Map pp76-7) is centred on bustling Th Yaowarat, which is lined with gold shops, herbalists and banquet restaurants, all with loud neon signs in Chinese characters. The whole district is great for aimless wandering through crowded markets, charismatic old soi lined with shop-houses and some of the best street food in the city. The old markets along **Sampeng Lane** (Soi Wanit; between Th Ratchawong and Th Chakwarat) and **Trok Itsaranuphap** are the most interesting and congested of all – mornings in Trok Itsaranuphap are like a mosh pit. See the walking tour (p88) for directions. Elsewhere there are dozens of little wát, some of them distinctively Chinese in style, dotted around the backstreets.

WAT TRAIMIT

วัดไตรมิตร

Right in the heart of Chinatown, between Th Traimit and Th Yaowarat, **Wat Traimit** (Temple of the Golden Buddha; Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2225 9775; Th Mitthaphap (aka Th Traimit); admission 20B; ☎ 8am-5pm) houses an incredible Buddha image made from 5.5 tonnes of solid gold (that's a hefty US\$190 million's worth at early 2008 prices).

The Sukhothai-era image was covered in plaster back in the Ayutthaya period to protect it from Burmese marauders, and its full worth was discovered only in 1955, when the image was accidentally dropped from a crane. Avoid the tour groups by visiting early in the morning or late in the afternoon. It's an easy walk from Hualamphong Metro station.

New Bangkok

In the new part of the city, the religious monuments and museums get crowded out by skyscraping offices and hotels and chic shopping malls the size of small suburbs. There are, however, a few sights that are made more interesting by their juxtaposition amid shiny modern Bangkok.

SRI MAHARIAMMAN

วัดพระศรีมหาอุมาเทวี

This colourful Hindu **temple** (Map pp78-9; Th Silom; ☎ 6am-8pm) is an important place of worship for Bangkok's Indian community as well as for many Thai Buddhists. The temple was built in 1879, and the ornate *gopura* (South Indian tower) is covered in figures from the Mahabharata. You can enter the compound (without your shoes), but photography is prohibited.

ERAWAN SHRINE

ศาลาพระพรหม

In spite of all the temples, modern Bangkok might not seem to be a particularly spiritual

place, but there are all sorts of interesting shrines hidden away among the skyscrapers. Most famous is this **shrine** (Saen Phra Phrom; Map pp80-1; cr Th Phoenchit & Th Ratchadamri; ☎ 6am-10.30pm), next to the Erawan Grand Hyatt. When the Erawan Hotel was first built in the 1950s a series of construction disasters stopped soon after this shrine to the Hindu god Brahma was erected. The hotel was a huge success and ever since people have come here to pray for luck and fortune. For an idea of just how revered the Erawan shrine is, when a mentally disturbed man attacked it in 2006, bystanders promptly beat him to death. You can see shrine dancers performing traditional *lá-kon gáa bon* dances here.

JIM THOMPSON'S HOUSE

บ้านจิมทอมป์สัน

This complex of traditional **teak buildings** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2216 7368; www.jimthompsonhouse.org; 6 Soi Kasem San 2, Th Phra Ram I; adult/child 100/50B; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) is the legacy of the American spy-cum-silk-mogul Jim Thompson. The traditional wooden houses were collected from as far away as northern Thailand and as near as the Muslim village of Baan Krua, just across the *klong* (where silk is still woven today), and reassembled as a private mansion on the edge of Khlong Saen Saep. Guided tours of the mansion with English-, French- and Japanese-speaking guides leave every 20 minutes. Photography is prohibited inside the mansion. Admission proceeds go to charities supported by the James Thompson Foundation. The mansion is a short walk from the National Stadium

Skytrain stop and an even shorter walk from the Hua Chang *klong* boat pier.

LUMPHINI PARK

สวนลุมพินี

Named after Buddha's birthplace in Nepal, Bangkok's largest and most popular public **park** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 5am-8pm) is crisscrossed by walking trails and has tranquil lawns, wooded glades and a large artificial lake with pedalos for hire. It's a great place to watch Bangkokians unwind; practising t'ai chi in the early morning, running, working out, taking part in outdoor aerobics classes or just unleashing their kids on the grass. From mid-February to April, Lumphini is a favourite spot for kite fighting. The main entrance to the park is on Th Phra Ram IV, but there are also entrances on Th Sarasin, Th Withayu and Th Ratchadamri. It's well connected by Metro at Lumphini and Silom and by Skytrain stations Sala Daeng and Ratchadamri.

ACTIVITIES

Massage

Bangkokians regard traditional massage as a vital part of preventative health care and they frequent massage parlours more regularly than gyms. You'll have no trouble finding a massage shop (rather, they'll find you), but after a few visits to the backpacker hangars, you may want a more focused, professional experience. A good sign is a small shop off the main path. Note that for men asking for an 'oil massage' can sometimes lead to techniques that aren't on the curriculum at

EXHIBIT ONE

In recent years, Bangkok has seen an explosion in the number of galleries, and the number of people interested in them, meaning you should be able to catch an interesting exhibition at any time. To find out what's on, look for **BAM!** (Bangkok Art Map) from the *Bangkok 101* people, and *Thailand Art & Design Guide* (www.thailandartanddesignguide.com), or check the lifestyle magazines for exhibition opening nights.

Galleries worth looking out for include the **Queen's Gallery** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2281 5360; 101 Th Ratchadamnoen Klang; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Thu-Tue), for conservative contemporary fare; **100 Tonson Gallery** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2684 1527; www.100tonsongallery.com; 100 Soi Tonson, off Th Phoenchit; ☎ 11am-7pm Thu-Sun), regarded as the city's top commercial gallery; **H Gallery** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 7556; www.hgallerybkk.com; 201 Soi 12, Th Sathon, Silom; ☎ noon-6pm Thu-Sat), a private gallery specialising in young Asian artists; and **Gallery F-stop** (Map p82; ☎ 0 2663 7421; www.galleryfstop.com; Tamarind Café, 27 Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; ☎ 3pm-midnight Mon-Fri, 10am-midnight Sat & Sun), which mixes photographic and painted exhibitions.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

There are some lovely, easily reached attractions within the city limits where you'll likely have the whole place to yourself. If you loved Jim Thompson's house, there are at least five other museums in old teak houses, including **Ban Kamthieng** (Map p82; ☎ 0 2661 6470; 131 Soi Asoke; admission 100B; 🕒 9am-5pm) and **Wang Suan Phakkat** (Lettuce Farm Palace; Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2245 4934; Th Sri Ayuthaya; admission 100B; 🕒 9am-4pm). Both have collections of Thai artworks and handicrafts and you rarely see a soul, much less a tour bus full of camera slingers.

Wat Pho. If you're not looking for a 'happy ending', avoid parlours where the masseuses are young and wearing short skirts.

Depending on the neighbourhood, prices for massages tend to stay fixed: about 200B to 300B for a foot massage and 350B to 500B for a full-body massage. Recommended massages include:

Buathip Thai Massage (Map p82; ☎ 0 2251 2627; 4/13 Soi 5, Th Sukhumvit; 🕒 10am-midnight) Not in the most wholesome part of Bangkok, on a sub-soi behind the Amari Boulevard Hotel, but this crew are the real thing.

Marble House (Map p82; ☎ 0 2651 0905, 3rd fl, Ruamchit Plaza, 199 Th Sukhumvit at Soi 15; 🕒 10am-midnight) No 'happy endings' from these masseurs, either.

Skills Development Centre for the Blind (soon pá-tá-nah sà-màt-tà-páhp kon dah bòrt; Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2583 7327; Pak Kret) A government programme that trains the blind in Thai massage. Getting there is an adventure; take bus 33 from Sanam Luang to Pak Kret and hire a motorcycle taxi from there.

Wat Pho Thai Massage School (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2221 3686; Soi Penphat, Th Sanamchai; 🕒 8am-5pm) Thailand's primary massage school; open-air pavilions are also available in the southeast corner of the temple complex.

WALKING TOUR

Despite the traffic, the best way to discover much of Bangkok is by foot. And in some cases, such as the claustrophobic alleys of chaotic commerce in Chinatown, it's the only way. We recommend starting this tour after lunch so you can finish with a sunset drink. Remember that the river ferries stop about 7pm.

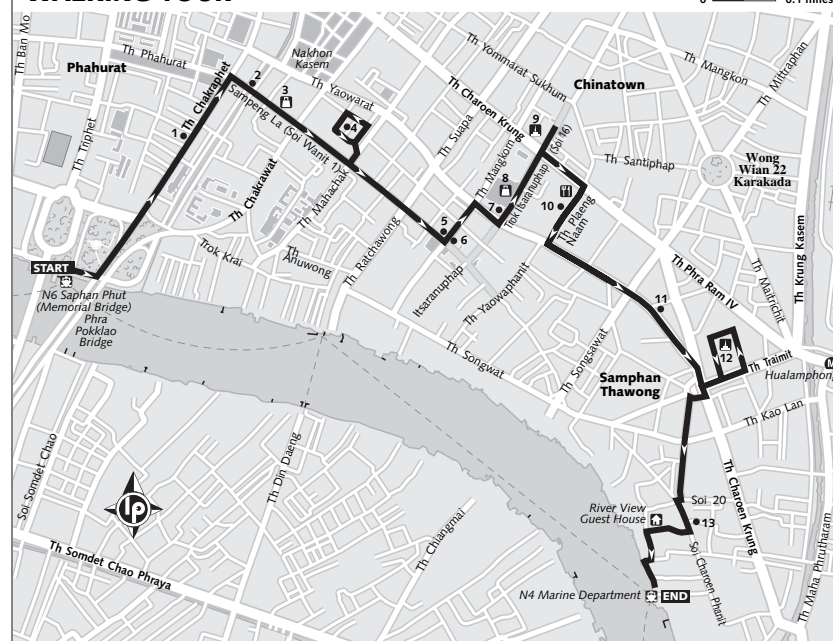
Starting from the river ferry at Tha Saphan Phut (Memorial Bridge Pier), walk north along Th Chakraphet and into **Phahurat (1)**, aka Little India. Turn right into narrow **Trok Huae Med (2)**, a largely-Indian market that extends east into **Sampeng Lane (3)**, signposted as Soi Wanit 1, the original Chinatown market that has been trading since 1782. Today it deals in useful stuff such as bulk Hello Kitty pens or tonnes of stuffed animals.

Turn left on Th Mahachak, walk 30m and turn left again through a covered passage to rows of photogenic, stuccoed yellow **Chinese shophouses (4)**; a peaceful intermission in the market tour. Return to Sampeng Lane and avoid the trolleys as far east as Th Mangkon, where you'll see two of Bangkok's oldest commercial buildings, the **Bangkok Bank (5)** and **Tang To Kang (6)** gold shop, both more than 100 years old.

Turn left (north) on Th Mangkun and walk up to manic Th Yaowarat, Chinatown's main drag. Turn right past the street's famous gold shops and after about 100m cross Th Yaowarat into super-crowded **Trok Itsaranuphap (7)**; you'll know it by the people shuffling into the alley one at a time. Not far along the alley is **Talat Leng-Buai-la (8)**, which was once the city's central vegetable market but today sells mainly Chinese ingredients such as fresh cashews, lotus seeds, and shiitake mushrooms. You will, eventually, pop out the far end of Trok Itsaranuphap onto Th Charoen Krung. Cross over a road and on Soi Charoen Krung 21 is **Wat Mangkon Kamalawat (9)**, one of Chinatown's largest and liveliest temples.

Head back to Th Charoen Krung, turn left (east) and then right into **Th Plaeng Naam (10)**. This atmospheric street of shophouses and street food makes a good pit stop, particularly at the two streetside kitchens at the north end. Turn left onto **Th Yaowarat (11)** and after passing a couple of old Art Deco buildings turn left at the Odeon Circle, with its distinctive Chinese gate, onto Th Mitthaphap (aka Th Traimit) for the **Wat Traimit and the Golden Buddha (12, p86)**. Head back to Odeon Circle, cross and walk past the machine shops of Soi Yaowarat 1 onto Soi Charoen Phanit and the atmospheric **Talat Noi (13)** neighbourhood. You deserve a drink now, so follow the signs to the River View Guest House (p94), where the 8th-floor restaurant-bar

WALKING TOUR



WALK FACTS

Start Tha Saphan Phut (Memorial Bridge, river ferry N6)
End Tha Marine Department (river ferry, N4) or Hualamphong Metro
Distance 4km
Duration Three hours
Fuel Stop Streetside kitchens on Th Plaeng Naam

has cheap beer and amazing sunset views. Take either the ferry or the Metro to get your lodgings.

COURSES

There are some interesting courses available if you don't mind spending a little longer in the capital.

Cooking

Several luxury hotels offer expensive but memorable gourmet Thai cooking courses. Other recommended courses include:

Blue Elephant Thai Cooking School (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2673 9353; www.blueelephant.com; 233 Th Sathon Tai; lessons 🕒 8.45am-12.30pm, 1.15-5pm Mon-Sat; 3276B) Bangkok's most renowned Thai cooking school offers two lessons daily. The morning class squeezes in a visit to a local market, while the afternoon session includes a detailed introduction to Thai ingredients.

May Kaidee's Vegetarian Thai Cooking School (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2281 7699; www.maykaidee.com; 33 Th Samsen, Banglamphu; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-5pm; 1200B) A truly meat-free cooking experience; learn veggie versions of 10 Thai classics.

Silom Thai Cooking School (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 84726 5669; www.bangkokthaicooking.com; 68 Soi 13, Th Silom; lessons 🕒 9.30am-1pm; 1000B) With a market trip and instruction in six dishes, this is the best bang for your baht.

Language

The most intensive language course in Bangkok is held at **AUA Language Center** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2252 8170; www.authai.com; 179 Th Ratchadamri; per hr 102B), which offers rolling classes from 7am to 8pm Monday to Friday; go whenever you like.

Meditation & Massage

Most Buddhist study centres in Bangkok specialise in *vipassana* (insight) meditation. **Dharma Thai** (www.dhammadhai.org) has a rundown on several prominent wat and meditation centres, or speak to the **World Fellowship of Buddhists** (WFB; Map p82; ☎ 0 2661 1284; www.wfb-hq.org; 616 Benjasiri Park, Soi Medhiviet, Soi 24, Th Sukhumvit).

International Buddhist Meditation Center (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2623 6326; www.mcu.ac.th/IBMC/; Vipassana Section Room 106, Mahachula Bldg, Wat Mahathat, Th Pra Chan) Holds twice-monthly lectures on Buddhist topics in English, and meditation classes.

Wat Pho Thai Traditional Massage School (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2221 3686; www.watpomassage.com; Soi Phenphat 1, Th Maharat) By far the best place to learn traditional massage. Courses are held at school headquarters across from Wat Pho, just off Th Maharat. A 30-hour course costs 8500B.

