

Bangkok



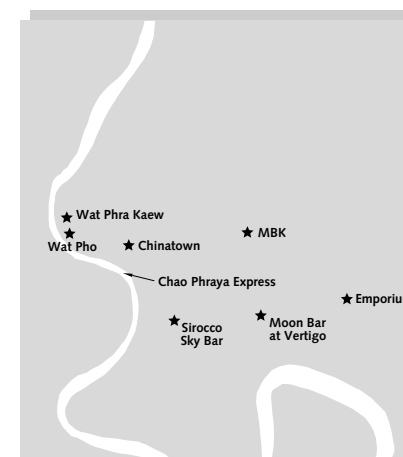
In recent years, Bangkok has broken away from its old image as a messy third-world capital to be voted by numerous metro-watchers as a top-tier global city. The sprawl and tropical humidity are still the city's signature ambassadors, but so are gleaming shopping centres and an infectious energy of commerce and restrained mayhem. The veneer is an ultramodern backdrop of skyscraper canyons containing an untamed universe of diversions and excesses. The city is justly famous for debauchery, boasting at least four major red-light districts, as well as a club scene that has been revived post-coup. Meanwhile the urban populous is as cosmopolitan as any Western capital – guided by fashion, music and text messaging.

But beside the 21st-century façade is a traditional village as devout and sacred as any remote corner of the country. This is the seat of Thai Buddhism and the monarchy, with the attendant splendid temples. Even the modern shopping centres adhere to the old folk ways with attached spirit shrines that receive daily devotions.

Bangkok will cater to every indulgence, from all-night binges to shopping sprees, but it can also transport you into the old-fashioned world of Siam. Rise with daybreak to watch the monks on their alms route, hop aboard a long-tail boat into the canals that once fused the city, or forage for your meals from the numerous and lauded food stalls.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Joining the adoring crowds at Thailand's most famous temple, **Wat Phra Kaew** (p108)
- Escaping the tour groups at maze-like **Wat Pho** (p108)
- Skipping between sightseeing spots aboard the **Chao Phraya Express** (p182)
- Wandering through the crowded *soi* and markets of **Chinatown** (p134)
- Toasting the stars and the twinkling skyscraper lights atop a rooftop bar, such as **Moon Bar at Vertigo** (p168) or **Sirocco Sky Bar** (p168)
- Spending a day shopping with the Thai teens in **MBK** (p174) or with the filthy rich at the **Emporium** (p175)
- Escape the heat into VIP luxury at Bangkok's ultramodern **movie theatres** (p171)



FAST FACTS

- **Best Time to Visit** November to February
- **Population** 7.5 million

HISTORY

The centre of government and culture in Thailand today, Bangkok was a historical miracle during a time of turmoil. Following the fall of Ayuthaya in 1767, the kingdom fractured into competing forces, from which General Taksin emerged as a decisive unifier. He established his base in Thonburi, on the western bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River), a convenient location for sea trade from the Gulf of Thailand. Taksin proved more of a military strategist than a popular ruler. He was later deposed by another important military general, Chao Phraya Chakri, who moved the capital across the river in 1782 to a more defensible location in anticipation of a Burmese attack. The succession of his son in 1809 established the present-day dynasty, and Chao Phraya Chakri is referred to as Rama I.

Court officials envisioned the new capital as a resurrected Ayuthaya, complete with an island district (Ko Ratanakosin) carved out of the swampland and cradling the royal court (the Grand Palace) and a temple to the auspicious Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew). The emerging city, which was encircled by a thick wall, was filled with stilt and floating houses ideally adapted to seasonal flooding.

Modernity came to the capital in the late 19th century as European aesthetics and technologies filtered east. During the reigns of Rama IV (King Mongkut) and Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), Bangkok received its first paved road (Th Charoen Krung) and a new royal district (Dusit) styled after European palaces.

Bangkok was a gangly town when soldiers from the American war in Vietnam came to rest and relax in the city's go-go bars and brothels. It wasn't until the boom years of the 1980s and 1990s that Bangkok exploded into a fully fledged metropolis crowded with hulking skyscrapers and an endless spill of concrete that gobbled up rice paddies and green space. The city's extravagant tastes have been tamed by the 1997 economic meltdown, and in an effort to address its legendary traf-

fic, Bangkok now boasts an elevated light-rail system (Skytrain) and an underground subway (Metro).

The turn of the millennium has seen the return of many foreign-educated Thai nationals, infusing the city with a cultured and cosmopolitan poise. Multinational businesses continue to see Bangkok as a stable regional investment, helping move Thailand toward internationalism. Today the maturing metropolis holds a common footing with other regional centres, such as Singapore and Hong Kong.

ORIENTATION

Occupying the east side of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, Bangkok proper can be divided in two by the main north-south railway terminating at Hualamphong train station.

The portion between the serpentine river and the railway is old Bangkok, a district of holy temples, crowded markets and family-owned shophouses. Swarming either side of the train station is the dense neighbourhood of Chinatown, a frenzy of red, gold and neon. Chinatown's chaos is subdued by Ko Ratanakosin, the former royal-palace district and Bangkok's most popular tourist district. Charming Banglamphu and the backpacker strip of Th Khao San (Khao San Rd) are north up the river. Crowning the old city is Dusit, a planned homage to the great European capitals, and the easy-going neighbourhood of Thewet.

East of the railway is new Bangkok – a near approximation of a sci-fi megalopolis. Around Siam Square is a universe of boxy shopping centres that attracts fashion-savvy Thai teenagers and shopping holiday tourists. Th Sukhumvit runs a deliberate course from the geographic city centre to the Gulf of Thailand, and has limblike tributaries reaching into corporate-ecat cocoons and the girl-bar scene at Soi Cowboy and Nana Entertainment Plaza. Bangkok's financial district centres along Th Silom, which cuts an incision from the river to Lumpini Park. Intersecting Th Silom near the river is Th Charoen Krung; Bangkok's first paved road that was once the artery for the city's mercantile shipping interests. Its narrow *sois* (lanes) branch off through the old *faràng* (Western) quarters that are littered with decaying Victorian monuments, churches and the famous Oriental Hotel. True to the city's resistance to efficiency, there are two main

embassy districts: Th Withayu (Wireless Rd) and Th Sathon.

On the opposite (west) side of the river is Thonburi, which was Thailand's capital for 15 years, before Bangkok was founded. *Fàng thon* (Thonburi Bank), as it's often called by Thais, seems more akin to the provincial capitals than Bangkok's glittering high-rises.

Bangkok Addresses

Any city as large and unplanned as Bangkok can be tough to get around. Street names are often unpronounceable to begin with, and the problem is compounded by the inconsistency of Romanised spellings as well as a mystifying array of winding streets that never lead where a map dares to propose.

Building numbers are equally confounding; the string of numbers divided by slashes and dashes (eg 48/3-5 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit) indicate lot disbursements rather than sequential geography. The number before the slash refers to the original lot number; the numbers following the slash indicate buildings (or entrances to buildings) constructed within that lot. The preslash numbers appear in the order in which they were added to city plans, while the postslash numbers are arbitrarily assigned by developers.

STREET ALIASES

As there is no standardisation for transliterating Thai into the Roman alphabet, Bangkok's streets operate under many aliases. Here are some common variants:

- Rajadamri and Ratchadamri are often abbreviated as Rat'damri
- Phetburi, Phetchaburi, and the eastern extension become Phetburi Tat Mai (often appearing as its English translation: New Phetburi)
- Phra Ram (I-VI) is sometimes Rama (I-VI)

The Thai word *thànlón* (Th) means road, street or avenue. Hence Ratchadamnoen Rd (sometimes called Ratchadamnoen Ave) is always Th Ratchadamnoen in Thai.

A *soi* is a small street or lane that runs off a larger street. So, the address referred to as 48/3-5 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit, will be located off Th Sukhumvit on Soi 1. Alternative ways of writing the same address include 48/3-5 Th Sukhumvit Soi 1 or even just 48/3-5 Sukhumvit 1. Some Bangkok *sois* have become so large that they can be referred to both as *thànlón* and *soi*, eg Soi Sarasin/Th Sarasin and Soi

BANGKOK IN...

Tackling Bangkok is simple if you avoid rush hour and dehydration. Try mixing and matching these suggestions for a short fling or a long affair.

One Day

Make an early-morning visit to **Wat Phra Kaew** and the **Grand Palace** (p108), quirky **Wat Pho** (p108) and the crowded **Amulet Market** (p109). Charter a long-tail boat to ride through Thonburi's **canals** (p147) to **Wat Arun** (p110).

For dinner, head to **Ton Pho** (p159) or **Harmonique** (p163). Then go-go to the red-light district in **Patpong** (p171).

Three Days

Do as the Thais do – go **shopping** (p174). Zip to and fro aboard the ultramodern **Skytrain** (p184). Glimpse old-style Bangkok with a trip to **Jim Thompson's House** (p135) and wrap up the daylight hours with a traditional **Thai massage** (p139). Then work off those rice calories at the dance clubs of **RCA** (p170).

One Week

Now that you're accustomed to the noise, pollution and traffic, you're ready for **Chinatown** (p134) and its congested markets. On the weekend, take the Skytrain to **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (p178) for intensive souvenir hunting. For a little R&R, take a river ferry to **Ko Kret** (p138), a car-less island north of central Bangkok.

Asoke/Th Asoke. Smaller than a *soi* is a *trok*, sometimes spelt *tràwk* (alleyway).

Maps

A map is essential for finding your way around Bangkok. The long-running and oft-imitated *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok* is a schematic guide to the city, with listings of out-of-the-way places, beloved restaurants, and colourful anecdotes about neighbourhoods and markets. It is an entertaining visual guide but should be complimented by a more hard-nosed navigator, such as Think Net's *Bangkok* bilingual map with accompanying mapping software. To master the city's bus system, purchase Roadway's *Bangkok Bus Map*. 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. For nightcrawlers, Groovy Map's *Bangkok Map 'n' Guide* series makes a good drinking companion.

If travelling to districts outside central Bangkok, invest in *Bangkok & Vicinity A to Z Atlas*, which covers the expressways and surrounding suburbs.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Dasa Book Café (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2661 2993; 710/4 Th Sukhumvit, btwn Soi 26 & 28; Skytrain Phrom Phong) Multilingual used bookstore.

Kinokuniya Siam Paragon (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2610 9500, 3rd fl, Th Phra Ram I; Skytrain Siam) Emporium (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2664 8554; 3rd fl, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Phrom Phong) Multilanguage selections, magazines, children's books.

Mahamakuta Buddhist Bookshop (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2281 1085; 241 Th Phra Sumen; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun; air-con bus 511) Has a handful of Buddhist titles in English.

Rim Khob Fah Bookstore (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2622 3510; 78/1 Th Ratchadamoen, Democracy Monument; bus 511, 512, khlong taxi to Tha Phan Fah) Small selection of booklets on culture and history.

Suksit Siam (☎ 0 2222 5698; 113-115 Th Fuang Nakhon; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat; bus 507, 508) Political works by social critic Sulak Sivaraksa and the progressive Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute. Located south of Mae Thorani Shrine

Cultural Centres

Various international culture centres in Bangkok organise film festivals, lectures, language classes and other educational liaisons.

Alliance Française (Map p127; ☎ 0 2670 4200; www.alliance-francaise.or.th; 29 Th Sathon Tai; bus 17, 22, 62)

British Council (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2652 5480; www.britishcouncil.or.th; Siam Square, Th Phra Ram I, 254 Soi Chulalongkorn 64; Skytrain Siam)

Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand (FCCT; Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2652 0580; www.fccthai.com; Penthouse, Maneeya Center, 518/5 Th Ploenchit; Skytrain Chitlom)

Goethe Institut (Map p127; ☎ 0 2287 0942; www.goethe.de; 18/1 Soi Goethe, btwn Th Sathon Tai & Soi Ngam Duphli; subway Lumpini)

Japan Foundation (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2260 8560; Serm-mit Tower, Th Sukhumvit, 159 Soi Asoke; bus 136, 206)

Emergency

If you have a medical emergency and need an ambulance, contact the English-speaking hospitals listed on opposite. In case of a police

or safety issue, contact the city hotlines for the following emergency services:

Fire ☎ 199

Police/Emergency ☎ 191

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

Internet Access

There is no shortage of internet cafés in Bangkok competing against each other to offer the cheapest and fastest connection. Rates vary depending on the concentration and affluence of net-heads – Banglamphu is infinitely cheaper than Sukhumvit or Silom, with rates as low as 30B per hour. Many internet shops are adding Skype and headsets to their machines so that an international call can be made for the price of surfing the web.

Internet Resources

2Bangkok (www.2bangkok.com) News sleuth and history buff follows the city headlines from today and yesterday.

Asia-Hotels (www.asia-hotels.com) Handy rundown on hotels, their amenities and comments from former guests.

Bangkok Recorder (www.bangkokrecorder.com) Nightlife site following hot club nights, visiting DJs, music trends and other vexing capital questions.

Khao San Road (www.khaosanroad.com) News, reviews and profiles of Bangkok's famous tourist ghetto.

Mango Sauce (www.mangosauce.com) Bangkok's news of the weird for expats who need a breather.

Real Thai (www.realthai.blogspot.com) Local Bangkok foodie takes a bite out of the Big Mango.

Libraries

Besides offering an abundance of reading material, Bangkok's libraries make a peaceful escape from the heat and noise.

British Club's Neilson Hays Library & Rotunda Gallery (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2233 1731; 195 Th Surawong; family membership 2800B; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun; Skytrain Chong Nonsi) The oldest English-language library in Thailand, with many children's books and titles on Thailand.

National Library (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2281 5212; Th Samsen; admission free; ☎ 9am-7.30pm; river ferry Tha Thewet) A few foreign-language resources, but the library's strength is in its astrological books and star charts, as well as recordings by the king and sacred palm-leaf writings and ancient maps.

Siam Society (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2661 6470; Th Sukhumvit, 131 Soi Asoke; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat; Sky-

GUIDEBOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Bangkok* is ideal for those spending a month or more in the capital city. Weekenders should consider picking up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Bangkok Encounter*.

train Asoke, subway Sukhumvit) Royal patronage society with a public-access library on academic subjects.

Media

Daily newspapers are sold in 7-Eleven stores as well as streetside newsagents. Monthly magazines are available in most bookstores.

Bangkok 101 A monthly city primer with photo essays and reviews of sights, restaurants and entertainment.

Bangkok Post No-nonsense English-language daily with Friday and weekend supplements covering city events.

BK Magazine Free monthly for the young and hip.

Gavroche French-language magazine with news and views.

Metro: Magazine Glossy monthly targeted at the city's bilinguals.

Nation English-language daily with more style and flair than the *Bangkok Post*.

Untamed Travel Going where the guidebooks don't go anymore, the old *Farang* magazine finally bought a bus ticket from Th Khao San to other exotic destinations, including bars in other Bangkok neighbourhoods.

Medical Services

Thanks to its high standard of hospital care, Bangkok is fast becoming a destination for medical tourists shopping for more affordable dental checkups, elective surgery and cosmetic procedures. Pharmacists (chemists) throughout the city can diagnose and treat most minor ailments (Bangkok belly, sinus and skin infections etc). The following hospitals offer 24-hour emergency services, and the numbers below should be contacted if you need an ambulance or immediate medical attention. Most hospitals also have daily clinics with English-speaking staff.

Bangkok Adventist (Mission) Hospital (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2282 1100; 430 Th Phitsanulok; bus 16, 23, 99)

BNH (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2632 0550; 9 Th Convent, off Th Silom; Skytrain Sala Daeng)

Bumrungrad Hospital (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2667 1000; Th Sukhumvit, 33 Soi 3; Skytrain Ploenchit & Nana)

Phayathai Hospital 1 (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2245 2620; 364/1 Th Si Ayutthaya; bus 503)

CITY OF ANGELS

Krungthep mahanakhon amonratanakosin mahintara ayuthaya mahadilok popnopparat ratthachani burirum udomratchaniwet mahasathan amonpiman avatansathit sakkathattiya wit-sanukamprasit.

A real tongue twister, Bangkok's official name was conveniently truncated to Krung Thep (City of Angels) for everyday usage. The breathtaking 43 syllables were transformed into a hypnotic pop tune by Asanee-Wasan in 1989 and its recitation by memory is always a winning game. The bombastic title translates roughly as 'Great City of Angels, Repository of Divine Gems, Great Land Unconquerable, Grand and Prominent Realm, Royal and Delightful Capital City Full of Nine Noble Gems, Highest Royal Dwelling and Grand Palace, Divine Shelter and Living Place of Reincarnated Spirits'.

But why does the rest of the world call it 'Bangkok'? Turns out the royal capital was founded on a little village named Bang Makok (Place of Olive Plums) and stubborn foreign traders never bothered to adjust the appellation.

Samitivej Hospital (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2392 0011; Th Sukhumvit, 133 Soi 49)

St Louis Hospital (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2675 9300; 215 Th Sathon Tai; Skytrain Surasak)

Rutnin Eye Hospital (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2258 0442; 80/1 Soi 21/Asoke) Contact this hospital for urgent eye care.

Money

Regular bank hours in Bangkok are 10am to 4pm, and ATMs are common in all areas of the city. Many Thai banks also have currency-exchange bureaus; there are also exchange desks within the Skytrain stations and within eyeshot of most tourist areas. Go to 7-Eleven shops or other reputable places to break 1000B bills; don't expect a vendor or taxi to be able to make change on a bill 500B or larger.

Post

Main post office (Map pp124-5; Th Charoen Krung; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat & Sun; Chao Phraya Express Tha Si Phraya) Services include poste restante and packaging within the main building. Do not send money or valuables via regular mail. Branch post offices throughout the city also offer poste restante and parcel services.

Telephone & Fax

Bangkok's city code (☎ 02) is incorporated into all telephone numbers dialled locally or from outside the city. Public phones for both domestic and international calls are well distributed throughout the city, but it is tricky to find one that is quiet enough to have a conversation. Try the shopping centres for noiseless comfort.

Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT; Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2573 0099; Th Charoen Krung; ☎ 24hr; river ferry Tha Si Phraya) Next door to the main post office; offers Home Country Direct service, fax transmittal and phone-card services.

Telephone Organization of Thailand (TOT; Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2251 1111; Th Phloenchit; Skytrain Chitlom) Long-distance calling services and an English version of Bangkok's *Yellow Pages*.

Tourist Information

Official tourist offices distribute maps, brochures and advice on sights and activities. Don't confuse these free services with the licensed travel agents that book tours and transport on a commission basis. Often, travel agencies incorporate elements of the official national tourism organisation name (Tourism

Authority of Thailand; TAT) into their own and purposefully confuse tourists.

Bangkok Tourism Division (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2225 7612-5; www.bangkoktourist.com; 17/1 Th Phra Athit; ☎ 9am-7pm; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) City-specific tourism office provides maps, brochures and directions; yellow information booths staffed by student volunteers are located throughout the city.

TAT main office (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2250 5500/1672; www.tourismthailand.org; ground fl, 1600 Th Petchaburi Tat Mai; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm; Skytrain Asoke) City and country travel information.

Tourist police (Map pp116-17; ☎ 1155; Bangkok Tower, Th Petchaburi Tat Mai; ☎ 24hr) Handles matters involving theft and crimes against tourists.

Travel Agencies

Bangkok is packed with travel agencies where you can book bus and air tickets. Some are reliable, while others are fly-by-night scams issuing bogus tickets or promises of (undelivered) services. Ask for recommendations from fellow travellers before making a major purchase from a travel agent. The following are some long-running agencies:

Diethelm Travel (Map p127; ☎ 0 2255 9150; www.diethelm-travel.com; 140/1 Th Withayu, Kian Gwan Bldg; bus 13, 17, 62)

STA Travel (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2236 0262; www.sta-travel.com; 14th fl, Wall Street Tower, 33/70 Th Surawong; Skytrain Sala Daeng)

Vieng Travel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2280 3537; www.viengtravel.com; Trang Hotel, 99/8 Th Wisut Kasat; bus 49)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

You are more likely to be charmed rather than coerced out of your money in Bangkok. Practised con artists capitalise on Thailand's famous friendliness and a revolving door of clueless tourists. The tourist police can be effective in dealing with some of the 'unethical' business practices and crime. But in general you should enter into every monetary transaction with the understanding that you have no consumer protection or recourse.

Bangkok's most heavily toured areas – Wat Phra Kaew, Jim Thompson's House, Th Khao San, Siam Square – are favourite hunting grounds. The most typical scenario involves a well-dressed, professional-acting person who appears to come to your aid when an attraction is 'closed'. They will then graciously arrange an affordable tük-tük ride to an undiscovered wat or authentic market,

which is usually a guise for taking you and your wallet for the proverbial 'ride'. Don't believe anyone on the street who tells you that a popular attraction is closed; check for yourself. And don't engage in any sort of purchase – gems, tailors or jewellery – to which you've been referred by a helpful stranger.

More obvious are the tük-tük drivers who are out to make a commission by dragging you to a local silkstore, tailor or jewellery shop, even though you've requested an entirely different destination. Even if you're in the market for a tailor, avoid the hidden commissions by patronising businesses who don't engage in this practice.

Then there is the long-running and quite infamous gem scam, in which you act as an agent for selling bulk quantities of gems in your home country. It is only after you cough up the quoted wholesale price of the gems that you will discover your unexpected windfall comprises a collection of worthless pieces of glass.

The card-game scam has resurfaced after a brief hiatus. Perhaps it is the recent rise of online gambling and celebrity poker that has made average card players consider themselves in the league of sharks. After you've been invited to a Thai person's home, the card game usually starts off as an innocent way to pass the time and then money is added for the fun of it, and the rest is well documented in the classic movie *The Hustler*.

Uncharacteristically aggressive robberies have been perpetrated by groups of *kàthoey* (lady boys), typically around the lower Sukhumvit bar area. Lone, and generally drunk, foreign men have reportedly been approached by a solo *kàthoey* ('Hello, where you go, handsome?') who then creates a diversion while a partner swipes the victim's wallet.

Even though Thai children are taught to toss their garbage out of windows, foreigners should avoid following suit. This includes cigarette butts, too. An underpaid police officer will be more than happy to enforce the law (however broadly interpreted) on a foreigner who might possibly have the 1000B fine that an average Thai might not be able to afford.

See p741 for more information on countrywide scams.

SIGHTS

Ko Ratanakosin & Thonburi

เกาะรัตนโกสินทร์/ธนบุรี

Ko Ratanakosin is the ancient royal district, housing Bangkok's most famous attractions. These sights are within walking distance of each other and are best visited early in the morning before the day comes to a boil. Ignore anyone who approaches you in this area as most are touts commissioned to steer tourists to gem or tailor shops. Even guards or other official-looking people may be acting as agents for commission-paying businesses.

PRELUDES TO A RIP-OFF

Want to know the key to a great Thailand visit? Commit these warnings to memory and join us in our ongoing crusade to outsmart Bangkok's crafty scam artists.

- Remember your mother's advice: don't talk to strangers. In this self-absorbed city, the only people interested in chatting you up are usually interested in your wallet, not cultural exchange. You should be doubly suspicious if they are professionally dressed but aren't busy at a real job somewhere.
- If you ignore your mother's advice and talk to said stranger, your suspicion-meter should register if the stranger says (a) that wherever you're going is closed, (b) that he or she knows someone who is studying/working in your home country, or (c) there is a great one-day sale on jewellery, gems or silk. For a good laugh, you can always ask to see their TAT licence, which isn't a sign of legitimacy but does make their blood pressure visibly rise.
- A tük-tük driver offers a sightseeing tour for 10B to 20B. Do the maths: petrol and time will get paid by you thanks to a commission from whatever tailor or furniture store the driver 'happens' to know about.
- A metered taxi quotes a flat price for your fare. Any quoted price is usually three times higher than using the meter. Most in-town destinations are around 50B to 80B.

DRESS FOR THE OCCASION

Temples are sacred places and visitors should dress and behave appropriately. Wear shirts with sleeves, long pants or skirts and close-toed shoes (for some reason Thais are exempt from this latter rule). Sarongs and baggy pants are available on loan at the entry area for Wat Phra Kaew. Shoes should be removed before entering the main *bòt* (chapel) or *wihāan* (sanctuaries). When sitting in front of a Buddha image, tuck your feet behind you to avoid the highly offensive pose of pointing your feet towards a revered figure.

Remember to leave a donation when you visit temples; your contributions help with upkeep.

Directly across the river is Thonburi, which served a brief tenure as the Thai capital after the fall of Ayuthaya. Today the area along the river is easily accessed from Bangkok's cross-river ferries, and there are museums and temples here that are historical complements to those in Ko Ratanakosin.

WAT PHRA KAEW & GRAND PALACE

วัดพระแก้ว/พระบรมมหาราชวัง

Also known as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, **Wat Phra Kaew** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2224 1833; admission 250B; 🕒 8.30am-3.30pm; bus 508, 512, river ferry Tha Chang) is an architectural wonder and home to the venerable Emerald Buddha. Adjoining the temple is the former residence of the monarch, the Grand Palace.

This ground was consecrated in 1782, the first year of Bangkok rule, and is today a pilgrimage destination for devout Buddhists and nationalists. The 94.5-hectare grounds encompass more than 100 buildings that represent 200 years of royal history and architectural experimentation. Most of the architecture, royal or sacred, can be classified as Ratanakosin (or old-Bangkok style).

Housed in a fantastically decorated *bòt* and guarded by pairs of *yaksha* (mythical giants), the **Emerald Buddha** is the temple's primary attraction. It sits atop an elevated altar, barely visible amid the gilded decorations. The diminutive figure is always cloaked in royal robes, one for each season (hot, cool and rainy). In a solemn ceremony, the king himself changes the garments at the beginning of each season.

Extensive **murals of the Ramakian** (the Thai version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*) line the inside walls of the compound. Originally painted during the reign of Rama I (1782-1809) and continually restored, the murals illustrate the epic in its entirety, beginning at the north gate and moving clockwise around the compound.

Except for an anteroom here and there, the buildings of the **Grand Palace** (Phra Borom Maharachawong) are now put to use by the king only for certain ceremonial occasions, such as Coronation Day (the king's current residence is Chitlada Palace in the northern part of the city). The exteriors of the four buildings are worth a swift perusal for their royal bombast. The intrigue and rituals that occurred within the walls of this once-cloistered community are relatively silent to the modern visitor. A fictionalised version is told in the trilogy *Four Reigns*, by Kukrit Pramoj.

Borombhiman Hall (eastern end), a French-inspired structure that served as a residence for Rama VI, is occasionally used to house visiting foreign dignitaries. In April 1981 General San Chitpatima used it as headquarters for an attempted coup. The building to the west is **Amarindra Hall**, originally a hall of justice but used today for coronation ceremonies.

The largest of the palace buildings is the **Chakri Mahaprasat**, the Grand Palace Hall. Built in 1882 by British architects using Thai labour, the exterior shows a peculiar blend of Italian Renaissance and traditional Thai architecture. This is a style often referred to as *faràng sài chádaa* (Westerner in a Thai crown) because each wing is topped by a *mondòp* – a heavily ornamented spire representing a Thai adaptation of the Hindu *mandapa* (shrine). The tallest of the *mondòp*, in the centre, contains the ashes of Chakri kings; the flanking *mondòp* enshrine the ashes of Chakri princes. Thai kings traditionally housed their huge harems in the inner palace area, which was guarded by combat-trained female sentries.

Last, from east to west, is the Ratanakosin-style **Dusit Hall**, which initially served as a venue for royal audiences and later as a royal funerary hall.

The admission charge for the complex includes entrance to **Dusit Park** (p132), which includes Vimanmek Teak Mansion and Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall.

WAT PHO

วัดโพธิ์(วัดพระเชตุพน)

The modest hero of Bangkok's holy temples, **Wat Pho** (Map p130; Wat Phra Chetuphon; ☎ 0 2221 9911; Th Sanamchai; admission 50B; 🕒 8am-5pm; bus 508, 512, Chao Phraya Express Tha Tien) features a host of superlatives: the largest reclining Buddha, the largest collection of Buddha images in Thailand and the country's earliest centre for public education.

Almost too big for its shelter, the tremendous **reclining Buddha**, 46m long and 15m high, illustrates the passing of the Buddha into nirvana (ie the Buddha's death). The figure is modelled out of plaster around a brick core and finished in gold leaf. Mother-of-pearl inlay ornaments the feet, displaying 108 different auspicious *lákšana* (characteristics of a Buddha).

The **Buddha images** on display in the other four *wihāan* are worth a nod. Particularly beautiful are the Phra Chinnarat and Phra Chinnachai Buddhas, both from Sukhothai, in the west and south chapels. The galleries extending between the four chapels feature no less than 394 gilded Buddha images, many of which display Ayuthaya or Sukhothai features. The remains of Rama I are interred in the base of the presiding Buddha image in the *bòt*.

A small collection of tiled stupas commemorates the first three of the Chakri kings (Rama III has two stupas) and there are 91 smaller stupas. Note the square bell shape with distinct corners, a signature of Ratanakosin style.

Wat Pho is also the national headquarters for the teaching and preservation of traditional Thai medicine, including Thai massage, a mandate legislated by Rama III when the tradition was in danger of extinction. The

famous massage school has two massage pavilions without air-con located within the temple area and air-con rooms within the training facility outside the temple (p139). Nearby stone inscriptions showing yoga and massage techniques still remain in the temple grounds, serving their original purpose as visual aids.

The rambling grounds of Wat Pho cover eight hectares, with the major tourist sites occupying the northern side of Th Chetuphon and the monastic facilities on the southern side.

WAT MAHATHAT

วัดมหาธาตุ

Sightseeing is not the reason to wander through the whitewashed gates of **Wat Mahathat** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2221 5999; 3 Th Maharat; 🕒 9am-5pm; bus 47, 53, 503, 508, 512, river ferry Tha Phra Chan or Tha Maharat). But prospective students of Buddhist meditation will find a warm reception from the English-speaking director of the temple's **International Buddhist Meditation Centre** (which is located in Section 5), where classes in sitting and walking meditation are held three times daily.

