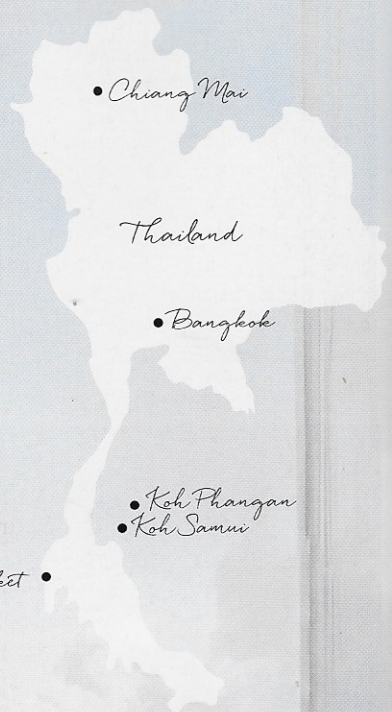


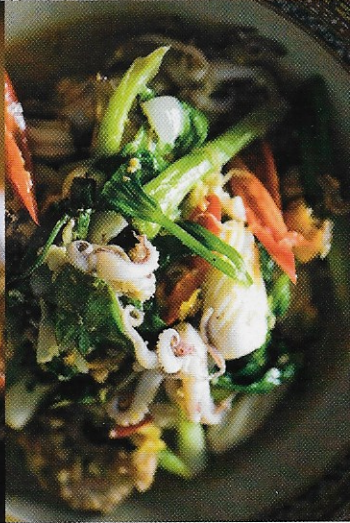
The Magic of Thailand

With fusion food, secluded beaches and some of the most stunning hotels in the world, Thailand has everything a traveller needs to relax and awaken. And the inspiration keeps flowing from there, through the nightlife, shopping and attractions.

WORDS BY SIMON N OSTHEIMER



outlooks mean a stay at Trisara is unforgettable.



STAY

Whether you're looking for a cliffside pool villa, a deluxe suite in the city or a lodge high in the mountains, Thailand has no shortage of high-end accommodation. On the island of Phuket, the most luxurious resorts can be found on the west coast, which boasts the best beaches and sunset views. One example is Trisara (trisara.com), an acclaimed property of 48 pool villas, all with jaw-dropping ocean outlooks.

Over on the east coast is Point Yamu by Como (comohotels.com), a sleek, minimalist haven perched over the incredible karst outcrops of Phang Nga Bay – the retreat even has its own private beach club on a nearby island. Just a short flight away is the island of Koh Samui, home to amazing resorts such as the Vana Belle, a Luxury Collection Resort (vanabellekohsamui.com) that overlooks scenic Chaweng Beach, and the InterContinental Samui Baan Taling Ngam Resort

(samui.intercontinental.com), where the rooms hug the cliff face. Just north on the island of Koh Phangan, Anantara Rasananda's (phangan-rasananda.anantara.com) 64 villas and suites – many with private pools – are mere steps from the sand at Thong Nai Pan Noi Beach. Up in Bangkok, visitors are spoiled for choice with the city's selection of five-star stays. Right at the top of them is the Siam (thesiamhotel.com), a superb urban retreat run by a multitalented Thai family, and designed by famed hotel architect Bill Bensley. If heritage is your thing, check into the Mandarin Oriental, known lovingly by locals simply as the Oriental (mandarinoriental.com), which has hosted illustrious guests by the shore of the Chao Phraya River for more than 130 years.

In the far north, a region still known in Thailand as Lanna after a long-vanished kingdom, 137 Pillars House (137pillarshouse.com) has its own colonial charm, with a

ON THE MENU Clockwise from opposite page: Breeze at Cape Yamu entices diners with open-air banquet tables; Trisara offers uninterrupted ocean views; the Siam hotel mixes Art Deco and Oriental styles; at Nahm, squid stir-fry and caramelised taro are elevated to art.

history as a local headquarters for the British-run Borneo Company. Outside of town is probably the best hotel in the country: the Four Seasons Chiang Mai (fourseasons.com/chiangmai), where an infinity pool faces a working rice paddy, water buffalo wander by and everything is taken care of before you even ask.