Moo-ay Tai (Muay Thai)

Many foreigners come to Thailand to study *moo-ay tai* (or *muay thai*; Thai boxing). Training regimens can be extremely strict. See www.muaythai.com for more information.

Fairtex Muay Thai Camp (☎ 0 2755 3329; www.muaythairttx.com; 99/8 Soi Boonthamansorn, Th Theparak, Samut Prakan) Training from 500B a session to 7700B-a-week residence. Samut Prakan is about 25km southeast of central Bangkok.

Sor Vorpin (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 3551; www.thaiboxings.com; 13 Trok Kasap, Th Chakkaphong) Around the corner from Th Khao San, it offers training for foreigners. More serious training is held at a second facility outside the city. Half-day/weekly/monthly training costs 500/2500/9000B.

BANGKOK FOR CHILDREN

Bangkok has loads to offer children. Most malls have diverse and appealing attractions for kids of various ages: shopping for the tweens and rides for preschoolers. The website www.bambiwib.org is a useful resource for parents.

Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute (Snake Farm)

สถานเสาวภา

Lovers of things that slither will be fascinated by this working **snake farm** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2252 0161; 1871 Th Phra Ram IV, Lumpini; adult/child 200/50B; ☎: 9.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm Sat & Sun), which provides antivenin for Thai hospitals. You can see deadly snakes being milked for their venom at 11am daily, or

have one draped around your neck Monday to Friday at 2.30pm.

Dusit Zoo

สวนสัตว์ดุสิต(เขาดิน)

This above-average **zoo** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 2281 9027; www.zoothailand.org; Th Ratchawithi; adult/child 100/50B; ☎: 8am-6pm) has loads of indigenous species, including banteng, gaur, tigers, serow and rhinoceros. The zoo is between Chitralada Palace and the National Assembly Hall.

Children's Discovery Museum

พิพิธภัณฑ์เด็ก

Bangkok's leading children's **museum** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2618 6509; www.bkkchildrenmuseum.com; Queen Sirikit Park, Th Kamphaeng Phet 4; adult/child 70/50B; ☎: 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) is opposite the sprawling Chatuchak Weekend Market. The displays are fully interactive, and both kids and adults will enjoy pressing the buttons and making giant bubbles with the bubble machine. Follow the signs from the Mo Chit Skytrain station.

Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre

โรงละครโขนหุ่ยศรี

The wonderful **Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre** (Joe Louis Theatre; Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2252 9683; www.thaipuppet.com/en/; Suan Lum Night Bazaar; adult/child 7-15/child under 7 900/300B/free; ☎: shows 8pm) is great fun for adults and kids and provides a rare chance to see the ancient Thai art of puppetry. The future of the Suan Lum Night Bazaar is in doubt, so call ahead or check online that it hasn't moved.

Siam Ocean World

สยามโอเชียนเวิร์ล

Southeast Asia's largest oceanarium, **Siam Ocean World** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 2687 2000; www.siamoceanworld.com; basement, Siam Paragon, Th Rama 1; adult/child 750/600B; ☎: 9am-10pm, last entry 9pm) has hundreds of species of fish, crustaceans and even penguins. The main tank is the highlight, with an acrylic tunnel allowing you to walk beneath sharks and rays. Time your trip to coincide with the shark and penguin feedings; usually at 12.30pm and 1pm, and 4pm and 4.30pm.

TOURS

Cruises

Chao Phraya dinner cruises are hugely popular, with boats ranging from century-old rice barges to neon-clad cruisers taking in the brightly lit riverside sights, passing Wat

Arun, the Grand Palace and Saphan Phra Ram IX. Larger vessels often have dance floors and live bands, which might be less romantic than you hoped. Day trips to Ayuthaya are also possible. Book in advance. Options include: **Loy Nava** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2437 4932; www.loynava.com; set menu 1618B; ☎: 6-8pm & 8-10pm) Travels from River City shopping centre (Map pp78-9) aboard a converted rice barge.

Manohra Cruises (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2477 0770; www.manohracruises.com) These restored wooden rice barges are the grandest of all. Departing the Marriott Resort & Spa, take a hotel boat from Tha Sathon; there is a sunset cruise (900B, ☎: 6-7pm) that includes one cocktail, and a dinner cruise (2342B, ☎: 7.30pm-10pm). The Thai food is well above average.

Wan Fah (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2222 8679; www.wanfah.com; dinner cruise 1200B; ☎: 7-9pm) Reasonably priced cruises on a fine converted Chinese rice barge leaving from River City.

Yok Yor Restaurant (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2439 3477; www.yokyor.co.th; dinner 300-320B plus 120B surcharge; ☎: 8-10pm) This famous old restaurant beside the Hilton in Thonburi also runs a dinner cruise for the average folks, mainly Thais celebrating birthdays.

Other Tours

Every travel agent and most hotels can arrange guided tours of important sites.

Long-tail boats can be chartered for tours of the Thonburi *klong*, particularly Khlong Bangkok Yai and Khlong Bangkok Noi. Shop around for a tour that doesn't include Wat Arun and the Royal Barge Museum, both of which can be more easily (and, let's be honest, more cheaply) visited independently.

Tha Chang pier (Map pp74-5), close to Thammasat University, is the best place to go and hire a boat. They can also be booked at Tha Saphan Phut (Map pp76-7), Tha Oriental (Map pp78-9) and Tha Si Phraya (Map pp78-9); rental costs from about 400B to 800B an hour (it costs more the closer you are to an expensive hotel).

If you want a custom tour with an expert guide, and money is no objective, **Bangkok Private Tours** (www.bangkokprivatetours.com) is earning a reputation for its food tours, among others.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

As well as the main countrywide festivals (see p19), Bangkok has a few celebrations of its own.

Kite Festival (March) Kite fights at Bangkok's public parks and Sanam Luang.

Royal Ploughing Ceremony (May) Ceremonial ploughing by the king (or more recently the crown prince) at Sanam Luang to forecast the coming rice harvest.

Bangkok International Film Festival (July, but dates vary; www.bangkokfilm.org) In cinemas across town.

Thailand International Swan-Boat Races (September) During the middle of the month on Chao Phraya River, near Saphan Rama IX.

Vegetarian Festival (September/October) Centred on Soi 20, Th Charoen Krung, Chinatown becomes an orgy of veg food.

Fat Festival (November) Popular alternative radio station hosts up-and-coming Thai bands at this annual music event.

King's Birthday (5 December) Illuminations and parades around the Grand Palace, Banglamphu.

Bangkok Jazz Festival (December; www.bangkokjazzfestival.com) Features international and Thai performers.

SLEEPING

Bangkok boasts more than 400 hotels and guesthouses, ranging from cheap backpacker joints to some of the most luxurious lodgings on earth. Hotels of a type tend to congregate in certain neighbourhoods.

In 'old Bangkok', Banglamphu and the famous (or should that be infamous?) Th Khao San are a virtual tractor beam for backpackers. This area is very convenient for the river and the monuments and museums of old Bangkok. A long walk north is Thewet, which is refreshingly laid-back and handy for the palaces in Dusit. Further south, Chinatown is a lively but often-overlooked part of Bangkok that has a couple of decent options, while nearby Hualamphong has some good budget choices.

In 'new Bangkok', the riverside boasts super-luxurious properties with spectacular views, while Th Silom and more recently Th Sathon are home to midrange and some funky top-end places. The area around Siam Sq also has several upmarket hotels, plus a handful of budget options. Th Sukhumvit, where you'll find sleaze and class in plentiful supply depending on which soi you're in, is home to most of the new boutique places plus loads of tourist-class midrangers. See p380 for more on accommodation in Thailand.

Ko Ratanakosin & Thonburi

Bangkok's oldest districts make an ideal base for exploring the city's major historic sights. It's best to book well ahead.

Arun Residence (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2221 9158; www.arunresidence.com; 396 Th Maharat; Ko Ratanakosin; d 3100-5000B; ☎ ☎) Near Wat Pho, this romantic

BANGKOK ROOMS: WHAT YOUR MONEY WILL BUY

Bangkok suffers from capital-city syndrome and room rates can be considerably higher than elsewhere in Thailand. We have divided rooms into the following three categories:

- Budget:** under 1000B
Midrange: 1000B-4500B
Top-end: over 4500B

These are the walk-in rates we were quoted, but it's well worth noting that big, sometimes huge, discounts can be found by booking online or in advance by phone; see p382 for details.

So what do you get for your money? At the **budget** end, the days of 50B beds in Banglamphu are over but those on wafer-thin budgets can still get a dorm bed for between 150B and 400B with a shared bathroom. More comfortable and stylish rooms are available for upwards of 800B, with prices rising with size and location.

The **midrange** is where you'll find the biggest discounts for advance bookings. Rooms listed at up to 4500B will often go for between about 2500B and 4000B. More modest properties have more modest rates – modesty seemingly defined by the style of the décor. Thus the older places are often quite cheap, while trendier new places more pricey. If you're on a lower midrange budget, some very nice rooms can be had for between about 1500B and 2500B.

Bangkok's growing array of **top-end** hotels start at about 4500B per room and climb much higher. In the top tier rooms start at more than 10,000B, but in most of the luxurious design and boutique hotels, and the vast majority of the international brands, you're looking at about 6000B to 9000B, before hefty online discounting.

retreat appeals as much for the Deck restaurant, the bar and views of Wat Arun as the appealingly decorated but rather dark rooms (with wi-fi and cable broadband). The suite is the pick.

Ibrik Resort (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2848 9220; www.ibrikresort.com; 256 Soi Wat Rakhang, Th Arun Amarin, Thonburi; d with breakfast 3200-3500B; 🍷) In a white wooden house that's literally right on the river on the Thonburi side, Ibrik has just three romantic rooms with silks and four-poster beds. It's not exactly luxurious, but it's very private. The Moonlight room has no view.

Aurum: The River Place (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2622 2248; www.aurum-bangkok.com; 396 Th Maharat; Ko Ratanakosin; tw/d with breakfast 3600/4100B; 🍷) At the river-end of a row of old Chinese godowns, the attractive and very comfortable faux-Parisian-style Aurum has 12 tastefully furnished rooms with not-wholly-uninterrupted river views.

Chakrabongse Villas (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2622 3356; www.thaivillas.com; 396 Th Maharat; Ko Ratanakosin; villas 10,000-25,000B; 🍷) Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath's 19th-century mansion has been converted into a luxurious, personal destination in itself. Four villas of varying ages (some quite new) are set around a garden and pool. The riverside dining pavilion is super romantic; meals are cooked to order. Delightful.

Banglamphu

The days of Th Khao San (p85) being all about supercheap flophouses are almost over. As hippies have been replaced by flashpacking couples so the tiny, boxlike fan rooms featured in the movie *The Beach* have been replaced by larger, air-conditioned rooms with private bathrooms starting at about 500B. Most places have attached restaurants serving farang-oriented food and screening nightly movies.

Calmer guesthouses and a growing number of midrange places have spread in a 1km radius from Th Khao San, and these are where more experienced travellers prefer to stay. From December to February, competition for rooms is intense and many places are full by 10am. Staff usually won't reserve a room unless you pay in advance.

Th Khao San has all the life-support systems a traveller needs. Get here by public bus, the Chao Phraya River express to Tha Phra Athit (Tha Banglamphu, N13) or Airport Express bus from Suvarnabhumi.

BUDGET

There are now close to 100 guesthouses and hotels in Banglamphu. If one is not listed here, that doesn't mean it's no good – look around and use your own discretion. Remember that most of the best (and cheapest) places are not

actually on Th Khao San, and the street can get pretty noisy. Look along Soi Rambutri, which bends around Wat Chana Songkhram west of Th Khao San; in the soi off Th Samsen north of Khlong Banglamphu; and if you're going supercheap the alley running parallel between Th Khao San and Th Ratchadamnoen Klang where you'll find a handful of old-style wooden guesthouses offering rooms with fan and shared bathroom (200B to 400B) or with fan and private bathroom (400B to 600B).

Prakorp's House (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2281 1345; fax 0 2629 0714; 52 Th Khao San; s/d with shared bathroom 160/250B) One of few remaining old-style guesthouses on Th Khao San. The simple rooms in an old wooden house are best, while the homely café is a highlight.

Villa Guest House (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2281 7009; 230 Soi 1, Th Samsen; s 300B, d 400-600B) In a garden oasis amid the village life of Soi 1, this historic 19th-century nobleman's teak house has 10 rooms with fan and shared bathroom; reservations strongly recommended.

Roof View Place (Map pp74-5; ☎ 081-805 8846; Soi 6, Th Samsen; s 450B, d 550-800B; 🍷) These white, sparsely stylish rooms and a friendly young crew make the Roof View worth the 10-minute walk to Th Khao San. Guests can use the kitchen.

Lamphu House (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 5861; www.lamphuhouse.com; 75-77 Soi Rambutri, Th Chakraphong; d from 590B; 🍷) Lamphu House creates a mellow mood with its hidden, relatively quiet location and clean, smartly decorated rooms. Cheaper rooms with fans and shared bathrooms are also available.

Boworn BB (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 1073; www.bowornbb.com; 335 Th Phra Sumen; r 600-700B; 🍷) Boworn has bland but clean rooms but it's the familial atmosphere centred around the café-lobby and the garden rooftop that are most attractive.

Rikka Inn (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 7511; www.rikkainn.com; 259 Th Khao San; r 600-950B; 🍷) With a rooftop pool, small but mainly stylish rooms and a central Khao San location, the new Rikka is great value.

Shambara (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 7968; www.shambara-bangkok.com; 138 Th Khao San; r 700-950B; 🍷) Just off Th Khao San, this century-old wooden home has nine tiny rooms that share two clean showers and toilets. Great atmosphere. Book ahead.

Others include:

Prasuri Guest House (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2280 1428; prasuri_gh_bkk@hotmail.com; Soi Phrasuli; s 220-380B, d

280-420B; 🍷) Simple, family-run – if a little tired – guesthouse in a quiet soi.

New Siam Guest House (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 4554; www.newsiam.net; 21 Soi Chana Songkhram, Th Phra Athit; s 280B, d 380-650B; 🍷) The original New Siam. Relaxed, backpacker atmosphere; bathrooms are shared.

MIDRANGE

Midrange places are popping up in Banglamphu faster than mushrooms at a Ko Phangnan full-moon party.

Erawan House (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 2121; www.erawanhouse.net; 17 Soi Chana Songkhram, Th Phra Athit; r 1000B; 🍷) A dash of 'boutique' in this soi of veteran guesthouses, the Erawan has comfortable rooms with modest fittings for an excellent price.

our pick New Siam Riverside (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 3535; www.newsiam.net; 21 Th Phra Athit; d with breakfast 1190-2190B; 🍷) The fourth member of the New Siam guesthouse empire, this 104-room hotel on the riverfront has a pool (get some tanning in before the beach) and vaguely stylish rooms; those with views (from 1590B) are best. The New Siam II and III are also popular.

our pick Lamphu Treehouse (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 0991-92; www.lamphutreehouse.com; Soi Baan Pan Thom, 155 Wanchat Bridge, Th Prachatiptai; s/d 1250/1450B; 🍷) Accessed via a klong-side footpath a few minutes northeast of Khao San, the Lamphu is no treehouse but with a pool and 40 colourful new rooms it's good value.