Founded in the 1700s, Wat Mahathat is the national centre for the Mahanikay monastic sect and headquarters for the renowned Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya, one of Bangkok's two Buddhist universities. Religious scholarship is extended to visiting foreigners with twice-monthly lectures in English on different aspects of *dhamma* (Buddhist philosophy). Stop by Section 5 for lecture topics and room assignment.

AMULET MARKET

ตลาดพระเครื่องวัดมหาธาตุ

TRAVELS OF THE EMERALD BUDDHA

The Emerald Buddha (Phra Kaew Morakot) holds a prominent position in Thai Buddhism in spite of its size (a mere 75cm) and original material (probably jasper quartz or nephrite jade rather than emerald). In fact, the Emerald Buddha was just another ordinary image, with no illustrious pedigree, until its monumental 'coming out' in 15th-century Chiang Rai. During a fall, the image revealed its luminescent interior, which had been covered with plaster (a common practice to safeguard valuable Buddhas from being stolen). After a few successful stints in various temples throughout northern Thailand, the image was stolen by Laotian invaders in the mid-16th century.

The Emerald Buddha achieved another promotion in the cult of Buddha images some 200 years later when Thailand's King Taksin waged war against Laos, retrieving the image and mounting it in Thonburi. Later, when the capital moved to Bangkok and General Chakri took the crown, the Emerald Buddha was honoured with one of the country's most magnificent monuments, Wat Phra Kaew.

Just outside the theological solitude of Wat Mahathat is a more vibrant application of Thailand's diverse spirituality. A **tàlàt phrá khreuang** (holy amulet market; Map p130; Th Maharat; ☎ 9am-5pm) claims sidewalk space and rabbit-warren *sois* near Tha Phra Chan, displaying a wide variety of small talismans carefully scrutinised by collectors. Monks, taxi drivers and people in dangerous professions are the most common customers well versed in the different powers of the images. Also along this strip are handsome shophouses overflowing with family-run herbal-medicine and traditional-massage shops. In the cool season, vendors sell aromatic herbal soups that ward off colds and sinus infections.

WAT ARUN

วัดอรุณฯ

Striking **Wat Arun** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2891 1149; Th Arun Amarin, Thonburi; admission 20B; ☎ 9am-5pm; cross-river ferry from Tha Tien) commands a martial pose as the third point in the holy triumvirate (along with Wat Phra Kaew and Wat Pho) of Bangkok's early history. After the fall of Ayuthaya, King Taksin ceremoniously clinched control here on the site of a local shrine (formerly known as Wat Jaeng) and established a royal palace and a temple to house the Emerald Buddha. The temple was renamed after the Indian god of dawn (Aruna) and in honour of the literal and symbolic founding of a new Ayuthaya.

It wasn't until the capital and the Emerald Buddha were moved to Bangkok that Wat Arun received its most prominent characteristic: the 82m-high *prang* (Khmer-style tower). The tower's construction was started during the first half of the 19th century by Rama II and later completed by Rama III. Rebuilding was necessary because the porous mud initially used was an inferior base. Not apparent from a distance are the ornate floral mosaics made from broken, multihued Chinese porcelain, a common temple ornamentation in the early Ratanakosin period, when Chinese ships calling at the port of Bangkok used tonnes of old porcelain as ballast.

Also worth an inspection is the interior of the *bót*. The main Buddha image is said to have been designed by Rama II himself. The murals date from the reign of Rama V; particularly impressive is one that depicts Prince Siddhartha encountering examples of birth, old age, sickness and death outside his

palace walls, an experience that led him to abandon the worldly life. The ashes of Rama II are interred in the base of the presiding Buddha image.

LAK MEUANG (CITY PILLAR)

ศาลหลักเมือง

Serving as the spiritual keystone of Bangkok, **Lak Meuang** (Map p130; crn Th Ratchadamnoen Nai & Th Lak Meuang; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm; bus 506, 507, river ferry Tha Chang) is a phallus-shaped wooden pillar erected by Rama I during the founding of the new capital city in 1782. Today the structure shimmers with gold leaf and is housed in a white cruciform sanctuary. Part of an animistic tradition, the pillar embodies the city's guardian spirit (Phra Sayam Thewathirat) and also lends a practical purpose as a marker of the town's crossroads and measuring point for distances between towns.

The pillar was once of a pair. Its taller counterpart, which was carved from *chaiyá-préuk* (tree of victory; laburnum wood), was cut down in effigy following the Burmese sacking of Ayuthaya during 1767. Through a series of Buddhist-animist rituals, it is believed that the felling of the tree empowered the Thais to defeat the Burmese in battle. Thus it was considered an especially talismanic choice to mark the founding of the new royal capital. Two metres of the pillar's 4.7m total length are buried in the ground.

If you happen to wander through and hear the whine of traditional instruments, investigate the source as a *lákhn káe bon* (commissioned dance) may be in progress. Brilliantly costumed dancers measure out subtle movements as thanks to the guardian spirit for granting a worshipper's wish.

SANAM LUANG

สนามหลวง

The royal district's green area is **Sanam Luang** (Map p130; Royal Field; bordered by Th Na Phra That, Th Na Phra Lan, Th Ratchadamnoen Nai, Th Somdet Phra Pin Klao; admission free; ☎ 6am-8pm; bus 30, 32, 47, 53, river ferry Tha Chang), which introduces itself to most visitors as a dusty impediment to Wat Phra Kaew and other attractions. The park's more appealing attributes are expressed during its duties as a site for royal cremations and for the annual Ploughing Ceremony, in which the king officially initiates the rice-growing season. The most recent ceremonial cremation took place here in March 1996, when the king presided

over funeral rites for his mother. Before that, the most recent Sanam Luang cremations were held in 1976, without official sanction, for Thai students killed in the demonstrations of that year. A large kite competition is also held here during the kite-flying season (mid-February to April).

A statue of **Mae Thorani**, the earth goddess (borrowed from Hindu mythology's Dharani), stands in a white pavilion at the northern end of the field. Erected in the late 19th century by Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), the statue was originally attached to a well that provided drinking water to the public.

NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติ

Often touted as Southeast Asia's biggest museum, the **National Museum** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2224 1402; 1 Th Na Phra That; admission 40B; ☎ 9am-3.30pm Wed-Sun; bus 503, 506, 507, 53, river ferry Tha Mahathat) is home to an impressive collection of religious sculpture – from Dvaravati to Ratanakosin periods – best appreciated on one the museums weekly **tours** (☎ 9.30am Wed; in English, German & French).

In addition to the cluttered art and artefacts building, the restored **Buddhaisawan (Phut-thaisawan) Chapel** provides a welcome relief from the curatorial hotchpotch. Inside the chapel (built in 1795) are some well-preserved original murals and one of the country's most revered Buddha images, Phra Phut Sihing. Legend says the image came from Sri Lanka, but art historians attribute it to 13th-century Sukhothai.

The recently renovated **history wing** has made impressive bounds towards mainstream curatorial aesthetics with a succinct chronology of prehistoric, Sukhothai-, Ayuthaya- and Bangkok-era events and figures. Despite the hokey dioramas, there are some real treasures here: look for King Ramakamhaeng's inscribed stone pillar, the oldest record of Thai writing; King Taksin's throne; the Rama V section; and the screening of King Prajadhipok's movie *The Magic Ring*.

Perhaps part of the charm, though, is wandering through a veritable attic of Thai art and handicrafts. For the free-form culturalist, peruse the scatterbrained collections in the **central exhibit hall**, which cover every possible handicraft: traditional musical instruments, ceramics, clothing and textiles, woodcarving, regalia and weaponry.

Most of the museum buildings were built in 1782 as the palace of Rama I's viceroy, Prince Wang Na. Rama V turned it into a museum in 1884. The ticketing office provides free maps of the grounds.

ROYAL BARGES NATIONAL MUSEUM

เรือพระที่นั่ง

The royal barges are slender, fantastically ornamented vessels used in ceremonial processions along the river. The tradition dates back to the Ayuthaya era, when most travel (for commoners and royalty) was by boat. Today the royal barge procession is an infrequent occurrence, most recently performed in 2006 in honour of the 60th anniversary of the king's ascension to the throne.

When not in use, the barges are on display at this Thonburi **museum** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2424 0004; Khlong Bangkok Noi, Thonburi; admission 30B, photo permit 100B; ☎ 9am-5pm; tourist shuttle boat from Tha Phra Athit). At the time of writing, the museum was temporarily closed for restoration work on the elderly boats. Check with the Chao Phraya Express desk at Tha Phra Athit for the current situation.

Suphannahong, the king's personal barge, is the most important of the boats. Made from a single piece of timber, it's the largest dugout in the world. The name means 'Golden Swan', and a huge swan head has been carved into the bow. Lesser barges feature bows that are carved into other Hindu-Buddhist mythological shapes such as *naga* (mythical sea serpent) and *garuda* (Vishnu's bird mount). Historic photos help envision the grand processions in which the largest of the barges would require a rowing crew of 50 men, plus seven umbrella bearers, two helmsmen and two navigators, as well as a flagman, rhythm-keeper and chanter.

The easiest way to get to the museum is by the tourist boat from Tha Phra Athit (20B). You can also walk from the Bangkok Noi train station (accessible by ferrying to Tha Rot Fai), but the walk is tricky and unpleasant and you'll encounter uninvited guides who will charge for their service. The museum is also a stop on long-tail boat trips through Thonburi's canals.

NATIONAL GALLERY

หอศิลป์แห่งชาติ

The humble **National Gallery** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2282 2639; Th Chao Fa; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) belies the country's impressive

tradition of fine arts. Decorating the walls of this early Ratanakosin-era building are works of traditional and contemporary art, mostly by artists who receive government support. The general consensus is that it's not Thailand's best – in fact, some of the art snobs criticise it as a 'dead zone' – but the gallery is worth a visit if you need an escape from the crowds.

SILPAKORN UNIVERSITY

มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร

Thailand's first **art university** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2221 1422; Th Na Phra Lan; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat & Sun; bus 12, 44, 503, 506, 508, river ferry Tha Chang), opposite the Grand Palace, originally trained civil servants in traditional painting techniques. It then led the nation's transition into European and contemporary art, thanks to the contributions of Professor Silpa Bhira Sri (Corrado Feroci), an Italian artist who designed the Democracy Monument. A student and faculty art gallery is open to the public.

Banglamphu

บางลำพู

Banglamphu is Bangkok's most charming neighbourhood and offers easy access to the river and lots of unfettered wandering. It is also home to Th Khao San, a decompression

zone for backpackers transiting in and out of the country. Khao San's long tourist-trapping tentacles – internet cafés, Western-style restaurants, silver shops, beer stalls – sprawl throughout neighbouring streets but quickly disappear as you move away from the river. In the Thai parts of the area there is a work-day streetscape – safari-uniformed civil servants and lottery-ticket dealers with their wooden portfolio boxes. Bus is the primary public transport option for inland destinations. The *khlong* (canal) taxi along Khlong Saen Saeb is another convenient option for hopping over to Siam Square or Sukhumvit. The closest Skytrain station is Ratchathewi.

DEMOCRACY MONUMENT

อนุสาวรีย์ประชาธิปไตย

One of the first striking landmarks you'll notice on your way into Banglamphu is this large, Art Deco **monument** (Map pp120-1; Th Ratchadamnoen Klang, Th Din So; river ferry Tha Phra Athit, bus 44, 511, 512) occupying the avenue's traffic circle. It was erected in 1932 to commemorate Thailand's momentous transformation from absolute to constitutional monarchy. Italian artist Corrado Feroci designed the monument and buried 75 cannon balls in its base to signify the year Buddhist Era (BE) 2475

(AD 1932). Before immigrating to Thailand to become the nation's 'father of modern art', Feroci designed monuments for Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. In recent years the 'Demo' has become a symbolic spot for public demonstrations, most notably during the antimilitary, pro-democratic protests of 1992.

OCTOBER 14 MEMORIAL

อนุสาวรีย์ 14 ตุลาคม

This peaceful **amphitheatre** (Map pp120-1; Khok Wua intersection, Th Ratchadamnoen Klang; bus 2, 82, 511, 512) commemorates the civilian demonstrators who were killed on 14 October 1973 (remembered in Thai as 'sip-see tula', the date of the event) by the military during a pro-democracy rally. More than 200,000 people assembled at the Democracy Monument and along Th Ratchadamnoen to protest the arrest of political campaigners and to express their discontent over the continued military dictatorship; more than 70 demonstrators were killed when the tanks met the crowd. The complex is an interesting adaptation of Thai temple architecture for a secular and political purpose. A central *chedi* (stupa) is dedicated to the fallen, and a gallery of historic photographs lines the interior walls.

WAT SAKET & GOLDEN MOUNT

วัดสระเกศ

Even if you're wat-ed out, you should take a brisk walk to **Wat Saket** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2223 4561; btwn Th Wora Chak & Th Boriphat; admission to Golden Mount 10B; ☎ 8am-5pm; bus 508, 511, khlong taxi to Tha Phan Fah). Like all worthy summits, the temple's Golden Mount (Phu Khao Thong), which is visible from Th Ratchadamnoen, plays a good game of optical illusion, appearing closer than its real location. Serpentine steps wind through an artificial hill shaded by gnarled trees, some of which are signed in English, and past graves and pictures of wealthy benefactors.

This artificial hill was created when a large stupa, under construction by Rama III, collapsed because the soft soil beneath would not support it. The resulting mud-and-brick hill was left to sprout weeds until Rama IV built a small stupa on its crest. Rama V later added to the structure and housed a Buddha relic from India (given to him by the British government) in the stupa. The concrete walls were added during WWII to prevent the hill

from eroding. Every year in November there is a big festival on the grounds of Wat Saket, which includes a candle-lit procession up the Golden Mount.

At the peak, you'll find a breezy 360-degree view of Bangkok's most photogenic side.

WAT RAJANADDA

วัดราชนาค

Across Th Maha Chai from Wat Saket, **Wat Rajanadda** (Ratchanatda; Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2224 8807; cnr Th Ratchadamnoen Klang & Th Mahachai; ☎ 9am-5pm; bus 56, 505, khlong taxi to Tha Phan Fah) dates from the mid-19th century. It was built under Rama III and is an unusual specimen, possibly influenced by Burmese models. The wat has a well-known market selling Buddhist *phrá phim* (magical charm amulets) in all sizes, shapes and styles. The amulets not only feature images of the Buddha, but also famous Thai monks and Indian deities. Full Buddha images are also for sale. Wat Rajanadda is an expensive place to purchase a charm, but a good place to look.

BAN BAHT (MONK'S BOWL VILLAGE)

บ้านบาตร

Just when you start to lament the adverse effects of tourism, pay a visit to this **handicraft village** (Map pp120-1; Soi Ban Baht, Th Bamrung Meuang; ☎ 10am-6pm; bus 508, khlong taxi to Tha Pan Fah), within walking distance of Th Khao San. This is the only surviving village established by Rama I to make the *bàat* (rounded bowls) that the monks carry to receive food alms from faithful Buddhists every morning. Today the average monk relies on a bowl mass produced in China, but the traditional technique survives in Ban Baht thanks to patronage by tourists.

About half a dozen families still hammer the bowls together from eight separate pieces of steel representing, they say, the eight spokes of the Wheel of Dharma (which symbolise Buddhism's Eightfold Path). The joints are fused in a wood fire with bits of copper, and the bowl is polished and coated with several layers of black lacquer. A typical output is one bowl per day. If you purchase a bowl, the craftsperson will show you the equipment and process used. To find the village from Tha Pan Fah (*khlong* taxi pier), head south along Th Boriphat, past

SO REAL THAILAND

You've wandered up and down Th Khao San five times now and just can't believe how touristy Bangkok has become. The obvious answer is to get on a bus and go to another tourist ghetto and curse Lonely Planet for being lazy. Or you could realise that Khao San is for tourists and any Thais who once lived here have long since moved away because they couldn't come and go easily for all the half-naked 'ghosts' milling about. If you take a left off Th Khao San on to Th Tanao and then another left or right on Th Phra Sumen, BAM!, there's a Thai neighbourhood. No internet shops, no beer stalls, just some shops selling dusty mosquito coils and book satchels.

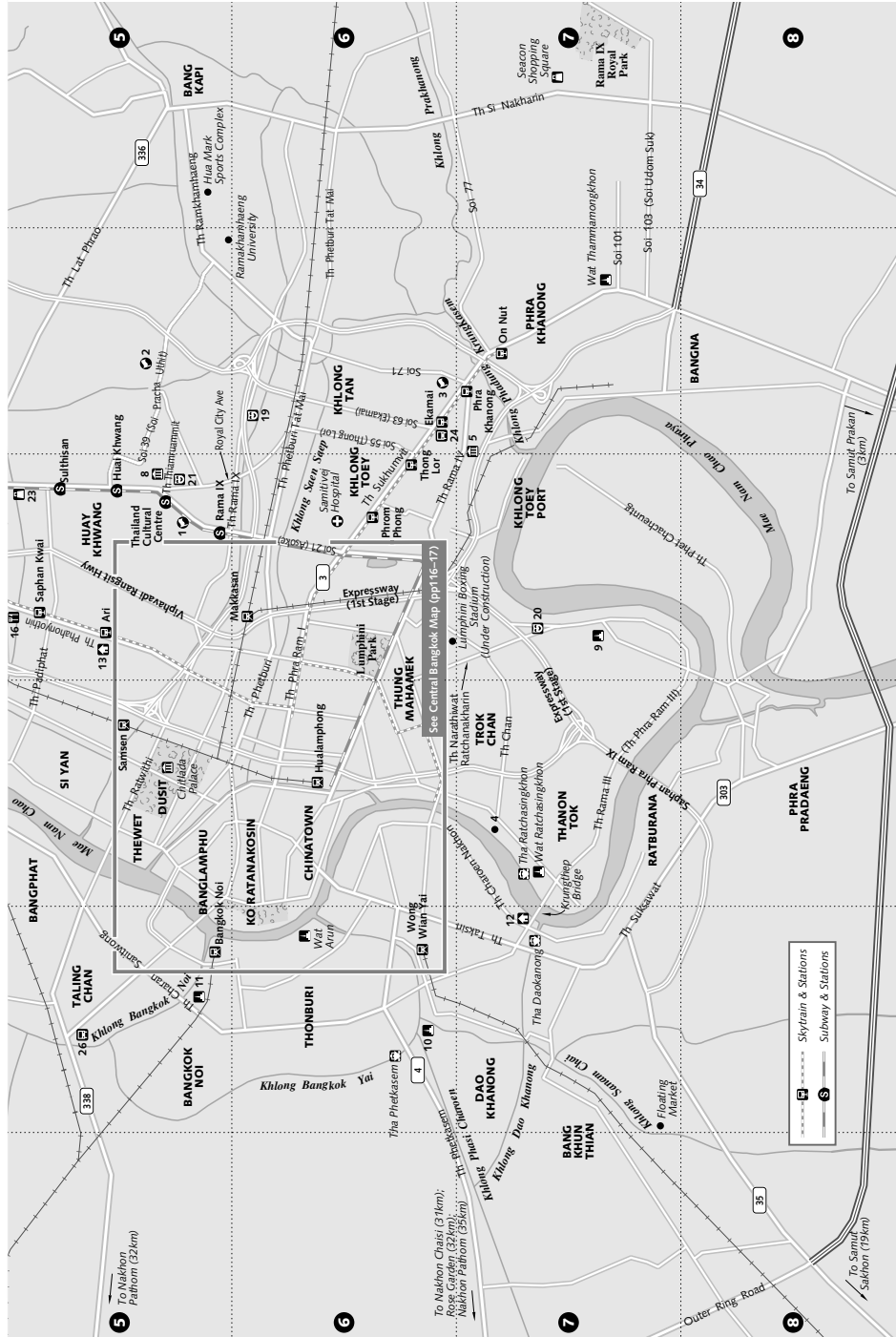
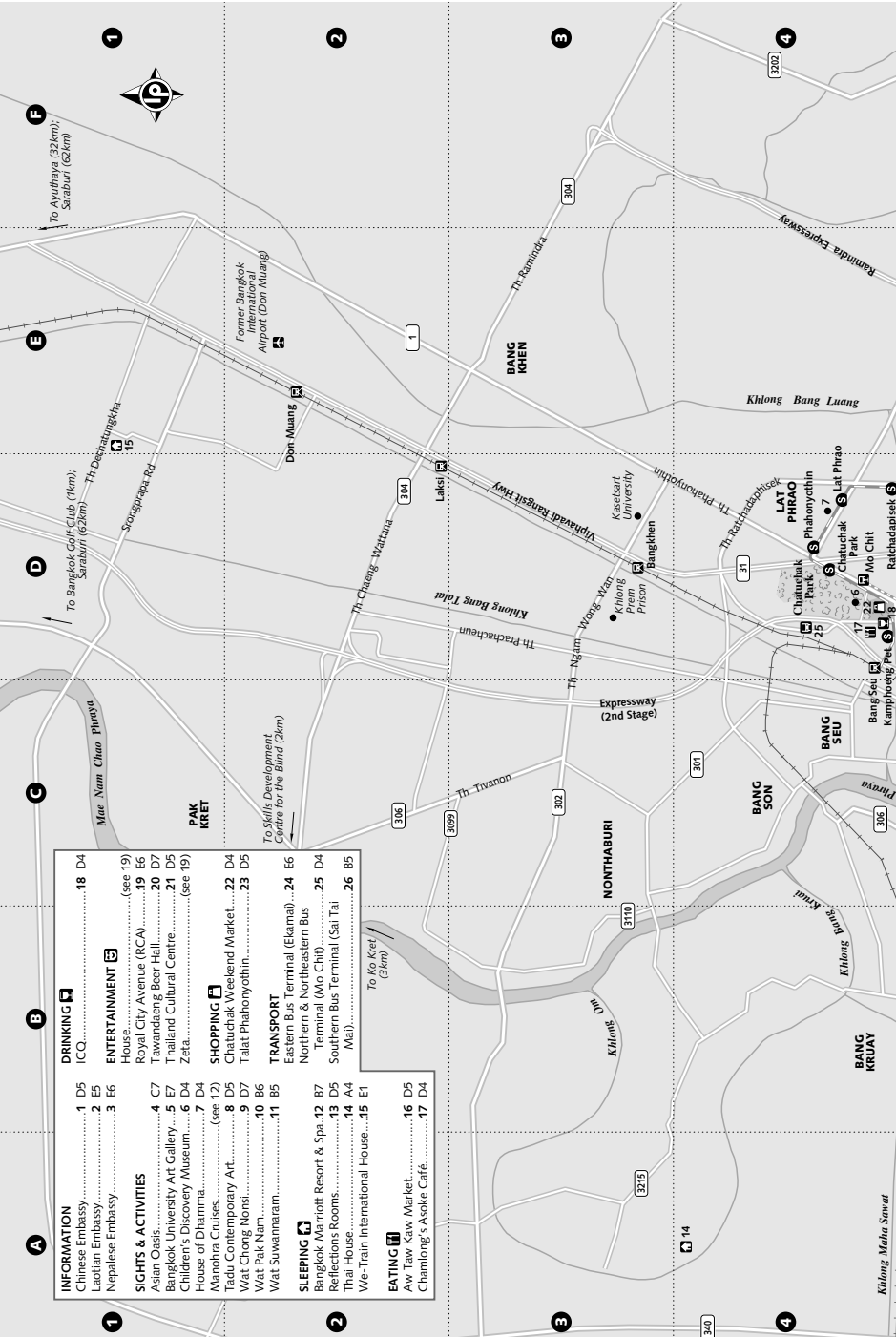
There are plenty of places like this all over the city, where nobody cares where you're going, what you want to eat or where you're from. Here are our favourite spots for blessed anonymity and Thai people-watching:

Victory Monument (Map pp116-17; Skytrain Victory Monument) Exit the Skytrain station to the elevated walkway that encircles a monument honouring a very minor Thai victory over the French. After sunset, the elevated walkway becomes a city park with students filling the empty spaces for flirting and chilling.

MBK (Map pp128-9; Skytrain National Stadium) On the weekends, this is where Bangkok hangs out. Bands and fashion shows perform in front of the shopping centre. On one visit, we saw a fully choreographed dance routine staged in front of idling cars during a long red traffic light. Sure you'll see some foreigners and big extended Arab families haggling over beaded sandals but you'll also see average Thai folk.

Nonthaburi (Chao Phraya Express Tha Nonthaburi) North of central Bangkok, this quiet suburb still has *sāmlāw* and a multiblock market of hairbrushes, batteries, polyester clothes and other general-store goods.

(Continued on page 132)

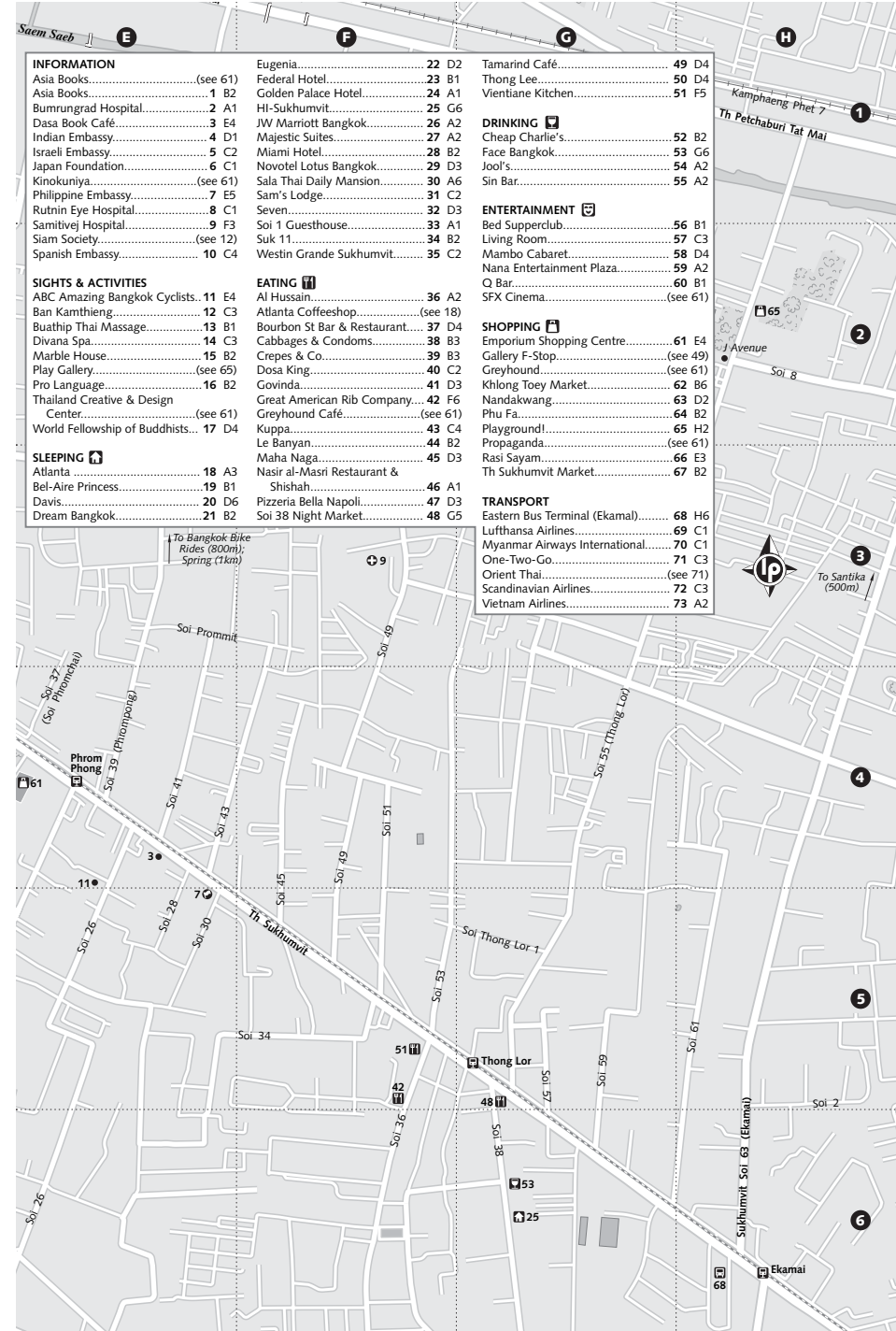






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To Bangkok Bike Rides (800m); Spring (1km)



To Santika (500m)