DINE

Thai food is one of the world's core cuisines, and it's no surprise that Bangkok delivers the best the country has to offer. For something a little low-key, head to Soul Food Mahanakorn (soulfoodmahanakorn.com), where a former food writer turned his passion into his profession, serving up refined

street food in a sophisticated setting. About half an hour away by taxi, you'll find Nahm (comohotels.com), where Australian-born chef David Thompson, who made his name in the early '90s at Sydney's Darley Street Thai, is at the forefront of the movement to elevate Thai food to the upper echelons of fine dining. At the always quirky Gaggan (eatatgaggan.com), Kolkata-raised chef and mad scientist Gaggan Anand prepares molecular Indian dishes in a whitewashed wooden house. Despite – or more likely because of – Anand's eccentricities, it was voted Asia's best restaurant in 2015. Meanwhile, leading the charge for Thai chefs is Ian Kittichai. At Issaya Siamese ►



TASTE OF THAILAND In Issaya's beanbag-strewn garden, diners enjoy international dishes and drinks such as jasmine flan and the Issaya cocktail. *Top right:* Wealthy jetsetters look no further than the luxurious Andaman Cruises for their Thailand explorations.

Club (*issaya.com*), he pairs contemporary cuisine with classic cocktails.

Of course, there's more to Thailand's dining scene than Bangkok, as proven by Aziamendi (*aziamendi.com*) just north of Phuket, where three-star Michelin chef Eneko Atxa, a native of the Basque Country, has recently passed the baton to rising talent Aisha Ibrahim, who has added her own Californian twists to his modernist menu. A few kilometres southeast is the inspirational Breeze at Cape Yamu (*breezecapecayamu.com*), famed for its Sunday brunch, where the French-Canadian team sit diners at one long table and serve dish after amazing dish in

DRINK

There are probably more "sky" bars in Bangkok than in any other city in the world, not least of which is Lebua Sky Bar (*lebua.com*). Featured in *Hangover 2*, the 250-metre-high perch offers a Hangoverini in honour of Bradley Cooper and company. For our money, though, the best views can be found at the Banyan Tree's Vertigo and Moon Bar (*banyantree.com*), where you drink and dine 61 floors up in the air. If you don't have a head for heights, then down at street level the Thai capital has a slew of other sophisticated venues. Leading the emerging scene of hidden, speakeasy-style bars is Havana Social



Cuba that is accessed via a telephone booth and a secret entry code. Inside, you're transported back 75 years, with a cocktail list of classics made with a twist, such as the Cuba Libre served with Coca-Cola-flavoured ice cubes.

Another revolution taking the city by storm is craft beer; a new venue seemingly opens every week. Down a quiet backstreet off trendy Ekkamai is one of the originators, Mikkeller (*mikkellerbangkok.com*), where you choose from a wall of boutique beers from around the world. Alternatively there's Craft (*craftbangkok.com*), where hipsters gather to discuss the world's best brews, then partake in fine whisky and cigars at the adjoining Whisgars (*whisgars.com*).

Of course, Thailand's drinking scene doesn't begin and end with Bangkok. At the stunning Baba Nest (*babaphuket.com*) in Phuket, you watch the sun set from a roof deck surrounded by an infinity pool, while at the sleek W Retreat Koh Samui, the rather chic Woo Bar (*starwoodhotels.com*) takes the concept further, placing sunken circular booths *inside* the water.