Buddy Lodge (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 4477; www.buddy-lodge.com; 265 Th Khao San; r 2400-2900B; 🍷) The leader of Th Khao San's gentrification, Buddy has 76 airy, tropical-mansion style rooms, a rooftop pool, a middle-of-the-action location...and...emm a Maccas in the lobby.

Old Bangkok Inn (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 1787; www.oldbangkokinn.com; 609 Th Phra Sumen; d with breakfast 3190-3990B, f 6590B; 🍷) In several evocatively furnished old shophouses, this 10-room boutique hotel offers both charisma and warm service in a historic setting.

Also try:

Vientai Hotel (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2280 5434-45; www.vientai.co.th; 42 Th Rambutri; s/tw 2000/2200B; 🍷) A Banglamphu fixture since 1953; now a 200-room, reliable but fairly soulless midrange place.

Royal Hotel (Hotel Ratanakosin; Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2222 9111-26; fax 0 2224 2083; cnr Th Ratchadamnoen Klang & Th Atsadam; d 1200-1700B; 🍷) Old, comfortable but variable rooms; be sure to see a few.

Thewet

North of Banglamphu near the National Library, a strip of family-run budget places actually pre-dates Th Khao San but has managed to maintain a genuinely local feel, with no nightclubs and the only fast food coming from the nearby wet market. Thewet appeals particularly to repeat travellers who are 'over' Th Khao San. These places, plus the ecofriendly midrange Phranakorn Nornlen, are a (longish) walk to Th Khao San, Ko Ratanakosin and Dusit, but not that convenient to other areas. To get here, take a Chao Phraya express boat (get off at Tha Thewet, N15) or public buses 3, 30 and 53 along Th Samsen.

our pick **Shanti Lodge** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2281 2497; Th Sri Ayuthaya; dm 200, s/d 400/750-850B; 🏠 📶 🚶) Stylish and self-assured, Shanti Lodge has a variety of rooms from simple affairs to the newer concrete wing with artful wall murals and bathrooms. The downstairs café and restaurant is popular with people hanging out, strumming guitars and not doing too much. Very chilled.

Taewez (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2280 8856-58; 23 Soi 12, Th Sri Ayuthaya; s/d 250/430B; 🏠 📶 🚶) This popular place down a lane has an easy, family-oriented atmosphere. The fan rooms aren't fantastic but the air-conditioned rooms are excellent value.

Sri Ayuttaya Guest House (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2282 5942; Th Si Ayuthaya; s 350B, d 600-850B) Not quite as social as the neighbouring Shanti, but still superior to many Khao San joints. Rooms are attractive and fair value.

our pick **Phranakorn Nornlen** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2628 8188-90; www.phranakorn-nornlen.com; 46 Soi Thewet 1, Th Krung Kasem; s/d 1800/2200B; 🏠 📶 🚶) Everyone loves this arty, rustically charming boutique hotel set in a garden and converted wooden building. Social and environmental responsibility is atop the agenda. Delicious organic breakfasts are served, but the helpful staff will also encourage you to spend your money at local restaurants and markets. Recommended.

Chinatown & Hualamphong

Bangkok's Chinatown is noisy, hectic and full of energy. Most hotels are institutional affairs suffering from the sort of total charisma bypass familiar in hotels in, ahm, China. However, change is coming and some of the budget places around Hualamphong train station are quite appealing.

There are several very rundown dosshouses beside Hualamphong train station, on Th Rong Muang (aka Th Hualamphong), but avoid them and try for one of these first two.

Baan Hualampong (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2639 8054; www.baanhualampong.com; 336/20 Soi 21, Th Charoen Krung; dm 220B, s 290B, d 520-700B; 🏠 📶 🚶) A short walk from the station, this old-style wood-and-concrete guesthouse has developed a loyal following among those seeking a mix of family atmosphere and backpacker self-sufficiency. The owner is a font of knowledge.

Train Inn (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0818-195 544; www.traininn.com; 428 Th Rong Muang; r 450-900B; 🏠 📶 🚶) The new, clean, secure and relatively funky Train Inn is a breath of fresh air. Owner Jana maintains a young, friendly and helpful atmosphere and her 41 rooms are hostel-style compact; ask to see a few.

River View Guest House (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2234 5429; www.riverviewbkk.com; 768 Soi Phanurangsi, Th Songwat; r 450-900B; 🏠 📶 🚶) The aptly named River View has some rooms (on upper floors) and a rooftop bar-restaurant with views you'd pay thousands for in nearby hotels. Rooms are big and mostly with fan; air-con costs more. It's in a local neighbourhood and hard to find; start at the Maritime Department ferry stop, and follow the signs north.

Most hotels in Chinatown are in the mid-range price bracket and these are the best.

Grand China Princess (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2224 9977; www.grandchina.com; 215 Th Yaowarat; r 2200-4200B; 🏠 📶 🚶) A certifiable monstrosity to look at, this hotel in the heart of Chinatown is popular with groups and has nondescript but comfortable rooms buoyed by great views.

our pick **Shanghai Inn** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2221 2121; www.shanghai-inn.com; 479 Th Yaowarat; r with breakfast 2800-4000B; 🏠 📶 🚶) The Shanghai is a genuine boutique hotel that brings a technicolour interpretation of '30s Shanghai to manic Th Yaowarat. The 55 Chinese-style rooms have four-poster beds, bright-painted walls and as many as 10 hanging silk lights. Wi-fi is available throughout. Chinatown's best, by far.

Siam Square & Around

This is Bangkok's retail heart so if working your way through half-a-dozen huge air-conditioned malls sounds like a good time, look no further. Several big international chains have hotels on or around Th Ploenchit and Th Withayu, and a few midrange places are dotted about. For budgeteers there is Soi Kasem

San 1. This area is easily reached by Skytrain, or via a boat along Khlong Saen Saep.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

If you prefer to spend your baht shopping than sleeping, the places along Soi Kasem San 1 are for you. This dead-end soi is off Th Phra Ram I just before the intersection with Th Phayathai, a five-minute walk to Siam Sq and Jim Thompson's House.

A-One Inn (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2215 3029; www.aoneinn.com; 25/13-15 Soi Kasem San 1, Th Phra Ram I; d 600-850B; 🏠 📶 🚶) This friendly family operation has 25 cosy rooms (with hot showers and TVs) that live up to it's advertising, offering value 'in the heart of town'. A-One is a wi-fi hotspot.

Wendy House (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2214 1149-50; www.wendyguesthouse.com; Soi Kasem San 1; Th Phra Ram I; s/tw with breakfast 900/1100B; 🏠 📶 🚶) Wendy is a cheery backpacker joint with 20 small but well-scrubbed rooms and tiled bathrooms; all are nonsmoking. Desk staff are sweet and the well-lit lobby quietly social.

VIP Guest House/Golden House (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2252 9535-8; www.goldenhouses.net; 1025/5-9 Th Ploenchit; r with breakfast from 1400B; 🏠 📶 🚶) The 27 clean, quiet and mainly bright rooms make this a good lower-midrange choice in this otherwise pricey part of town.

Reno Hotel (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2215 0026; www.renohotel.co.th; 40 Soi Kasem San 1, Th Phra Ram I; d 1180-1550B; 🏠 📶 🚶) This Vietnam War veteran has embraced the new millennium with colour and some flair, keeping some attitude with its retro features (check out the monogrammed pool) and funky up the foyer and café. The 70 rooms remain fairly simple, the best being those overlooking the pool.

Other reliable midrange options include: **Pathumwan House** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2612 3580; www.pathumwanhouse.com; 22 Soi Kasem San 1, Th Phra Ram I; d 1200-2300B, monthly 15,000-34,000B; 🏠 📶 🚶) Mainly a long-term hotel but lots of dailies cycle through after striking out elsewhere.

Asia Hotel (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2215 0808; www.asiahotel.co.th; 296 Th Phayathai; r from 2600B; 🏠 📶 🚶) The classic Asian midranger; busy, faux-luxurious, reliable. Connects to Ratchathewi Skytrain.

TOP END

These and several other top-end hotels gather around this central commercial area.

Siam@Siam (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2217 3000; www.siamatsiam.com; 865 Th Phra Ram I; d from 5700B; 🏠 📶 🚶) This world of concrete, rust, copper and

railway sleepers, with dashes of orange, takes industrial design to the limit. The 203 rooms occupy the 14th to 25th floors and have city views. Rates include breakfast and wi-fi internet.

Nai Lert Park Hotel (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2253 0123; www.swissotel.com/bangkok-nailetpark; 2 Th Withayu (Wireless Rd); d from US\$185; 🏠 📶 🚶) A mishmash of bygone styles, the Nai Lert is a bit disappointing in the cramped rooms, but glorious underneath a shady tree in its private garden-park. There are ponds, palms, walking trails and a lovely tree-shaded swimming pool.

Grand Hyatt Erawan (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2254 1234; www.bangkok.hyatt.com; 494 Th Ratchadamri; d from 8800B; 🏠 📶 🚶) The Erawan's neoclassical lobby, embellished with mature tropical trees, sets the establishment tone in what is one of Bangkok's most-respected hotels. The 320 rooms are relatively big and well-designed. Wi-fi internet is unnecessarily expensive.

Riverside

The riverside area along Th Charoen Krung has several of Bangkok's top hotels, plus a couple of cheaper options. A combination of the Skytrain to Saphan Taksin and either a walk or ferry ride on the complimentary hotel ferries is the way to reach the top-end places.

New Road Guesthouse (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2630 6994-98; www.jysk-rejsebureau.dk; 1216/1 Th Charoen Krung; dm 90B, d 600-1300B, f 2500B; 🏠 📶 🚶) This Danish-run guesthouse is the go-to budget lodging in this part of town, with a wide range of rooms, a social communal area and bar. The JYSK tourist office here offers quality tours. Good choice.

P&R Residence (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2639 6091-93; pandr.residence@gmail.com; 34 Soi 30, Th Charoen Krung, Bangrak; r 1000-1200B; 🏠 📶 🚶) Comfortable, clean and very fairly priced midrange option in an atmospheric old part of town. Ask for a front room for embassy views. Cash only.

Millennium Hilton (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2442 2000; bangkok.hilton.com; 123 Th Charoenakorn, Klongsan; d from 6000B; 🏠 📶 🚶) This new kid on the riverside block is usually cheaper than its neighbours, but has a more relaxed atmosphere and 543 rooms all with cinematic views. The Beach (sunbeds by the pool) and ThreeSixty (jazz, penthouse views) add to the package. A private ferry connects it to River City shopping centre and Saphan Thaksin Skytrain.

Oriental Hotel (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2659 9000; www.mandarinoriental.com; 48 Soi Oriental, Th Charoen Krung; r from US\$360; 🏠 📶 🚶) Bangkok's answer to

BANGKOK'S TOP BOUTIQUE HOTELS

Bangkok has seen an explosion in the number of small hotels that have embraced a different idea of design and décor. These are our pick:

Money is No Object

Dream (p98) Rock star in blue.

Eugenia (p98) Explorer chic.

Ma Du Zi (p98) Design masterpiece.

Sukhothai Hotel (right) Modern classic Thai.

Won't Break the Bank

Phranakorn Nornlen (p94) Green smiles.

Refill Now! (opposite) The hostel redefined.

Seven (opposite) Six rooms, seven colours.

Shanghai Inn (p94) Old China kaleidoscope.

Raffles in Singapore or the Peninsula in Hong Kong, this classic hotel is also one of the finest in Southeast Asia. The original Author's Wing is steeped in colonial-era charm. Since those days, two vast new wings have been added, and there are several fine restaurants, including Le Normandie (p101). The hotel also has dinner cruises, a dinner show and a cooking school.

Thanon Silom & Thanon Sathon

Although the infamous Soi Patpong is right on the doorstep, the sleaze is limited to that area and is easy enough to avoid if desired.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

This area has few budget places but a good selection of good-value midrange hotels, most of which are family friendly.

Urban Age (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2634 2680; theurbanage@hotmail.com; 130/6 Soi 8, Th Silom; dm 250B, d 800B; 📶 📺 📺) A New Age version of the classic Bangkok budget haunt. Rooms are small but attractive, bathrooms are shared and the women who run the place are friendly. The dorms are six storeys up, all stairs.

Lub*D (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2634 7999; www.lubd.com; 4 Th Decho, Th Surawong; dm 550B, d 1800B; 📶 📺 📺) This 'boutique hostel' has four-storeys of dorms (including a ladies-only wing) and rooms (with and without bathrooms) in industrial chic style. It has free internet, tight security and a streetside bar-cum-lobby.

our pick **Rose Hotel** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2266 8268-72; www.rosehotelbkk.com; 118 Th Surawong, Silom; r from 1700B;

📶 📺 📺) After a much-needed facelift, the veteran Rose has been reborn as one of the best-value hotels in Bangkok. Its 70 spacious, stylish rooms are complemented by a small gym, sauna and Thai restaurant in an old teak house set around an oasis-like pool.

All Seasons (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2343 6333; www.allseasons-asia.com; 31 Th Sathon Tai; r 1800-2500B; 📶 📺 📺) The 78 spacious, high-ceilinged rooms in this newly made over hotel have a contemporary feel and are well-equipped, with desk, free wi-fi and cable broadband. Superior and deluxe rooms are best. Good value. Note that it's not on All Seasons Pl.

our pick **La Résidence Hotel** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2233 3301; www.laresidencebangkok.com; 173/8-9 Th Surawong; d/ste 2000/3700B; 📶 📺 📺) La Résidence is a charming boutique inn with 26 playfully and individually decorated rooms that are both casually sophisticated and fantastic value.

Triple Two Silom (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2627 2222; www.tripletwosilom.com; 222 Th Silom; r/ste 4500/5900B; 📶 📺 📺) Once a bland shopping mall, this is now a classy, 75-room boutique hotel in a pleasing pan-Asian mode. Rooms are large and well-kitted out with both wi-fi and ADSL internet at the desk.

TOP END

Many of Bangkok's finest and most-interesting luxury hotels are in this area.

Banyan Tree Hotel (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2679 1200; www.banyantree.com; Thai Wah Tower II, 21/100 Th Sathon Tai; d from 10,500B; 📶 📺 📺) This tall, wafer-thin and ultramodern hotel appeals for its spa-like atmosphere, larger luxurious rooms and, indeed, its six storeys of well-respected spa facilities. Then, of course, there is the dreamy Moon Bar and Vertigo grill (p102) on the roof.