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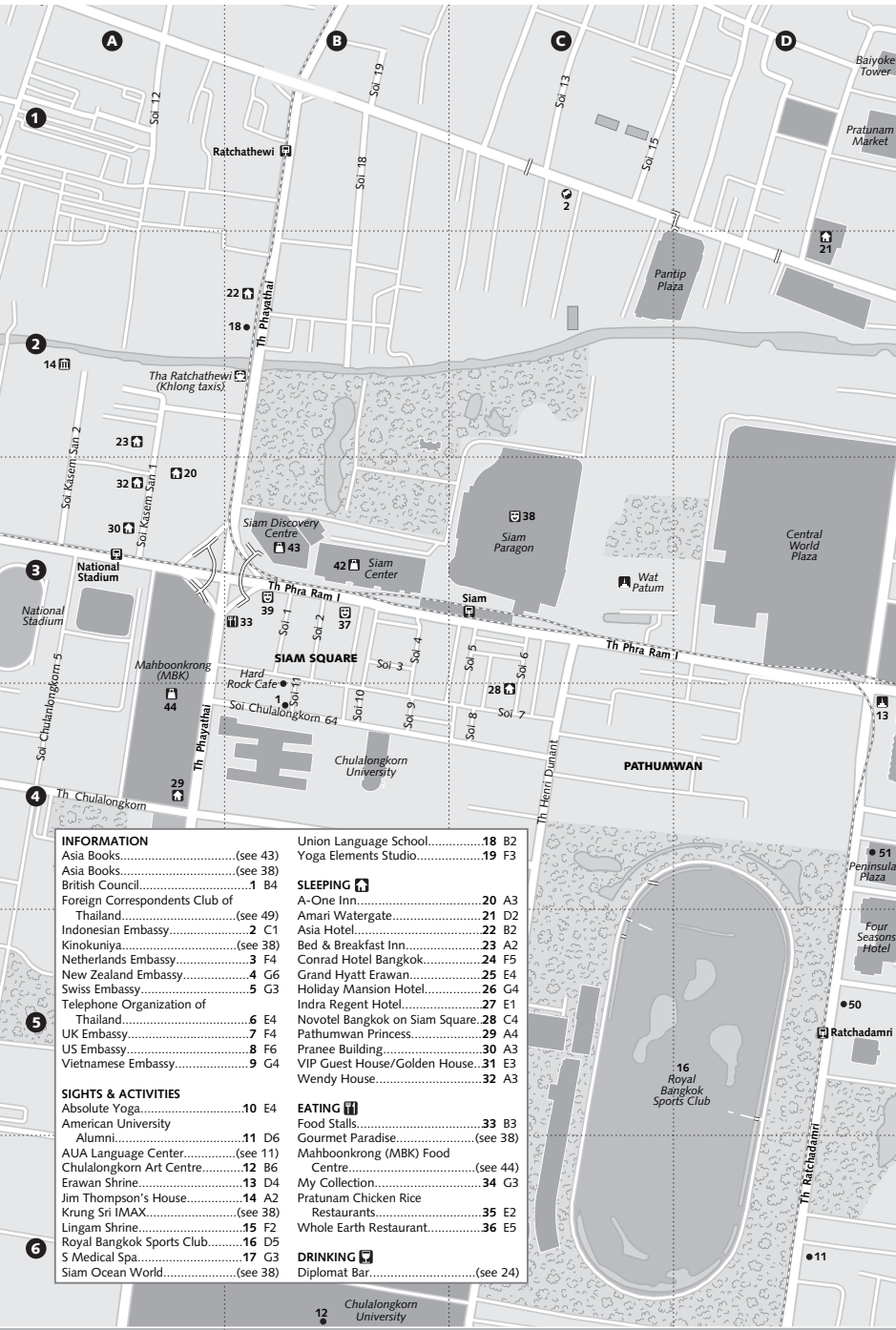
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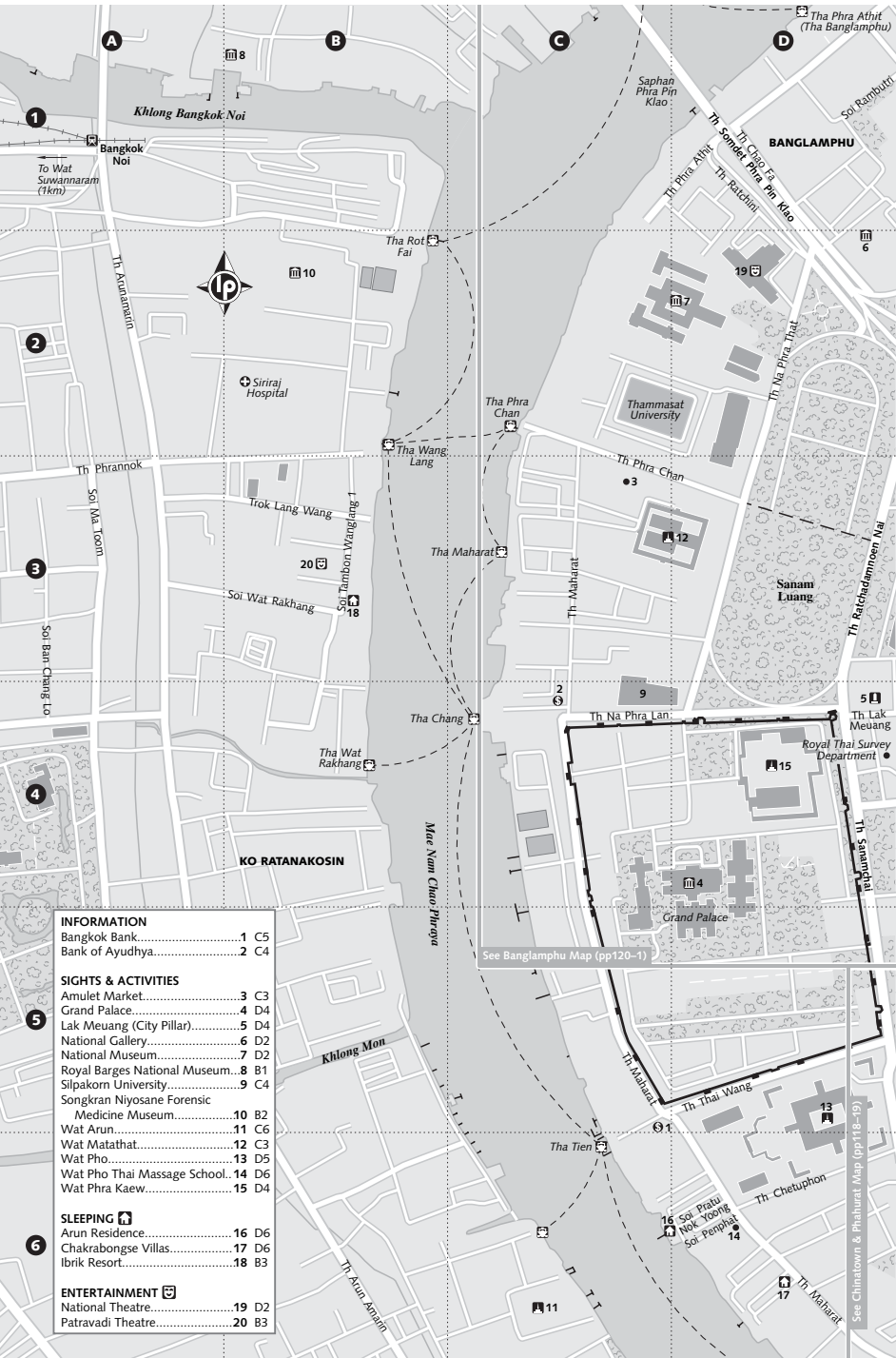
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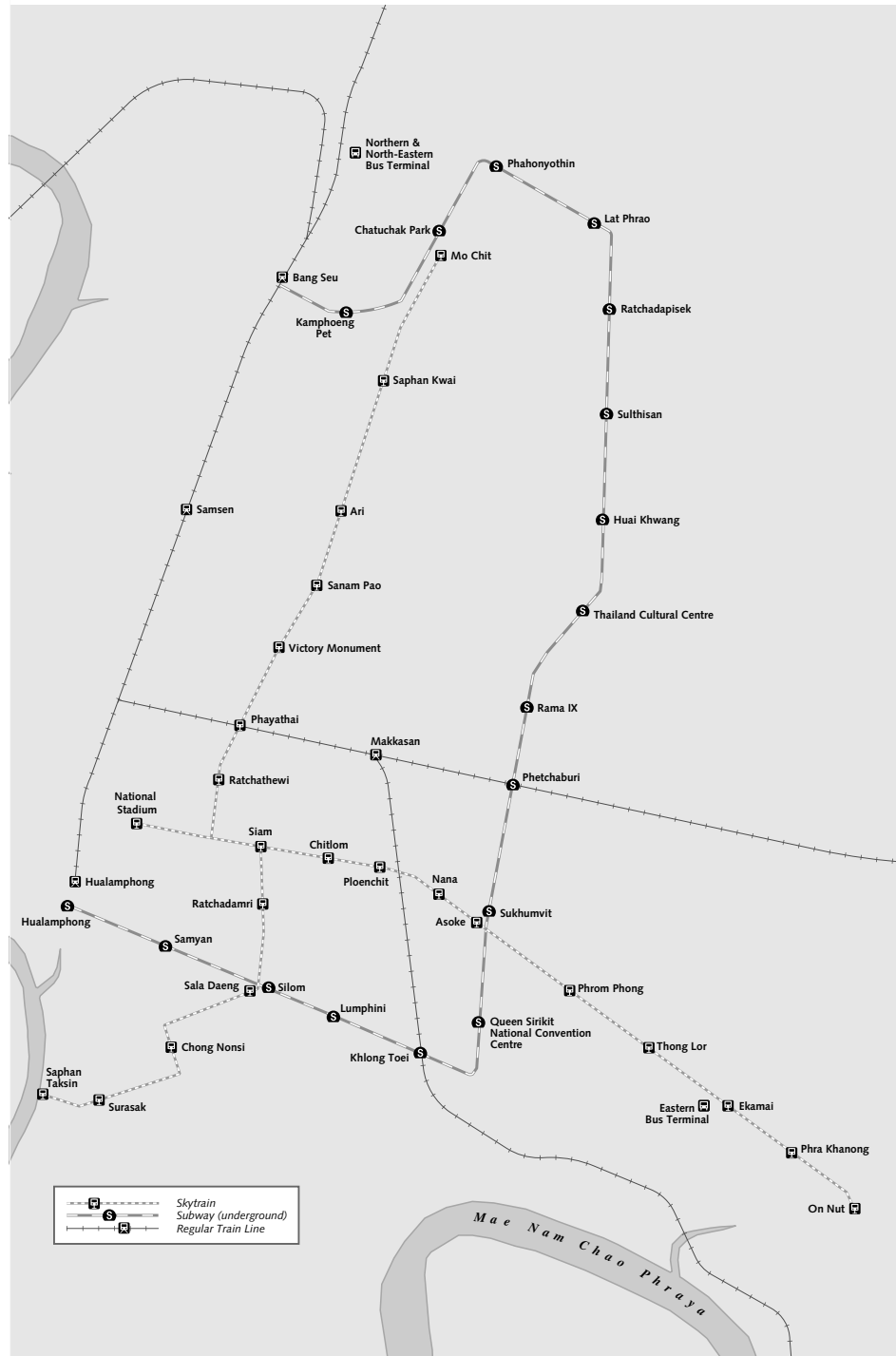


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Th Bamrung Meuang, then turn left into Soi Ban Baht.

WAT SUTHAT & SAO CHING-CHA

วัดสุทัศน์/เศวตฉิ่ง

Brahmanism predated the arrival of Buddhism in Thailand and its rituals were integrated into the dominant religion. This **temple** (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2224 9845; Th Bamrung Meuang; admission 20B; 🕒 9am-8pm; bus 508, khlong taxi to Tha Phan Fah) is the headquarters of the Brahman priests who perform the Royal Ploughing Ceremony in May. Begun by Rama I and completed in later reigns, Wat Suthat boasts a *wihāan* with gilded bronze Buddha images (including Phra Si Sakayamuni, one of the largest surviving Sukhothai bronzes) and colourful, but decaying, *jataka* (stories of Buddha's previous lives) murals. The wat also holds the rank of Rach-avoramahavihan, the highest royal-temple grade; and the ashes of Rama VIII (Ananda Mahidol, the current king's deceased older brother) are contained in the base of the main Buddha image in the *wihāan*.

Suthat's priests also perform rites at two nearby Hindu shrines: Thewa Sathan (Deva Sathan), which contains images of Shiva and Ganesha; and the smaller Saan Jao Phitsanu (Vishnu Shrine), dedicated to Vishnu.

The spindly red arch in the front of the temple is **Sao Ching-Cha** (Giant Swing), which formerly hosted a spectacular Brahman festival in honour of Shiva. Participants would swing in ever-higher arcs in an effort to reach a bag of gold suspended from a 15m bamboo pole. Many died trying and the ritual was discontinued during the reign of Rama VII. Stroll along Th Bamrung Meuang past the nearby religious-paraphernalia shops filled with huge Buddhas, monk robes and other devotional items.

WAT BOWONNIWET

วัดบวรนิเวศ

Bangkok's second Buddhist university, Mahamakut University, is housed at **Wat Bowonniwet** (Map pp120-1; Wat Bovornives or Wat Bowon; cnr Th Phra Sumen & Th Tanao; 🕒 8am-5.30pm; bus 15, 53, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) and is the national headquarters for the Thammayut monastic sect. King Mongkut, founder of this minority sect, began a royal tradition by residing here as a monk – in fact, he was the abbot of Wat Bowonniwet for several years. King Bhumibol and Crown

Prince Vajiralongkorn, as well as several other males in the royal family, have been temporarily ordained as monks. India, Nepal and Sri Lanka all send selected monks to study here. The temple was founded in 1826, when it was known as Wat Mai. Because of its royal status, visitors should be particularly careful to dress properly for admittance to this wat – no shorts or sleeveless shirts.

WAT TRITOSATHEP MAHAWARAWIHAN

วัดศรีเทพวรมหาวิหาร

A fairly subdued neighbourhood **temple** (Th Prachathipatai; donations accepted; bus 12, 19, 56) is the site of one of modern Thailand's emerging mural masterpieces by national artist Chakrabhand Posayakrit.

Dusit

ดุสิต

In the name of modernity, Rama V moved the royal seat to this planned district complete with the wide avenues and measured elegance of such European cities as Paris and London. If you're suffering from Bangkok-overload, Dusit's quiet poise will be a welcome relief. Sights are spread out and don't make recommendable strolls; rely on buses or taxis.

DUSIT PALACE PARK

วังสวนดุสิต

Dainty **Dusit Palace Park** (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2628 6300; bounded by Th Ratchawithi, Th U-Thong Nai & Th Ratchasima; adult/child 100/50B, admission free with Grand Palace ticket; 🕒 9.30am-4pm; bus 70, 510) is the girl-next-door of Bangkok's attractions – photogenic and relaxed. In addition to its architecture and gardens, this is a convenient place to see performances of traditional Thai dancing (10.30am and 2pm daily). Dusit Park's attractions include Vimanmek Teak Mansion, Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall, Royal Elephant Museum, HM King Bhumibol Photography Exhibitions and Ancient Cloth Museum. Admission to the park allows entry to all sights within the complex.

Following Rama V's European tour, he returned home with visions of European castles swimming in his head and set about transforming these styles into a uniquely Thai expression. The royal palace, throne hall and minor palaces for extended family were all moved here from Ko Ratanakosin, the ancient royal court. Today the current King has yet another home (Chitlada Palace) and this

complex now contains a house museum and other cultural collections.

Because this is royal property, visitors should wear long pants (no capri pants) or long skirts and shirts with sleeves.

Vimanmek Teak Mansion

Originally constructed on Ko Si Chang in 1868 and moved to the present site in 1910, this beautiful L-shaped, three-storey mansion contains 81 rooms, halls and anterooms, and is said to be the world's largest golden-teak building. The staircases, octagonal rooms and lattice work are nothing short of magnificent, but in spite of this, the mansion retains a surprisingly serene and intimate atmosphere.

Vimanmek was the first permanent building on the Dusit Palace grounds. It served as Rama V's residence in the early 1900s. The interior of the mansion contains various personal effects of the king and a treasure-trove of early Ratanakosin art objects and antiques.

Compulsory English-language tours last an hour. Don't expect to learn a lot on the tours as the guide's English is quite laboured and tours tend to overlap with one another.

Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall

Originally built as a throne hall for Rama V in 1904, the smaller Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall is typical of the finer architecture of the era. Victorian-influenced gingerbread architecture and Moorish porticoes blend to create a striking and distinctly Thai exterior. The hall houses an excellent display of regional handiwork crafted by members of the Promotion of Supplementary Occupations & Related Techniques (SUPPORT) foundation, an organisation sponsored by Queen Sirikit. Among the exhibits are cotton and silk, *málaeng tháp* (collages made from metallic, multicoloured beetle wings), damascene and nielloware, and basketry.

Royal Elephant Museum

Near the Th U-Thong Nai entrance, two large stables that once housed three white elephants – animals whose auspicious albinism automatically made them crown property – are now a museum. One of the structures contains artefacts and photos outlining the importance of elephants in Thai history and explaining their various rankings according to physical characteristics. The second stable holds a sculptural representation of a living

royal white elephant (now kept at the Chitlada Palace, home to the current Thai king). Draped in royal vestments, the statue is more or less treated as a shrine by the visiting Thai public.

Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall

The domed neoclassical building at the foot of Royal Plaza is Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, which was built in the early 1900s by Italian architects in the style of European government houses. Used today for ceremonial purposes, the throne hall also hosted the first meeting of the Thai parliament until their meeting place was moved to a facility nearby. Visitors can explore the architecture of the building and view rotating exhibits.

HM King Bhumibol Photography Exhibitions

Near the Th Ratwithi entrance, two residence halls display a collection of photographs and paintings by the present monarch. Among the many loving photos of his wife and children are also historic pictures of the king playing clarinet with Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong in 1960.

WAT BENCHAMABOPHIT

วัดเบญจมบพิตร (วัดเบญจม)

Made of white Carrara marble, **Wat Benchamabophit** (Marble Temple; Map pp116-17; cnr Th Si Ayuthaya & Th Phra Ram V; admission 20B; 🕒 8am-5.30pm; bus 72, 503) was built in the late 19th century under Rama V. The large cruciform *bôt* is a prime example of modern Thai wat architecture. The base of the central Buddha image, a copy of Phitsanulok's Phra Phuttha Chinnarat, contains the ashes of Rama V. The courtyard behind the *bôt* exhibits 53 Buddha images (33 originals and 20 copies) representing famous figures and styles from all over Thailand and other Buddhist countries.

Rama V Memorial

พระบรมรูปทรงม้า

A bronze **figure** (Map pp116-17; Royal Plaza, Th U-Thong Nai) of a military-garbed leader may seem like an unlikely shrine, but Bangkokians are flexible in their expression of religious devotion. Most importantly, the figure is no forgotten general – this is Rama V (King Chulalongkorn; 1868–1910), who is widely credited for steering the country into the modern age and for preserving Thailand's independence from

European colonialism. He is also considered a champion of the common person for his abolition of slavery and *corvée* (the requirement that every citizen be available for state labour when called). His accomplishments are so revered, especially by the middle class, that his statue attracts worshippers who make offerings of candles, flowers (predominantly pink roses), incense and bottles of whiskey, and is the site of a huge celebration during the anniversary of the monarch's death.

Chinatown

เขาวราช(สำเพ็ง)

Bangkok's Chinatown (called 'Yaowarat' after its main thoroughfare, Th Yaowarat) comprises a confusing and crowded array of commerce organised into guildlike districts – rubber-bath-plug stores in one block, bulk plastic bags in another, handmade signs, hand guns and even used-vinyl-record stores can be found. The district was born in 1782 when Bangkok's Chinese population, many of them labourers who came to build the new capital, were moved here from today's Ko Ratanakosin area by the royal government.

The neighbourhood's energy is exhausting and exhilarating. There are endless pedestrian wanderings, especially in the tiny *sois* along the river, but getting in and out of Chinatown is hindered by continuous traffic. The Chao Phraya Express connects the neighbourhood to Ko Ratanakosin, Banglamphu and Silom, but slow-moving buses are needed to get to inland Siam Square and Sukhumvit.

WAT MANGKON KAMALAWAT

วัดมังกรกมลาวาส

Explore the labyrinthine passageways of this busy Chinese-style **temple** (Neng Noi Yee; Map pp118-19; Th Charoen Krung; ☎ 9am-6pm; bus 73, 501, 507, river

ferry Tha Ratchawong) to find Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian shrines. During the annual Vegetarian Festival, religious and culinary activities are centred here. But almost any time of day or night, this temple is packed with worshippers lighting incense, filling the ever-burning altar lamps with oil and making offerings to their ancestors. The Thai name means Dragon Lotus Temple.

WAT TRAIMIT

วัดไตรมิตร

The attraction at **Wat Traimit** (Temple of the Golden Buddha; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2225 9775; cnr Th Yaowarat & Th Charoen Krung; admission 20B; ☎ 9am-5pm; subway Hualamphong, bus 53) is undoubtedly the impressive 3m-tall, 5.5-tonne, solid-gold Buddha image, which gleams like, well, gold. Sculpted in the graceful Sukhothai style, the image was 'discovered' some 40 years ago beneath a stucco or plaster exterior, when it fell from a crane while being moved to a new building within the temple compound. It has been theorised that the covering was added to protect it from marauding hordes, either during the late Sukhothai period or later in the Ayuthaya period when the city was under siege by the Burmese. The temple itself is said to date from the early 13th century.

PHAHURAT

พาหุรัด

At the western edge of Chinatown is a small but thriving Indian district, generally called **Phahurat** (Map pp118-19; around intersection of Th Phahurat & Th Chakraphet). Here, dozens of Indian-owned shops sell all kinds of fabric and clothes. Behind the more obvious shopfronts along these streets, in the bowels of the blocks, is **Phahurat Market** (Map pp118-19; Th Phahurat & Th Chakraphet; bus 73, river ferry Tha Saphan Phut), an endless bazaar sell-

ing flamboyant Bollywood fabric and other necessities.

In an alley off Th Chakraphet is **Sri Gurusingh Sabha** (Map pp118-19; Th Phahurat; ☎ 9am-5pm; bus 53, 73, river ferry Tha Saphan Phut), a large Sikh temple reminiscent of a mosque interior, devoted to the worship of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the 16th-century Sikh holy book, which is itself considered to be a 'living' guru and the last of the religion's 10 great teachers. Reportedly the temple is the second-largest Sikh temple outside India. Visitors are welcome, but they must remove their shoes.

Siam Square & Pratunam

ปทุมวัน/ประตูน้ำ

Boxy shopping centres dominate the landscape of Siam Square's teeming commercial zone. Back behind the modern façade is the former lifeblood of the neighbourhood: soot-coloured Khlong Saen Saeb, lined with rickety wooden shacks and drying laundry. Skytrain and the *khlong* taxis provide easy access to most attractions here.

JIM THOMPSON'S HOUSE

บ้านจิมทอมป์สัน

A pretty place to pass some time, **Jim Thompson's House** (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2216 7368, 0 2215 0122; Th Phra Ram I, Soi Kasem San 2; adult/child 100/50B; ☎ 9am-5pm, compulsory tours (English & French) every 10min; Skytrain National Stadium, bus 73, 508, khlong taxi to Ratchathewi) is also a museum-quality preservation of Thai residential architecture and Southeast Asian art. Another hook is the home's former owner, Jim Thompson, a compelling character who created an international appetite for Thai silk.

Born in Delaware in 1906, Thompson was a New York architect who briefly served in the Office of Strategic Services (forerunner of the CIA) in Thailand during WWII. Following the war he found New York too tame and returned to Bangkok. His neighbours' handmade silk caught his eye and piqued his business sense; he sent samples to fashion houses in Milan, London and Paris, gradually building a steady worldwide clientele.

A tireless promoter of traditional Thai arts and culture, Thompson also collected parts of various derelict Thai homes in central Thailand and had them reassembled in their current location in 1959. One striking departure from tradition is the way each wall has its exterior side facing the house's interior,

thus exposing the wall's bracing system. His small but splendid Asian art collection and his personal belongings are also on display in the main house.

Thompson's story doesn't end with his informal reign as Bangkok's best-adapted foreigner. While out for an afternoon walk in the Cameron Highlands of western Malaysia in 1967, Thompson mysteriously disappeared. That same year his sister was murdered in the USA, fuelling various conspiracy theories. Was it communist spies? Business rivals? Or a man-eating tiger? The most recent theory – for which there is apparently some hard evidence – has it that the silk magnate was accidentally run over by a Malaysian truck driver who hid his remains. *Jim Thompson The Unsolved Mystery*, by William Warren, is an excellent book on Thompson, his career, residence and subsequent intriguing disappearance.

ERAWAN SHRINE

ศาลพระพรหม

A seamless merging of commerce and religion occurs at all hours of the day at this bustling **shrine** (San Phra Phrom; Map pp128-9; cnr Th Ratchadamri & Th Ploenchit; admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm; Skytrain Chitlom). Claiming a spare corner of the Grand Hyatt Erawan hotel, the four-headed deity Brahma (Phra Phrom) represents the Hindu god of creation and was originally built to ward off bad luck during the construction of the first Erawan Hotel (torn down to make way for the

FORTUNE'S FOLLOWERS

Some people travel to Thailand because they want a tan or an adventure, but others know that fortune is fond of the Land of Smiles and come for a slice of luck. Of the many auspicious outposts, Lak Muang (City Pillar; p110) has an impressive reputation for wiping away misfortune and strengthening the powers of merit-making. Cheaper than a financial consultant, Wat Arun and Wat Phra Kaew (p108) have granted many requests for wealth and prosperity. Some even joke that the Emerald Buddha likes *sôm-tam* (papaya salad) because of his brief exile in Laos. The trouble with merit-making is that fortune is often slow and subtle, but the Erawan Shrine has a reputation for fast action, regardless of the request.

ON THE AIRWAVES

In a city as gridlocked as Bangkok, many drivers' best friend is the radio, broadcasting stations that are always at the ready to entertain and inform. The taxi drivers typically listen to the stations that play *lūk thung*, the Thai equivalent of country music in which the lyrics often feature a poor family having to send a devoted child to Bangkok to work after their buffalo dies – the personal story of many cabbies. Ruam Duay Chuay Kan (Helping Each Other) is a call-in show where people report accidents, breakdowns and other odd sights. Political talk shows are also popular and the former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra used to hold weekly state of the nation broadcasts. During the peak of Thaksin's unpopularity, a Thai satirical newspaper column called 'Poojadkuan', the Thai version of the *Onion* (US parody newspaper), quoted a grocer who wished to save energy by turning off his radio during the prime minister's weekly address.

current structure). Apparently the developers of the original Erawan (named after Airvata, Indra's three-headed elephant mount) first erected a typical Thai spirit house but decided to replace it with the more impressive Brahman shrine after several serious mishaps delayed the hotel construction. The shrine was later adopted by the lay community as it gained a reputation for granting wishes. Worshippers who have had a wish granted may return to the shrine to commission the musicians and dancers, who are always on hand for an impromptu performance.

Silom & Lumpini

สี่ลม/ลุมพินี

Forming the artery of Bangkok's financial district, Th Silom has only a few daytime tourist attractions scattered among its corporate hotels, office towers and wining-and-dining restaurants. As Th Silom approaches Th Charoen Krung, the area becomes spiced with the

sights and smells of its Indian and Muslim residents. The sliver of land that buffers Th Charoen Krung from the river was the international mercantile district during Bangkok's shipping heyday. Crumbling Victorian buildings and luxury hotels now occupy this neighbourhood of tributary *sois*.

Silom's most famous attraction is Patpong, a raunchy circus of go-go bars and an oddly complementary market of pirated goods. Traffic is notorious in this part of town, but the Skytrain, subway and Chao Phraya Express provide some transport relief.

SRI MARIAMMAN TEMPLE

วัดพระศรีมหาอุมาเทวี(วัดแขกสีลม)

As flourishing as it is flamboyant, this **Hindu temple** (Wat Phra Si Maha Umathewi; Map pp124-5; cnr Th Silom & Th Pan; donations accepted; ☎ 6am-8pm; Skytrain Chong Nonsi) visually leaps off the block. Built in the 1860s by Tamil immigrants in the centre of a still thriving ethnic enclave, the main temple

is a stacked façade of intertwined, full-colour Hindu deities, topped by a gold-plated copper dome. In the centre of the main shrine is Kao Mae Maha Umawee (Uma Devi, also known as Shakti, Shiva's consort); her son Phra Khanthakuman (Subramaniam) is on the right; on the left is her other son, elephant-headed Phra Phikkhanet (Ganesh). Along the left interior wall sit rows of Shiva, Vishnu and other Hindu deities, as well as a few Buddhas, so that just about any non-Muslim, non-Judaeo-Christian Asian can worship here – Thai and Chinese devotees come to pray and offer bright-yellow marigold garlands alongside the Indian residents.

Thais call this temple Wat Khaek – *khàek* is a colloquial expression for people of Indian descent. The literal translation is 'guest', an obvious euphemism for a group of people you don't particularly want as permanent residents; hence most Indians living permanently in Thailand don't appreciate the term.

LUMPHINI PARK

สวนลุมพินี

Named after the Buddha's place of birth in Nepal, **Lumphini Park** (Map p127; Th Phra Ram IV, btwn Th Withayu & Th Ratchadamri; admission free; ☎ 5am-8pm; bus 13, 505, Skytrain Sala Daeng, subway Lumphini) is the best way to escape Bangkok without leaving town. Shady paths, a large artificial lake and swept lawns temporarily blot out the roaring traffic and hulking concrete towers.

One of the best times to visit the park is before 7am when the air is fresh (well, relatively

so for Bangkok) and legions of Thai-Chinese are practising *taijiquan* (fai chi). Also in the morning, vendors set up tables to dispense fresh snake blood and bile, considered health tonics. The park reawakens with the evening's cooler temperatures – aerobics classes collectively sweat to a techno soundtrack.

SNAKE FARM

สถานเสาวภา

Snake farms tend to gravitate towards carnivalesque rather than humanitarian, except at **Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2252 0161; cnr Th Phra Ram IV & Th Henri Dunant; admission 70B; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat & Sun; Skytrain Sala Daeng, subway Samyan & Silom). Founded in 1923, the snake farm prepares antivenin from venomous snakes – common cobra, king cobra, banded krait, Malayan pit viper, green pit viper and Russell's viper. This facility was only the second of its kind in the world (the first was in Brazil).

Tourists are welcome to view the **milking** (11am & 2.30pm Mon-Fri, 11am Sat & Sun) or to stroll the small garden where the snakes are kept in escape-proof cages. The snakes tend to be camera-shy during nonperformance times.