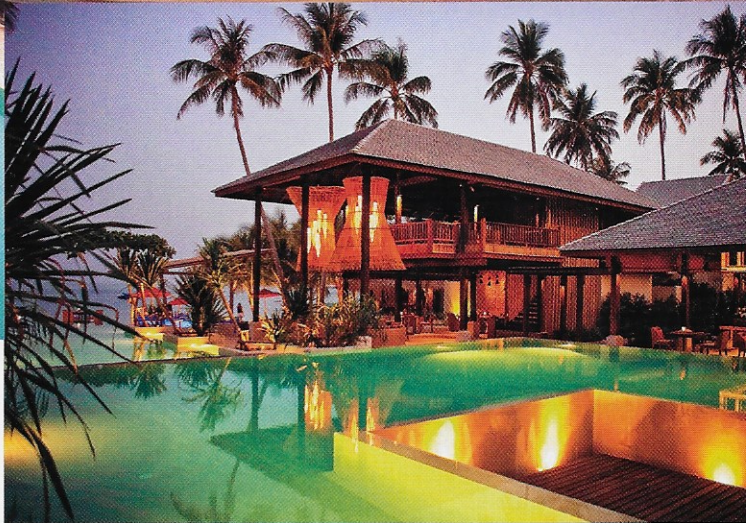
TOUR

With a lengthy coastline and

Thailand is often best seen by boat – river boat, that is. Anantara Cruises (*bangkok-cruises.anantara.com*) runs two restored rice barges on three-day trips up the Chao Phraya river, the lifeblood of Bangkok for more than 700 years. With a choice between a private or shared cruise – and breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner enjoyed onboard – crews take you upriver on a voyage of discovery, stopping at centuries-old temples and former palaces, and getting off to explore the magic that is Ayutthaya – Thailand's former capital.

For a faster experience, charter one of the boats of Andaman Cruises (*andaman-cruises.com*), which runs a fleet of 10 luxury yachts in the Andaman Sea, where they comfortably cruise in Phang Nga Bay, Krabi, the Similan Islands and Phi Phi. Back in Bangkok, explore the capital on a walking trip with Context (*contexttravel.com*), for which highly knowledgeable "docents" lead small groups on intimate explorations of the city such as the recommended "Bangkok Buzz, Night Markets and Street Food" three-hour tour.

But for the last word in luxury, there's only one choice:



SIAM DREAM Clockwise, from top right: Anantara Rasananda is the perfect place to bliss out with yoga, nature-inspired wellness rituals and some extra sleep; try your hand at Thai cooking at the restaurant; or explore the surrounding pools and marine reserve.

the classic two-night train journey from Singapore to Bangkok can't be beat, it's worth considering the newly introduced Ancient Kingdom of Lanna tour, which rolls from Bangkok up to Lampang and then on to Chiang Mai, with dinner and drinks served in a dedicated restaurant and nights spent in your own private cabin, all of which feature en suite bathrooms. Book through Wendy Wu Tours (wendywutours.com.au).

SHOP

Bangkok is full of stand-out shopping malls filled with famous brands. The best of the bunch is the newly opened Central Embassy (centralembassy.com), built on the former grounds of the British Embassy. With a minimalist interior and futuristic design, it contains all the high-end names you'd expect – Gucci, Prada and Michael Kors among them – as well as a cinema

that costs \$57 per ticket. Not far away is the Em District (theemdistrict.com), which features two malls, Emporium and Emquartier, containing just as many major brands, including Jimmy Choo and Valentino, and an impressive indoor waterfall.

However, for a truly unique purchase, seek out the country's most famous brand, which was founded not by a Thai, but by a former architect, wartime spy and a man claimed by some as the saviour of the kingdom's silk industry: American Jim Thompson (jimthompson.com). From 1948 until his mysterious 1967 disappearance in Malaysia's Cameron Highlands, Thompson grew the company that bears his name. You can find branches in cities and airports all across the country, but the most immersive experience has to be at his former residence in central Bangkok, a traditional house

that features a remarkable assemblage of priceless art, which now decorates a museum and restaurant.

For something a little more modern, award-winning firm Thann (thann.info) has a glowing international reputation for its natural skincare and aromatherapy products, which use the country's biggest export – rice – as a core ingredient. Or pick up a bottle of boutique Chalong Bay Rum (chalongbayrum.com), made in Phuket by a young French couple that uses the best Thai sugarcane to make one of the world's finest rums. **M**



mindfood.com

Head online to mindfood.com to read about our favourite Thai festivals. **KEYWORDS:**

Thailand, Festivals

AT A GLANCE

Covering more than 500,000 square kilometres, Thailand offers a huge variety when it comes to climate and topography, from the ancient jungles of the deep south – still home to wild elephants, tigers and bears – to the lush tropical islands in the Andaman Sea and Gulf of Thailand, such as Phuket, Phi Phi, Samui and Samet. Then there's the capital city of Bangkok, home to 14 million people, almost a quarter of the population. The northeast region, known as Isaan, is still largely agrarian, but the far north – once known as the kingdom of Lanna – is the country's spiritual heart, home to ethnic minorities who still practise their traditional customs. tourismthailand.org