Sukhothai Hotel (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2344 8888; www.sukhothai.com; 13/3 Th Sathon Tai; r 14,000-100,000B; 📶 📺 📺) Architect Ed Tuttle's uniquely Thai modernism embraces both classic Thai features – think winged roofs, hardwood floors and six acres of garden full of Sukhothai-style brick stupas – and a modern minimalism that is deeply satisfying.

Other good luxury hotels in this area include:

Metropolitan (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2625 3322; www.metropolitan.com.bz; 27 Th Sathon Tai; d from US\$290;

📶 📺 📺) Uber-cool urban chic; excellent C'yan restaurant (p101); pricey rooms.

Dusit Thani (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2200 9000; www.dusit.com; 946 cnr Th Phra Ram IV & Th Silom; r from 6100B;

📶 📺 📺) This '60s landmark has embraced global Zen with mixed results. Great location and D'Sens restaurant.

Thanon Sukhumvit

Th Sukhumvit has been the centre of a hotel building boom in recent years. Many of the new places are boutique and design hotels, mostly in the midrange and top-end, though there are a couple of decent budget places scattered about. Alongside the new places are several 1970s cheapies catering largely to middle-aged Western men with teenage Thai girlfriends or boyfriends in tow, or long-termers gathering material for 'novels'. Intense competition at the upper end means big discounts can be found online.

BUDGET

Suk 11 (Map p82; ☎ 0 2253 5927-28; www.suk11.com; sub-soi off Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; dm 250B, d 480-800B; 📶 📺 📺) Sukhumvit's predominant outpost of backpacker culture, Suk 11 creates an atmosphere of convivial post-beach chill amid the concrete jungle. The small, garden-guarded entrance opens Tardis-like to 80 upstairs rooms along a wooden hallway. Rooms come with and without bathrooms.

HI Sukhumvit (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2391 9338; www.hi.sukhumvit.com; 23 Soi 38, Th Sukhumvit; dm 300B, d 800-900B, f 1200B; 📶 📺 📺) Out east near the Ekamai bus station, the clean, simple dorms and rooms and welcoming family owners make this budget place a real find. The breezy rooftop and nearby night food market add to the appeal.

Atlanta Hotel (Map p82; ☎ 0 2252 1650; fax 0 2656 8123; 78 Soi 2, Th Sukhumvit; d from 800B; 📶 📺 📺) Sukhumvit's first hotel is (in the lobby, at least) like a time capsule of 1950s décor, with old-fashioned writing desks and a grand-entrance staircase sweeping up five floors (there's no lift). The rooms are functional and those on the top floor aren't good at all, but they're fair value. Note: 'The Atlanta does not welcome sex tourists and does not try to be polite about it.'

Bangkok Centre Sukhumvit 25 (Map p82; ☎ 0 2259 6869; www.thailandhotel.com; Soi 25, Th Sukhumvit; dm 390B, s/d with breakfast 1200/1500B; 📶 📺 📺) This place looks a bit institutional but feels friendly and communal and is very good value. The large, clean rooms and dorms are well-equipped (though dorms need three people for the air-con to be turned on). Prices here are for nonmembers of HI, but sign up for 200B per person and save 100/300/500B on a dorm/single/double.

Refill Now! (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2713 2044; www.refillnow.co.th; 191 Soi Pridi Banhom Yong 42, Soi 71, Th Sukhumvit; dm 560B, s/d 1085/1470B; 📶 📺 📺) Refill promises and delivers 'high-style low-cost', with spotless white private rooms and dorms that have flirtatious pull screens between each double-bunk; women-only dorms are also available. It's inconveniently located and pricey for shared bathrooms, but the hip-and-unpretentious vibe has made it hugely popular. Take a taxi or mototaxi from the Phra Kanong Skytrain down Soi 71, turn right on Soi 42 and left.

MIDRANGE

Citichic (Map p82; ☎ 0 2342 3888; www.citichicotel.com; 34 Soi 13, Th Sukhumvit; r from 2300B; 📶 📺 📺) Everything from the foyer, to the rooms, the gym and the rooftop pool is small in this new midranger. The self-applied 'boutique' classification might be stretching credulity a little, but it is very good value, with 'chic'-enough design, broadband internet included and smiling service.

Le Fenix (Map p82; ☎ 0 2305 4000; www.lefenix-sukhumvit.com; 33 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; r 2590B; 📶 📺 📺) Accor's foray into the hip-design-boutique market has 147 rooms at the end of busy Soi 11 and is aimed at young, party-oriented tourists. It is reasonable value, though bear in mind that the small rooms all come with two single mattresses on one base, pushed together or separated by a few inches. Rooms have both wi-fi and cable internet.

Napa Place Bed & Breakfast (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2661 5525; www.napaplace.com; 11/3 Yaek 2, Soi 36, Th Sukhumvit; d 2750-4800B; 📶 📺 📺) Tucked away in a quiet soi seven minutes walk from Thong Lo Skytrain, the 12-room Napa has a homely B&B atmosphere and appeals to families because it has huge rooms (36 to 67 sq m), plenty of communal space, solid security and free buffet breakfasts. Cable broadband is also free. Superb value.

Bangkok Boutique Hotel (Map p82; ☎ 0 2261 2850; www.bangkokboutiquehotel.com; 241 Soi Asoke, Th Sukhumvit; r from with breakfast 2900B; 📶 📺 📺) This low-rise place combines a minimalist, polished-concrete mode with hi-tech gadgetry (free internet and wireless keyboards plugged into the big flatscreen TVs so you can surf from bed). Superior rooms are the best value; ask for one away from the cacophonous street.

Seven (Map p82; ☎ 081-616 2636; www.sleepatseven.com; 3/15 Soi 31, Th Sukhumvit; r 3100-6000B; 📶 📺 📺) Six

rooms, seven colours. From the designers of London's Ministry of Sound, this design hotel applies to its six rooms and lobby the Thai idea that each day has its own colour (eg Monday is yellow; the King was born on a Monday, hence the yellow shirts on Mondays). Rooms are quite small but well appointed with free wi-fi and mobile phones and iPods to use during the stay. Good for hip young singles and couples.

TOP END

Eugenia (Map p82; ☎ 0 2259 9017-19; www.theeugenia.com; 267 Soi 31, Th Sukhumvit; r 5800-7200B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This unique 12-room boutique place is modelled on the colonial mansions of Africa and the Subcontinent. Think Livingston, Hemingway, Indian Raj and rooms packed full of art, books, antique furniture, beaten copper bathtubs and stuffed animals. Rooms aren't huge (the Siam suites are tiny), but it's the ambience you're here for. Ask about the vintage-car airport transfers.

Dream (Map p82; ☎ 0 2254 8500; www.dreambkk.com; 10 Soi 15, Th Sukhumvit; r from US\$200; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Call it 'boutique' or 'design', but this hotel in two adjacent buildings is a rock-star world of cream leather, mirrors, silver and blue motifs and, in the uber-chic Flava lounge bar-cum-

restaurant, a white tiger (with blue stripes). Blue is the theme, and 195 rooms are blue-lit (for deeper sleep, apparently). Suites are way overpriced, though.

Ma Du Zi (Map p82; ☎ 0 2615 6400; www.maduzihotel.com; cnr Th Ratchadapisek & Sukhumvit Soi 16; r 15,000B-33,000B; 🍷 🍷) This 41-room luxury hotel is a masterpiece of design. The fittings, restrained but very stylish décor and service are all top notch – everything works. Rooms are huge and, in fairness, so too are the prices. But they include everything, from airport pickup through wi-fi to the minibar. The French restaurant is also excellent. Reservations only, no walk in.

Also worth considering: **S15** (Map p82; ☎ 0 2651 2000; www.s15hotel.com; 217 Th Sukhumvit, cnr Soi 15; d 4500-6000B, ste 7700B; 🍷 🍷) New boutique place with reasonably sized, Zen-styled rooms.

Grand Millennium Sukhumvit (Map p82; ☎ 0 2204 4111; www.grandmillenniumskv.com; 30 Soi Asoke, Th Sukhumvit; r from 7500B, ste 13,500B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Bright, spacious and tastefully furnished rooms in one of Bangkok's more interesting new buildings.

EATING

Nowhere else is the Thai reverence for food more evident than in Bangkok. The city's

characteristic body odour is a unique blend of noodle stall and car exhaust, and in certain parts of town, restaurants appear to form the majority of businesses, typically flanked by streetside hawkers and mobile snack vendors. To outsiders, the life of an average Bangkokian can appear to be little more than a string of meals and snacks punctuated by the odd job, not the other way around. If you can adjust your guttural clock to fit this schedule, we're confident your stay in Bangkok will be a happy one indeed.

Despite the global infatuation with Thai food, many visitors go from one mediocre meal to another, mainly at guesthouse kitchens and tourist-oriented restaurants catering more to a Western definition of ambience than food. In order to break the bonds of so-so meals, we strongly urge you to break out of the ghetto mentality and explore the small eateries and street stalls of this great city. Virtually every regional Thai cuisine can be found in Bangkok.

The standard opening hours for restaurants here are 11am to 11pm daily, but many mid-range places close from 2.30pm to 6pm.

Banglamphu

Despite encompassing farang-dominated Th Khao San, Banglamphu is home to some of the city's most legendary Thai eats. The foreign influence has resulted in an abundance of cheap Western-style and vegetarian restaurants.

Arroi (Map pp74-5; 152 Th Din So; mains 20-30B) Employing a variety of tasty meat substitutes and sticking to a repertoire of classic Thai dishes, even dedicated flesh-eaters will be happy at this tiny restaurant.

Thip Samai (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2221 6280; 313 Th Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya; mains 25-120B; 🍷 dinner) Less than a five-minute tuk-tuk drive away from Th Khao San is Thip Samai, home to the most legendary *pàt tai* in town. For something a bit different, try the delicate egg-wrapped version, or the *pàt tai* fried with *man gung*, shrimp fat.

Kim Leng (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2622 2062; 158-160 Th Tanao; mains 40-80B; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Kim Leng is a true Bangkok eatery and, as with much of the food of the capital, sweet intermingles with spicy. You can't go wrong with the *hòr mòk* (steamed curry) or *nám prik gà-Bì* (shrimp paste dip served as a set with veggies and deep-fried fish).

Roti-Mataba (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 2119; 136 Th Phra Athit; mains 50-90B; 🍷 Tue-Sun) This classic

eatery serves tasty Thai-Muslim dishes such as roti, *gaang má-t-sà-màn* (Muslim curry), a brilliantly sour fish curry, and *má-tà-bà* (a sort of stuffed Indian pancake). An upstairs air-conditioned dining area provides barely enough seating for its loyal fans.

our pick Chote Chitr (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2221 4082; 146 Th Phraeng Phutong; mains 60-150B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Combining just six tables and two talented cooks, Chote Chitr (pronounced *chòht jit*), puts out delicious, dictionary-definition Central Thai fare. The second-generation restaurant is particularly renowned for its *mèe gròp*, sweet-and-spicy crispy fried noodles, still made the old-school way, but just about anything from the expansive menu will bring a smile.

Oh My Cod! (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 6553; 95d, Rambuttri Village Inn, Soi Rambuttri I; mains 70-200B) Fish and chips fried to perfection, not to mention all-day breakfast and a sunny courtyard dining area where parched Anglophiles can enjoy a proper cuppa.

Hemlock (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 7507; 56 Th Phra Athit; mains 80-200B; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sat) The classiest of Banglamphu's bohemian Thai restaurants, Hemlock offers sublime Thai cuisine in stylish surroundings. As well as more familiar dishes such as *gaang pá-naang gàì* (Penang curry with chicken), this place serves ancient and unusual dishes you won't find elsewhere.

Shoshana (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 9948; 88 Th Chakraphong; mains 90-150B) The 'I heart Shoshana' T-shirts worn by the wait staff may be a hopelessly optimistic description of employee morale, but the gut-filling chips-falafel-and-hummus plates leave nothing to be desired.

Chinatown

There are surprisingly few formal restaurants in Chinatown, and those that exist specialise in shark fin and bird's nest soup and dim sum. At night much of the neighbourhood is taken over by hawkers serving some of Bangkok's finest street food. Seafood is also great value – you can get *gung pow* (grilled prawns) for a fraction of the cost of many Bangkok restaurants.

Chinatown becomes a major culinary destination during the Vegetarian Festival in September or October, when every restaurant in the area turns out special veg dishes.

During the day in nearby Phahurat heaps of tiny shops serve Indian food including fresh chapattis and Indian-style

AIRPORT ACCOMMODATION

Most people will use the new Suvarnabhumi International Airport, which takes all international flights, but old Don Muang airport still hosts some domestic services, many of which fly to the islands and beaches of the south.

Suvarnabhumi International Airport

Grand Inn Come Hotel (☎ 0 2738 8189-99; www.grandinncome-hotel.com; 99 Moo 6, Th Kingkaew, Bangplee; s/tw from 1800/2000B; 🍷 🍷) Solid midranger a few minutes by shuttle bus east of the airport, with 'lively' karaoke bar.

Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel (☎ 0 2131 1111; www.novotel.com; r from 5000B; 🍷 🍷) Has 600-plus luxurious rooms in the airport.

Refill Now! (see p97) Nearest good budget option.

Don Muang Airport

Amari Airport Hotel (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2566 1020; www.amari.com; 333 Th Choet Wutthakat; r from US\$90; 🍷 🍷) Opposite Don Muang, it's the most popular airport hotel and has well-equipped day-use rooms from US\$85.

Rama Gardens Hotel (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2561 0022; www.ramagardenshotel.com; 9/9 Th Vibhavadi Rangsit; r from 4700B; 🍷 🍷) Tranquil garden setting and very comfortable deluxe wings with deep-soak tubs. Shuttle buses to airport.

We-Train International House (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2967 8550-54; www.we-train.co.th; 501/1 Muu 3, Th Dechaturungkhá, Sikan, Don Muang; dm 200B, r 800-1100B; 🍷 🍷) Quiet place with good-value rooms 3km from airport, run by the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women. Take a taxi (about 80B) from outside Amari Hotel.

chai (tea), catering to Bangkok's small Indian community.

Mangkawn Khao (Map pp76-7; cnr Th Yaowarat & Th Yaowaphanit; meals 25-40B; ☺ dinner) Mangkawn Khao (White Dragon), a popular street stall, is a respected vendor of *bà-mèe*, Chinese-style wheat noodles, and *gêe-o*, wontons, both served with generous slices of bacon-like barbecued pork.

Royal India (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2221 6565; 392/1 Th Chakraphet; mains 100-250B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This legendary north Indian place continues to draw local foodies despite the lack of aesthetics. Try any of the delicious breads or saucy curries, and finish with a homemade Punjabi sweet.