M R KUKRIT PRAMOJ HOUSE

บ้านหม่อมราชวงศ์คึกฤทธิ์ปราโมจ

Author and statesman Mom Ratchawong Kukrit Pramoj once resided in this charming Thai house now open to the public as a **museum** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2286 8185; Soi 7/Phra Phinij, Th Narathiwat Rachananakharin; admission 50B; ☎ 10am-5pm

BANGKOK'S EXHIBITIONISTS

After surveying Thailand's artistic traditions of temple murals and religious sculpture, fast forward into the present time to see how these inherited techniques are being adapted to the contemporary language of modern art. The noncommercial galleries and exhibition spaces listed here range from conventional to avant-garde and display a wide range of media. Rotating exhibits are advertised in the English-language press and online at www.rama9.org. For a list of commercial galleries, see the boxed text on p176.

About Studio/About Café (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2623 1742; 418 Th Maitritchit; subway Hualampong) Cutting-edge Thai artists working in alternative and experimental media.

Bangkok Sculpture Center (☎ 0 2559 0505; www.bangkoksculpturecenter.org; PM Center Co, Soi Nuanchan, Th Ramindra; ☎ by appointment 10am-4pm 2nd/4th Sat of each month) Many art critics believe that Thai sculpture, not its canvases, hold the true promise of Thai modern art. This private collection is one of the few venues to admire the graceful lines of 3-D art.

Bangkok University Art Gallery (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2350 3626, 0 2671 7526; 3rd fl, Bldg 9, Kluay Nam Thai Campus, Th Rama IV; ☎ 9am-7pm) This art university excels in mixed-media exhibits.

Chulalongkorn Art Centre (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2218 2964; 7th fl, Library Bldg, Chulalongkorn University, Th Phayathai; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat; Skytrain Siam) Major names in the modern-art scene, as well as international artists.

Play Gallery (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2714 7888; Playground1, 2nd fl, Soi 55, Th Sukhumvit; ☎ 10am-11pm; Skytrain Thonglor to red soi bus) Urban art, including manga and graffiti, gets an artistic salute at this exhibition space within a concept mall.

Queen's Gallery (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2281 5360; www.queengallery.org; 101 Th Ratchadamnoen Klang; ☎ 10am-7pm Thu-Tue; bus 2, 511, 512, klong taxi to Tha Phan Fah) Modern painters receiving royal patronage are displayed at this new and tidy museum, walking distance from Th Khao San.

Silpakorn University Art Gallery (Map p130; ☎ 0 2623 6120; 31 Th Na Phra Lan; ☎ 9am-4pm; Chao Phraya Express Tha Chang) Known as the primary university for painting, this campus gallery displays student and faculty work.

Tadu Contemporary Art (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2645 2473; www.tadu.net; 7th fl, Barcelona Motors Bldg, 99/2 Th Tiamruammit; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat; subway Thailand Cultural Centre) Major centre for experimental art, culture and conversation.

COUP D'PARTY

Call us worrywarts but when the West hears news of a government overthrow, we think blood, guts and tanks. This is not necessarily the case in Thailand. Through the dozen or so coups d'état that Thailand has experienced since 1932, few have resulted in bloodshed or civil unrest. In most cases, the ouster is orchestrated within the political ranks and unravelling the motives and players requires being one of them. In the case of the 2006 coup, deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was so unpopular in the capital that the overthrow of democracy was met with initial jubilation. Bangkokians brought food and flowers to the soldiers who guarded the government buildings. The military occupation of the city became a photo-op with soldiers posing with families and babies, many of whom were dressed in military fatigues. Even the city's go-go dancers showed their support of the troops by staging an outdoor performance near the military checkpoints. An encore show was later banned by the coup leadership.

These celebrations have since been replaced with trepidation after the 2006 New Year's Eve bombings targeted several spots where revellers had assembled. Each feuding political side pointed the finger at the other and each side looked guilty. But by February 2007 a southern 'bandit' had been nabbed, suggesting either that the southern insurgency has grown more sophisticated or that the southern insurgency is a convenient fall guy.

Sat & Sun; Skytrain Chong Nonsi). European-educated but devoutly Thai, M R Kukrit surrounded himself with the best of both worlds: five traditional teak buildings, Thai art, Western books and lots of heady conversations. A guided tour is recommended for a more intimate introduction to the former resident, who authored more than 150 books and served as prime minister of Thailand.

Sukhumvit

สุขุมวิท

Executive-strength expat neighbourhoods branch off this marathon-running street. More time will be spent here eating, drinking and perhaps sleeping (as there is a high concentration of hotels here) than sightseeing. The Skytrain is the primary public-transport option.

BAN KAMTHIENG

บ้านคำเที่ยง

An engaging **house museum** (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2661 6470; Siam Society, 131 Soi Asoke/Asoke, Th Sukhumvit; adult/child 100/50B; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat; Skytrain Asoke), Ban Kamthieng transports visitors to a northern Thai village complete with informative displays of daily rituals, folk beliefs and everyday household chores, all within the setting of a traditional wooden house. This museum is

operated by and shares space with the Siam Society, the publisher of the renowned *Journal of the Siam Society* and a valiant preserver of traditional Thai culture. A reference library is open to visitors and contains titles on anything you'd want to know about Thailand (outside the political sphere, since the society is sponsored by the royal family).

THAILAND CREATIVE & DESIGN CENTER

Modern design is all the rage in Bangkok and this new **museum** (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2664 8448; www.tcdc.or.th; 6th fl, Emporium Shopping Center, Th Sukhumvit; free admission; ☎ 10.30am-10pm Tue-Sun; Skytrain Phrom Phong) invites retrospectives of international designers to educate burgeoning Thai creatives. Rotating exhibits have included costume displays by former punk-queen Vivienne Westwood and profiles of regional handicrafts.

Greater Bangkok

WANG SUAN PHAKKAT

วังสวนผักกาด

An overlooked treasure, **Lettuce Farm Palace** (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2245 4934; Th Sri Ayutthaya, near Th Ratchaprarop; admission 100B; ☎ 9am-4pm; Skytrain Phayathai, bus 63, 504) is a collection of five traditional wooden Thai houses that was once the residence of Princess Chumbon of Na-

khon Sawan and before that a lettuce farm – hence the name. Within the stilt buildings are displays of art, antiques and furnishings, and the landscaped grounds are a peaceful oasis complete with ducks, swans and a semi-enclosed garden.

The diminutive **Lacquer Pavilion**, at the back of the complex, dates from the Ayutthaya period and features gold-leaf *jataka* and *Ramayana* murals, as well as scenes from daily Ayutthaya life. The building originally sat in a monastery compound on Mae Nam Chao Phraya, just south of Ayutthaya. Larger residential structures at the front of the complex contain displays of Khmer-style Hindu and Buddhist art, Ban Chiang ceramics and a very interesting collection of historic Buddhas, including a beautiful late U Thong-style image.

WAT CHONG NONSI

วัดชองนันทรี

Close to the Bangkok side of the river, this **temple** (Map pp114-15; Th Nonsi, off Th Phra Ram III; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) contains some notable *jataka* murals painted between 1657 and 1707. It is the only surviving Ayutthaya-era temple in which both the murals and architecture are of the same period with no renovations. As a single, 'pure' architectural and painting unit, it's considered quite important for the study of late Ayutthaya art.

ACTIVITIES

Traditional 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, but don't be deterred by a petite masseuse – many of them have vice-grip strength.

Depending on the neighbourhood, prices for massages tend to stay fixed: about 250B for a foot massage and 500B for a full body massage.

The primary training ground for the masseuses who are deployed across the country is **Wat Pho Thai Massage School** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2221 3686; Soi Penphat, Th Sanamchai; ☎ 8am-5pm; bus 12, 53, 503, 508, 512, Chao Phraya Express Tha Tien); there

are also massage pavilions inside the temple complex.

Don't worry that **Marble House** (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2651 0905, 3rd fl, Ruamchit Plaza, 199 Th Sukhumvit at Soi 15; ☎ 10am-midnight) is in the middle of the sleazy Sukhumvit girlie scene. The work of its traditional masseurs doesn't reflect the neighbouring 'friendly' services.

Other tried-and-true practitioners can be found at **Buathip Thai Massage** (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2251 2627; 4/13 Soi 5, Th Sukhumvit; ☎ 10am-midnight; Skytrain Nana), which is on a small sub-soi behind the Amari Boulevard Hotel.

Skills Development Centre for the Blind (suon pháthánaa sámthápháap khon taa báwt; ☎ 0 2583 7327; Pak Kret, north of central Bangkok) is a government outreach programme that trains the blind in Thai massage, creating what many people consider to be expert masseuses because of their sensitive sense of touch. While a massage might be memorable, getting here is the primary adventure. Take bus 33 from Sanam Luang to Pak Kret and hire a motorcycle taxi from there. You'll need a little Thai to pull this off, but Pak Kret villagers are pretty easy-going and willing to listen to foreigners massacre their language.

Spas

Bangkok isn't the prettiest city in the world, but its residents outshine the architectural shortcomings. Keeping up with these flawless beauties means your humidified look is going to need professional assistance. To undo the stresses of Bangkok pollution or just to treat yourself like royalty, consider a spa splurge complete with body rubs, floral baths and age-defying treatments. For true luxe, the spas in the Oriental Hotel and the Shangri-La are the city's reigning retreats, but for more local tastes, try out these options:

Offering international beauty and well-being therapies, **Divana Spa** (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2261 6784; www.divanaspa.com; 7 Soi 25, Th Sukhumvit; spa package from 2500B; Skytrain Asoke) retains a unique Thai touch with a private and soothing setting in a garden house.

More down-to-earth than your average Bangkok spa, **Health Land** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2637 8883; 120 Th Sathon Neua; spa treatments from 750B; Skytrain Chong Nonsi) started its career as an all-purpose health centre selling organic vegetables, promoting meditation and providing basic massage treatments. Now the winning formula of affordable prices and expert treatments has

BANGKOK'S ISLAND GETAWAY

Soothe your nerves with a half-day getaway to **Ko Kret**, a car-free island in the middle of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, at Bangkok's northern edge. It is home to one of Thailand's oldest settlements of Mon people, who were the dominant culture in central Thailand between the 6th and 10th centuries AD. The Mon are also skilled potters, and Ko Kret continues the culture's ancient tradition of hand-thrown earthenware, made from local Ko Kret clay. Along the narrow footpaths that circumnavigate the island are small pottery shops behind which the potters work with relaxed precision in open-air studios.

Beside the long-tail boat pier, a Mon Buddhist temple called **Wat Paramai Yikawat**, also known simply as 'Wat Mon', contains a Mon-style marble Buddha. A leisurely stroll around the island provides a fascinating contrast to the Big Mango's streetlife – Ko Kret's rush hour may consist of two motorcycles, and the counterparts to those fierce soi dogs are now lazy creatures too content to scratch themselves. That is, if you visit during the week. On weekdays Ko Kret is a popular Thai outing with lots of food vendors, tacky souvenir stalls and even traditional dance performances.

Current transport options from Bangkok include hiring a long-tail boat from the Tha Nonthaburi (accessible via Chao Phraya Express boat heading north). You can also take bus 33 from Sanam Luang to Pak Kret and board the cross-river ferry to Ko Kret.

Alternatively, you can join one of the long-tail tours that depart from Tha Nonthaburi (100B per person; three hours); these outings spend 1½ hours on the island and the remaining time visiting nearby desert-making shops. The Sunday tours operated by **Chao Phraya Express** (☎ 0 2623 6001; fax 0 2225 3002; adult/child 500/250B; ☎ 9am-3.30pm) depart from Tha Maharat.

created a small empire of Health Land centres throughout the city.

Need to lose weight, erase wrinkle lines, clear-up persistent acne, or flush out the lymphatic system? Then head to **SMedical Spa** (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2253 1010; www.smedspa.com; Th Withayu; treatments from 1000B; Skytrain Ploenchit), part of the new generation of Bangkok spas merging alternative medicine with relaxation techniques and cosmetic surgery. The centre has a textbook menu of possible treatments from acupuncture, hydrotherapy, nutritional counselling, face lifts and exercise programmes.

River & Canal Trips

Glimpses of Bangkok's past as the 'Venice of the East' are still evident today, even though the motor vehicle has long since become the city's conveyance of choice. Along the river and the canals is a motley fleet of watercraft, from paddled canoes to rice barges. In these areas many homes, trading houses and temples remain oriented towards life on the water and provide a fascinating glimpse into the past, when Thais still considered themselves *jão náam* (water lords).

An exploration of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya is a journey through Thailand's watery artery. Hulking barges transport sand to points upriver, or long-tail boats ricochet from one bank to another, kicking up the muddy water into a boil. At each pier, the boat hands plead to the crowd to keep a 'cool heart' (*jai yen*) and allow the gap between dock and boat to close before disembarking or boarding.

The best way to commute between riverside attractions is the **Chao Phraya Express** (Map p183; ☎ 0 2623 6001; tickets 10-27B). The terminus for most northbound boats is Tha Nonthaburi

and for most southbound boats is Tha Sathon (also called Central Pier), near the Saphan Taksin Skytrain station, although some boats run as far south as Wat Ratchasingkhon. See p182 for more information about boat travel.

Across the river in Thonburi are several functional canals, including **Khlong Bangkok Noi** and **Khlong Bangkok Yai**, both of which offer lovely leafy scenery.

Along Khlong Bangkok Noi, **Wat Suwan-naram** (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2434 7790; 33 Soi 32, Th Charoen Sanitwong, Khlong Bangkok Noi; ☎ 5am-9pm) contains 19th-century *jataka* murals painted by two of early Bangkok's foremost religious muralists. Art historians consider these the best surviving temple paintings in Bangkok.

Along Khlong Bangkok Yai, Wat Intharam is the home to a stupa that contains the ashes of King Taksin, the Thai general who re-established order in the kingdom after the fall of Ayuthaya. He was assassinated in 1782. Fine gold-and-black lacquerwork adorning the main *bót* doors depicts the mythical *naariphon* tree, which bears fruits that are shaped like beautiful maidens.

Khlong Mon, between Bangkok Noi and Bangkok Yai, offers more typical canal scenery, including orchid farms.

Mit Chao Paya (Tha Chang) arranges long-tail boat tours along the river to sights such as the Royal Barges National Museum, Wat Arun and into the Thonburi canals. It usually costs 700B for the entire boat for one hour, excluding admission and various mooring fees. There are other similar services at every boat pier and most operators have set tour routes, but if you have a specific destination in mind you can request it. Some operators quote rates for chartering the boat and others per person.

Sports Facilities

If you're dedicated to the cause of athletics in this energy-sucking climate, you need access to an air-conditioned facility. Most membership gyms and top-end hotels have fitness centres and swimming pools. Some hotels offer day-use fees but these policies vary per establishment.

British Club (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2234 0247; www.britishclubbangkok.org; 189 Th Surawong; fitness centre ☎ 6am-10pm Mon-Fri, 6am-9pm Sat & Sun) maintains a membership gym open to citizens of Aus-

tralia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, or to other nationalities through a waiting list. Among the sports facilities are a pool, golf driving range, and squash and tennis courts.

Clark Hatch Physical Fitness Centers (www.clarkhatchthailand.com) is a top-class operation with more than 14 locations throughout the city. All branches have weight machines, aerobics classes, pool, sauna and massage.

Other commercial gyms include **California Wow** (www.californiawow.com; 13 branches) and **Fitness First** (www.fitnessfirst.co.th; 7 branches).

These days Bangkok has every imaginable fitness trend: Pilates, kickboxing and even salsa dancing. Most exercise options are centred around the business district on Th Ploenchit or Th Sukhumvit, but there are also studios directly on Th Khao San.

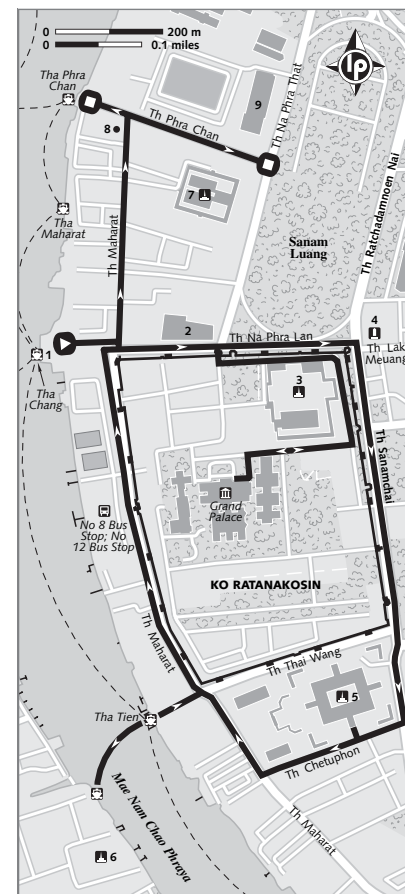
Yoga Elements Studio (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2655 5671; www.yogaelements.com; 23rd fl, 29 Vanissa Bldg, Soi Chitlom; Skytrain Chitlom) teaches classes in Vinyasa and Ashtanga and offers attractive introductory rates.

Absolute Yoga (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2252 4400; www.absoluteyogabangkok.com; 4th fl, Amarin Plaza, Th Ploenchit; Skytrain Chitlom) offers yoga for the gym rat, not the spiritualist, with classes in hot yoga, Pilates and Vinyasa.

One of Bangkok's longest-running sports groups is the **Hash House Harriers** (www.bangkokhhs.com), who pride themselves both on their dedication to running and their ability to subdue dehydration with massive amounts of beer. If you've got commitment issues with either pursuit, start with a simple jog at a local park, like Lumpini or Sanam Luang. Every imaginable hometown sport – be it softball, football, rugby or biking – attracts a loyal group of expat participants. Most clubs have websites with more information.

WALKING TOUR Ko Ratanakosin

On this action-packed walking tour, you can efficiently tick off Bangkok's 'must-sees' in just one morning. The city's highlights reside in compact Ko Ratanakosin, the former royal district filled with gleaming temples and bustling markets. It is best to start early to beat the heat and before the hordes have descended. Remember to dress modestly (long pants and skirts, shirts with sleeves and close-toed shoes) in order to gain entry to the temples. Also ignore any strangers who



WALK FACTS

Start Tha Chang
Finish Thammasat University
Distance 2.1km
Duration 1-2 hours
Fuel Stop Food stall off Th Maharat

approach you offering advice on sightseeing or shopping.

Start at **Tha Chang (1)** and follow Th Na Phra Lan east with a quick diversion to **Silpakorn University (2)**, Th Na Phra Lan), Thailand's premier fine-arts university. Originally founded as the School of Fine Arts by Italian artist Corrado Feroci, the university campus includes part

RIVER SURGERY

Mae Nam Chao Phraya experiences a diurnal tide that is felt as far as 180km upriver, a phenomenon that enabled ocean-going sailing ships to trade with Ayuthaya. One tricky bend in the river, from the present-day sights of Wat Arun to Thammasat University, required the digging of a shortcut to aid nonmotorised vessels. The original course of the river has been demoted to Khlong Bangkok Noi, which is not a canal at all.

of an old palace built for Rama I. Continue east to the third gate into the **Wat Phra Kaew & Grand Palace** (3; p108), two of Bangkok's most famous attractions.

Cross Th Sanamchai to the home of Bangkok's city spirit, **Lak Meuang** (4; p110), which is generally alive with the spectacle of devotion – including burning joss sticks and traditional dancing. Go south down Th Sanamchai for 500m and turn right onto Th Chetuphon, where you'll enter **Wat Pho** (5; p108), home of the giant reclining Buddha and lots of quiet nooks and crannies.

Take Th Mahathat north to Th Thai Wang and turn left to catch the cross-river ferry to Khmer-influenced **Wat Arun** (6; p110).

Return to Bangkok and head up Th Maharat and stop for a spot of lunch from one of the food stalls or air-con restaurants along the way. North of Th Na Phra Lan, Th Maharat becomes an informal healing centre of herbal apothecaries and sidewalk amulet sellers, catering to the health of one's body and spirit. On your right is **Wat Mahathat** (7; p109), one of Thailand's respected Buddhist universities. Take a left into the narrow alley immediately after Trok Mahathat to discover the cramped **amulet market** (8; p109). Follow the alley all the way towards the river to appreciate how extensive the amulet trade is.

If you've worked up yet another appetite, hop over to the next alley, Trok Nakhon, to a dim alternate world of food vendors; some even offer a river view. The graduation-gown stalls and swarm of white-and-black uniforms

is an obvious clue that you are approaching **Thammasat University** (9; Th Phra Chan), known for its law and political-science departments. The campus was also the site of the bloody October 1976 prodemocracy demonstrations, when hundreds of Thai students were killed or wounded by the military.

If you've made it this far, feel free to call it a day; hang a left on Th Phra Chan towards Sanam Luang to return home by bus. Alternatively you could take a cross-river ferry from Tha Phra Chan to Tha Wang Lang, where you can pick up Chao Phraya express boats in either direction.

Chinatown

Busy and chaotic, Chinatown is the walking-tour version of an obstacle course: you'll be dodging street vendors, traffic and other shoppers.

Start at **Tha Ratchawong** (1). Walk along Th Ratchawong to **Sampeng Lane** (2; p134); you won't see a street sign here, but you'll know it by the queue of people slowly shuffling into the alley. You have now entered the shopping fun house, where the sky is completely ob-

WALK FACTS

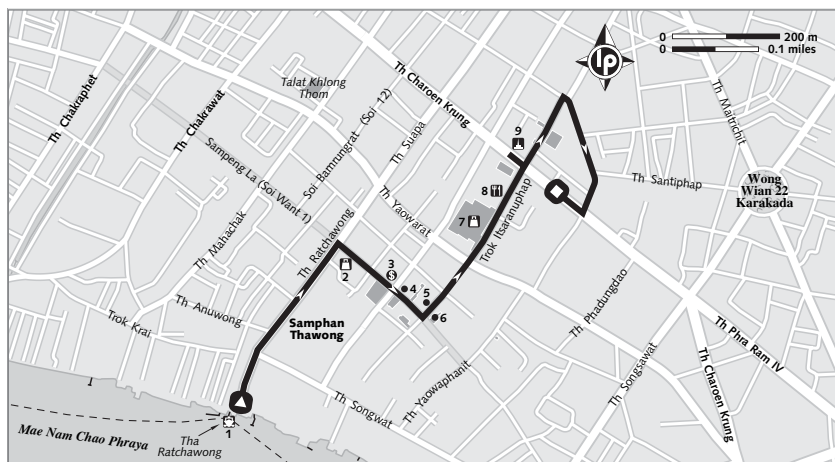
Start Tha Ratchawong

Finish Th Charoen Krung

Distance 1.5km

Duration 1 hour

Fuel Stop Hong Kong Noodles



sured and bargains lie in wholesale ambush – 500 Hello Kitty pens, a tonne of stuffed animals and books of stickers. Sampeng was originally a trading centre built in 1782 near the river for goods bound for the international markets.

After about 100m, Sampeng Lane crosses Th Mangkon. On either side of the intersection are two of Bangkok's oldest commercial buildings, a **Bangkok Bank** (3) and the venerable **Tang To Kang** (4) gold shop, which are both more than 100 years old and are classic examples of early Ratanakosin architecture.

Continue walking another 60m or so to **Trok Itsaranuphap** (5), where you'll take a left on to a wider lane past rows of vendors selling huge bags of fried pork skins, dried fish and other delicacies. Down the lane on your right is **Talat Kao** (6), Chinatown's two-centuries-old market. The real action runs from 4am to 11am, any later and you'll only find slick sidewalks and piles of rubbish.

From Trok Itsaranuphap, continue to Th Yaowarat, Chinatown's main thoroughfare, lined with gold shops. Cross the road to **Talat Leng-Buai-la** (7), the new market where you'll find all manner and size of freshwater and saltwater fish and shellfish, alive or filleted – or, as is sometimes the case, half alive and half filleted. If uncooked food makes the belly grumble, stop in at **Hong Kong Noodles** (8; p161), on the left side of the alley.

Cross the next major intersection, Th Charoen Krung, and turn left. Continue for 20m to **Wat Mangkon Kamalawat** (9; Leng Noi Yee), one of Chinatown's largest and liveliest temples. Along this stretch of Th Charoen Krung, shops sell fruit, cakes, incense and ritual burning paper for offering at the temple. Work your way back to Trok Itsaranuphap and continue past funerary stalls to the termination of the *soi* at Th Yommarat Sukhum. Turn right on to Th Phla Phla Chai and follow the bend in the road to return to Th Charoen Krung. About midblock, this tour ends fittingly beside a coffin shop.

COURSES

Culture and cooking courses dominate Bangkok's continuing education syllabus.

Cooking

One of the best ways to crack Thailand's lengthy menu is to take a cooking course. Bangkok has several different types of pro-

grammes aimed at backpackers, expat housewives or wannabe master chefs.

Blue Elephant Thai Cooking School (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2673 9353; www.blueelephant.com; Thai Chine Bldg, 233 Th Sathon Tai; class 3300B; Skytrain Surasak) is considered the most gourmet of the cooking schools. The half-day sessions introduce students to Thai cooking techniques and ingredients. The morning session includes a trip to the market.

Oriental Hotel Cooking School (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2659 9000; Oriental Hotel, Soi 38/ Oriental, Th Charoen Krung; course US\$120) features cooking demonstrations, lectures and hands-on work under the direction of well-known chefs. The intimate setting in a traditional Thai-style house adds to the charm, but to get your money's worth pick a menu that covers more complex dishes than basic *phat thai*.

Thai House (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2903 9611; www.thaihouse.co.th; Bang Yai, Nonthaburi; class 3500B) is held in a homey teak house about 40 minutes north of Bangkok by boat. You can choose between one- to three-day programmes, which include preparing Thai standards (*tôm yam*, *phat thai* and various curries). There are also cooking and lodging packages available. There are public boats that run from Tha Chang to Bang Yai but their schedule is pegged to commuter hours and is not always reliable.

May Kaidee (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 9137 3173; Soi Damnoen Klang; class 1000B) is Khao San's favourite vegetarian restaurant and also offers cooking courses. There are two half-day sessions that include a visit to the market and preparation of a whopping 10 dishes. The menu differs between the morning and afternoon classes.

Silom Thai Cooking School (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 4726 5669; 31/11 Soi 13, Th Silom; class 1000B), run out of a private home, is an introduction to both homecooking and ordinary Thai life. The setting is rustic (and not entirely hygienic) but it is completely hands-on: you'll sit cross-legged on the floor to chop shallots, pound chillies into paste and fry it all up in the pan. Includes a market tour and five dishes.

Meditation

Although at times Bangkok may seem like the most un-Buddhist place on earth, there are several places where foreigners can practise Theravada Buddhist meditation.

Wat Mahathat (Map p130; ☎ 0 2222 6011; 3 Th Maharat; ☎ 9am-5pm; bus 47, 53, 503, 508, 512, river ferry Tha Phra Chan or Tha Maharat) provides three daily medita-

tion sessions (7am, 1pm and 6pm) based on the Mahasi Sayadaw system of developing the *satipatthana* (foundations of mindfulness). Accommodation for long-term meditation is also available; just stop by and fill out an application. Phra Suphe, the monk who runs the centre, speaks flawless English, and there are often Western monks or long-term residents available to interpret. Within the temple complex is the International Buddhist Meditation Centre, which hosts twice-monthly lectures on various aspects of Buddhism.

Wat Pak Nam (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2467 0811; Th Thoet Thai, Phasi Charoen, Thonburi; bus 103, 504, 509), where hundreds of monks and nuns reside during *phansa* (Buddhist Lent), has hosted many foreigners over the years. Meditation classes are held twice a day (8.30am and 6pm). The teacher usually speaks some English and there are often people around who can interpret. The emphasis is on developing concentration through *nimitta* (acquired mental images) in order to attain *jhana* (state of 'absorption'). If interested in residing at the temple, you can talk to the head monk or nun for permission. The wat can also be reached by chartered long-tail boat.

Baan Dvara Prateep (☎ 0 1845 5445; www.baandvara.prateep.com; 53/3 Mu 5, Ko Kret) is a perfect solution for the moderately mindful. This meditation and cultural retreat is more relaxed than the strict temple environment and is often used as a meeting centre for corporate team-building. Meditation classes focus on relieving stress and achieving peace, and culture classes connect visitors to Thai handicrafts.

House of Dhamma (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2511 0439; www.houseofdhamma.com; 26/9 Soi 15, Th Lat Prao; Skytrain Mo Chit) is a meditation centre in the northern suburbs of Bangkok. The centre hosts monthly introduction courses to vipassana meditation as well as weekend retreats in cooperation with the Young Buddhists Association of Thailand.

For more information about meditation centres or teachers with English skills in Bangkok and beyond, contact the **World Fellowship of Buddhists** (WFB; Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2661 1284; www.wfb-hq.org; Soi 24, Th Sukhumvit, beside Benjasiri Park), which sells a guide to meditation centres and hosts meditation classes on the first Sunday of every month. Also visit the online guide to Thai meditation centres at www.dhammathai.org for details such as instructions on applications, size of monastery and proficiency

of English (of the monks and meditation instructors).

For background information on Buddhism, see p58; for temple etiquette, see p42.

Muay Thai

Training in *muay thai* (Thai boxing) for foreigners has increased in popularity in the past five years and many camps all over the country are tailoring their programmes for English-speaking fighters. The following camps provide instruction in English and accept men and women. Food and accommodation are usually provided at *muay thai* camps for an extra charge. The website www.muaythai.com contains loads of information on training camps.

Fairtex Muay Thai (☎ 0 2757 5147; www.fairtexbkk.com; 99/5 Mu 3, Soi Buthamanuson, Th Theparak, Banpli, Samut Prakan; tuition per day 400B) is a popular, long-running camp south of Bangkok.

Jitti's Gym Thai Boxing & Homestay (Sor Vorapin; Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2282 3551; 13 Soi Krasab, Th Chakraphong; tuition per day/month 400/8000B) specialises in training foreign students of both genders; the gym is sweating distance from Th Khao San.