Tang Jai Yuu (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2224 2167; 85-89 Th Yaowaphanit; mains 100-300B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This Chinatown legend specialises in Teo Chew and Chinese-Thai specialties with an emphasis on seafood. You can't go wrong choosing a fresh fish from the tank out front and letting the experts grill it for you.

Shangarila Restaurant (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2224 5933; 306 Th Yaowarat; mains 220-500B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Roast duck, red pork and freshly steamed seafood feature prominently on the menu at this popular Chinese banquet restaurant. Chow down on some dim sum at lunchtime or Peking duck in the evening.

Thanon Silom & Thanon Sathon

The business heart of Bangkok has dozens of upscale restaurants for business lunches and dinners, and fast-food eateries catering to hungry office workers. Don't immediately assume that restaurants in malls will serve mediocre food. In fact many of Bangkok's leading eateries are tucked away in shopping arcades or hotels.

Th Charoen Krung and the river end of Th Silom near Th Charoen Krung, are good places for Indian and Muslim food.

BUDGET

Several cheap food markets set up at lunchtime or in the evenings. Opposite the Sri Mahariamman temple is the setting for a lively **day and night market** (Soi Pradit; Map pp78-9). Most of the stalls here serve Hainanese and Muslim dishes for around 30B to 50B, catering to local workers and devotees from the nearby Masjid Mirasuddeen mosque. Numerous fast-food outlets can be found at the Th Phra Ram IV end of Th Silom.

Khrua Aroy Aroy (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2635 2365; Th Pan, Th Silom; mains 30-70B) Prepare yourself for the trip down south at this authentic southern-style curry shack. The richest curries around and interesting daily specials make Khrua Aroy Aroy ('Delicious Delicious Kitchen') live up to its lofty name.

Ran Nam Tao Hu Yong Her (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2635 0003; 68 Th Narathiwat, Silom; mains 40-205B; ☺ lunch & dinner) The emphasis here is on northern Chinese cuisine – a rarity in Bangkok. Try the Shanghaiese specialty *xiao long bao* (described on the menu as 'Small steamed bun') steamed dumplings encasing a pork filling and rich hot broth that pours out when you bite into them.

Home Cuisine Islamic Restaurant (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 7911; 196-198 Soi 36, Th Charoen Krung; mains 45-130B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This bungalow-like restaurant does tasty Thai-Muslim with an endearing Indian accent. Sit out on the breezy patio and try the simultaneously rich and sour fish curry, accompanied ideally by a flaky roti or three.

Chennai Kitchen (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 1266; 10 Th Pan, Th Silom; mains 50-120B; ☺ lunch) This thimble-sized restaurant near the Hindu temple puts out solid southern Indian vegetarian nosh. If you're feeling indecisive go for the banana-leaf thali that seems to incorporate just about everything in the kitchen.

Suan Lum Night Bazaar (Map pp72-3; Th Phra Ram IV; meals 60-120B; ☺ dinner) Find a seat (preferably as far from the tacky stage music as possible if you value your eardrums), order a draft hefeweizen and a dish of deep-fried soft-shell crabs, and settle down for an evening of typically tasty Thai entertainment. There is talk that Suan Lum is slotted for the wrecking ball in 2008, but until the bulldozers arrive, we're remaining sceptical.

Mizu's Kitchen (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2233 6447; 32 Soi Patpong 1, Th Silom; mains 90-400B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This certifiable hole-in-the-wall oozes character, not to mention the beefy essence of thousands of steaks served over the decades. The house steak is a winner, and you'll be hard-pressed to find a better macaroni and cheese in Bangkok.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Scoozie (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 6999; 174 Th Surawong, Silom; mains 150-350B; ☺ lunch & dinner) At this trendy pizzeria you can witness your pie be skillfully tossed and topped before being blistered in a

FOOD COURT FRENZY

Every Bangkok mall worth its escalators has some sort of food court. In the recent past these were the abode of working-class Thais; the food was cheap, the settings bland, and you were even expected to serve yourself. In recent years, however, food courts have moved upscale, and the setting, cuisine and service have elevated accordingly. Expect to pay 30B to 150B for a meal at one of these.

Food Loft (Map pp80-1; 7th fl, Central Chidlom, 1027 Th Ploenchit) This new concept in food court serves up fresh Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian and Italian prepared by staff from some of Bangkok's better restaurants. Upon entering, you'll be given a temporary credit card and will be led to a table. You have to get up again to order, but the dishes will be brought to you. Paying is done on your way out.

our pick MBK Food Court (Map pp80-1; 6th fl, Mahboonkrong Centre, cnr Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai) A virtual crash-course in Thai food, MBK's Food Court offers tens of vendors selling eats from virtually every corner of the country and beyond. Standouts include an excellent vegetarian food stall (stall C8), whose mock-meat mushrooms almost taste better than the real thing, and a very decent Isan food vendor (C22). The Fifth, on the 5th floor of the same mall, emphasizes international eats in a slightly more upscale setting.

Park Food Hall (Map pp70-1; 5th fl, Emporium Shopping Centre, 622 Th Sukhumvit, cnr Soi 24) Park brings together some of the city's most-loved international food vendors. Emporium Food Hall, on the same floor, features cheaper, mostly Chinese/Thai food, and what must be the cheapest meal with a view in town. Paying is done by buying coupons at the windows in the entrance. Be sure to leave these in your pocket until the next day when it's too late to get a refund; it's an integral part of the food court experience.

wood-burning oven from Italy. The Scoozie empire has other branches, including one at Th Khao San (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2280 5280; 201 Soi Sunset).

Le Bouchon (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 9109; Soi Patpong 2, Th Silom; mains 150-350B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This homey bistro smack-dab in the middle of one of Bangkok's more 'colourful' districts is a capable and fun introduction to French cooking. Choose your dishes from a chalkboard menu of Gallic faves touted about by the cheery wait staff.

Somboon Seafood (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2233 3104; cnr Th Surawong & Th Narathiwat Ratchanakharin; mains 150-250B; ☺ dinner) As with all good Thai seafood restaurants, your fish should be enjoyed with as many friends as you can get together, and an immense platter of *kôw pát 'Boo* (fried rice with crab).

Blue Elephant (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2673 9353; 233 Th Sathon Tai, Silom; mains 200-500B; ☺ lunch & dinner) If you're going to do upscale Thai, you can do no worse than the Blue Elephant. Set in a stunning Sino-Portuguese colonial building with service fit for royalty, the restaurant also features an impressive cooking school.

Le Normandie (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2236 0400; Oriental Hotel, Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung; 3-7-course meals 1000/4000B; ☺ lunch & dinner, closed for lunch Sun) This elegant glass case overlooking the Chao Phraya River is the epitome of the French culinary tradition. Michelin-starred chefs and decadent

ingredients are flown in from all corners of the world, making reservations and formal attire (including jackets) a necessity.

our pick Cy'an (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2625 3333; Metropolitan Hotel, 27 Th Sathon Tai, Silom; 7-course meal 2800B) Resembling the sleekest school cafeteria that Philippe Starck never designed, Cy'an is the perfect forum for the mix-and-match creations of Australian chef Daniel Moran. Combining vibrant Mediterranean and Moroccan flavours, a healthy obsession with the finest seafood, and a chic yet intimate atmosphere, the result is quite possibly the most faultless fine dining experience in town.

Siam Square & Thanon Ploenchit

This shopping area has lots of fast-food-type places that cater to diners on the run, plus a handful of posher options.

Sanguan Sri (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2252 7637; 59/1 Th Withayu, Th Ploenchit; mains 60-150B; ☺ lunch Mon-Sat) This restaurant can afford to remain decidedly *cheu-i* (old-fashioned) simply because of its reputation. Follow the lead of the local hungry office staff and try the excellent *gaang pèt 'bèt yaang*, red curry with grilled duck breast served over snowy white *kà-nôm jeen* noodles.

Crystal Jade La Mian Xiao Long Bao (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2250 7990; Urban Kitchen, Basement, Erawan Bangkok, 494 Th Ploenchit; mains 120-300B; ☺ lunch & dinner) The tongue-twistingly long name of

this Singaporean chain refers to the restaurant's signature wheat noodles (*la mian*) and Shanghainese steamed dumplings (*xiao long pao*).

Gianni Ristorante (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2252 1619; 34/1 Soi Tonson; mains 260-600B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This classy restaurant nearly single-handedly upped the bracket for Italian dining in Bangkok. Homemade sausages, lobster-stuffed raviolis, and braised lamb shank transport tastebuds to the Adriatic. Wine lovers rave about the huge and unique selection.

Thanon Sukhumvit

Stretching east all the way to the city limits, Th Sukhumvit attracts equal numbers of business travellers and monkey-business travellers. This is where to go to eat foreign food, as the majority of expats and immigrants claim a Sukhumvit address.

BUDGET

Imoya (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2663 5185; 3rd fl, Terminal Shop Cabin, 2/17-19 Soi 24, Th Sukhumvit; mains 40-120B; ☺ dinner) A visit to this well-hidden Japanese restaurant, with its antique advertisements, wood panelling and wall of sake bottles, is like taking a trip in a time machine. Even the prices of the better-than-decent Eastern-style pub grub haven't caught up with modern times.

Thonglee (Map p82; ☎ 0 2258 1983; Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; mains 40-70B; ☺ closed 3rd Sun of the month) Thonglee, the epitome of a typical Thai restaurant, offers a few dishes you won't find elsewhere, such as *mòu pàt gà-bi* (pork fried with shrimp paste) and *mèe gròrp* (sweet-and-spicy crispy fried noodles).

SKY-HIGH SUNDOWNERS

Bangkok is one of the few places in the world where nobody seems to mind if you set up a bar or restaurant on top of a skyscraper. Except for Rang Mahal, the views are considerably more memorable than the pricey meals, so it's worth opting for a sundowner or two and then go and eat elsewhere.

Rang Mahal (Map p82; ☎ 0 2261 7100; Rembrandt Hotel, Soi 18, Th Sukhumvit; mains 195-595B) Sheltered from the elements, Rang Mahal still claims the altitude high on the top floor of the Rembrandt Hotel and delivers majestic Indian sets and buffets.

Sirocco/Sky Bar (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2624 9555; 63rd fl, State Tower, 1055 Th Silom; dishes 500-1000B) A sweeping staircase provides a Hollywood-style entrance to Sirocco. The connected Sky Bar is poised on the roof's edge and pours shots of vertigo; reservations and smart casual dress are required.

Moon Bar at Vertigo (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2679 1200; Banyan Tree Hotel, 21/100 Th Sathon Tai) Perched near the clouds on the 61st floor with the roar of Bangkok traffic far below, Vertigo has a front-row view of virtually the entire city.

Komala's (Map p82; ☎ 0 2663 5971; 15 Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; mains 80-200B; ☺ lunch & dinner) If you can forgive the form-fitting plastic furniture and reckless use of teal, this Singaporean chain puts out some tasty south Indian vegetarian staples.

Je Ngor (Map p82; ☎ 0 2258 8008; 68/2 Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; mains 90-600B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Je Ngor proffers banquet-size servings of tasty Thai-Chinese dishes in a banquet-like setting. The relatively brief seafood-heavy menu features rarities such as *sòm-dam Boo dornp* (papaya salad with preserved crab), and baked rice with preserved olive.

MIDRANGE

Ana's Garden (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2391 1762; 67 Soi 55, Th Sukhumvit; mains 150-250B; ☺ dinner) Ana's lush garden of broad-leafed palms and purring fountains will almost make you forget about the urban jungle on the other side. The spicy *yam tò-a ploo* (wing bean salad), on the other hand, will leave no doubts about which city you're in.

Crêpes & Co (Map p82; ☎ 0 2653 3990; 18/1 Soi 12, Th Sukhumvit; mains 150-350B) The homey setting and excellent service, not to mention a menu that offers much more than the restaurant's name suggests, keep the desperate housewives of Bangkok's diplomatic corps coming back.

Little Arabia (Map p82; Soi 3/1, Th Sukhumvit) Packed full of Middle Eastern restaurants, Little Arabia provides a delicious respite from rice and noodles. *Shishah* (water pipe) smoke perfumes the air while concentrating couples devour sesame-flecked flatbread, creamy hummus and flawless falafels.

TOP END

Face (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2713 6048; 29 Soi 38, Th Sukhumvit; mains 150-400B; ☺ dinner) This handsome dining complex is essentially two very good restaurants in one: Lan Na Thai does excellent domestic (with an emphasis on regional) Thai dishes, while Hazara dabbles in exotic-sounding 'North Indian frontier cuisine'.

La Piola (Map p82; ☎ 0 2250 7270; 31/4 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; small/full set menu 900/1200B; ☺ dinner Tue-Sat) They've recently gone à la carte, but the highlight at this homey Italian is still the fixed menu that has been known to punish even the biggest eater.

Bed Supperclub (Map p82; ☎ 0 2651 3537; 26 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; set menu 1000B; ☺ Sun-Thu three seatings per evening, Fri & Sat one seating at 8.30pm) Think breakfast in bed, except that it's not breakfast, and your 'bed' is a gigantic white tube that you share with other diners. Come on Fridays when Kiwi Head Chef Paul Hutt takes the best of what he can get his mitts on and transforms it into a surprise four-course menu.

DRINKING

Bangkok's girly-bar scene may still be going just as strong as it has for the last 30 years, but having a good time in the city doesn't have to involve ping-pong balls or bar fines. Just like any other big international city, Bangkok's drinking and partying scene ranges from classy to trashy, and touches on just about everything in-between.

Bangkok's nightlife took a serious hit in 2004 when the Thaksin administration decided that the city's residents needed to go to bed at a respectable hour. A gradual moving back to pre-2004 hours was halted by a renewed crackdown in 2008.

The good news is that everything old is new again. Th Khao San, that former outpost of foreigner frugality, has undergone something of an upscale renaissance, and is now more popular with the locals than ever. And RCA (Royal City Avenue), a suburban nightclub zone previously associated with gum-snapping Thai teenagers, is drawing in dancers and drinkers of all ages and races.

Buddy Bar (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 4477; Th Khao San) Buddy Lodge's clean and cool colonial-themed bar is perfect for folks who find Bangkok too dirty. Brick Bar, the subterranean live-music den, features nightly performances of Teddy Ska, one of Bangkok's most energetic live bands.

our pick Cheap Charlie's (Map p82; Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit) An outdoor wooden shack decorated with buffalo skulls and wagon wheels, Charlie's is refreshingly out of place on image-conscious Th Sukhumvit, and draws a staunchly foreign crowd that doesn't mind a bit of kitsch and sweat with their Singha.

Opera Riserva Winetheque (Map p82; ☎ 0 2258 5601; 53 Soi 39, Th Sukhumvit) You're more than likely to find a vintage you'll fancy from this sleek den's weekly wine pics, and an attractive and extensive menu of wine-friendly Italian-style meals and snacks is also available.

Phranakorn Bar (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2282 7507; 58/2 Soi Damnoen Klang Tai) Students and arty types make Phranakorn Bar a home away from hovel with eclectic décor, gallery exhibits and, the real draw, a rooftop terrace with great views over old Bangkok.

Taksura (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2622 0708; 156/1 Th Tanao) There are no signs to lead you to this seemingly abandoned almost 100-year-old mansion in the heart of old Bangkok. Take a seat outside to soak up the breezes, and go Thai and order some spicy nibbles with your drinks.

To-Sit (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2658 4001; Soi 3, Th Phra Ram 1, Siam Sq) Live, loud and sappy music; cheap and spicy food; good friends and cold beer: To-Sit epitomises everything a Thai university student could wish for on a night out.

Tuba (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2622 0708; 30 Soi 21, Soi 63 (Ekamai), Th Sukhumvit) Used furniture store by day, Italian restaurant-slash-bar by night. Oddly enough, this business formula is not entirely unheard of in Bangkok.

Wong's Place (Map pp72-3; 27/3 Soi Sri Bumphen, off Soi Ngam Duphli, Th Phra Ram IV) A time warp into the backpacker world of the early 1980s, Wong's works equally well as a destination or a last resort, but don't bother knocking until midnight.

Every expat neighbourhood has an Irish-style pub where the lads can catch the game on a big-screen TV and drink Guinness amid North Atlantic temperatures. On Silom there's **Molly Malone's** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2266 7160; 1/5-6 Th Convent) and on Th Sukhumvit, **Bull's Head** (Map p82; ☎ 0 2259 4444; 595/10-11 Soi 33/1, Th Sukhumvit) and **Black Swan** (Map p82; ☎ 0 2626 0257; 326/8-9 Th Sukhumvit) are two homey places to knock back a pint or three.

GAY & LESBIAN BANGKOK

Is there a gay-friendlier city on the planet? While stepping off the Western shelf is a gamble for many gays, Bangkok's male-gay nightlife is out and open with bars, discos and *gà-teu-i* (also spelt *kàthoey*; ladyboys) cabarets, but night spots for Thai lesbians (*torm-dee*) aren't as prominent or as segregated.

Utopia, the well-known gay information provider, publishes the *Utopia Guide to Thailand*, covering gay-friendly businesses in 18 Thai cities, including Bangkok. More listings and events can be found at www.fridae.com. Both gays and lesbians are well advised to visit Bangkok in mid-November, when the city's small but fun **Pride Festival** (www.bangkokpride.org) is in full swing. Dinners, cruises, clubbing and contests are the order of the week.

Some recommended bars:

DJ Station (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2266 4029; 8/6-8 Soi 2, Th Silom) Massively popular with the younger crowd, and among the most well known gay destinations in town, this place has pounding dance music, flamboyant costume parties and *gà-teu-i* cabaret at 11pm.

G.O.D. (Guys On Display; Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2632 8032; Soi 2/1, Th Silom; cover 280B; ☎ 11.30pm-late) The former Freeman has been reincarnated as this popular after-hours destination. Open late and, as the name suggests, not averse to a bit of shirtless dancing. Located on the tiny alley between Soi 2 and Soi Thaniya.

Kluen Saek (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2254 2962; 297 Th Sarasin) One of a strip of bars along Th Sarasin that is becoming gayer by the day, Kluen Saek is barely able to contain a mixed crowd of ravers in its cool grey grip.

Shela (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2254 6463; 106/12-13 Soi Lang Suan (cnr Soi Lang Suan & Soi Sarasin) Owned by the same ladies who run Zeta, Shela draws a slightly more mature crowd with live music, a pool table and food. Women only.

Telephone (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 3279; 114/11-13 Soi 4, Th Silom) Bangkok's oldest gay bar-restaurant still features telephones so that patrons can 'ring' each other. The cafélike seating in front is probably the best place from which to watch the virtual gay pride parade that is Soi 4.

Zeta (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2203 0994; 29 Royal City Ave (RCA), off Phra Ram IX) This exceedingly popular lesbian club on the quiet end of RCA is packed to the gills with young *torm-dee* on weekends. Women only.

ENTERTAINMENT

Bangkok is a mature metropolis with lots of entertainment options for both culture vultures and cosmopolitan clubbers. To get an idea of what's going on, check out the entertainment listings in the daily *Bangkok Post* and *Nation* newspapers, the excellent weekly listings rag *BK* and the monthly *Bangkok 101*.

Discos & Nightclubs

Fickleness is the reigning characteristic of the Bangkok club scene, and venues that were pulling in thousands a night just last year are often only vague memories today. What used to be a rotating cast of hotspots has slowed to a few standards on the sois off Sukhumvit, Silom, Ratchadapisek and RCA (Royal City Ave), the city's 'entertainment zones' that qualify for the 2am closing time. You'll need an ID to prove you're legal (20 years old); they'll card even the grey hairs. Cover charges run as high as 600B and usually include a drink. Most places don't begin filling up until midnight.

To get an idea of current happenings around town, go check out *Bangkok Spin*

(www.bangkokspin.com), as well as the entertainment press, in particular *BK* and the *Bangkok Post's* Friday supplement, *Guru*, and the *Bangkok Recorder's* online mag (www.bangkokrecorder.com).

808 Club (Map pp70-1; www.808bangkok.com; Block C, Royal City Ave (RCA), off Th Phra Ram IX) Named after the infamous beat machine, this club fills the space previously occupied by Astra and looks to follow the tradition of big-name DJs and insanely crowded events.

Club Culture (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 89497 8422; www.club-culture-bkk.com; Th Sri Ayuthaya; ☎ 7pm-late Wed, Fri & Sat) Housed in a unique 40 year-old Thai-style building and run by the same folks who ran RCA's popular Astra, Culture is the biggest recent arrival on Bangkok's club scene.

Dance Fever (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2247 4295; 71 Th Ratchadaphisek) Like taking a time machine back to the previous decade, Dance Fever is a holdover from the days when a night out in Bangkok meant live stage shows, wiggling around the whisky set table, and neon, neon, neon.

Nang Len (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2711 6564; 217 Soi 63 (Ekamai), Th Sukhumvit) Nang Len (literally 'Sit

Around') is a ridiculously popular sardine tin of live music and uni students on popular Th Ekamai. Get in before 10pm or you're not getting in at all.

Superfly (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2633 9990; cnr Phra Ram 4 & Soi 1, Th Sala Daeng) The gargantuan dance hall is a decent middle ground in the jungle of Bangkok clubs; not achingly trendy, with music that the majority of us can shake to.

Although not as hot as it once was, Soi 4 off Th Silom still boasts a few intimate dance clubs, such as **Tapas Room** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 4737; 114/17-18 Soi 4, Th Silom). A few streets down, **Lucifer** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 0234 6902; 76/1-3 Soi Patpong 1; ☎ 9pm-1am) is a less devilish alternative to Patpong's ping-pong shows.

Live Music

Bangkok's live-music scene is fairly diverse: international jazz in the high-end hotels, blues in funky closet pubs, Thai pop in shiny kitchen clubs and Thai folk in cosy art bars. The website www.bangkokgiguide.com lists the city's music calendar. The Bangkok symphony plays every Sunday (5.30pm to 7.30pm) between mid-December and mid-February at Lumpini Park; see www.bangkoksymphony.net.

Brown Sugar (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2250 1825; 231/19-20 Th Sarasin) Cosy Brown Sugar mingles jazz musicians and listeners into an intimate embrace of good times and good music. The pub is the longest-running spot along a strip of bars on Th Sarasin, just north of Lumpini Park.

Gazebo (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 0705; 3rd fl, 44 Th Chakrapong) Like an oasis above Th Khao San, this Middle Eastern-themed pub draws in backpackers and locals alike with fun cover bands and fez-topped sheesha attendants. Its elevated location also appears to lend it some leniency with the city's strict closing times.

our pick Living Room (Map p82; ☎ 02 649 8888; Level 1, Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, 250 Th Sukhumvit) Every night this deceptively bland hotel lounge transforms into one of the city's best venues for live jazz, attracting a dedicated following of regulars. Contact ahead of time to see which sax master or hide hitter is currently in town.

Saxophone Pub (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2246 5472; 3/8 Th Phayathai) A live-music institution, good old Saxophone is worth the trip from your Banglamphu buffer zone for jazz, blues and beyond.

Tawan Daeng German Brewhouse (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2678 1114; 462/61 Th Narathiwat Ratchanakharin, cnr Th Phra Ram III) Despite its hangar-like girth, this Thai version of a Bavarian beer hall manages to pack 'em in just about every night with live music and fresh beer.

Cabaret

Bangkok is famous with tourists for its *gà-teu-i* (ladyboys; see p127 for more details) cabarets that are basically lip-synching dance routines performed by Thailand's third gender.

Calypso Cabaret (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2653 3960-2; 1st fl, Asia Hotel, 296 Th Phayathai; tickets 1000B; ☎ shows 8.15pm & 9.45pm) Bangkok's most popular *gà-teu-i* cabaret, this place is half Moulin Rouge, half Broadway show.

Mambo Cabaret (Map p82; ☎ 0 2259 5715; Washington Sq, Th Sukhumvit btwn Soi 22 & Soi 24; tickets 600-800B; ☎ shows 8.30pm & 10pm) This is a less flashy operation than at the Calypso, but the show is still entertaining.

Cinemas

You might think that only film fanatics would want to see a movie overseas, but Bangkok's love of excess makes the glitzy cinemas worth a visit in their own right. VIP seats ring in at a mere 500B and include reclining seats (some with electric massage) and seatside service. Most cinemas are housed in the big shopping centres around Th Phra Ram I and Th Ploenchit. Hollywood blockbusters in English, and Thai movies (sometimes subtitled in English), are the usual staples. Many of Bangkok's cultural centres also screen movies for the benefit of expats, and various annual film festivals ensure going to the movies is a social event.

The royal anthem is played before every screening and you are expected to stand respectfully.

For movie listings and show times, see the *Bangkok Post* or www.movieseer.com; some reviews of Thai movies are available at www.thaicinema.org.

EGV Cinema (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2812 9999; www.egv.com; Siam Discovery Center, cnr Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai) Bangkok's poshest cinema shows international and Thai films in English.

SF Cinema City (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2611 6444; www.sfcinemacity.com; 7th fl, MBK Centre, Th Phra Ram I) This place has comfortable VIP seats and shows international blockbusters in English and Thai films with English subtitles.

Lido Multiplex (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2252 6498; Siam Sq, Soi 2) This retro cinema shows some European and art house films as well as US blockbusters.

SFX Cinema (Map p82; ☎ 0 2260 9333; www.sfxcinema.com; Emporium Shopping Centre, Th Sukhumvit) This is a convenient cinema for the Sukhumvit hotels.

House (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2641 5177; www.houserama.com; 3rd fl, UMB Cinema, RCA, Th Phra Ram IX) Arty and avant-garde flicks are on the menu here.

Go-Go Bars

Bangkok is legendary for its go-go bars, and lonely foreign men still flock here in huge numbers to take advantage of Thailand's liberal attitude towards love for sale. For some people this is paradise, for others it's pitiable.

Most visitors to Bangkok put in an appearance at Soi Patpong 1 and Soi Patpong 2, between Th Silom and Th Surawong, for the spectacle, but few stay here for any longer than it takes to buzz around the pirated goods market and sink a cold beer at one of the circus-like 'sex' shows.

These days the serious sex business has mainly shifted to the streets off Th Sukhumvit, particularly Soi Cowboy (Soi 23) and Nana Plaza (Soi 4), and the long strip of vast 'entertainment complexes' along Th Ratchadaphisek, which cater to an Asian clientele.

Moo-ay Tai

No-holds-barred *moo-ay tai* (often spelt *muay thai*) can be seen at two boxing stadiums in central Bangkok. Admission fees vary according to seating. Ringside seats are the most expensive and where the VIPs usually sit, backpackers usually opt for the 2nd-class seats while die-hard *moo-ay tai* fans bet and cheer from the bleachers in 3rd class. At some programmes a ticket mafia tries to steer every tourist into buying an expensive ringside seat. Don't believe anyone who says that the cheap seats are sold out unless you hear it directly from a window ticket vendor.

Sanam Muay Lumpinee (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2252 8765; Th Phra Ram IV; admission 1000-2000B; ☎ bouts 6.30-11pm Tue & Fri, 5-8pm & 8.30-11.30pm Sat) This large, popular stadium is close to Lumpini Park.

Sanam Muay Ratchadamnoen (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2281 4205; 1 Th Ratchadamnoen Nok; admission 1000-2000B; ☎ bouts 5-8pm & 8.30pm-midnight Sun, 6.30-11.30pm Mon, Wed & Thu) The best-matched bouts are held here on Thursday nights.

Theatre

Several theatres around town show modern and classical Thai theatrical performances, including traditional *lá-kon* and *kôhn* performances (Thai mask dramas based on stories from the Ramayana) and modern plays. The following theatres are worth a look.

National Theatre (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2221 0171; Th Ratchini, Ko Ratanakosin; tickets 40-80B) Thailand's National Theatre is the country's centre stage for Thai drama and *kôhn*. Exhibitions of Thai classical dancing and music are held on the last Friday and Saturday of each month.

Patravadi Theatre (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2412 7287; www.patravaditheatre.com; 69/1 Soi Wat Rakhang, Thonburi; tickets 300-800B; ☎ shows 7pm Fri-Sun) Patravadi is Bangkok's leading modern-dance venue. The theatre is also the primary venue for the Bangkok International Fringe Festival, held in January or February.

Sala Chalermkrung (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2222 0434; www.salachalermkrung.com; 66 Th Charoen Krung, Chinatown; tickets 1000-2000B; ☎ shows 8.30pm Fri & Sat) This art-deco Bangkok landmark, a former cinema dating back to 1933, is one of the few remaining places to witness *kôhn*.

Thailand Cultural Centre (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2247 0028; www.thaiculturalcenter.com; Th Ratchadaphisek btwn Th Thiam Ruammit & Th Din Daeng) Bangkok's primary performing arts facility, the Thailand Cultural Centre is the home of the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra and hosts the International Festival of Dance and Music in September.

SHOPPING

Hope you brought your credit card; hardly a street corner in Bangkok is free from a vendor, hawker or impromptu stall, and the city is also home to one of the world's largest outdoor markets and Southeast Asia's largest mall. There's something here for just about everybody, and often the real and the knock-off live happily side-by-side. Although the tourist brochures tend to tout the upscale malls, Bangkok still lags slightly behind Singapore and Hong Kong in this area, and the open-air markets are where the best deals and most original items are found.