Muay Thai Institute (Map p187; ☎ 0 2992 0096; www.muaythai-institute.net; Rangsit Muay Thai Stadium, 336/932 Th Prachatiapat, Pathum Thani; tuition for 1st level 6400B) is associated with the respected World Muay Thai Council. The institute offers a fundamental course (consisting of three levels of expertise), which can be completed in 120 days, as well as courses for instructors, referees and judges. If you're interested, make an appointment to visit the facility, which is north of Bangkok International Airport, and watch the teachers and students at work.

Thai Language & Culture

American University Alumni Language Centre (AUA; Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2252 8170; www.auathai.com; 179 Th Ratchadamri; tuition per hr 102B; Skytrain Ratchadamri) is run by the American University Alumni and is one of the largest English-language teaching institutes in the world. There are 10 levels consisting of 200 hours worth of class time that can be completed within a sliding time-scale. The teaching method is based on the natural language acquisition of children, first focusing on listening and comprehension and then advancing to speaking and reading.

Chulalongkorn University's Intensive Thai Office (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2218 4640; www.inter.chula.ac.th; Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Th Phayathai; Skytrain

Siam) offers three different levels (basic, intermediate and advanced) of Thai-language coursework with each level lasting five weeks (100 hours of study). At the intermediate level, the classes focus on specialised vocabulary, such as environment, tourism, culture, religion, economics and news reading. The programme is best suited for academics or business professionals. Contact the department for tuition, enrolment and accommodation queries.

Chulalongkorn's Thai Studies Center (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2218 4862; www.inter.chula.ac.th; Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Th Phayathai; Skytrain Siam) offers MA and PhD degrees in Thai studies, an English-language programme that covers aspects of Thai culture, including folklore, theatre, ecology and urbanisation. The PhD programme includes additional years of supervised doctoral research. Depending on class availability, the centre also accepts students who are not enrolled in the full MA programme. Contact the department for tuition, enrolment and accommodation queries.

Siri Pattana Thai Language School (Map p127; ☎ 0 2677 3150; siri_pattana@hotmail.com; Bangkok Insurance Bldg, 13 Th Sathon Tai; tuition from 7500B), located in front of the YWCA building, offers Thai-language courses that cover 30 hours broken into one- or two-hour classes per day, as well as preparation for the *paw hòk* (teaching proficiency exam).

Pro Language (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2250 0072; www.prolanguage.co.th; 10th fl, Times Square Bldg, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Nana) is a favourite of expat professionals. Pro Language starts with the basics and increases in difficulty to the advanced level, which involves studying examples of Thai literature. Classes are thematically designed: asking questions, giving opinions, business Thai, and the like.

Union Language School (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2214 6033; www.unionlanguage.com; 7th fl, 328 CCT Office Bldg, Th Phayathai; tuition from 6000B; Skytrain Ratchathewi) is generally recognised as having the best and most rigorous courses (many missionaries study here). Union employs a balance of structure- and communication-oriented methodologies in 80-hour, four-week modules.

Thai Massage

Wat Pho Thai Massage School (Map p130; ☎ 0 2221 3686; www.watpomassage.com; 392/25-28 Soi Phenphat 1, Th Maharat; tuition from 6500B; ☎ 8am-4pm; river ferry Tha Tien) offers basic and advanced courses in

traditional massage; each course comprises 30 hours available in five- to 10-day increments. There are two basic level courses: general massage and foot massage. The advanced level covers therapeutic and healing massage or oil and aromatherapy. Some knowledge of Thai will ease the communication barrier in all of these courses. The school is outside the temple compound in a restored Bangkok shophouse.

BANGKOK FOR CHILDREN

Want to ingratiate yourself into Thai culture? Bring your children along as passports. The family is so revered in Thailand that even the most aloof taxi driver will warm to a fat *faràng* baby. Blonde-headed children will get even more attention, and children of all ages will be showered with affection and treats.

Bangkok Doll Factory & Museum (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2245 3008; 85 Soi Ratchathaphan/Mo Leng; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) houses a colourful selection of traditional Thai dolls, both new and antique. This museum is really hard to find: approach via Th Si Ayuthaya heading east. Cross under the expressway past the intersection with Th Ratchaprarop and take the *soi* to the right of the post office. Follow this windy street until you start seeing signs.

Children's Discovery Museum (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2615 7333; Chatuchak Park, Th Kamphaeng Phet 4; adult/child 70/50B; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun; Skytrain Mo Chit, subway Chatuchak Park) disguises learning as kid's play. Most activities are geared to early elementary-aged children. There is also a toddler-aged playground at the back of the main building. Opposite Chatuchak Weekend Market

Dusit Zoo (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2281 2000; Th Phra Ram V, btwn Th Ratwithi & Th Sri Ayuthaya; adult/child 100/50B; ☎ 8am-5pm; bus 18, 510) covers 19 hectares with caged exhibits of more than 300 mammals, 200 reptiles and 800 birds, including relatively rare indigenous species such as banteng, gaur, serow and some rhinoceros. The facilities are a bit tired, but if nothing else, the zoo is a nice place to get away from the noise of the city and observe how Thai people amuse themselves – mainly by eating. There are shady grounds plus a lake in the centre with paddle boats for hire. There's also a small children's playground.

Siam Ocean World (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2687 2000; www.siamoceanworld.co.th; basement, Siam Paragon, Th Phra Ram I; adult/child 450/280B; ☎ 9am-10pm; Skytrain Siam) A

BIZARRE BANGKOK

If you've joined the routine of the lotus-eaters and have stopped noticing the taxi-cab shrines, the groundskeepers sweeping the lawns, the children bathing in the filthy canals, or mangy soi dogs, then you need to wake up and smell the fish sauce. Or spend the day experiencing Bangkok's freakier side.

Horse Races

Bangkok's bluebloods and accomplished nouveau riche enjoy the status, privilege and...oh yeah, sports facilities at the exclusive **Royal Bangkok Sports Club** (RBSC; Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2251 0181-86; btwn Th Henri Dunant & Th Ratchadamri; bus 16 & 21). Commoners can gain a glimpse of greener pastures during public horse-racing events held twice a month.

Kàthoey Cabaret

Thailand's third gender (*kàthoey*; lady boys) pushes gender-bending well into gender-illusion, in turn fooling many unsuspecting foreign visitors. While night stalkers will no doubt encounter lady-boys at go-go bars, the more straight-laced visitor can witness the magic of sequinned costumes, big hair and natural hour-glass figures at the city's *kàthoey* cabarets. **Calypso Cabaret** (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2653 3960; www.calypsocabaret.com; Asia Hotel, 296 Th Phayathai; tickets 1000B; 🎭 showtimes 8.15pm & 9.45pm) and **Mambo Cabaret** (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2259 5128; Washington Theatre, Th Sukhumvit, btwn Soi 22 & 24; tickets 800B; 🎭 showtimes 8.30pm & 10pm) host choreographed stage shows featuring Broadway high kicks and lip-synched pop tunes.

Lingam Shrine at Nai Lert Park

Clusters of carved stone and wooden phalli surround a spirit house and **shrine** (Saan Jao Mae Thap Thim; Map pp128-9; Nai Lert Park Hotel, Th Withayu; Skytrain Phoenich, khlong taxi Tha Withayu) built by millionaire businessman Nai Lert to honour Jao Mae Thap Thim, a female deity thought to reside in the old banyan tree on the site. Someone who made an offering shortly thereafter had a baby, and the shrine has received a steady stream of worshippers – mostly young women seeking fertility – ever since. To get here if facing the entrance of the Raffles hotel follow the small concrete pathway to the right which winds down into the bowels of the building beside the car park. The shrine will be at the end of the building next to the *khlong*.

Songkran Niyosane Forensic Medicine Museum

Holy gun-shot wound, Batman! This grisly **museum** (Map p130; ☎ 0 2419 7000; 2nd fl, Forensic Pathology Bldg, Siriraj Hospital, Th Phranok, Thonburi; admission 40B; 🎭 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri; river ferry Tha Rot Fai) will efficiently separate the aspiring doctors from the reluctant patients. One of seven medical museums on the hospital premises, this one's claim to fame is the leathery cadaver of Si Ouey, an infamous Thai serial killer, and other appendages and remnants of famous murders, including the bloodied T-shirt from a victim who was stabbed to death with a dildo.

From Tha Rot Fai, follow the road to the second entrance into the Siriraj Hospital campus. The museum building will be on your left.

massive underwater world has been re-created at this shopping-centre aquarium. Gaze into the glass-enclosed deep reef zone or view the daily feedings of penguins and sharks.

Lumphini Park (Map p127; Th Phra Ram IV, btwn Th Withayu & Th Ratchadamri; admission free; 🕒 5am-8pm; bus 13, 505, Skytrain Sala Daeng, subway Lumphini) is a trusty ally in the cool hours of the morning and evening for kite-flying (in season) as well as stretching of the legs and lungs. View lethal

snakes become reluctant altruists at the anti-venin-producing **Snake Farm** (p137).

Join the novice monks and other children as they sprinkle tiny pellets of fish food (which are sold on the pier) into the river at **Tha Thewet** (Map pp116-17; Th Samsen; 🕒 7am-7pm), transforming the muddy river into a brisk boil of flapping bodies.

Near the old Portuguese quarter in Thonburi, **Wat Prayoon** (Map pp118-19; 24 Th Pracha-

dhikok cnr Thetsaban Soi 1; admission free; 🕒 8am-6pm; cross-river ferry from Tha Pak Talaad/Atsadang) is an artificial hill cluttered with miniature shrines and a winding path encircling a turtle pond. Vendors sell cut fruit for feeding to the resident turtles. It's near Memorial Bridge.

MBK (p174) and Siam Paragon (p175) both have bowling alleys to keep the older ones occupied. **Krung Sri IMAX** (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2511 5555; Siam Paragon, Th Phra Ram I; admission adult/child 600/250B) screens special-effects versions of Hollywood action flicks and nature features.

TOURS Dinner Cruises

Perfect for romancing couples or subdued families, dinner cruises swim along the Mae Nam Chao Phraya basking in the twinkling city lights at night, far away from the heat and noise of town. Cruises range from down-home to sophisticated and several even sail underneath Saphan Phra Ram IX, the longest single-span cable-suspension bridge in the world. The food, of course, runs a distant second to the ambiance.

Yok Yor Marina & Restaurant (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2863 0565; www.yokyor.co.th; 885 Soi Somdet Chao Phraya 17, Thonburi; adult/child 120/60B plus meal costs; 🕒 8-10pm) is a favourite among Thai friends celebrating birthdays with rousing renditions of 'Happy Bert-day'.

Wan Fah Cruises (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2639 0704; River City Shopping Complex; dinner cruise 680-780B; 🕒 7-9pm) runs a buxom wooden boat that floats in style with accompanying Thai music and traditional dance. Dinner options include a standard or seafood set menu.

Manohra Cruises (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2476 0022; www.manohracruises.com; Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa, Thonburi; cocktail/dinner cruise 500/1700B; 🕒 6-7pm & 7.30-10pm) commands a fleet of converted teak rice barges that part the waters with regal flair. Boats depart from the Marriott Resort, accessible via a free river shuttle that operates between Tha Sathon (near Saphan Taksin Skytrain station).

Bang Pa-In & Ayuthaya Cruises

A little faster than the days of sailing ships, river cruises from Bangkok north to the ruins of the former royal capital of Ayuthaya (p194) take in all the romance of the river. Most trips include a guided tour of Ayuthaya's ruins with a stop at the summer palace of Bang Pa-In (p202). To ruin-weary travellers, the

river journey might broaden the historical centre's appeal. Normally only one leg of the journey between Bangkok and Ayuthaya is aboard a boat, while the return or departing trip is by bus.

Asian Oasis (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2651 9101; www.mekhalacruise.com; Menam Riverside Hotel; 2-day trip US\$289-\$347 depending on season) sails the waters aboard a fleet of restored rice barges with old-world charm and modern conveniences. Trips include either an upstream or downstream journey to/from Ayuthaya with bus transfer in the opposite direction. Lodging and a candlelit dinner are provided on the boat. Offering food alms to the monks at Ayuthaya is an optional activity.

Manohra Cruises (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2477 0770; www.manohracruises.com; Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa, Thonburi; 3-day trip US\$1265) operates the *Mekhala 2*, the nautical equivalent of the *Eastern & Oriental Express* train. This is a restored teak rice barge decorated with antiques, Persian carpets and four luxury sleeping berths. The trip is a three-day, two-night excursion to Ayuthaya, and the package price is all-inclusive except for tax and service. In the evening the boat anchors at a temple, where a candlelit dinner is served. The next morning passengers offer food to the monks from the wat before the barge moves on to Bang Pa-In. Private charter is also available.

Bicycle & Segway Tours

Just beyond all of Bangkok's concrete is a lush, undeveloped district known as Phra Phradeang, where narrow walkways crisscross irrigation canals that feed small-scale fruit plantations and simple villages. Cycling is a great way to explore the area.

ABC Amazing Bangkok Cyclists (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2665 6364; www.realasia.net; 10/5-7 Soi 26, Th Sukhumvit; tours from 1000B; 🕒 daily tours depart at 10am or 1pm) offers one of the longest-running two-wheeled adventures to this area. Seasoned cyclists start from crowded Th Sukhumvit stopping at Khlong Toey produce market and transferring to Phra Phradeang via long-tail boat.

Bangkok Bike Rides (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2712 5305; www.bangkokbikerides.com; 14/1-B Soi Phromsi 2, off Soi 39, Th Sukhumvit; tours from 2000B), a division of the tour company Spice Roads, also conducts bike tours to outlying agricultural areas, to Ko Kret and Damnoen Saduak floating market and beyond.

Not into tropical exertion? Then climb aboard a Segway, the nonmotorised scooter

that any monkey, except George Bush, can ride without effort. **Thailand Segway Tours** (☎ 0 2255 8463; www.thailandsegwaytours.com; 90-min tours from 1900B) offers several tours through Bangkok's parks, and to the Ancient City in Samut Prakan (p186).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

In addition to the national holidays, there's always something going on in Bangkok. Check the website of **TAT** (www.tourismthailand.org) or the **Bangkok Tourism Division** (www.bangkoktourist.com) for exact dates. The cultural centres also host various international festivals.

January

Bangkok International Film Festival (www.bangkokfilm.org) Home-grown talent and overseas indies arrive on the silver screens. If you haven't heard, Bangkok is fast becoming a Bollywood and Hong Kong movie hybrid. Held in mid-January.

February/March

Chinese New Year Thai-Chinese celebrate the lunar New Year with a week of housecleaning, lion dances and fireworks. Most festivities centre around Chinatown. Dates vary.

March

Kite-Flying Season During the windy season, colourful kites battle it out over the skies of Sanam Luang and Lumpini Park.

April

Songkran The celebration of the Thai New Year has morphed into a water war with high-powered water guns and water balloons being launched at unsuspecting and unsuspecting participants. The most intense water battles take place on Th Khao San. Held in mid-April.

May

Royal Ploughing Ceremony His Majesty the King commences rice-planting season with a ceremony at Sanam Luang. Dates vary.

Miss Jumbo Queen Contest (early May) With fat-trends creeping across the globe, Thailand hosts a beauty pageant for extra-large women (over 80kg) who display the grace of an elephant at Nakhon Pathom's Samphan Elephant Park.

June

International Festival of Music & Dance An extravaganza of arts and culture sponsored by the Thailand Cultural Centre. Held twice a year in June and September.

August

Queen's Birthday The queen's birthday is recognised as Mother's Day throughout the country. In Bangkok, festivities centre around Th Ratchadamnoen and the Grand Palace. Held on 12 August.

September/October

Vegetarian Festival A 10-day Chinese-Buddhist festival wheels out yellow-bannered streetside vendors serving meatless meals. The greatest concentration of vendors is found in Chinatown. Dates vary.

October/November

King Chulalongkorn Day Rama V is honoured on the anniversary of his death at the Royal Plaza in Dusit. Crowds of devotees come to make merit with incense and flower garlands. Held on 23 October.

November

Loi Kràthong A beautiful festival where, on the night of the full moon, small lotus-shaped boats made of banana leaf and containing a lit candle are set adrift on the Mae Nam Chao Phraya. Held in early November.

Fat Festival Sponsored by FAT 104.5FM radio, Bangkok's indie-est indie bands gather for an annual fest. Held in early November.

Bangkok Pride (www.utopia-asia.com) A week-long festival of parades, parties and awards is organised by the city's gay businesses and organisations. Held in mid-November.

December

King's Birthday Locals celebrate their monarch's birthday with lots of parades and fireworks. Held on 5 December.

SLEEPING

Accommodation in Bangkok ranges from the threadbare to ultraluxurious, and there are seemingly thousands of choices, true to the Thai commercial philosophy of 'more is better'. Because of the wide distribution of places and budget types, you might first narrow your choices by neighbourhood and then by budget range.

For close to two decades, Banglamphu and its tourist ghetto of Th Khao San have reigned as the most likely crashpad for a recent Bangkok arrival. Fast becoming a rival, Chinatown is less touristy and is stealing many of the independent-minded travellers from Banglamphu. Both neighbourhoods offer a variety of affordable options and are less urbanised than other areas, meaning that shophouses far outnumber skyscrapers. Ko Ratanakosin, the former royal district, is beginning to sprout a few beautiful boutique

WHAT TO EXPECT IN BANGKOK

We list high-season rack rates. For midrange and top-end hotels, search online booking agencies or individual hotel websites for promotional rates. Some of the top-end hotels quote rates in US dollars, a holdover from the Asian currency crisis.

- Budget (less than 700B) – Don't expect much in the low end of this price range. From 100B to 300B, you'll get a bed and four walls. You'll share a bathroom (no hot water), and a rickety fan will chase the hot air around the room. Once you step up to the 400B range, you should start to expect air-con, private bathroom with hot-water shower and walls thick enough to block out noise.
- Midrange (700B to 3999B) – The biggest mixed bag of all, the midrange level starts out with the high-quality guesthouses, then moves into a grey area of mediocrity. Above 1000B, the hotels have all the appearance of a hotel back home – a bellboy, uniformed desk clerks and a well-polished lobby – but without the predictability. Swimming pools and complimentary breakfasts are noted in the review. Some hotels also charge a 7% tax.
- Top end (more than 4000B) – These hotels will maintain international standards and have at least one pool either tropically landscaped or with city views, fitness and business centres, and sometimes a spa. Rooms typically have data ports, IDD international phones, international cable channels, minibar, safety-deposit boxes etc. New-trend boutique hotels have a lot of style, but rooms can be tiny. Rates usually include breakfast. Special perks are listed in the individual reviews. The hotels in this category will add a 10% service charge plus 7% tax to hotel bills.

options, if you're looking for something romantic and unique.

The Siam Square area is centrally located between old and new Bangkok and is on both Skytrain lines. High-rise hotels and low-rise guesthouses offer the variety of budget choices within striking distance to shopping-centre nirvana.

Th Sukhumvit and Th Silom are major business areas with corporate hotel chains and package-tour specials. The Sukhumvit area tends to attract sex tourists visiting the nearby go-go bars.

The most famous hotels, however, are along the riverside near Th Silom. The river views are scenic and the experience is a comfortable and sanitised version of a country that can be a little rough on the edges.

Banglamphu

Banglamphu, the neighbourhood that includes the backpacker street of Th Khao San, is a well-padded landing zone for jet-lagged travellers. As a rule you can arrive anytime at night and find a place to crash. And services abound: you can't swing a tük-tük driver without hitting an internet shop, travel agent or beer stall.

If you're hanging out in the low end of the budget range, just show up and start hunting,

as most cheapies don't take reservations. The cheapest options start at 180B (shared bathroom); look for long-running guesthouses such as Lek, Chada House and Nat on Th Khao San, or other spots in the alleys behind Th Khao San or across Th Tanao.

More and more, the neighbourhood is gravitating towards the multistorey, upper-budget phenomenon with in-room décor (truly a revolution compared to the former flophouse aesthetic of dried projectile vomit) and comfort (air-con, sturdier beds, private bathrooms). New hotels are always opening up, accompanied by attractive promotional rates. Savvy travellers should shop on Th Khao San, Th Rambutri, Soi Rambutri and Th Kraisi.

Most of the year, it pays to visit several guesthouses before making a decision, but in the high season (December to February), take the first vacant bed you come across. The best time of day to find a vacancy is around check-out time; 10am or 11am.

The following are only a cross section of the accommodation options. We trust you to be savvy enough to find the best fit for you and your wallet.

BUDGET

LATE-NIGHT TOUCHDOWN

A lot of nail-biting anxiety is expended on the international flights arriving in Bangkok around midnight. Will there be taxis into town, will there be available rooms, will my family ever hear from me again? Soothe those nagging voices with the knowledge that most international flights arrive late and that Bangkok is an accommodating place. Yes, there are taxis and even an airport bus service (see p181). And if you haven't made hotel reservations, go straight to Th Khao San, which stays up late, is full of hotels and guesthouses, and sees a near-continuous supply of 'fresh-off-the-birds' just like you. But do keep in mind that jet lag, noise and lack of cleanliness may all hinder a restful night if you opt for a budget cheapie. On the other hand, Th Khao San has plenty of watering holes to smooth the path to slumberland.

Chai's House (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2281 4901, 49/4-8 Soi Rongma; s/d 165/275B; bus 53, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) This family-run guesthouse has shared bathrooms. It's a quiet and secure spot that enforces a 1am curfew.

Donna Guesthouse (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2281 9374; subsoi off Soi Damnoen Klangnalla, Th Ratchadamnoen; d 250-350B; bus 53, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; ☎) Dear Donna, we are so happy to have found you. The sign pointing down a little sub-soi was followed on a whim, and tucked back in there was a clean and quiet nest with big twin beds, new comforters and large shared bathrooms. Not all rooms have windows.

New Siam GH (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2282 4554; www.newsiam.net; 21 Soi Chana Songkhram, Th Phra Athit; s 290B, d 320-490B; river ferry Tha Phra Athit, bus 53, 506; ☎) Long-running New Siam is a smart spot to park your backpack. It passed the schoolmarm's cleanliness inspection (shower curtains are mould-free). Singles share bathrooms, while some doubles have private facilities. There are also small, self-accessible lockers for safekeeping valuables. Guests can use the pool at the affiliated guesthouse New Siam II for a day-use fee.

Bella Bella House (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2629 3090; 74 Soi Rambutri, Th Chakraphong; s 250B, d 420-500B; bus 53, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; ☎) Just past Soi Chana Songkhram, Bella Bella has great views into the tiled roofs of the neighbouring temple. Rooms are spartan and clean with rickety beds, and the bathrooms are new and shiny. Singles have shared bathrooms. As with most guesthouses, the desk staff tends to be the usual cast of grumpy teenagers.

Villa Guest House (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2281 7009; 230 Soi 1, Th Samsen; s/d 250/500B; bus 30, 53, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit & Tha Saphan Ram VIII) Just over the *khlong* is a great residential neighbourhood of bicycle-riding children and chatting

housewives. This old teak house occupies a womblike garden amid the village noises of crowing roosters and the smells of mesquite cooking fires. With only 10 fan rooms (all with shared bathrooms), Villa is often full and reservations are recommended.

Mango Lagoon Place (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2281 4783; Soi Rambutri, Th Chakraphong; r from 650B; bus 53, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; ☎) Sunny, lemon-yellow complex has rooms that look surprisingly like a real hotel: bed and box spring, wall-to-wall carpet (a bad idea in the tropics), big TVs and art on the wall. The pretty garden at the front is a nice noise buffer.

MIDRANGE

New World House Apartments & Guest House (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2281 5596; www.newworldlodge.com; Soi 2, Th Samsen; r from 1300B; bus 30, 53, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit & Tha Saphan Ram VIII; ☎) It is surprising to find such a big hotel in a residential neighbourhood; in fact, it is easy to walk right by and never notice it. You'll be glad you did, if you score a room on the 4th or 5th floor, which boast terraces overlooking Khlong Banglamphu.

Hotel De Moc (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2629 2100; fax 0 2280 1299; 78 Th Prachathipatjai; r from 1500B; bus 12, 56; ☎) Recently adopted by the Buddy Lodge group and rechristened, the former Thai Hotel is expecting a grand makeover. In the meantime, the rooms are large and charmingly outdated.

Viengtai Hotel (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2805 4345; www.viengtai.co.th; 42 Th Rambutri; d 1600-2000B; bus 53, 506, ferry Tha Phra Athit; ☎) Before Th Khao San was 'discovered', this was an ordinary Chinese-style hotel in a quiet neighbourhood. It now sits comfortably in the midrange with reliable but unstylish rooms. Make advance bookings for cheaper rates.

Buddy Lodge (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2629 4477; www.buddylodge.com; 265 Th Khao San; r from 2200B; bus 53, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; ☎) This splashy boutique hotel has lead Th Khao San's gentrification. Rooms are evocative of a breezy tropical manor house and outfitted with traditional Thai designs. And then at your doorstep is the continuous freak show of Th Khao San.

Baan Chantra (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2628 6988; www.baanchantra.com; 120 Th Samsen; d from 2200B; ☎) Promoted as a boutique hotel, Baan Chantra is much too big and casually dressed to be pinned with such a title. Akin to its residential neighbourhood, this converted house is without pretensions, preferring to be comfortable and roomy than fashionable and pinched. Many of the house's original teak details remain, and the deluxe room boasts a sunny patio. Free wi-fi.

Old Bangkok Inn (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2629 1785; www.oldbangkokinn.com; 609 Th Phra Sumen; d incl breakfast from 3100B; bus 2, 82, 511, 512, khlong taxi Tha Phan Fah; ☎) This atmospheric shophouse has been transformed into a cottage-cosy boutique hotel with romantically decorated, if slightly cramped, rooms. Shop at its website for rate promotions.

Ko Ratanakosin & Thonburi

The most touristed area of Bangkok was until recently utterly devoid of lodging options. But with the advent of the Bangkok boutique hotels, the riverside warehouses are being transformed into charming tourists nests.

Arun Residence (Map p130; ☎ 0 2221 9158; www.arunresidence.com; 36-38 Soi Pratu Nok Yoong, Th Maharaj; r from 2950B; river ferry Tha Tien; ☎) A simple wooden house on the river has been polished and coaxed into a comfortable and airy boutique hotel. Most rooms are lofts, but the best is the top floor with its own balcony and view of Wat Arun.

Ibrik Resort (Map p130; ☎ 0 2848 9220; www.ibrikresort.com; 256 Soi Wat Rakang, Th Arunamrin, Thonburi; d incl breakfast 4000B; Thonburi; river ferry Tha Wang Lang; ☎) Only three rooms big, this itty-bitty hotel offers style and privacy for the average professional. The rooms are minimal cool and cosy with a morning wake-up view of the busy river.

Chakrabongse Villas (Map p130; ☎ 0 2622 3356; www.thaivillas.com; 396 Th Maharaj; r from US\$140; river ferry Tha Tien; ☎) Members of royalty were the usual residents of this converted minor palace, just a brief stroll from the historic sites of Ko Ra-

tanakosin. But today, you can usurp the royal birthright in one of three luxury retreats surrounded by a lush garden and a river view.

Thewet

Thewet, the district north of Banglamphu near the National Library, is another backpackers enclave, especially popular with families and the over-30 crowd. It is a lovely leafy area, but during the rainy season it is prone to flooding.

Taewez Guest House (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2280 8856; 23/12 Soi Thewet, Th Si Ayuthaya; s/d 182/328B; bus 30, 503, river ferry Tha Thewet; ☎) At the end of the block, Taewez's no-frills concrete rooms vary greatly in quality, but the spot ranks highly with travellers because of the buddy mood that flourishes in the common spaces. Singles share a bathroom.

Sri Ayuttaya Guest House (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2282 5942; Soi Thewet, Th Si Ayuthaya; d 350-500B; bus 30, 503, river ferry Tha Thewet; ☎) Sri Ayuttaya has romantic rooms with pretty hardwood floors, exposed brick and other stylish touches.

Shanti Lodge (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2281 2497; 37 Soi Thewet, Th Si Ayuthaya; d 350-600B; bus 30, 503, river ferry Tha Thewet; ☎) The omphalos of the street's family-owned (all by the same family) guesthouses, Shanti masters a yogalike atmosphere. The cheaper bamboo-walled rooms don't do a good job of blocking out the neighbours, but more expensive rooms are creative and sealed.

Chinatown

Crowded and chaotic, Chinatown is the traditional host of mainland Chinese tourists and Indian import-exporters. Lately, Western backpackers have started to slip into the neighbourhood with little fanfare – a distinctly anonymous experience from the usual walking-ATM treatment you'll get elsewhere. The hotels in the heart of Chinatown are high-rise numbers with basic midrange amenities and relatively easy-going rates; accommodation around the Hualamphong area can provide simple shelter before making a train escape.

This area is central but difficult to get in and out of (unless travelling by boat) because of a steady supply of traffic.

TT Guest House (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2236 2946; fax 0 2236 3054; 516-518 Soi Sawang, Th Maha Nakhon; d 250-280B) In a low-key neighbourhood, this family-run guesthouse is an easy walk to the train station. Step through the gate into a shaded courtyard perfect for sipping coffee and reading a news-

paper. The rooms, which share bathrooms, are clean, with a few touches to stave off blandness. To get here, follow Th Maha Nakhon underneath the expressway, turn left onto Soi Sawang and follow it all the way to the end of the block past the machine shops and deep-fry woks.

238 Guesthouse (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2623 9287; 238 Th Phahurat; d 400-600B; bus 73, Chao Phraya Express Tha Tien; 🚗) A popular option for Wat Pho massage students, this converted shophouse has generous rooms with all the basics. The guesthouse is within walking distance of the temple on the edge of Chinatown.

River View Guest House (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2234 5429; fax 0 2237 5428; 768 Soi Phanurangsi, Th Songwat; d 450-690B; river ferry Tha Si Phraya; 🚗) The River View has a great hidden location amid machine shops and streamlike *soi*, just north of River City Complex, and a river-view restaurant on the top floor. But the rooms aren't on speaking terms with mops or brooms. If you want to see for yourself, you'll need these directions: heading north from Th Si Phraya along Charoen Krung, take a left into Th Songwat (before the Chinatown Arch), then the second left onto Soi Phanurangsi. You'll start to see signs at this point.

Krung Kasem Srikung Hotel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2225 0132; fax 0 2225 4705; 1860 Th Krung Kasem; d 650-700B; subway Hualamphong, bus 25, 35, 53; 🚗) West of the train station, this high-rise is the tweener version of a grown-up hotel: more comfort than a guesthouse but still a little rough around the edges.

Bangkok Centre Hotel (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 238 4980; www.bangkokcentrehotel.com; 328 Th Phra Ram IV; r from 1400B; subway Hualamphong; 🚗 🚗) From this hotel tower, you can see your train pull

into the station. It has all the usual midrange amenities: large frumpy rooms with a crew of *túk-túk* drivers working the entrance.

Grand China Princess (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2224 9977; www.grandchina.com; 215 Th Yaowarat; s/d 2000/2200B; river ferry Tha Ratchawong, bus 73, 507; 🚗) Literally in the heart of Chinatown, this multistorey matron has acceptable rooms buoyed by great views of Banglamphu. The top floor has a panoramic rotating restaurant to fulfil your dreams of gaudy Asia.

Shanghai Inn (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2221 2121; www.shanghai-inn.com; 479 Th Yaowarat; r from 2500B; 🚗) Nouveau-Shanghai style has arrived in worn-down Chinatown. Pink and purple lanterns, bamboo floors and imperial-style furniture crowd the rooms creating a 1920s cigarette girls boudoir in colonial Shanghai.

Siam Square & Pratunam

Siam Square and the area around it are centrally located on both Skytrain lines and smack dab in the middle of the city's shopping orgy. The area is also perfect for those who have been away from civilisation for awhile and are starved for bookshops, cinemas and Western fast food (psst, we won't tell anyone). The only drawback is that nightlife is nonexistent, but you're a short taxi ride to nightspots in Silom or Sukhumvit.

Found in the shadow of Mahboonkrong (MBK; p174), a low-key backpacker community bunks down on Soi Kasem San 1, intermixed with a local community of lunching shop girls and commuting office workers. The foreign crowd is an early-to-bed, early-to-rise troupe dedicated to do-it-yourself itineraries. Taxi drivers have a terrible time

understanding foreigners trying to pronounce this street. To bridge the language barrier, try telling them that Soi Kasem San 1 (pronounce 'Kasem' with a 'g' instead of 'k') is across from the National Stadium (*trong khàam sanaam kii-laa hàeng chàat*).

BUDGET

Pranee Building (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2216 3181; 931/12 Soi Kasem San 1, Th Phra Ram I; r 450B; Skytrain National Stadium, klong taxi Tha Ratchathewi; 🚗) One of the cheapest options on the street, Pranee isn't fancy but the rooms are large with air-con and hot water; the bathrooms are a tad decrepit.

Bed & Breakfast Inn (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2215 3004; Soi Kasem San 1, Th Phra Ram I; s/d incl breakfast 400/500B; Skytrain National Stadium, klong taxi Tha Ratchathewi; 🚗) This maze-like guesthouse has standard, recently remodelled rooms.

A-One Inn (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2215 3029; www.aoneinn.com; 25/13-15 Soi Kasem San 1, Th Phra Ram I; d from 600B; Skytrain National Stadium, klong taxi Tha Ratchathewi; 🚗) Well-proportioned rooms don't have a lot of bells and whistles but are just plain good value. A-One sees a lot of return business.

MIDRANGE

Wendy House (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2216 2436; fax 0 2216 8053; Soi Kasem San 1, Th Phra Ram I; d incl breakfast from 1000B; Skytrain National Stadium, klong taxi Tha Ratchathewi; 🚗) Wendy House is as professional as they come with a genuine Thai-style concern for its guests. The rooms are on the small side, though.

VIP Guest House/Golden House (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2252 9535; fax 0 2252 9538; 1025/5-9 Th Ploenchit; d incl breakfast 2000B; Skytrain Chitlom; 🚗) Shiny lobby of this small inn leads to rooms with mammoth-sized beds and parquet floors. Bathrooms, however, don't have tubs, only showers. VIP is down a little alley near Telephone Organization of Thailand.

Holiday Mansion Hotel (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2255 0099; fax 0 2253 0130; 53 Th Withayu; d incl breakfast from 2500B; Skytrain Ploenchit; 🚗 🚗) A solid midrange option, the Mansion is a poster child of provincial sophistication. There is a pleasant interior courtyard pool, marble lobby and a dusty grandfather clock (the standard uniform for hotels of this calibre). The generous-sized rooms are entering the sunset years of their career, but the whole package becomes utterly charming when promotions give your credit card a holiday.

Indra Regent Hotel (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2208 0022-33; www.indrahotel.com; 120/126 Th Ratchaprarop, d from 2800B; Skytrain Chitlom, klong taxi Tha Pratunam; 🚗 🚗) This soot-stained box doesn't look like much from the outside, but the interior offers one of the better-value stays in this price range. Junior suites are touted as the best buys.

Asia Hotel (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2215 0808; www.asiahotel.co.th; 296 Th Phayathai; d from 2900B; Skytrain Ratchathewi, klong taxi Tha Ratchathewi; 🚗 🚗) A favourite with ageing backpackers who have creaky joints and more fat around their wallets, this huge place has a good location and large rooms with generous-sized bathrooms. A walkway from the Skytrain is another plus, sparing visitors the barrage of 'whereyousg' from the taxis and *túk-túk* that park outside.

Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2255 6888; www.acorhotels-asia.com; Soi 6, Siam Square; d from 3500B; Skytrain Siam; 🚗 🚗) For business or leisure, Novotel Siam is conveniently located near the Skytrain and shopping. Rooms are spitting images of corporate class back home, but the deluxe ones are better suited for business purposes.

Pathumwan Princess (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2216 3700; www.pprincess.com; 444 Th Phayathai; r from 3700B; Skytrain Siam; 🚗 🚗) Families rave about this hotel because it is connected to MBK shopping centre and the Skytrain. The deluxe rooms have a work desk and huge bathrooms with separate shower and tub, and the suites boast two TVs and fabulous views (your choice between pool or city views). The sky-high swimming pool is another plus.

TOP END

Amari Watergate (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2653 9000; www.amari.com; 847 Th Petchaburi; s/d from US\$125; Skytrain Chitlom, klong taxi Tha Pratunam; 🚗 🚗) This 34-storey hotel is right in the centre of Bangkok's Pratunam district and its crowded street market. The large rooms receive a stylish blending of Thai and European details, and the large fitness centre keeps off those extra pounds graciously added by too many Thai sweets. The 8th-storey pool catches breezes and views unimaginable from street level.

Grand Hyatt Erawan (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2254 1234; www.bangkok.hyatt.com; cnr Th Ratchadamri & Th Ploenchit; d from US\$150; Skytrain Chitlom; 🚗 🚗) Just an elevated walkway away from shopping bliss, the Erawan provides one of Bangkok's most prestigious postcommerce slumbers. Rooms

WHERE YOU GO?

Getting around Bangkok has always been a challenge, even way back in the 18th century as canals were ceding to roads, and human-drawn *rôt chék* (rickshaws) were the era's taxis. During the early 20th century, the rickshaw gave way to the squeaky *sāmlāw* (three-wheeled pedicab), which better suited Bangkok's flat terrain. At certain arched bridges, however, the incline was too steep and passengers would have to walk across themselves. Once cars and trucks dominated the roadways, the *sāmlāw* was replaced by its motorised counterpart: the three-wheeled, onomatopoeic *túk-túk*. These wily go-carts fly around corners, kicking up a cloud of blue smoke and coughing like asthmatic power saws. Even though most short-term visitors will get ripped-off by unscrupulous *túk-túk* drivers, few can resist the call 'Hey you, where you go?'. If you can withstand this siren's song, you should not apologise for your disinterest. It is not considered rude in Thailand to ignore a hawker; in fact, a polite 'no thank you', a requisite in Western cultures, is considered an invitation for a stronger sales pitch in Thailand. It might feel disrespectful but the silent treatment delivers untold sums of sanity.

are sleek and modern with fully functional European-style tubs and tall shower heads. Rooms at the rear of the hotel overlook the Royal Bangkok Sports Club racetrack.

Conrad Hotel Bangkok (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2690 9999; www.conradhotels.com; 87 Th Witthayu; d from US\$165; Skytrain Ploenchit; 🚗 🚗) Bangkok's legendary luxury hotels can be a tad musty for the 30-something jet-setters. But this business-district option delivers enough nouveau style and attitude to keep the media-weened from being fussy. The rooms are decorated with Thai silks and rich earth tones, and the bathrooms transform washing into spa-ing with deep-soak tubs and overhead 'rain' shower heads.

Silom, Lumpini & Sathon

The city's financial district along Th Silom is not the most charming area of town, but it is convenient to nightspots and to the Skytrain for quick access to modern parts of Bangkok. Traffic can be thick, and getting to older, more historic parts of town can be time-consuming.

If you were hitting the Asian hippie trail back in the 1970s, you would have laid your love beads at a guesthouse in Soi Ngam Duphli, off Th Phra Ram IV, near Lumpini Park. Some shoestrings still filter into this traffic-clogged area to get business done at the nearby embassies or to trade the postbeach scene on Khao San with a 'busted-flat-in-Bangkok' seediness.

Along Th Sathon are several top-end hotels that counterbalance Soi Ngam Duphli's proletarian aesthetic. The hotels are stylish but the location is severed from the Skytrain by a shadeless megaroad.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Sala Thai Daily Mansion (Map p127; ☎ 0 2287 1436; 15 Soi Si Bamphen, off Soi Ngam Duphli; d 200-400B; subway Lumpini, bus 74, 109, 116, 507) At the end of a narrow cul-de-sac, this family-run guesthouse is more akin to the lodging options in the provinces than bright-lights Bangkok. All rooms are standard issue – four walls, bed and a light, with shared bathroom. To get here, take a left off Soi Ngam Duphli at the 7-Eleven, then take the second left and the first right.

Niagara Hotel (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2233 5783; 26 Soi 9/Suksavithaya, Th Silom; d 700B; Skytrain Chong Nonsi; 🚗) From the outside, Niagara looks like just another crummy no-tell motel, but inside reveals one of the best bargains in Silom. The rooms

are immaculate, almost sterile, and the rock-hard bed is graced with a plush comforter.

Malaysia Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 0 2286 3582; fax 0 2287 1457; 54 Soi Ngam Duphli, Th Phra Ram IV; s/d from 700B/800B; subway Lumpini, bus 74, 109, 116, 507; 🚗 🚗) The Malaysia was once Bangkok's most famous budget lodge and even gave shelter to Maureen and Tony Wheeler on their maiden shoestring trip through Southeast Asia. Nowadays it is an HQ for gay sex tourists, but the well-maintained rooms and trim prices make it a good spot for those who are amused by the hormone scene.

La Résidence Hotel (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2233 3301, fax 0 2237 9322; 173/8-9 Th Surawong; d 1200-1500B, ste 2700B; Skytrain Chong Nonsi; 🚗) La Résidence is a boutique inn with playfully and individually decorated rooms. A standard room is very small and fittingly decorated like a child's bedroom. The next size up is more mature and voluptuous with blood-red walls and modern Thai motifs.

Bangkok Christian Guest House (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2233 2206; www.bcgh.org; 123 Soi Sala Daeng 2, Th Convent; s/d 1100/1540B; Skytrain Sala Daeng; 🚗) Puritan austerity reigns at this boarding house originally serving Protestant missionaries after WWII. Today all are welcome – as long as you aren't accompanied by durian or alcohol. A 2nd-floor children's play area and lots of tourist information are also available.

TOP END

Swiss Lodge (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2233 5345; www.swisslodge.com; 3 Th Convent; d 3880-4150B; Skytrain Sala Daeng; 🚗 🚗) The small inn with big-guy muscles prides itself on its personal touches – handwritten welcome notes to return guests or pre-dawn breakfasts for early-morning departures. Its central location is padded against exterior noise by soundproofed rooms, which are a tad tight. It's also green; rooftop panels help supply 90% of the hotel's hot-water needs.

Dusit Thani (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2200 9000; www.dusit.com; 946 Th Phra Ram IV; d US\$210-300; Skytrain Sala Daeng, subway Silom; 🚗 🚗) Much to everyone's shock, this conservative old gal has gone under the knife of the global Zen design trend. Despite the identity crisis, this venerable hotel has an impressive tiered lobby, a central location and a train-station excitement as Thais in their finest arrive and depart for wedding banquets or conferences.

Metropolitan (Map p127; ☎ 0 2625 3333; www.metropolitan.com.bz; 27 Th Sathon Tai, d from US\$240; 🚗 🚗) This London-hotel boutique is ground zero for Bangkok's minimalism fascination. The rooms are spare and severe, but ultracosmopolitans are still enamoured of the hotel's naked coolness.

Sukhothai Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 0 2344 8888; www.sukhothai.com; 13/3 Th Sathon Tai; d from 11,900B; 🚗 🚗) Stylishly unique, the Sukhothai mines the temple monuments of its namesake, Thailand's ancient capital, for design inspiration. White colonnaded antechambers look out at exterior pools with floating stupas or serene Buddha figures. The rooms are exquisitely decorated and have hardwood floors and war-room-sized bathrooms.

Riverside

When people swoon about Bangkok, they've typically lodged along the river at one of the luxury hotels.

New Road Guesthouse (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2237 1094, fax 0 2237 1102; 1216/1 Th Charoen Krung; d 600-700B; river ferry Tha Si Phraya; 🚗) Sandwiched between the luxe hotels is New Road, a friendly cheapie with clean, tiled rooms with compact bathrooms. A comfortable downstairs sitting area collects all the guests in front of the communal TV.

Royal Orchid Sheraton (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2266 0123; www.starwoodhotels.com; Soi 30, Th Charoen Krung; d from US\$150; 🚗 🚗) More down-to-earth and affordable than its other riverside neighbours, the Royal Sheraton has high-end service and picture-postcard views without a lot of style or sophistication to hike up the room rates.

Millennium Hilton (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2442 2000; www.bangkok.hilton.com; 123 Th Charoen Nakorn, Thonburi; r from US\$150; 🚗 🚗) Reviving a long-abandoned ghost tower on the river, the Hilton delivers a riverside eyrie without bankrupting the piggy bank. Because of the building's oblong design, most rooms claim a riverside view, with the standard rooms possessing better feng shui. There are lots of design toys: a soaring atrium, an infinity pool through which a glass-enclosed elevator does a perfect nose-dive and the attached beach (real sand included). The only trouble is that its Thonburi location makes late nights in Bangkok a long taxi ride away.

Peninsula Hotel (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2861 2888; www.peninsula.com; 333 Th Charoen Nakhon, Thonburi; d from US\$200; private pier near Tha Oriental; 🚗 🚗) Across the river in Thonburi, the Peninsula Hotel is one of the highest-ranking luxury hotels in the world. The lobby exudes a hushed sense of privilege and pedigree with polished marble and squat, squared hallways. Rooms have

BANGKOK'S GRANDE DAME

The Oriental Hotel started out as a roughshod boarding house for European seafarers in the late 19th century, but was transformed into an aristocratic magnet by Hans Niels Anderson, the founder of the formidable East Asiatic Company (which operated between Bangkok and Copenhagen). He hired an Italian designer to build what is now known as the Authors' Wing, which was the city's most elaborate secular building; all other grand architecture at the time was commissioned by the king.

With a dramatic setting beside Mae Nam Chao Phraya, the hotel has gained its reputation from its famous guests. A Polish-born sailor named Joseph Conrad stayed here in between nautical jobs in 1888. W Somerset Maugham stumbled into the hotel with an advanced case of malaria contracted during his overland journey from Burma. In his feverish state, he heard the German manager arguing with the doctor about how a death in the hotel would hurt business. Maugham's recovery and completion of *Gentleman in the Parlour: A Record of a Journey from Rangoon to Haiphong* contributed to the long-lasting literary appeal of the hotel. Other notable guests have included Noël Coward, Graham Greene, John Le Carré, James Michener, Gore Vidal and Barbara Cartland. Some modern-day writers even claim that a stay in the Oriental will overcome writer's block.

To soak up the ambience of old seafaring Bangkok, stop by for a cocktail at the Bamboo bar or toast the 'swift river' as Noël Coward did from the riverside terrace. For teatottlers, an afternoon brew is served in a frilly Victorian lounge filled with black-and-white photographs of Rama V. To ensure its aristocratic leanings in a less formal age, the hotel enforces a dress code (no shorts, sleeveless shirts or sandals allowed).

brehtaking views of Bangkok's high-rises. The Peninsula is also known for its affiliated golf course.

Oriental Hotel (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2659 9000; www.mandarinoriental.com; 48 Soi Oriental/Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung; d US\$300; river ferry Tha Oriental; 🚗 🚶) While the rest of the city jumps overboard for the new Zen trend, the classic Oriental stays rooted in its Victorian past. It is consistently rated as one of the best hotels in the world and prides itself on personalised service. For the full bygone immersion, there is the original Authors' Wing rooms named after famous writers who have bedded here. But new generations might prefer the simply decorated new wing that drinks in full draughts of a river view.

Sukhumvit

Staying in this area puts you in the newest part of Bangkok. Th Sukhumvit can clearly be divided into two personalities. West of Soi Asoke (Soi 21) is the sex-tourist sector ruled by girlie bars and the quintessential Nana couple (an overweight, older *faràng* man with a young Thai girl). If you're not wowed or amused by it, stay elsewhere. East of Soi Asoke, every imaginable nationality calls Bangkok home, forming a motley, yet well-paid, expat community.

Because visitors with larger budgets stay in Sukhumvit, tourist services are more expensive here than in Banglamphu. Although traffic is horrendous because of the one-way streets, the Skytrain has opened up vast frontiers from the start of Th Sukhumvit at Th Ploenchit to well beyond the Eastern bus terminal.

BUDGET

Soi 1 Guesthouse (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2655 0604; www.soi1guesthouse.com; 220/7 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit; dm from 250-300B; 🚗 🚶) Basic accommodation within hobbling distance of Bumrungrad Hospital, Soi 1 Guesthouse has six and eight-bed dorms and a few private-room options (shared bathrooms). The owners are well travelled and give all new arrivals a quick introduction on how to avoid scams and hassles.

Atlanta (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2252 1650, 0 2252 6069; fax 0 2656 8123; 78 Soi 2, Th Sukhumvit; d from 400B; Skytrain Ploenchit; 🚗 🚶) You half expect Humphrey Bogart to trot down the stairs in the perfectly preserved, mid-century lobby. The rooms are skeletal compared to the lobby, complete with old-fashioned letter-writing desks (remember,

before email), and a jungle-landscaped swimming pool. Another plus is that the Atlanta is also the only hotel in the area that openly forbids sex tourists.

Suk 11 (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2253 5927; www.suk11.com; dm/s/d 250/550/750B; Skytrain Nana; 🚗 🚶) A garden village has been re-created amid Sukhumvit's traffic at this budget-friendly spot. Mood music along with toast-and-jam breakfasts are enjoyed in the shady common space. Advance reservations required.

HI-Sukhumvit (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2391 9338; www.hisukhumvit.com; 23 Soi 38, Th Sukhumvit; dm 300B, s 550-600B, d 800-850B; Skytrain Thong Lor) This friendly multistorey dorm (floors segregated by sex) is within walking distance of Ekamai (Eastern) bus terminal and the Skytrain. There is lots of tourist information, a rooftop deck, laundry and kitchen. The hostel is open 7am to 11am and 4pm to 1am.

MIDRANGE

Miami Hotel (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2253 0369; 2 Soi 13, Th Sukhumvit; s/d 650/750B; Skytrain Nana; 🚗 🚶) Bearing the mark of the GI days in more ways than its name, the Miami has a strange down-and-out charm. The *kàthoey* desk clerk, poolside lizards and lumpy beds have all the makings of a greenhorn-does-Bangkok novel.

Golden Palace Hotel (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2252 5115; www.goldenpalacehotel.com; 15 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit; r 950B; Skytrain Ploenchit; 🚗 🚶) A contender in the featherweight midrange division, Golden Palace is an institutional vision in aquamarine. The rooms are functional and affordable but not stylish.

Sam's Lodge (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2253 2993; www.samslodge.com; 28-28/1 Soi 19, Th Sukhumvit; d 1000B; Skytrain Asoke; 🚗 🚶) Above a tailor shop, this guesthouse has touches of Japanese minimalism and a cosy roof terrace. All rooms share bathrooms (an oversight considering the price) and some don't have windows. According to the desk clerk, the place also discourages prostitutes and bad manners.

Federal Hotel (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2253 0175; federalhotel@hotmail.com; 27 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; d from 1100B; Skytrain Nana; 🚗 🚶) Since its freewheelin' days as an R&R stop for American GIs, the Federal has gone upmarket, sort of, and now enjoys the affectionate nickname of 'Club Fed' from its sexpat fans. The upstairs rooms are comfortably decorated with rattan furniture and generous beds. The ground-level rooms, however, should be avoided. The real draw is

the frangipani-lined pool and time-warped American-style coffee shop.

Majestic Suites (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2656 8220; www.majesticuites.com; 110-110/1 Th Sukhumvit, btwn Soi 4 & 6; s/d 1160/1500B; Skytrain Nana; 🚗 🚶) Small and friendly, Majestic has hermetically sealed rooms that deliver privacy and quiet even with screaming Sukhumvit right outside. Front rooms have a bird's-eye view of the street's traffic-snarled grandeur. The petite among us will find the rooms cosy, while others may argue for the term 'cramped'.

Novotel Lotus Bangkok (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2261 0111; www.accorhotels-asia.com; 1 Soi 33, Th Sukhumvit; d from 3000B; Skytrain Phrom Phong; 🚗 🚶) Another in the Accor brand is this well-designed modern creation complete with a soothing lotus pond in the centre of the lobby. Rooms are plush and private. There are also suites on a semiprivate floor with a terrace.

Davis (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2260 8000; www.davisbangkok.net; Soi 24, Th Sukhumvit; d from 3000B; 🚗 🚶) Close to Th Phra Ram IV, the Davis is a peach of a place with cool sophistication and rooms decorated like a Raj's palace, a Kyoto hermitage or a Burmese plantation. Freshen up in the big marble bathrooms after a dreamy slumber in the fluffy beds. Straight from the pages of *Architectural Digest*, the detached Thai villas are polished to a burnished golden wood with deep sleigh beds and big sunny windows arranged around a private lap pool and garden.

Bel-Aire Princess (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2253 4300; www.bel-aireprincess.com; 16 Soi 5, Th Sukhumvit; d from 3500B; Skytrain Nana; 🚗 🚶) This hotel is all dolled up

with a stylish lobby and rooms that are being upgraded to match.

TOP END

Seven (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2662 0951; www.sleepatseven.com; 3/15 Soi 31, Th Sukhumvit; d from 4000B; Skytrain Phrom Phong; 🚗 🚶) Did you know that in Thailand the days of the week are associated with the Hindu Gods and their symbolic colours? This new boutique hotel has incorporated this cultural hook into its conversion of a Sukhumvit apartment building. Each room is decorated to match the colour associated with a particular day of the week. The décor is evocative of Thai mural painting in modern and elegant hues. To further the theme, pick the room that represents the day of the week you were born – an important component of Thai astrology.

Eugenia (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2259 9011; www.theuegenia.com; 267 Soi 31, Th Sukhumvit; r from 5800B; Skytrain Phrom Phong; 🚗 🚶) Colonial manor houses aren't an indigenous legacy in Thailand but this anachronistic hotel polishes the anomaly to reflect a refined Victorian lady. Here in the most modern part of town, Eugenia looked into the history books for inspiration, decorating 12 guest rooms with canopy beds, old-fashioned light fixtures and other clean yet feminine touches.

Dream Bangkok (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2254 8500; 10 Soi 15, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Asoke or Nana; r from US\$136; 🚗 🚶) If heart-shaped beds and champagne-glass tubs were given a modern makeover, you'd have Dream Bangkok, another conquest by New York hotelier and socialite

SPEAKING BANGKOK

You might not learn Thai during your stay in Bangkok, but plenty of Thai phrases and hybrid words infuse the city's unique bilingual dictionary. Here are a few:

- *Hi-so* – There are three criteria for being *hi-so*: young, rich and beautiful. Most are bilingual Thais or *lùuk khрэung* (half Thai-*faràng*) with VIP credentials and serious shopping addictions satisfied at the Emporium Shopping Centre. Don't expect to sit next to a *hi-so* on the Skytrain, they have chauffeured cars. Oddly, the English word 'hipster' has been coopted by the *hi-so* crowd to refer to things that are fabulous.
- *Khunying* – An aristocratic title, this term is sometimes used more broadly to refer to Bangkok's ruling matrons. With their Imelda Marcos-helmet hairdos, jewel-toned Thai silks and thick pancake makeup, *khunying*s can usually be found at official ceremonies or heading an entourage of merit-makers.
- *Dek Neaw* – Supercool teenagers who hang out in Siam Square showing off urban fashion and meticulously styled bed-head hairdos.
- *Freelancer* – Careful when you use this all-purpose word to refer to a contract worker. In Bangkok, it means you are a prostitute who doesn't belong to a brothel.

Vikram Chatwal. The clubby blue-lit décor is unintentionally kitsch, making it a match made in dreamland for the City of Angels and a welcome addition to beer-belly Nana.

Westin Grande Sukhumvit (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2207 8000; www.westin.com/bangkok; 259 Th Sukhumvit, Soi 19; r from US\$140; Skytrain Asoke; 🚶 🚶 🚶) Central and professional, the Westin boasts efficient staff and roomy rooms outfitted with the trademarked 'Heavenly' beds, as soft and cosy as an eternal reward should be. Bathrooms have separate tub and shower with a shower head that is *faràng*-sized.

Greater Bangkok

We-Train International House (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2967 8550-4; www.we-train.co.th; 501/1 Mu 3, Th Dechatungkha, Don Muang; dm/r 200/740B; 🚶 🚶 🚶) This basic hotel is operated by a nonprofit women's group with proceeds going to fund emergency shelters for abused women and children. Its location near Don Muang, the old airport, was the secondary selling point, but now that the airport has moved, lodgers should come solely for good deeds not flight layovers.

Thai House (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2903 9611; www.thaihouse.co.th; 32/4 Mu 8, Bang Yai, Nonthaburi; d from 1200B) North of central Bangkok in Nonthaburi is this traditional Thai home surrounded by fruit trees, which has been converted into a guesthouse. Contact the proprietors for transport details. The guesthouse also conducts cooking courses open to guests and nonguests (see p143).

Ibis Siam Bangkok (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2209 3888; www.accorhotels.com/asia; 97 Th Ratchaprarop; r 2300B; Skytrain Victory Monument, bus 513) Part of a new line-up of business-friendly hotels for modest budgets, Ibis Siam delivers comfort and convenience without a corporate expense account. Shop the website for plumper discounts.

Reflections Rooms (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2270 3344; 0 2270 3359; www.reflections-thai.com; 81-83 Soi 7/Ari, Th Phahonyothin; d 2850-3450B; Skytrain Ari; 🚶 🚶 🚶) All dressed up in fun arty colours, Reflections is the best thing Bangkok has cooked up since lunch. Local designers were assigned a room (30 in all) and went to town with brushes of whimsy, urbanity and straight-up cool. They use Starbucks sizing for their rooms: small is really big and large is really large.

Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel (☎ 0 2131 1111; www.accorhotels-asia.com; Th Ratchathewi, Samut Prakan; d from 3600B; 🚶 🚶 🚶) The closest lodging

option to the new Suvarnabhumi International Airport, which is just a 300m stroll away.

Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2476 0022, fax 0 2476 1120; 257/1-3 Th Charoen Nakhon; d from US\$180; hotel shuttle boat from Tha Sathon & Tha Oriental; 🚶 🚶 🚶) Set amid lush landscaped gardens by the river, the Marriott really is a place where you can get away from it all. Because it's downriver from the main action, it gives you the perfect excuse not to leave the pool.

EATING

No matter where you go in Bangkok, food is always available. There is so much variety just at street level that days can go by without stepping inside a restaurant. Enacting the modern equivalent of hunter-gatherers, many visitors skip from stall to stall sampling *kúaytiaw* (noodles), plates of *râat khô* (rice and curry) or *mùat phàt* (stir-fries) for 25B to 40B.

When the need comes for a restaurant, Bangkok's best are the décor-less mom-and-pop shops that concentrate only on the food; most of these restaurants hover around 60B to 100B for a main dish. As the prices increase, so does the ambience – more servers, traditional Thai antiques, white tablecloths or ultramodern outfits. Be careful treading in these waters, as dining in Bangkok's fashionable or touristy restaurants is sometimes more for show than for flavour.

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

The wealth of dining choices can cripple you with indecision. We've taken the liberty here of providing a cross section of Bangkok's culinary landscape.

- **Best Thai Restaurants** – Vientiane Kitchen (p165), Reflections (p166), Hemlock (p161), Ton Pho (opposite)
- **Best Snapshots of Bangkok's Expat & Immigrant Communities** – Nasir al-Masri Restaurant & Shishah (p165), Dosa King (p165), Eat Me (p164)
- **Best Restaurants to Brag about in Backpacker Circles** – Shoshana (p161), Pickle Factory (p166), Th Phadungdao Seafood Stalls (p162), hotel buffets (p163)

While Thai food may be sufficiently exotic, Bangkok offers an international menu prepared by its many immigrant communities. Chinatown is naturally a good area for Chinese food. In the crowded bazaarlike area of Little Arabia, just off Th Sukhumvit, there is Middle Eastern cuisine. All of Europe and America have their culinary embassies that prepare the tastes of home in the *haute* fashion for power players or as pub grub to cure homesickness.