Antiques

Real Thai antiques are rare and costly, but many shops sell good reproductions, made using traditional techniques, which are far cheaper. The most popular genuine antiques are woodcarvings, furniture, celadon porce-

BUYING BUDDHAS

The government of Thailand places strict controls on the export of Buddha images and antiques. Reproductions of antiques and modern Buddha images can be exported with a permit from the Fine Arts Department (Map pp72-3). You should contact the **Office of Archaeology and National Museums** (☎ 0 2226 1661) for more information. If you don't have the appropriate paperwork and a Buddha image is discovered in your bags when you are leaving the country, it will be confiscated.

lain and lacquerware. Be warned that many shops in Thailand sell souvenirs made of turtle shell and ivory, in spite of international treaties restricting the sale of these items. If you try to bring these into Australia, Europe, the UK or the USA, they will be confiscated.

You might need a permit to take antiques out of Thailand, and you'll definitely need one for any Buddha images – see the boxed text, above, for details.

House of Chao (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2635 7188; 9/1 Th Decho) This three-storey antique shop, located (appropriately) in an antique house, has everything necessary to deck out your fantasy colonial-era mansion.

River City (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2237 0077; 23 Th Yotha, off Th Charoen Krung; ☎ many shops close Sun) This multistorey centre is an all-in-one stop for old-world Asiana, much of it too large to fit in the bag of most travellers. There's a free boat service from Saphan Taksin pier. Note that any Angkorian artefacts are most likely reproductions or being sold illegally, as the export of artefacts from Cambodia is banned.

Cameras & Electronics

Contrary to popular belief, Bangkok is not a good place to invest in electronic gadgetry. Import taxes make the prices probably more than you'd pay at home, and the selection doesn't compare with that of places such as Tokyo or Hong Kong. Where the city does excel is in the grey-market trade of pirated software and DIY recycling of computer peripherals.

Pantip Plaza (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2656 5030; 604 Th Phetburi) The best place to browse for tech gear and software, Pantip has five storeys of computer stores and dozens of stalls selling

computers and peripherals (both genuine and openly pirated software). **IT City** (☎ 0 2656 5030), on the 5th floor of the plaza, is a reliable computer megastore that is used to providing VAT refund forms for tourists.

Niks/Nava Import Export (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2235 2929; www.niksthailand.com; 166 Th Silom; ☎ 11am-4pm Mon-Fri) Thailand's biggest camera importer sells all types of professional equipment, including Nikon, Mamiya and Rollei. It's also the best place to bring your sick Nikon for a check-up.

Sunny Camera (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2236 8365; 144/23 Th Silom; ☎ Mon-Sat) Dedicated Nikon-heads should head directly to Sunny Camera to satisfy their gear addiction. There are other branches on the 3rd floor of MBK (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2620 9293) and at 1267-1267/1 Th Charoen Krung (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2235 2123).

Clothing

Once you realise everything you packed completely disagrees with Thailand's tropical heat, you'll need Bangkok's fashion-focused stores to fill the gaps. Clothes and food are typically sold side-by-side in Thai markets, but the sizes are far too petite for most foreigners; Pratunam and Chatuchak Weekend Market (see p108) are notable exceptions, selling sizes and styles geared towards Westerners.

Central World Plaza (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2635 1111; cnr Th Phra Ram I & Th Ratchadamri, Ploenchit) Boasting seven floors of unadulterated commercial bliss, we fancy the concrete-floored Section F that features cool domestic brands with barely pronounceable names such as Playground! Manga, Qconceptstore and Flynw III.

Gaysorn Plaza (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2656 1149; cnr Th Ploenchit & Th Ratchadamri) More haute than the catwalk, Gaysorn is a manicured showroom for vogue fashions. The 2nd-floor 'Urban Street Chic' zone highlights the handiwork of local designers.

It's Happened To Be A Closet (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2629 5271; 32 Th Khao San; ☎ 1-11pm) Bright colours and bold patterns rule among the Thai designed and made togs, and the elegant multistorey shop even features a restaurant and café, a hair and nail salon, and private rooms for movie viewing.

Mahboonkong Centre (MBK) (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2620-9111; cnr Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai) The energy of a Thai market is in full force in Bangkok's most popular mall. Just about everything is

available here, and the 6th floor holds one of the city's best food courts (see p101).

Marco Tailors (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2251 7633; 430/33 Soi 7, Siam Sq; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) Dealing solely in men's suits, this longstanding and reliable tailor has a wide selection of banker-sensibility woods and cottons.

Siam Discovery Center (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2658 1000-19; Th Phra Ram I) Clothes, furniture and books round out Siam Discovery's subdued corridors. The mall is also, somewhat incongruously, one of the best places in town to stock up outdoor gear. Within tent-pitching distance of each other on the 3rd floor are Pro Cam-Fis, Equinox Shop, Rockcamp Climbing Shop and the North Face.

Gems & Jewellery

Bangkok is a major centre for the gem trade, but amateurs should tread very carefully as many gem dealers are notorious for their underhanded sales techniques. Flawed or even glass gems are passed off as top quality, and many stores offer big commissions to tuk-tuk drivers and other touts who bring in foreigners off the street or offer phoney 'sales' to entice customers (for more information see p390). Above all beware of the infamous gem scam, where shopkeepers try to persuade customers to buy large quantities of gems to sell at a profit back home. Two longstanding and reputable shops are:

Johnny's Gems (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2224 4065; 199 Th Fuang Nakhon; ☞ Mon-Sat) A long-time favourite of Bangkok expats, Johnny's Gems is a reliable name in an unreliable business.

Uthai's Gems (Map pp80-1; ☎ 02 253 8582; 28/7 Soi Ruam Rudi, Th Ploenchit; ☞ Mon-Sat) With 40 years in the business, Uthai's fixed prices and good service, including a money-back guarantee, make him a popular choice among expats.

Handicrafts

Handicrafts are excellent value in Bangkok. The best place to start is Chatuchak Weekend Market (right), followed by the Suan Lum Night Bazaar (right), but the street markets on Th Khao San, Th Sukhumvit and Th Silom are also well stocked.

Some reliable shops selling handicrafts:

Rasi Sayam (Map p82; ☎ 0 2262 0729; 82 Soi 33, Th Sukhumvit) A step above Chatuchak, but not quite a Th Silom area antique shop, Rasi Sayam stocks a classy selection of handmade *objets d'art*. Particularly helpful are the in-

formative tags that describe the origin of your potential purchase.

Silom Village Trade Center (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 4448; 286 Th Silom) This complex of teak houses has been converted into a handicrafts market, with some decent open-air restaurants as well as nightly dance performances.

Thai Home Industries (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 1736; 35 Soi Oriental) A visit to this temple-like building is like discovering an abandoned attic of Asian booty. Despite the odd assortment of items and lack of order (not to mention the dust), it's heaps more fun than the typically faceless Bangkok handicraft shop.

Markets

In every tourist area, there are day and night markets for almost 24-hour souvenir shopping. Polite bargaining is expected and prices at Th Khao San market are more reasonable than at more upscale markets in Patpong, Th Silom and Th Sukhumvit.

Chatuchak Weekend Market (Jatujak Market; Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2272 4440; Th Phahonyothin; ☞ 6am-6pm Sat & Sun) This gigantic market is the daddy of all Thai markets, with thousands of vendors selling everything from live rabbits to hill-tribe handicrafts.

Around 200,000 people mob the market every Saturday and Sunday. Pickpockets are common so keep an eye on your belongings. Many people make a day of it and eat at one of the many excellent covered restaurants and food stalls around the market. It's easy to get lost along the endless rows of covered booths, so a map can be helpful – *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok* has a good Chatuchak panel. The best way to get to Chatuchak is by taking the Skytrain to Mo Chit or Metro to Kamphaeng Phet.

Suan Lum Night Bazaar (Map pp72-3; Th Phra Ram IV; ☞ 6pm-midnight) If you aren't in Bangkok for a weekend, Suan Lum is a fine alternative to Chatuchak. It is a huge government-sponsored night market with thousands of stalls selling slightly pricey modern Thai souvenirs, handicrafts and a few antiques.

Pak Khlong Market (Map pp76-7; off Th Maharat near Tha Saphan Phut (Memorial Bridge); ☞ 9pm-late) Orchids might not be on your gift-giving list, but Bangkok's wholesale flower market is a fascinating destination for flora lovers and people watchers. Keep an eye out for *poo-ang mah-lai* (flower garlands) that are offered to sacred Buddhas by merit-makers.

Pratunam Market (Map pp80-1; cnr Th Phetchaburi & Th Ratchaprarop) A virtual jungle of markets and shops that extends north from Th Phetchaburi, Pratunam is the paragon of the Thai market.

Religious Paraphernalia

Th Bamrung Muang, near Wat Suthat, is lined with dozens of emporia selling massive bronze Buddha statues and other votive objects used in Buddhist rituals.

To buy traditional Buddhist amulets, visit the amulet markets, see the boxed text, p86, or try at Wat Mahathat and Wat Ratchanatda (p85).

Charoen Chaikarnchang (Map pp74-5; ☎ 0 2222 4800; 87 Soi Nava, Bamrung Muang) This is easily the largest and most impressive religious shop in the area. The workshop in the back produces gigantic bronze Buddha images for wát all over Thailand.

Scuba Diving Supplies

Most of Bangkok's dive shops are located around Th Sukhumvit.

Dive Indeed (Map p82; ☎ 0 2665 7471; www.diveindeed.com; 14/2 Soi 21, Th Sukhumvit)

Dive Master (Map p82; ☎ 0 2259 3191; www.dive-master.net; 16 Asoke Court, Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit)

Dive Supply (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2354 4815; www.dive-supply.com; 457/4 Th Sri Ayuthaya)

Larry's Dive Center, Bar & Grill (Map p82; ☎ 0 2663 4563; www.larrysdive.com; 8/3 Soi 22, Th Sukhumvit)

Planet Scuba (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2261 4412/3; www.planetscuba.net; 666 Th Sukhumvit)

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Bangkok has two main airports. Opened in late 2006, **Suvarnabhumi International Airport** (☎ 0 2132 1888; www.2.airportthai.co.th) is the vast glass and concrete construction 30km east of central Bangkok that acts as the main international airport. After rather a lot of teething problems (see the boxed text, p32), at most times Suvarnabhumi (pronounced *sù-wan-ná-poom*) works fairly efficiently. The unofficial www.bangkokairportonline.com site has good, more up-to-date information and real-time details of airport arrivals and departures.

Don Muang Airport (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2535 1111; www.2.airportthai.co.th) is 25km north of the city centre and after being temporarily retired it now serves some, but not all, domestic routes.

For hotels near the airports, see p98 for details. For transport details to the airports, see p110. Many airline offices appear on the various Bangkok maps.

Bus

A vast network of public and private bus services fan out from Bangkok all over the kingdom. Buses come in several varieties (see p411 for details). Ordinary and air-conditioned public buses are run by Baw Khaw Saw, the state-run bus company, which has three terminals around Bangkok. You can check departure times and fares at www.transport.co.th/Eng/HomeEnglish.htm, though it's not always completely up to date.

On all buses, and especially on buses catering to tourists and running to the beaches and islands in the south, keep valuables on your person or within reach; see p412 for details of bus scams.

PRIVATE BUS

The best private buses leave from the government bus stations (see below); tickets should be booked at the terminals themselves, not through a travel agent. It is not recommended you book tickets for pick-up at your hotel or from a tourist centre, particularly along Th Khao San. These services aren't always as prompt, fast, comfortable or safe as promised. Incidents of theft are also quite common.

See p411 and the regional chapters for more information about bus travel in Thailand.

PUBLIC BUS

There are three main public bus terminals in Bangkok:

Eastern Bus Terminal (Ekamai; Map p82; ☎ 0 2391 6846; Soi 40, Th Sukhumvit) Buses to cities on or near the eastern gulf coast such as Pattaya, Rayong, Chanthaburi and Trat. The Ekamai Skytrain station is right by the terminal.

Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal (Mo Chit; Map pp70-1; ☎ northern office 0 2936 2852 ext 311/442, northeastern office 0 2936 2852 ext 611/448; Th Phahonyothin) This terminal is just north of Chatuchak Park (and the Weekend Market), and all buses to the north and northeast leave from here. From Mo Chit Skytrain station, you can take an ordinary bus 3; alternatively you can catch bus 3 from Th Phra Athit in Banglamphu.

Southern Bus Terminal (Sai Tai Mai; Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2435 1200; cnr Th Boromratchachonanee & Th Phuttamonthon 1, Chim Phli) Across Saphan Phra Pinklao in the far western suburbs, this new and refreshingly well organised station is the departure point for buses to all

points south – hello Phuket, Surat Thani, Krabi, Hat Yai – as well as buses to Kanchanaburi and western Thailand. You can reach the station on bus 503 from Th Phra Athit.

Fares listed here are for government-run services from the Southern bus terminal that have air-con. Private companies also offer more expensive services on most of these routes:

| Destination | Price | Duration | Frequency |
|---------------------|----------|----------|--------------------------------|
| Chumphon | 211-500B | 7hr | 5 daily |
| Hat Yai | 640-950B | 14hr | 10 daily |
| Hua Hin | 99-171B | 3½hr | half-hourly |
| Ko Samui | 337-660B | 15hr | 6-8 daily |
| Krabi | 357-710B | 12hr | 5 daily |
| Nakhon Si Thammarat | 353-705B | 12-13hr | 7 daily |
| Pattaya | 125B | 2hr | half-hourly |
| Phetchaburi | 80-120B | 2½hr | every 20 minutes 9.20am-6pm |
| Phuket | 596-900B | 13-14hr | 10 daily |
| Ranong | 357-665B | 10hr | 6 daily |
| Satun | 433-800B | 14hr | 4 daily |
| Songkhla | 437-870B | 15hr | 4 daily |
| Surat Thani | 295-590B | 11hr | 7 daily |
| Trang | 377-750B | 14hr | 6 daily |

Places on the eastern gulf coast are served by long-haul buses from the Eastern bus terminal. Rayong and Ban Phe are used for connections to Ko Samet and Chanthaburi, and Trat for Ko Chang.

| Destination | Price | Duration | Frequency |
|-------------|-------|----------|------------------------|
| Ban Phe | 152B | 3½ hr | hourly 5am-8pm |
| Chanthaburi | 194B | 4 hr | hourly 4.30am-midnight |
| Pattaya | 117B | 2 hr | hourly 5am-10pm |
| Rayong | 152B | 3½ hr | hourly |
| Trat | 250B | 5 hr | hourly 5am-midnight |

Train

Centrally located just southeast of Chinatown, historic **Hualamphong train station** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 0 2220 4334, information & advance booking 1690; www.railway.co.th; Th Phra Ram IV) is Bangkok's – and indeed Thailand's – main rail hub and the station you'll use when heading south. Ordinary, rapid and express trains depart for Hua Hin, Surat Thani, Trang, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Hat Yai and then on to Malaysia. Ignore touts at the station who try to steer you towards travel agents (frequently using the name

'TAT'); it's better to book all train tickets directly at the station ticket desks or through a reputable agent. For more details on train travel in Thailand, see p417.