Banglamphu

This area near the river is one of the best for cheap Thai eats. Open-air restaurants and street vendors claim the majority of grazing options. Because of the backpacker presence, Western and vegetarian food are well represented. Duck into the maze of *soi* for more authentic street-side eating than what you'll find along Th Khao San.

THAI

Arawy (Alloy; Map pp120-1; 152 Th Din So; dishes 35B; 🚶 breakfast & lunch; bus 10, 19, 42, khlong taxi to Tha Phan Fah) Opposite the Municipal Hall and a few doors down from a 7-Eleven store, this matron of meatless is one of the best Thai vegetarian restaurants in the city. A selection of prepared dishes makes it user-friendly, and

the chef brings out the flavour of the veggies without the tasteless oil spill. The restaurant was inspired by the strict vegetarianism of Chamlong Srimuang, the ex-governor of Bangkok.

May Kaidee's (Map pp120-1; subsoi off Soi Damnoen Klang; dishes 50B; 🚶 lunch & dinner; bus 56, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) For an all-veggie menu at meatless prices, follow Th Khao San to Th Tanao and jog right to the small *soi* beside the Burger King (yup, Khao San has gone corporate) and then another left to a string of vegetarian shops.

Roti-Mataba (Map pp120-1; cnr Th Phra Athit & Th Phra Sumen; dishes 60-80B; 🚶 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) A Bangkok legend, Roti-Mataba does a whirlwind business of *kaeng mât-sâmàn* (Thai Muslim curry) served with *rotii* (fried flatbread), and chicken or vegetable *mât-à-bà* (a stuffed *rotii*).

Khrua Nopparat (Map pp120-1; Th Phra Athit; dishes 60-100B; 🚶 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) With as much charm as a school cafeteria, the Nopparat's kitchen devotes all of its resources to the menu. The dishes are a little small, so don't shy away from the Thai tradition of overordering. Winners include the deep-fried shrimp or *phàt phàk kha-náa* (stir-fried Chinese greens).

VEGGING OUT IN BANGKOK

Although most Thais regard vegetarianism as antithetical to good sense, there are several strong currents of meatless philosophies represented in Bangkok's restaurant scene.

Banglamphu has the greatest concentration of vegetarian-friendly restaurants thanks to the nonmeat-eating *faràng*; these are typically low-scale stir-fry shops that do something akin to what your hippie roommates have cooking in their kitchens. A few standouts include **May Kaidee's** (above) and **Ranee Guesthouse** (above).

An indigenous vegetarian movement can be found in the food centres operated by the Santi Asoke community, an ascetic Buddhist sect that practises self-sufficiency through agriculture and strict vegetarian diets. The food centres are operated in conjunction with Bangkok's former governor Chamlong Srimuang, who popularised both the sect and vegetarianism during his corruption-reducing tenure in the 1980s and '90s. **Baan Suan Pai** (p166), **Chamlong's Asoke Café** (p166) and **Arawy** (above) are all affiliated centres.

Indian, Chinese and Muslim restaurants are also veggie-friendly. **Dosa King** (p165) and **Yogi** (p164) are both solely vegetarian. During the vegetarian festival in October, the whole city goes mad for tofu, and stalls and restaurants indicate their nonmeat menu with yellow banners; Chinatown has the highest concentration of stalls. **MBK Food Centre** (p162) has a vegetarian stall that requires mastery of the Asian queue in order to sneak in an order.

A more modern trend in vegetarianism is the health-conscious gourmet treatment that is well-established overseas. Stylish spots, such as **Govinda** (p166) and **Tamarind Café** (p166), deliver date settings for vegetarian epicures, tired of suffering with the meatless afterthoughts on most menus.

STREET EATS

Surely you've heard the rumours about what type of food in Bangkok to avoid, right? It goes: avoid ground meat, crushed ice, something borrowed, something blue – no that's not quite it. Just to be on the safe side, take that mental list and toss it in the first stinky *khlong* (canal) you see. By and large, most street food is not only hygienic but delicious. Granted you'll get Bangkok belly, which is often a result of personal intolerance to chillies or Beer Chang, rather than a tainted plate of *khào phật* (fried rice). At least with the street vendors you can see all the action, whereas you don't know the state of affairs in the supposedly 'safe' guesthouse kitchen.

If you're thoroughly convinced that streetside eating is a healthy pursuit, here is a profile of each neighbourhood's general grazing options.

Banglamphu

As you'll quickly discover, Th Khao San (Map pp120–1) is great for late-night snacking: fresh fruit, spring rolls, shwarma sandwiches and stand-and-gulp *phật thai*. Near the 7-Eleven on Th Rambutri, postimbibing Thais fend off a hangover with a bowl of *jóhk* (rice porridge), which is also a good antidote to Bangkok belly. Soi Rambutri does a brisk business of grilled fish, chicken and cold beer. Night-time stalls on Th Samsen, between Soi 2 and 8, serve *sóm-tam* (papaya salad), *küaytiaw*, and *râat nâa* (noodles with gravy).

A few Muslim vendors occupy Trok Surat, between the shoe stores on the western side of Th Chakraphong between Th Tani and Th Rambutri.

Siam Square

If you're staying on or nearby Soi Kasem San 1, you don't have to suck motorcycle fumes crossing Th Phra Ram I and Th Phayathai to find something to eat. A row of vendors on the *soi* caters mainly to lunching Thais but they have mastered international sign language.

Go to the right of Siam Square's Scala cinema and plunge into the alley that curves behind the Th Phayathai shops (Map pp128–9) to find a row of cheap food stalls (closed weekends). If approaching this alley from Th Phayathai, look for the sign that reads 'food centre'. Behind the Sindhorn Building on Th Withayu, a village of umbrella-shaded vendors caters to lunchtime crowds.

Silom

Just off Th Silom at Soi Pradit (Soi 20), a market (Map pp124–5) assembles in front of the Masjid Mirasuddeen mosque every day. Daytime vendors sell fresh fruit, takeaway meals and spicy *khànom jiin* (stark, white-rice noodles served with curry sauce). There are also a few duck noodle vendors (just look for signs with an image of a duck). **Talat ITF** (Soi 10) has a string of food stalls purveying pots of curry and miles of noodles. Lunch stalls can also be found on Soi Sala Daeng 2 and on Soi 7. A midday vendor ekes out a small business selling *khào mók kái* (chicken briyani) in front of the Irish X-Change on Th Convent.

Sukhumvit

Soi 38 Night Market (Map pp122–3; Soi 38, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 30–50B; ☎ 8am–3am) offers gourmet night-noshing, and stays open late for the bleary-eyed clubbers. Try a busy bowl of *küaytiaw* or Chinese-style spring rolls.

Ton Pho (Map pp120–1; ☎ 0 2280 0452; Th Phra Athit; dishes 80–100B; ☎ lunch & dinner; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Right beside Tha Phra Athit is this converted floating dock that has all the staples with the expertise of a Thai grandmother. Do the litmus test here: the lack of décor inversely matches the strength of the food.

Ranee Guesthouse (Map pp120–1; 77 Trok Mayom; dishes 70–120B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; bus 56, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Quantity-loving vegetarians will appreciate this guesthouse kitchen, which serves large portions of vegetable-adoring dishes. Stir-fries are cooked to perfection and can be enjoyed in a quiet garden courtyard

where the owner's children play pretend dinner party. Specify if you want brown rice.

Jeh Hoy (Map pp120–1; cnr Th Samsen & Soi 2; dishes 50–150B; ☎ dinner; bus 53, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) If it is feeding time, this open-air restaurant has the best ad campaign around – an ice tray laden with seafood and the hypnotic manoeuvrings of the wok cook. Try the Hokkien special *puu phat phông kàrii* (crab stir-fried with curry powder and egg). If it is too busy, skip down the *soi* to other similar outfits.

Hemlock (Map pp120–1; ☎ 0 2282 7507; 56 Th Phra Athit; dishes 80–200B; ☎ dinner; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Living-room-sized restaurants line Th Phra Athit and form a social gathering point for Banglamphu's bohemians (writers, artists and intellectuals). This cosy gem has an eclectic menu inspired by ancient literary works; try the flavourful *miang kham* (tea leaves wrapped with ginger, shallots, peanuts, lime and coconut flakes) or *nám phrik khàa* (spicy dipping sauce served with vegetables and herbs), both items that don't usually pop up on menus.

INTERNATIONAL

Prakorb's House (Map pp120–1; ☎ 0 2281 1345; 52 Th Khao San; dishes 50–100B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; bus 56, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Good old Prakorb's does exceptionally good guesthouse fare. A huge menu covers all Southeast Asia's interpretations of Western breakfasts, but the real winner is the chewy cup of hot coffee.

Ricky's Coffeeshop (Map pp120–1; 22 Th Phra Athit; dishes 80–150B; ☎ 9am–7pm; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Why Thais prefer the Wonder variety of bread is a great mystery. But you can gnaw your way to carbo bliss with Ricky's crusty baguettes. Plus, the marble tabletops and wooden gallery will make you feel like a grown-up in perpetually adolescent Th Khao San.

Shoshana (Map pp120–1; unnamed soi off Th Chakraphong; dishes 100–150B; ☎ lunch & dinner; bus 56, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) One of Khao San's longest-running Israeli restaurants, tucked away in an almost secret alley beside the petrol station, Shoshana serves gut-filling falafel-and-hummus plates, but don't overlook the tasty *baba ghanoush* (Middle Eastern eggplant dish).

Chabad House (Map pp120–1; Th Rambutri; dishes 100–200B; ☎ lunch & dinner Sun-Fri; bus 56, 506, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) One plus to sharing the beaten path with Israeli travellers is the opportunity to sample the Mediterranean's comfort food. This well-scrubbed café serves Israeli kosher food directly underneath a Jewish worship centre.

Chinatown & Phahurat

When you mention Chinatown, Bangkokians begin dreaming of noodles, usually prepared by street vendors lining Th Yaowarat, near Trok Itsaranuphap, after dark. During the annual Vegetarian Festival (which is in September/October and centred around Wat Mangkon Kamalawat on Th Charoen Krung),

CHINATOWN STREET EATS

Even if you've mastered the street stalls in other parts of town, little of that savvy can be applied to the variations that appear in the night markets in Chinatown. Here is a quick introduction to the street vendors and the dishes worth noting. Once you've met and befriended these dishes, you'll spot them in other neighbourhoods too.

- *kuay jáp* – This steamy soup consists of tubular noodles, pork offal and *müu kráwp* in a broth spiced with star anise. Try it at the vendor who sets up in the lobby of the old movie theatre at 404 Th Yaowarat.
- *hàwy jaw* and *hàe kèun* – Usually sold together, these blistered sausages are wrapped in tofu and stuffed with either crab (*hàwy jaw*; whitish in colour and formed into segments) or shrimp (*hàe kèun*; orange-coloured tubes).
- *hàwy tháwt* – Fried mussels in batter are prepared in wide flat-bottomed skillets; a well-known vendor sets up near the Th Phadungdao and Th Yaowarat intersection.
- herbal drinks – Huge ice coolers spill over with small plastic bottles of oddly coloured liquid all along Th Yaowarat. In keeping with the Chinese observances of food as medicine, these drinks are made from various herbal teas renowned for their health benefits. The yellow ones are chrysanthemum; brown, *nám ráak bua* (lotus root); and the green, *nám bai bua bók* (a water plant).

the neighbourhood explodes with street stalls and vendors.

On the western side of the neighbourhood is the Indian fabric district of Phahurat, filled with small restaurants tucked into the *soi* off Th Chakraphet. The *soi* next to the old ATM building shelters a popular samosa push-cart vendor.

Hong Kong Noodles (Map pp118-19; 136 Trok Itsaranup-hap, Th Charoen Krung; dishes 30B; ☎ lunch & dinner; bus 53, 73, 507, river ferry Tha Ratchawong) Deep in the heart of a fresh-meat market, this busy shop does a bustling trade in steaming bowls of roast duck noodles.

Bà-mii Hong Kong (Map pp118-19; cnr Th Yaowarat & Soi Yaowiphani; dishes 50B; ☎ dinner; bus 53, 73, 507 river ferry Tha Ratchawong) Look for a big red sign with Chinese characters near the gold shop and you will have found a noodle adventure. The noodles are in great demand and there is an endless combination of choices, so you'll need a little Thai to accomplish an order; we've found the *bà-mii nàam miu daeng kiaw* (egg noodles with red pork and wontons) to be a reliable choice.

Th Phadungdao Seafood Stalls (Map pp118-19; cnr Th Phadungdao & Th Yaowarat; dishes 160-300B; ☎ 6-10pm; bus 53, 73, 507, river ferry Tha Ratchawong) After sunset, this street sprouts outdoor barbecues, iced seafood trays and sidewalk seating. Servers dash every which way, cars plough through narrow openings, and before you know it you're tearing into a plate of grilled prawns like a starved alley cat.

Shangarila Restaurant (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2235 7493; 206 Th Yaowarat; dishes 100-500B; ☎ lunch & dinner; bus 73, river ferry Tha Ratchawong) Near the corner of Th Ratchawong, this venerable old gal stays in the restaurant race with a wide selection of dim sum and lunchtime dishes.

Royal India (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2221 6565; 392/1 Th Chakraphet; dishes under 100B; ☎ lunch & dinner; bus 25, 508, 507, river ferry Tha Saphan Phut) Over in Phahurat, the Indian fabric district, Royal India is a long-running favourite because of its North Indian cuisine, heavily influenced by Moghul or Persian flavours and spices. Follow the signs off Th Chakraphet into a concrete alley.

Old Siam Plaza (Map pp118-19; ground fl, Old Siam Plaza, cnr Th Phahurat & Th Triphet; dishes 50-100B; ☎ lunch; bus 25, 508, 507, river ferry Tha Saphan Phut) The Thai version of Willy Wonka's factory occupies the ground floor of this shopping centre. Seemingly savoury ingredients, such as beans, corn and rice, are turned into syrupy sweet desserts

right before your eyes. Such transformations include *lùuk chíp* (miniature fruits made of beans), *tàkòh* (coconut pudding in banana leaves) and *khànmò bêuang* (taco-shaped pancakes filled with shredded coconut and sweetened egg yolks).

Siam Square & Pratunam

When in Shop-landia, you must pay homage to the mall food courts, which are a subset of the market-vendor cult. You'll also find every imaginable Western and Japanese fast-food chain, including a *wài*-ing Ronald McDonald.

Pratunam Chicken Rice Restaurants (Map pp128-9; cnr Th Phetchaburi & Th Ratchaprarop; dishes 30-50B; ☎ 7pm-4am) At the Pratunam intersection are two competing *khào man kài* (chicken rice) restaurants known by every taxi driver in the city (just say 'Midnight Kai Ton' to get here). Folks argue about which one is better, but we vote for the shop further from the corner.

MBK Food Centre (Map pp128-9; 6th fl, MBK, cnr Th Phayathai & Th Phra Ram I; dishes 40-60B; ☎ lunch & dinner; Skytrain National Stadium) Consider MBK's food centre to be a food boot camp – Thai and English signage accompanies an array of typical street eats. After a few sessions here, you'll be equipped for outdoor reconnaissance. Buy coupons from the ticket desk and cash in whatever you don't spend.

Gourmet Paradise (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2610 8000; ground fl, Siam Paragon, Th Phra Ram I; dishes 60-250B; ☎ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Siam) One entire floor is dedicated to food and eating in Siam Paragon's uber-mall universe. The feudal divisions of Thai society are in full effect on weekends. The aristocrats file into the branches of successful white-linen restaurants, while the working class hustles through the food court with trays of noodles and stir-fries.

Whole Earth Restaurant (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2252 5574; 93/3 Soi Lang Suan; dishes 100-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) This family-friendly restaurant will put your vegetarian conscience and your belly at ease, but your taste buds might feel left out. The Thai dishes are all extremely fresh but lacking in flair, an obvious shortcoming considering the fetching prices.

My Collection (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2655 7502; 2/10 Th Withayu; dishes 250-320B; ☎ lunch daily, dinner Fri & Sat) Moonlighting as an antique store, this family-run bistro is filled with pretty things – antique linen, teak furniture and bone China – when floral prints not funeral colours de-

finer sophistication. The ambiance is delicate and intimate, everything that Bangkok's fine-dining scene is lacking. The menu is firmly international and the bistro does a brisk weekday-lunch business for the nearby embassies.

Silom

Come lunchtime, the financial district goes into a feeding frenzy at the shanty villages of street vendors or the buffets at the English-Irish pubs. Dinner offerings include more gourmet choices, with a handful of elegant restaurants preparing international fusion and royal-Thai cuisine. Simple, family-run Indian restaurants proliferate towards the western end of Th Silom and Th Surawong.

THAI

Chulalongkorn University Canteen (Map pp124-5; Soi Chulalongkorn 42, Th Phayathai, Chulalongkorn Campus; dishes 20B; ☎ lunch; subway Samyan) You might be the only one here not in uniform, but who could say no to an innocent noodle craving? The university's canteen does a delicious sesame-seed-encrusted *kài thàwt* (fried chicken) that is served solo or atop a steaming bowl of noodles. You can also get the noodles spiked with a lip-tingling *tòm yam* broth. A little Thai is needed to order, but no conversation is required to gulp it down beside the uni students copying each others' homework.

Harmonique (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2237 8175; Soi 34, Th Charoen Krung; dishes 70-150B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Earning more points for ambiance than cuisine, Harmonique is a rambling oasis anchored by a banyan-tree courtyard. With twinkling fairy lights and marble-topped tables, you might

not notice (or be troubled by) the shortcomings of the bland dishes.

Ban Chiang (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2236 7045; 14 Soi Si Wiang, Th Surasak; dishes 100-180B; ☎ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Surasak) A barely tamed garden girthed by a wooden fence marks the entrance to Ban Chiang, which delivers the fiery cuisine of the northeast. This restaurant is a favourite of undiscerning tour groups and sometimes tip-toes too close to mediocre (avoid the *tòm yam kàng*). Luckily the *yam pla duk foo* (salad of fried shredded catfish) swoops in to rescue any sagging opinions.

Sara-Jane's (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2676 3338; 55/21 Th Narathiwat Ratchanakharin; dishes 100-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of Bangkok's most famous *faràng* (who is married to a Thai) has built a small food empire from the fusion of Isan and Italian food. There is another branch on Th Withayu, but this location puts more passion into the otherwise incongruous food traditions.

Tongue Thai (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2630 9918; 18-20 Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung; dishes 150-250B; ☎ lunch & dinner) When you need to be pleased, Tongue Thai is at your service. The dining room is filled with teak furnishings and oh-so Thai décor. The menu is equally accommodating with a few Western ingredients added to traditional Thai recipes in an effort for familiarity.

Le Lys (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2287 1898; 104 Soi 7, Th Narathiwat Ratchanakharin; dishes 100-250B; ☎ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Chong Nonsi) Foreign-friendly Thai dishes and a homey setting make Le Lys a trustworthy dinner companion for the city's expats. Some diners snack and drink in between sets of *pétanque* (French lawn bowling) in the restaurant's backyard.

Blue Elephant (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2673 9353; 233 Th Sathon Tai; dishes 250-500B; ☎ lunch & dinner; Skytrain

BEEFING UP AT THE HOTEL BUFFETS

If you're a feast or famine eater, then the hotel buffets are your trough. The huge, all-you-can-eat spread offers a one-stop introduction to Thai food, a raw fish bar, continental specialties or dim-sum exploration. Most hotel buffets are offered for lunch, dinner or Sunday brunch. Reservations are recommended (call for prices, as these vary); business-casual attire is appropriate.

Sukhothai Hotel (Map p127; ☎ 0 2344 8888, 13/3 Th Sathon) offers one of the city's most decadent Sunday brunches. **Royal Orchid Sheraton** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2266 0123; Soi 30, Th Charoen Krung) is geared towards the kiddies with games and finger food. **JW Marriott Hotel** (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2656 7700; 4 Th Sukhumvit, Soi 4) is known for its American-style abundance. The riverside hotels, such as the **Oriental** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2659 9000; 48 Soi Oriental/Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung) and the **Peninsula** (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2861 2888; 333 Th Charoen Nakhon, Thonburi) add an additional element of elegance to the gorging. Various hotel restaurants will also host seasonal promotions or feature a prominent visiting chef; watch the English-language press for these culinary events.

Surasak) Set in a refurbished Sino-Thai colonial building with service fit for royalty, the Blue Elephant balances the once-secret recipes of the monarchy with international fusion. The setting and service is impeccable, but the dishes are merely pedestrian.

INDIAN & MUSLIM

Sallim Restaurant (Map pp124-5; Soi 32, Th Charoen Krung; dishes 50-70B; ☺ lunch & dinner; river ferry Tha Meuang Khae) This open-air restaurant could easily win the challenging award for the dirtiest restaurant in Thailand, but the food is fabulous. Dig into one of the southern Thai-Muslim curries – *kaeng kai* (chicken), *neua* (beef) or *plaa* (fish) – served with your choice of rice or *rotii* (two loaves should be enough). The restaurant is the last option along the right-hand block.

Yogi (Map pp124-5; Soi Phuttha Osot, Th Mahesak; dishes 70-100B; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; river ferry Tha Oriental) Practically sawed in half by the nearby expressway, this New York City-sized restaurant whips up all-vegetarian South Indian meals in a small kitchen. Wash up at the outdoor sink before eating.

Islamic Restaurant (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2234 7911; 196-198 Soi 36, Th Charoen Krung; dishes 80-180B; ☺ lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily) Around the corner from the French embassy, this neighbourhood spot is a site for sore feet: the low-key dining area is blissfully air-conditioned and the outdoor patio attempts a café-culture setting. Dishes draw from the Muslim traditions that proliferate on the Malay peninsula and include a turmeric-spiked *khào mòk kai*.

Indian Hut (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2237 8812; Th Surawong; dishes 100-250B; ☺ lunch & dinner; river ferry Tha Oriental) Opposite the Manohra Hotel, Indian Hut proudly displays a slightly altered Pizza Hut logo (so much for pesky copyright laws), and specialises in Nawabi (Lucknow) cuisine for a well-scrubbed business set. The vegetarian samosa, fresh prawns cooked with ginger and homemade *paneer* (soft Indian cheese) are all must nibbles.

INTERNATIONAL

Mizu's Kitchen (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2233 6447; Soi Patpong 1, Th Silom; dishes 80-150B; ☺ noon-1am; Skytrain Sala Daeng, subway Silom) Relive the grubby days of Bangkok's R&R era at this Patpong institution. Old-style Japanese-Western dishes (such as macaroni and cheese, steak and vegetable hotplate) are the most recent decorations amid chequered tablecloths and fading girlie

calendars. All the dishes are warm and salty, and a perfect companion for a slurred-speech night.

La Boulange (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2631 0355; 2-2/1 Th Convent; dishes 160-240B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Should you need a breather from the working grind in Silom, stop by this European-style café with marble-topped tables facing all the street action.

Eat Me (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2238 0931; Soi Phiphat 2, off Th Convent; dishes 200-400B; ☺ dinner; Skytrain Sala Daeng) A little bit of cosmo Sydney has blossomed here off Th Silom. Chic, minimalist décor is accessorised by rotating art exhibits, supplied by H Gallery, a nearby contemporary gallery. And lest we forget, the food is creative, modern, and spans the globe; from pumpkin risotto to tuna tartare.

Lumphini

Soi Polo Fried Chicken (Map p127; ☎ 0 2655 8489; 137/1-2 Soi Polo, Th Withayu; dishes 160B; ☺ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Ploenchit, subway Lumphini) Golden and crispy on the outside, moist and meaty inside and sprinkled with fried garlic bits – it is easy to see why this is a beloved *kai thàwt* (fried chicken) restaurant. One half-serve will generously feed two, but don't forget about ordering sticky rice for the spicy dipping sauces.

Ngwan Lee Lang Suan (Map p127; ☎ 0 2250 0936; cnr Soi Lang Suan & Th Sarasin; dishes 150-300B; ☺ dinner; Skytrain Chitlom) Hardly more than a mess hall, this sweaty open-air place specialises in Chi-

nese-style seafood and *kai lao daeng* (chicken steamed in Chinese herbs).

Zanotti (Map p127; ☎ 0 2636 0002; 211 1st fl, Sala Daeng Colonnade, Soi Sala Daeng 1, Th Silom; dishes 350-550B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Never a surly word is uttered about this Italian restaurant. The dining room is intimate; the menu has been airlifted from the Piedmont and Tuscany regions; and pre-meal nibblers are rewarded with a huge selection of antipasto plates. Many meals become late-nighters.

Sukhumvit

This avenue, stretching east all the way to the city limits, is the communal dining room of most of Bangkok's expat communities, from Italian to Arabic. While a recent arrival might not be craving the tastes of home, many of these satellite stations are good observation points on the city's many microcosms. Sukhumvit's restaurants also provide an interesting looking glass through which to view a universal occurrence – locals embracing 'exotic' cuisines.

THAI

Thong Lee (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2258 1983; Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; mains 60-100B; ☺ 9am-8pm, closed 3rd Sun of the month; Skytrain Asoke) In any other neighbourhood, Thong Lee would be nearly indistinguishable from all the other shopfront wok shops, but Sukhumvit sometimes forgets that it is in Thailand. Instead of being transformed into a massage parlour or visa-wedding service, Thonglee offers a more nutritious service: lovingly made rice and curries.

Atlanta Coffeshop (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2252 6069; Atlanta Hotel, 78 Soi 2, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 60-150B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; Skytrain Ploenchit) Preserving the era of pillbox hats and white gloves, the Atlanta is the most grounded fashion idol in Bangkok. The subdued diner features a heavily annotated menu, and scratchy recordings of Thai, classical and jazz (including an hour of King Bhumibol's compositions beginning at noon). Vegetarian, standard Thai and Western breakfasts are all exemplary selections.

Cabbages & Condoms (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2229 4611; Soi 12, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 150-200B; ☺ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Asoke) If you haven't cottoned onto the rustic aspects of Thai food, then Cabbages & Condoms is a perfect 'wading' pool; plus, all proceeds go towards sex-education and AIDS-prevention programmes in Thailand through the Population & Community Development Association (PDA), headquartered next door.

A reminder of the restaurant's community outreach appears in the form of a packaged condom, a clever alternative to the traditional after-dinner mint.

Vientiane Kitchen (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2258 6171; 8 Soi 36, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 150-220B; ☺ dinner; Skytrain Thong Lor) Vientiane Kitchen is a cultural display for the reluctant tourist. In a big barnlike structure, *maw lam* (traditional northeastern Thai music) bands play all the rollicking tunes of the Isan countryside, while the fiery *tôm yam kung*, *lâap mûu* (minced pork salad), *kai yâang* (grilled marinated chicken) will give you a bee-stung pout without collagen injections.

INDIAN & MUSLIM

Nasir al-Masri Restaurant & Shishah (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2253 5582; 4/6 Soi 3/1, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 80-120B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; Skytrain Nana) You can't miss this blinding silver temple to Egyptian food. The fruity perfume from the nearby *shishah* (waterpipe) smokers scents the predinner atmosphere, until the sensory banquet arrives. Worth crowding the table is the sesame-freckled flatbread, creamy hummus and flawlessly fried falafels. Open until 4am.

Dosa King (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2651 1651; 265/1 Soi 19, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 120-240B; ☺ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Asoke) Nosh alongside the sari-wrapped mamas or clubbing teenagers at this Punjabi vegetarian favourite. The regional speciality, *dosa* (a thin, stuffed crepe), adorns most tables like ancient parchment scrolls. (If you don't know, you eat these with your hands, using the wrapper as a spoon.)

Al Hussain (Map pp122-3; 75/7 Soi 3/1; dishes 150-250B; ☺ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Nana) Just off Th Sukhumvit near Soi 3 (Sai Nana Neua), there is a winding maze of cramped sublanes known as Little Arabia. At the crossroads is this open-air café displaying a steam table of vegetarian and meat curries, along with *dahl* (curried lentils), *aloo gobi* (spicy potatoes and cauliflower), *naan* (bread) and rice.

INTERNATIONAL

Crepes & Co (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2653 3990; 18/1 Soi 12, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 150-280B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; Skytrain Asoke) This cottage oasis creates delicate, platter-sized crepes stuffed with smoky bacon and woody mushrooms, as well as mud-thick coffee. Servers, striped in the colours of the French flag, sail these piping hot dishes to the

BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

What's for breakfast in the City of Angels? Well, judging by the platoon of tûk-tûk drivers parked outside your hotel, Thailand's morning mainstay is an M150 energy drink and a cigarette. Too nutritious, you say? In addition to the name-only guesthouse pancakes, the Western breakfast tradition is charmingly pantomimed at the **Atlanta Coffeshop** (opposite) and the coffee shop of the **Federal Hotel** (p156), both appealing for their flashback in time. Expats who have forgotten what a toaster looks like go to **Bourbon St Bar & Restaurant** (p166). Yuppy Thais who claim international up-bringsings prefer the gourmet chic of **Kuppa** (p166). And anyone who has the Gaul to do so, savour the crepes at **Crepes & Co** (opposite).

garden-view tables, which are packed during weekend brunch.

Greyhound Cafe (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2664 8663; 2nd fl, Emporium, btwn Soi 22 & 24, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 100-250B; ☺ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Phrom Phong) Oh, the follies of fashion. This trendy café continues the lifestyle branding efforts of Thailand's hottest design label, Greyhound. Like the clientele, the hybrid menu on offer here emphasises updated Thai cuisine after a sojourn in southern Europe. Of late, the branch at J Avenue (Soi Thong Lor, Th Sukhumvit) has been everyone's darling.