Infrequent trains to western Thailand (including Kanchanaburi) leave from **Bangkok Noi train station** (Map pp72-3; Thonburi), across the river from Banglamphu.

GETTING AROUND

Getting around Bangkok easily all depends on where you are, where you're going and what time it is. In the new part of town, you'll rely primarily on Skytrain and meter taxis. Taxis are cheap but during the many rush hours they can be excruciatingly slow. The rush hours are from about 7.30am to 10am and 5pm to 7.30pm. On Friday nights traffic in Bangkok is an immovable force of nature between about 4.30pm and 9.30pm. At these times the Skytrain, Metro, *klong* boat or river ferry are all better options.

If the traffic is bad and there isn't a non-road alternative, you might as well move painfully slowly in a bus as a taxi.

To/From the Airport

You can travel by taxi, bus and soon Skytrain between Suvarnabhumi and Bangkok. There are fewer services to Don Muang.

SUVARNABHUMI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT Airport Bus & Minivans

Airport Express runs four useful routes between Suvarnabhumi and Bangkok city. They operate from 5am to midnight for a flat 150B fare, meaning the price of a taxi will be comparable for two or more people heading to central Bangkok, but more expensive if you're going to Banglamphu. The Airport Express counter is near entrance 8 on level 1. Routes stop at Skytrain stations, major hotels and other landmarks.

AE-1 to Silom By expressway via Pratunam, Central World shopping centre, Ratchadamri Skytrain, Lumpini Park, Th Saladaeng, Patpong, Plaza Hotel and others, finishing at Sala Daeng Skytrain.

AE-2 to Banglamphu By expressway via Th Phetchaburi Soi 30, Democracy Monument, Royal Hotel, Th Phra Athit, Th Phra Sumen, Th Khao San.

AE-3 to Sukhumvit Soi 52, Eastern Bus Terminal, Soi 34, 24, 20, 18, 10, 6, Central Chidlom, Central World, Soi Nana.

AE-4 to Hualamphong train station Via Victory Monument, Phayathai Skytrain, Siam Sq, MBK, Chulalongkorn University.

If heading to the airport from Banglamphu, hotels and guesthouses can book you on air-conditioned minivans. These pick up from the front door and cost about 180B per person (you're better off using the AE bus).

Local Transport

With more time and less money, you could take the Skytrain to On Nut (40B), then from near the market entrance opposite Tesco take the BTS minivan (25B, about 40 minutes; look for the yellow BTS 552 Suvarnabhumi on the window) to the airport.

Several other air-conditioned local buses serve Suvarnabhumi for a 35B flat fare. Most useful are:

Bus 551 Siam Paragon Via Victory Monument.

Bus 552 Klong Toei Via Sukhumvit 101 and On Nut Skytrain.

Buses 554 & 555 Don Muang Airport

Bus 556 Southern Bus Terminal Via Democracy Monument (for Th Khao San) and Thammasat University.

Intercity buses to places including Pattaya, Rayong and Trat stop at the Public Transportation Centre, reached via a free shuttle from the airport.

Skytrain

From early 2009 (insha'Allah) a new Skytrain line will run from downstairs at the airport to a huge new City Air Terminal (Map pp72-3) in central Bangkok, near Soi Asoke and Th Phetchaburi. There will be an express service (the pink line) that will take 15 minutes, and a local service (the red line) taking 27 minutes.

Taxi

Ignore the touts and all the yellow signs pointing you to 'limousines' (which cost 800B flat), walk outside on the arrivals level and join the fast-moving queue for a public taxi. Cabs booked through this desk should always use their meter, but they often try their luck so insist by saying 'meter, please'. You must also pay a 50B official airport surcharge and reimburse drivers for any toll charges (up to 60B); drivers will usually ask your permission to use the tollway. Depending on traffic, a taxi to Asoke/Silom/Banglamphu should cost 200-250B/300-350B/350-425B per vehicle.

DON MUANG AIRPORT

There are no longer any express airport buses to/from Don Muang.

Bus

Slow, crowded public bus 59 stops on the highway in front of the airport and carries on to Banglamphu, passing Th Khao San and the Democracy Monument; luggage is not allowed. Buses with air-con are faster, and you might actually get a seat. Useful air-conditioned routes:

Bus 510 Victory Monument, Southern Bus Terminal.

Bus 513 Th Sukhumvit, Eastern Bus Terminal.

Bus 29 Northern Bus Terminal, Victory Monument, Siam Sq and Hualamphong train station.

Taxi

As at Suvarnabhumi public taxis leave from outside the arrivals hall and there is a 50B airport charge added to the meter fare. Fares are lower to Banglamphu but about the same to Sukhumvit and Silom.

Train

The walkway that crosses from Terminal 1 to the Amari Airport Hotel also provides access to Don Muang train station, which has trains to Hualamphong train station every one to 1½ hours from 4am to 11.30am and then roughly every hour from 2pm to 9.30pm (3rd-class ordinary/express 5/10B, one hour).

Boat

Although many of Bangkok's *klong* have been paved over, there is still plenty of transport along and across Chao Phraya River and up adjoining canals.

RIVER FERRIES

The **Chao Phraya Express Boat Co** (☎ 0 2623 6001; www.chaophrayaboat.co.th) operates the main ferry service along the Chao Phraya. The central pier is known as Sathorn or Saphan Taksin, and connects to the Skytrain's Saphan Taksin station, Riverside. Each pier is numbered consecutively from Sathorn.

Ferries run four stops south to Ratburana (S4), though tourists rarely use these. Much more useful are the services running to and from Nonthaburi (N30) in northern Bangkok; the maps in this book show the piers and their numbers. Fares are cheap and range from 10B to 34B. There are four different services, differentiated by the colour of the flags on their roofs. To avoid an unwanted trip halfway to Nonthaburi be sure to keep an eye on those flags.

Local Line (no flag) The all-stops service, operating every 15 to 20 minutes mornings and evenings.

Orange Express Stops at N1, N3, N4, N5, N6, N8, N9, N10, N12, N13, N15, N18, N21, N22, N24, N30. The most common service, departing every five to 20 minutes depending on the time of day.

Yellow Express Stops at N3, N5, N10, N12, N15, N22, N24, N30. Departing every five to 20 minutes depending on the time of day.

Blue Express Nonthaburi express, stopping N10 and N30 only. Just a couple of services in the morning 7am to 7.30am and evening at 5.35pm and 6.05pm.

A special tourist boat runs between Phra Athit in Banglamphu and Sathorn (Central Pier) every 30 minutes between 9.30am and 3pm. A one-day pass for unlimited travel costs 120B. There is also a boat that connects Tha Phra Athit with the Royal Barges Museum in Thonburi every hour from 10am to 3.35pm for 50B.

All this is best illustrated in the small, folding maps that detail routes, prices and times and are sometimes available at the ferry piers – ask for one – or on boards at the piers.

There are also dozens of cross-river ferries, which charge 3.50B and run every few minutes until late at night.

KLONG BOATS

Canal taxi boats run along Khlong Banglamphu and then Khlong Saen Saep (Banglamphu to Ramkhamhaeng) and are an easy way to get from Banglamphu to Jim Thompson's House, the Siam Square shopping centres (get off at Tha Hua Chang for both), and other points further east along Th Sukhumvit – after a mandatory change of boat at Tha Pratunam. These boats are mostly used by daily commuters and pull into the piers for just a few seconds – jump straight on or you'll be left behind. Fares range from 7B to 20B.

Bus

You can save a lot of money travelling in Bangkok by using the public buses, which are run by the **Bangkok Mass Transit Authority** (☎ 0 2246 4262; www.bmta.co.th); the website has incredibly useful information on all bus routes. Bangkok buses are cheap: air-conditioned fares typically start at 10B or 12B and increase depending on distance. Fares for ordinary (fan-con) buses start at 7B or 8B. Most of the bus lines run between 5am and 10pm or 11pm, except for the 'all-

night' buses, which run from 3am or 4am to midmorning.

Bangkok Bus Map, by Roadway, available at Asia Books (p67), is the most up-to-date route map available. Have small change and be careful with your belongings when riding on Bangkok buses. Bag-slashers and pickpockets are common on ordinary buses, particularly around Hualamphong train station.

Car

Renting a car just to drive around Bangkok is not a real good idea. Parking is impossible, traffic is frustrating, road rules can be mysterious and the alternative – taxis – are ubiquitous. If you are thinking of hiring a car to visit southern Thailand, you might be better off going south by plane or train and hiring a car when you get there. But if you still want to give it a go, all the big car-hire companies have offices in Bangkok and at Suvarnabhumi airport. Most can also provide chauffeur service (600B a day, 8am to 6pm), which gives local drivers a job and means you don't have to navigate, park or deal with overzealous police. Car-hire rates start at around 1500B per day for a small car. See p412 for more information on driving in Thailand.

Reliable car-rental companies include:

Avis Rent-A-Car (☎ 0 2255 5300; www.avisthailand.com; 2/12 Th Withayu) Also at Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel (Map pp80–1).

Budget Car Rental (Map pp70–1; ☎ 0 2203 9200; www.budget.co.th; 19/23 Bldg A, Royal City Ave, Th Phetburi Tat Mai)

Hertz (Map pp80–1; ☎ 0 2654 1105; www.hertz.com; M Thai Tower, All Seasons Pl, 87 Th Withayu).

Metro (Subway) & Skytrain (BTS)

METRO (SUBWAY)

The first line of Bangkok's underground railway opened in 2004 and is operated by the **Metropolitan Rapid Transit Authority** (MRTA; www.mrta.co.th). Thais call the subway *rôt fai dâi din* or 'Metro'. At the north end (Bang Sue) it connects with Chatuchak (with access to the Mo Chit Skytrain station), Thailand Cultural Centre, Sukhumvit (with access to Asoke Skytrain station), Queen Sirikit Convention Centre, Lumpini Park and Silom (with access to Sala Daeng Skytrain station) and terminates at Hualamphong. Altogether there are 18 stations with four that link up with the Skytrain.

Future extensions will connect Hualamphong to Chinatown and Thonburi. Fares cost 15B to 39B; child and concession fares can be bought at ticket windows. The trains run every seven minutes from 6am to midnight, except during peak hours – 6am to 9am and 4.30pm to 7.30pm – when frequency is less than five minutes. The main advantage for visitors is that the Sukhumvit hotel area is now easily connected to Hualamphong train station and Chinatown at one end, and Chatuchak weekend market and the northern bus terminal at the Bang Sue end.

SKYTRAIN (BTS)

The **BTS Skytrain** (rôt fai fâh; ☎ 0 2617 6000; www.bts.co.th) allows you to soar above Bangkok's legendary traffic jams in air-conditioned comfort. Services are fast, efficient and relatively cheap, although you'll need to squeeze in during rush hours. There are two Skytrain lines, with another route to Suvarnabhumi airport scheduled for early 2009.

Silom Line Starting at National Stadium on Th Phra Ram I, near Siam Sq, it passes the Siam interchange station and bends around via the eastern section of Th Silom and western end of Th Sathon to finish (for now) at Saphan Taksin, on the river near at the intersection of Th Charoen Krung and Th Sathon. The final stop connects to the Chao Phraya river ferries (p111). A long-awaited extension across the river is due to come online in 2009.

Sukhumvit Line Running from On Nut, at distant Soi 81 of Th Sukhumvit, this line runs west right along Th Sukhumvit crossing over the Metro at Asoke. It continues into the shopping and commercial district and the main interchange station at Siam, where it meets the Silom line. From here the line turns north up to Mo Chit, near Chatuchak Weekend Market. Five more stations are to be built at the eastern end of the line.

Fares range from 15B to 40B and trains run from 6am to midnight. Ticket machines accept coins and notes; pick up change at the staffed kiosks. One-day (120B) passes are available, but the rechargeable cards (130B, with 100B travel and 30B card deposit) are more flexible.

Motorcycle Taxi

Motorcycle taxis serve two purposes in Bangkok. Most commonly and popularly

they form part of the public transport network, running from the corner of a main thoroughfare, such as Th Sukhumvit, to the far ends of soi that run off that thoroughfare. Riders wear coloured, numbered vests and gather at either end of their soi, usually charging about 10B for the trip (without a helmet unless you ask).

Their other purpose is as a means of beating the traffic. You tell your rider where you want to go, negotiate a price (from 20B for a short trip up to about 100B going across town), strap on the helmet (they will insist on this for longer trips) and say a prayer to whichever god you're into. Drivers range from responsible to kamikaze, but the average trip involves some time on the wrong side of the road and several near-death experiences. It's the sort of white-knuckle ride you'd pay good money for at Disneyland, but is all in a day's work for these riders. Comfort yourself in the knowledge that there are good hospitals nearby.

Taxi

Bangkok's thousands of taxis are some of the best value cabs on earth. Most are new, air-conditioned and have working seatbelts in the front seat but less often in the back. You can flag them down anywhere in the city centre. The meter charge is 35B for the first 2km, then 4.50B for the next 10km, 5B for 13km to 20km and 5.50B for any distance greater than 20km, plus a small standing charge in slow traffic. Freeway tolls – 25B to 70B depending on where you start – must be paid by the passenger. Because of high fuel prices, there is talk of raising taxi rates.

Taxi Radio (☎ 1681; www.taxiradio.co.th) and other 24-hour 'phone-a-cab' services are available for 20B above the metered fare.

During the morning and afternoon rush hours, taxis might refuse to go to certain destinations because of the traffic; if this happens, just try another cab. Around Th Khao San and other tourist areas, some cabbies might refuse to use the meter and try to charge a flat fee; if this happens just walk away and find another cab.

You can hire a taxi all day for 1500B to 2000B, depending on how much driving is involved. Taxis can also be hired for trips to Pattaya (1500B), Hua Hin (2300B) and Phetchaburi (1700B), among others; see www.taxiradio.co.th for an idea of fares.

Túk-Túk

Bangkok's iconic túk-túk (like motorised rickshaws) are used by Thais as a traffic-jumper or for short hops not worth using a taxi for. For foreigners, however, these emphysema-inducing machines are notorious for taking little 'detours' to commission-paying gem and silk shops and massage parlours. En route to 'special' temples, you'll meet helpful locals who will steer you to even more rip-off opportunities. See the boxed text, p83, for more details about túk-túk scams, and ignore anyone offering too-good-to-be-true 10B trips.

The other problem is that túk-túk drivers always ask for too much baht from foreigners (partly because few expats use them, and the drivers figure tourists don't know what is a fair price). Expect to be quoted a 100B fare, if not more, for even the shortest trip. Still, it's an iconic experience to travel by túk-túk so it's worth bargaining down to about 40B for a short trip, preferably at night, when the pollution won't sour your alfresco trip as much. Once you've had the experience, you'll find taxis are cheaper, cleaner, cooler and quieter.