Tamarind Café (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2663 7421; 27 Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 200-250B; ☺ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Asoke) Pacific Rim cuisine goes vegetarian at this sleek eatery. Imaginative fresh juice concoctions will stave off a cold or transport you to a long-forgotten beach vacation. Tamarind shares space with Gallery F-Stop (p176), which hosts rotating photography exhibits.

Govinda (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2663 4970; Soi 22, Th Sukhumvit; mains 150-300B; ☺ dinner Wed-Mon; Skytrain Phrom Phong) Pizzas and pastas get a soya-based makeover at this all-Italian, all-vegetarian restaurant.

Bourbon St Bar & Restaurant (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2259 0328; Soi 22; dishes 150-300B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; Skytrain Asoke & Phrom Phong) Near Mambo Cabaret, this New Orleans-style restaurant fills the bellies of all-day breakfast cravers. Mexican concoctions score with their homemade salsa and the riddle of chicken-fried steak continues to defy common sense.

Kuppa (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2663 0450; 39 Soi 16, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 200-400B; ☺ Tue-Sat; Skytrain Asoke) A popular brunch date, Kuppa administers Western replacement therapy: a modern but comfortable dining room with spot-on white sauces and real salads.

Pizzeria Bella Napoli (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2259 0405; 3/3 Soi 31, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 200-500B; ☺ dinner Mon-Fri, lunch Sat & Sun; Skytrain Phrom Phong) In Bangkok's Little Italy, an eclectic and boisterous crowd gulps down glasses of blood-red wine and gooey, garlicky wood-fired pizzas in this Neapolitan outpost. Prepare to be jealous when the table next to you orders the prosciutto-bridge pizza.

Spring (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2392 2747; 199 Soi 2/Soi Promsri, btwn Soi 39 & Soi 49, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 200-350B; ☺ lunch & dinner; taxi) In the dry season, this fashion restaurant spreads its guests out on the lawn for alfresco wining and dining. To soak

up a garden ambience in urban Bangkok is as luxurious as the chocolate desserts.

Great American Rib Company (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2661 3891; 32 Soi 36, Th Sukhumvit; mains 165-400B; ☺ 11.30am-11.30pm; Skytrain Thong Lor) Big plates of slow-cooked meat create an edible map of the American South: pulled pork from the Carolinas, Memphis-style ribs and slathered Texas-style chicken. The menu may be American but the setting and the clientele is totally Thai with outdoor picnic tables, chilli-laced sauces and lots of happy birthday celebrations.

Maha Naga (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2662 3060; Soi 29/Lak Khet, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 300-700B; ☺ 11.30am-2.30pm & 5pm-1am; Skytrain Phrom Phong) Upscale Maha Naga, named after the mythical sea serpent, has a setting to die for: a pan-Asian fantasy of winking candles, Moorish courtyards and Balinese carvings. So the East-meets-West flavours fall short of competent, but these are the sacrifices you have to make for beauty in Bangkok.

Le Banyan (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2253 5556; 59 Soi 8, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 400-900B; ☺ dinner Mon-Sat; Skytrain Nana) In a charming Ratanakosin-style house surrounded by a lush garden, this is the landed gentry of French restaurants in a city enamoured with upstarts. The French-managed kitchen is best known for its pressed duck.

Greater Bangkok

Chamlong's Asoke Café (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2272 4282; 580-592 Th Phahon Yothin, Chatuchak; dishes 20-30B; ☺ lunch Sat & Sun; subway Chatuchak Park) Operated by the Asoke Foundation, the vegetarian restaurant near the Chatuchak Weekend Market is one of Bangkok's oldest. Take the footbridge across Th Kamphaeng Phet, away from the market, and towards the southern end of Th Phahonyothin. Turn right onto the first through street and walk past bars into the car park. Behind a block of buildings selling bulk food stuff is the restaurant. Like Baan Suan Pai, you buy tickets at the front desk.

Baan Suan Pai (Bamboo Garden House; Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2615 2454; Th Phahonyothin; dishes 25B; ☺ lunch & dinner; Skytrain Ari) This vegetarian food centre offers a garden's bounty of diversity. Buy coupons from the woman at the desk by the door. (Some coupons are printed with Thai numbers only, but the denominations are colour-coded: green, 5B; purple, 10B; blue, 20B; and red, 25B). Everything is strictly vegetarian, there's even no fish sauce. Don't miss the handmade ice cream of such exotic flavours as passionfruit, lemongrass and lotus root.

THE WATER DIET

Despite the heat and the chaos, Bangkok's quintessential eating experiences are always outdoors. Nibble away an entire evening at an outdoor food market or at one of the rustic riverside restaurants. Riverside dining comes in all shapes and sizes, but a good rule of thumb is a converted pier with zero ambience except what nature intended: cool evening breezes and views of the city lights. Because the river is the primary draw, the food tends to run a distant second, but the following restaurants have either surprised us flavourwise or have been affordable enough for us not to care.

Ton Pho (p159), **Kaloang Home Kitchen** (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2281 9228; Soi Wat Thewet; dishes 70-280B; ☺ lunch & dinner) and **Nang Nual Riverside Pub** (Map pp118-19; Trok Krai, Th Mahachak; dishes 90-170B; ☺ dinner) are all incredibly low-key and serve standard Thai dishes. For a little more fuss, consider a dinner cruise (p147).

Pickle Factory (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2246 3036; 55 Soi 2, Th Ratchawithi; dishes 150-200B; ☺ dinner; Skytrain Victory Monument) Occupying a 1970s Thai house, the Pickle Factory creates a dinner-party mood with indoor sofa seating and outdoor tables around a pool – in short, the perfect place to kick back for an evening with friends. The menu includes creative pizza toppings, such as Chiang Mai sausage and basil paste with wing beans.

Aw Taw Kaw Market (Map pp114-15; Th Kampanghet; dishes 30-40B; ☺ lunch; Skytrain Mo Chit, subway Chatuchak Park) Across the street from Chatuchak Weekend Market, Aw Taw Kaw is one of Bangkok's biggest fruit and produce markets, and next door are food stalls that earn equal veneration for duck curries and other street treats.

DRINKING

Where can you get a drink in this town? The original R&R capital will water your gullet just about anywhere. Banglamphu has a dressed-down vibe in an otherwise fashion-status city. Th Silom and Sukhumvit represent the stock-and-trade of Bangkok bars: English-Irish-style pubs and yuppie clubs, while Royal City Ave (RCA; p169) has become an official entertainment zone for everyone old enough to drink.

Bangkok has gone through a mandatory detox thanks to the Thaksin administration's social-order policy, which enforced closing times (1am for bars, 2am for clubs). But the political crisis that followed the flawed elections in April 2006 pushed Bangkok back into its all-night boozing ways. Once a new government is instated, it is unclear if the police will once again enforce the curfew or continue to turn a blind eye.

Banglamphu

The tourist strip of Th Khao San (Map pp120-1) is one big, multicultural party with every imaginable outlet for swilling and socialising, and the party extends to the surrounding streets of Th Rambutri and Soi Rambutri. Backpackers drain away bottles of Beer Chang at outdoor stalls. Mixed Thai-*faràng* couples sip sweet cocktails at bars converted from VW buses. Thai teenagers flex their rebellious streak among this anything-goes circus. Even moneyed Thais have joined the street parade at chic wine-sipping bars.

Beyond the pull of Khao San's packed party zone are more low-key options along Th Phra Athit and beyond.

To-Sit (Map pp120-1; Ran Kin Duem; ☎ 0 2629 1199; 24 Th Phra Athit) One of several art bars in the wooden shophouses along Th Phra Athit. Less crowded than the Khao San bars, this bar-restaurant usually hosts a solo singer and a squeaky guitar.

Illy Café (Ran Siri Poom; Map pp120-1; Th Chakraphong; bus 53, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Eclectic and funky, Illy Café is a restaurant by day and a 30-something bar at night. The vintage décor captures Banglamphu's bohemian aesthetic and egalitarian spirit.

Phra Nakorn Bar (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2222 0282; 58/2 Soi Damnoen Klang Tai; ☺ 6pm-midnight; river ferry Tha Phra Athit, bus 2, 82, 511, 512) A well-kept secret that Lonely Planet has finally sniffed out, Phra Nakorn is just steps away from Th Khao San but a world removed. Students and arty types make this a home away from hovel with eclectic décor, gallery exhibits and, the real draw, a rooftop terrace for a view of the Golden Mount.

SMOKING IN THE CAPITAL

Bangkok gives the gift of a smoker's cough after only a few days of sucking in the city's toxic stew. If your lungs have Olympic prowess and can still suck on a cigarette, then be aware of the following smoking restrictions.

Most budget guesthouses discourage smoking in rooms as a fire-prevention measure; midrange hotels could care less where you light up; and top enders provide nonsmoking and smoking rooms on request.

Air-conditioned restaurants don't permit smoking, but air-conditioned bars do despite an unenforced city ban. Don't smoke in the Skytrain or subway stations. And don't throw your butts on the ground – the police love to pop foreigners with a hefty littering fine.

Lulla Bar (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2622 2585; Th Mahanot) This off-campus hang-out of a rotating cast of Thai students has been transformed into a makeshift bar. Hardly anybody who isn't a friend bothers to cross the threshold, making the odd foreigner who finds the place a barfly conquistador. The food is fantastic, the beers are cold, and the soundtrack skips through classics from the Beatles and the Cure.

Baghdad Café (Map pp120-1; Soi 2, Th Samsen) Just over the Khlong Banglamphu is this sardine-tight *shishah* bar for puffing pungent fruit tobacco on Arabic water pipes and chatting with your neighbours about distant lands. A divergence from the Arabic tradition is that alcohol is sold right alongside.

Bars tend to segregate into foreigner and Thai factions, but you can always reverse that trend. Here are few popular options:

Cave (Th Khao San) A Thai 'kitchen' club hosting folk and pop bands and an indoor climbing wall.

Center Khao San (Th Khao San) One of many front-row views of the human parade on Th Khao San; the upstairs bar hosts late-night bands.

deep (329/1-2 Th Rambutri) Stylish young Thai crowd and live bands.

Hippie de Bar (Th Khao San) Retro décor, pool tables and chill DJs.

Molly Bar (Th Rambutri) Packed on weekends for Thai local bands; more mellow on weekdays with outdoor seating.

Susie Pub (108/5-9 alley, btwn Th Khao San & Th Rambutri) Thai pop and pool tables.

Silom, Lumpini & Sathon

Barbican Bar (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2234 3590; 9 Soi Thaniya, Th Silom) Surrounded by massage parlours with teenage prom queens cat-calling at Japanese businessmen, this is a straight-laced yuppie bar where office crews come for some happy-hour drinks and stay until closing time.

O'Reilly's Irish Pub (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2632 7515; 62/1-2 Th Silom) At the entrance to Soi Thaniya, O'Reilly's needs to be on everyone's map for its wallet-friendly, happy-hour specials and proximity as a warm-up spot to Silom's dance clubs (see p170).

Tower Inn Sky Garden (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2237 8300; Soi 9, Th Silom; ☎ 6pm-midnight; Skytrain Chong Nonsi) Finding a sky-top bar in this city is easy. Finding one where you can afford to be is another matter. Luckily there is the poor-man's beer garden on the 19th floor of the Tower Inn. The view isn't as breathtaking as in some other places, but for down-to-earth beer cheerleaders this spot is lovable kitsch.

Sirocco Sky Bar (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2624 9555; The Dome, 1055 Th Silom) Descend the sweeping stairs like a Hollywood golden girl to the precipice bar of this rooftop restaurant. A dress code is enforced and drinks are impressively priced, but so is the view.

Moon Bar at Vertigo (Map p127; ☎ 0 2679 1200; Banyan Tree Hotel, 21/100 Th Sathon Tai) This sky-high, open-air bar will literally take your breath away. From ground level, the elevator delivers you to the 59th floor where you weave your way through dimly lit hallways to the roar of Bangkok traffic far below. Come at sunset and grab a coveted seat to the right of the bar for more impressive views.

Wong's Place (Map p127; 27/3 Soi Sri Bumphen, off Soi Ngam Duphli, Th Phra Ram 1; subway Lumpini) A time warp into the backpacker world of the early 1980s, Wong's Place resuscitated a Soi Ngam Duphli institution. No-one shows up until after midnight, when they're too drunk to realise that they really need to go home. Never mind – Wong's is like home, except with a bar and a music library.

Diplomat Bar (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2690 9999; Conrad Hotel, 87 Th Withayu) Young sophisticates toast their good fortune and good looks at one of Bangkok's leading hotel bars. The bubbly and the grapey spirits are raised in grand toasts while the diva-led lounge band serenades.

Sukhumvit

Cheap Charlie's (Map pp122-3; Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; ☎ Mon-Sat) Claiming the noble honour of serving the cheapest beer on the block, this wooden stall festooned with junk-yard decorations is a favourite happy-hour spot for the neighbourhood's wage-slave *faràng*. Turn a sharp left before the Federal Hotel at the 'Sabai Sabai Massage' sign to join the collective milling and swilling.

Jool's (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2252 6413; Soi 4/Nana Tai, Th Sukhumvit) A few doors down from the Nana Entertainment Plaza, Jool's is a sinking ship of a dive bar navigating through the district's commercial 'friendliness'. The horseshoe-shaped bar encourages entertaining exhibitionism and spinning of tall tales. With a ring of the captain's bell, indicating a free round, the mood shifts to a good-times drinking club.

Sin Bar (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 9501 6735; 18 Soi 4/Nana Tai, Th Sukhumvit) Technically an 'entertainment' complex, Sin Bar is Nana's alter ego: three floors divided into a pool hall, dance club and rooftop bar all noticeably lacking in the soi's namesake industry (prostitutes), and reliably sneaking past the curfew restrictions. Working girls might come in with their dates but so do other crowds more interested in carousing.

Face Bangkok (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2713 6048; 29 Soi 38, Th Sukhumvit) When you no longer need cheap and grungy, Face has a classy cocktail lounge attached to its affiliated Indian and Thai restaurants. The crowd and the décor are pretty and the soundtrack is conversation audible, if ranked on the Asian volume scale.

Central Bangkok

Water Bar (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2642 7699; 107/3-4 Th Rangnam) Every new arrival should learn the whisky-set routine, a drinking tradition integral to Thai family gatherings. At this misnamed bar, the Sang Som set (Thai whisky with Coke, soda and ice) still reigns as the tippie of choice. The attentive waitress will keep your glass filled to the right proportions (two fingers whisky, a splash of coke, the rest soda). You should offer up a toast after each refill.

ENTERTAINMENT

Bangkok's entertainment scene goes well beyond its naughty-nightlife image. Today Bangkok's nightscape looks a lot like that

of New York or London, only with thinner bartenders and louder sound systems. Even if you're usually in bed by 9pm, Bangkok still offers interesting postdinner diversions, from flash cinemas to traditional cultural performances.

Live Music

Since Bangkok is the capital of Thailand's music industry, the city is always host to big-name performers and small-time garage bands. Of late, Th Khao San has become a music venue for Thai indie bands playing street concerts or shows at various Khao San clubs (see p167). Also check out the music calendar at **Thai Poppers** (www.thaipoppers.com/live/) for appearances by top-10 bands. Nightly line-ups at smaller venues can be found online at **Bangkok Gig Guide** (www.bangkokgigguide.com).

Ad Here the 13th (Map pp120-1; 13 Th Samsen) Beside Khlong Banglamphu, Ad Here is everything a neighbourhood joint should be – lots of regulars, cold beer and heartwarming tunes delivered by a masterful house band starting at 10pm. Everyone knows each other, so don't be shy about mingling.

Living Room (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2653 0333; Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, 250 Th Sukhumvit, btwn Soi 12 & 14) With studio-style perfection, the well-scrubbed jazz bands of international calibre put a size into the men's-club aesthetic of this hotel bar. Order yourself a Johnny on the rocks and revel in being a first-class internationalist.

Radio City (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2266 4567; Soi Patpong 1) Wet your whistle and shake your tail feathers at this Patpong favourite after a bargaining crusade at the nearby night market. The masters of ceremonies include a Thai Elvis and a Tom Jones impersonator. Come late with a sufficient amount of social lubrication to enjoy the vacation-land cheesiness.

Bamboo Bar (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2236 0400; Oriental Hotel, Soi 38/Oriental, Th Charoen Krung) The Oriental's Bamboo Bar is famous for its live lounge jazz, which holds court inside a colonial-era cabin of lazy fans, broad-leafed palms and rattan décor.

Brown Sugar (Map p127; ☎ 0 2250 1825; 231/20 Th Sarasin, opposite Lumpini Park) Crescent City would be proud of this cluttered jazz space of odd angles and smoking chops. Brown Sugar whips up inspired performances that lean more towards bebop than brass.

Saxophone Pub & Restaurant (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2246 5472; 3/8 Th Phayathai) A Bangkok institution,

Saxophone is reminiscent of a German beer cellar, with brilliant acoustics and up-close views of the nightly bands. Reggae, rhythm and blues, jazz and rock will bridge any troubling language barriers.

Tawandaeng Beer Hall (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2678 1114; 462/61 Th Narathiwat Ratchanakharin, nr Th Phra Ram III) You'll find half of Bangkok in this huge, village-sized brewhouse sipping German-style microbrews and singing with stage pop shows. Between sets, choruses of 'Happy Birthday' erupt from overcrowded tables. Another draw is the Wednesday night performance by Fong Nam, a fusion band of Western and Thai classical music.

Raintree Pub (Map pp116-17; ☎ 0 2245 7230; 116/63-64 Soi Rangnam, Th Phahon Yothin) Decorated like a country-and-western bar with driftwood and the signature buffalo horns, Raintree is a relic in Bangkok's music scene. The nightly bands

carry on the 'songs for life' tradition, one of Thailand's most unique adaptations of rock music, that has now passed from current to classic.

Dance Clubs

All the big-city trends are here: clubs featuring international DJs, hip-hop and various electronica. The trick in doing Bangkok is to catch the right spot on the right night. Bangkok's discos burn strong and bright on certain weekends or during hot 'theme' nights, but then fall into comatose slumbers on off nights. **Dude Sweet** (www.dudesweet.org) does monthly party roundups at various clubs, and **Bangkok Recorder** (www.bangkokrecorder.com) documents the rotating theme nights and visiting DJ celebs.

Cover charges for clubs and discos range from 500B to 600B and usually include a drink. Don't even think about showing up

before 11pm, and always bring ID. Most clubs close at 2am. You'll see more Thais out on the town at the beginning of the month (pay day) than other times.

Lucifer (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2234 6902; 2nd fl above Radio City, Soi Patpong 1, Th Silom) The keystone of Bangkok's dance halls, the Lord of the Underworld has chosen a consistently tripped-out techno-rave soundtrack. The modest cover charge also ensures that warm bodies pack the floor when other clubs are empty.

Tapas (Map pp124-5; Soi 4, Th Silom) The ambassador of Soi 4's dead-end cruise, Tapas is a rendezvous point for the paired and the pairable. In its Moroccan-inspired spaces, small samplers fit every taste: from the outdoor people-watching tables to the upstairs dance floor of soulful sounds and sweaty bodies.

Met Bar (Map p127; ☎ 0 2625 3333; Metropolitan Hotel, Th Sathon) Cosy and fashionable, the Met Bar started its career as a members-only club but has relaxed its policy to include everyone dressed to impress. The Friday night theme nights get the most attention, but the Met's social standing is a precarious one in this fickle city.

Q Bar (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2252 3274; Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Nana) Much debate rages over this long-running club. New York-style industrial chic is merged with groovy beats and competent cocktails (including absinthe and 40 kinds of vodka), but dissenters charge that the beautiful crowd has migrated elsewhere and has been replaced by too many working girls.

Bed Supperclub (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2651 3537; 26 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Nana) Inside this futuristic building is an all-white interior reminiscent of the set from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. As the name suggests, there are beds for lounging with your friends, and supper is served in a separate restaurant. It is a fixture on the theme-night calendar.

Santika (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2711 5886; 235/11 Soi 63/ Ekkamai, Th Sukhumvit) That weekend traffic jam on Ekkamai is feeding into supersized Santika, a *hi-so* Thai favourite. Shove yourself into the main dance hall for live bands, or squirm into the hip-hop room. If all else fails, grab an outdoor table with the grown-ups.

Royal City Avenue (RCA; Map pp114-15; Royal City Avenue, Th Phra Ram IX) is a suburban block of nightclubs that has graduated from teenage binge drinking to good times for all kinds. Starting at the beginning of the block, you'll find the following:

Club Astra (☎ 0 2255 8476; www.club-astra.com) This

place coaxes a funkier crowd with electronica DJs and indie bands.

Flix/Slim (☎ 0 2203 0377) The poshest choice on the strip with big thumping house beats and a more club-jaded clientele.

Old Leng (☎ 0 2203 0972) Expect an easier-listening soundtrack for more sensitive eardrums.

Route 66 (☎ 0 1440 9666; www.route66club.com) It rocks to a younger beat with hip-hop and R&B to the 'east' and varying shades of house to the 'west'.

Go-Go Bars

Whole sections of Bangkok are dedicated to sex tourism, from sexy massage parlours to go-go bars, and tales about these places comprise the majority of English-language literature about the city. Like most illicit trades, prostitution in Thailand is run with mafia characteristics, including exploitation of workers, issues around people trafficking and health concerns regarding HIV/AIDS. When sex workers do speak up, often they ask the government for legal protection so that they can do their jobs in a safe and regulated environment; but these calls for workplace justice run counter to the government's moral objections to the profession, which is one of long-standing in the country and one of the highest-paying options for undereducated women from rural areas of the country.

Patpong on Th Silom (Soi Patpong 1 & 2) is Bangkok's most famous red-light district and dates back to the beginning of the West's fascination with Asian prostitutes. Patpong has become more of an all-purpose circus than a flesh market. A major diluter is the popular souvenir market (p179) on Soi Patpong 1, which draws in families and conservative couples. The remaining go-go bars still put on erotica shows that are visited by gawkers for a good laugh rather than a hard-on.

Soi Cowboy on Th Sukhumvit (btwn Soi 21 & Soi) is a single-lane strip of 25 to 30 bars that claims direct lineage to the Vietnam War R&R era. A real flesh trade functions here amid the flashing neon. At nearby internet cafés groups of bar girls write love-letter emails to their new sugar daddies; the well-worn piece of paper in front of them is something of a master copy.

The three-storey Nana Entertainment Plaza (Soi 4/Nana Tai, Th Sukhumvit) forms a nucleus of strip clubs that comes complete

GAY & LESBIAN BANGKOK

With out-and-open nightspots and annual pride events, Bangkok's homosexual community enjoys an unprecedented amount of tolerance considering attitudes in the rest of the region.

Utopia (www.utopia-asia.com) is an online resource for the Southeast Asian gay community, listing Bangkok entertainment venues, news and views, and providing travel services. **Dreaded Ned** (www.dreadedned.com) also does a rundown on gay nightlife in Bangkok and Pattaya. The city's lesbian community keeps a quieter profile than their more flamboyant counterparts, but there are a few hang-outs to tap into the community. The **Lesbian Guide to Bangkok** (www.bangkoklesbian.com) is one of the only English-language trackers of the scene.

Bangkok's pink triangle is formed on one side by Th Silom and the other by Th Sarasin, where cruising limits reach highway speeds. All of Soi 2 on Th Silom is lined with dance clubs, such as **DJ Station** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2266 4029; 8/6-8 Soi 2, Th Silom; cover 300B), where the crowd is a mix of Thai guppies (gay professionals), money boys and a few Westerners. Just a half soi over is **Freeman** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2632 8032; small soi btwn Soi 2 & Soi Thaniya, Th Silom), which reputedly does the best (and seediest) *kàthoey* cabaret in town. Traipse on over to Soi 4 to find the old-timer conversation bars, such as **Balcony** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2235 5891; 8/6-8 Soi 4, Th Silom) and **Telephone** (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2234 3279; 114/11-13 Soi 4, Th Silom). The gay men's equivalent of Patpong's go-go bars can be found on nearby Soi Thaniya and Soi Anuman Ratchathon.

If you prefer to dine before you imbibe, check out Eat Me (p164), a gay-owned restaurant with class and cuisine.

Th Sarasin, behind Lumpini Park, is lined with more loungey options, such as **70s Bar** (Map p127; ☎ 0 2253 4433; 231/16 Th Sarasin), a small dance club that resuscitates the era of disco, and **I-Chub** (Map p127; ☎ 0 1208 5069; 2nd fl, 297 Th Sarasin), a karaoke bar for the shy and big-boned.

Further out of town is a more local scene where a little Thai will make you feel more welcome. The bars around Chatuchak, including **ICQ** (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2272 4775; Th Kamphaengphet, Chatuchak; Skytrain Mo Chit, subway Chatuchak Park), are favourites for loud and lushy behaviour.

Bangkok has just started to develop a lesbian-only nightclub scene with two newcomers: **Shela** (Map p127; Soi Lang Suan, Th Ploenchit) and **Zeta** (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2203 0994; 29/67 Block 5, RCA, Th Phra Ram IX). Both are easy-going clubs for the girls with a nightly band doing Thai and Western covers. The night-hopping tom-dees tend to start out at Shela's and then make the trek out to Zeta's as the night gets later. The restaurant Hemlock (p161) and other art bars along Th Phra Athit are neighbourhood hang-outs for an intellectual and artistic crowd of lesbians and gays.

CELLULOID ENCOUNTERS

The Land of Smiles used to be the Land of Sappy Movies until a new breed of film-makers started bringing visual storytelling to the silver screen. Spotlighted at the annual Bangkok International Film Festival (p148) and at art-house theatres such as Scala, Lido and House, locally made movies have cultivated a devoted fan base of bohemians and intellectuals, both domestic and international, although commercial success still eludes the artier flicks. Keep an eye out for new releases from the feel-good king Nonzee Nimbutir; art-freaky Apichatpong Weerasethakul; and hip Pen-Ek Ratanarung. For a historical snapshot of Thailand's cinematic new wave, see p71.

If you are more of a cinematic populist, then you can gorge on a rotating diet of locally made horror flicks that headlines the mainstream cinemas. The genre is so prolific that the Ronin Team, a group of Thai film-makers, and their bloody and ancient-curse-filled film *Art of the Devil* 2 won the People's Choice award at the 2006 Bangkok International Film Festival.

with its own hotel, which is used almost exclusively by female bar workers for illicit assignments.

One of the more palatable documenters of Bangkok's sexy underbelly is Stickman's Guide to Bangkok (www.stickmanbangkok.com).

Cinemas

Get out of the smog and heat at one of the city's hi-tech cinemas. For the royal treatment, opt for the VIP section with reclining seats and table service. All movies screened in Thai cinemas are preceded by the Thai royal anthem and everyone is expected to stand respectfully for its duration.

All of Hollywood's big releases plus a steady diet of locally bred comedies and horror flicks hit Bangkok's cinemas in a timely fashion. The foreign films are often altered by Thailand's film censors before distribution; this usually involves obscuring nude sequences, although gun fights are sometimes edited out, too. Film buffs may prefer the offerings at Bangkok's foreign cultural centres. For contact details, see p104.

At the following cinemas, English movies are shown with Thai subtitles rather than being dubbed. The shopping-centre cinemas have plush VIP options, while Lido and Scala are older and artier. House is Bangkok's first 'art-house' theatre. Visit **Movie Seer** (www.movie-seer.com) for show times.

EGV Grand (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2515 5555; Siam Discovery Center, Th Phra Ram; Skytrain Siam)

House (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2641 5177; www.house-rama.com; UMG Bldg, RCA, near Th Petchaburi; subway Phetburi)

Lido Cinema (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2252 6498; Siam Square, Th Phra Ram I; Skytrain Siam)

Paragon Cineplex (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2515 5555; Siam Paragon, Th Phra Ram I Siam; Skytrain Siam)

Scala Cinema (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2251 2861; Siam Square, Soi 1, Th Phra Ram I; Skytrain Siam)

SF Cinema City (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2268 8888; 7th fl, MBK, cnr Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai; Skytrain National Stadium)

SFX Cinema (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2268 8888; 6th fl, Emporium, Th Sukhumvit, btwn Soi 22 & 24; Skytrain Phrom Phong)

Traditional Arts Performances

As Thailand's cultural repository, Bangkok offers an array of dance and theatre performances. For background information about these ancient traditions, see p66 and p69.

Chalermkrung Royal Theatre (Sala Chaloem Krung; Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2222 0434; www.salachalermkrung.com; cnr Th Charoen Krung & Th Triphet; bus 507, 508) In a Thai Art Deco building at the edge of the Chinatown-Phahurat district, this theatre provides a striking venue for *khohn* (masked dance-drama based on stories from the *Ramakian*). When it opened in 1933, the royally funded Chalermkrung was the largest and most modern theatre in Asia. Mom Chao Samaichalem Kridakara, a former student of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, designed the hexagonal building.

Khohn performances last about two hours plus intermission; call for the schedule. The theatre requests that patrons dress respectfully, which means no shorts, tank tops or sandals. Bring along a wrap or long-sleeved shirt in case the air-con is running full blast.

Natayasala (Joe Louis Puppet Theatre; Map p127; ☎ 0 2252 9683; www.thaipuppet.com; Suan Lum Night Bazaar, cnr Th Phra Ram IV & Th Withayu; tickets 900B; ☎ show 7.30pm) The ancient art of Thai puppetry was heroically rescued by Sakorn Yangkeawsot, more popularly known as Joe Louis, in 1985.

Today his children carry on the tradition of reenacting the *Ramakian* by using knee-high puppets requiring three puppeteers to strike humanlike poses. The present home of the theatre, Suan Lum Night Bazaar, is set for redevelopment in 2007, but a new location for the theatre was not certain at the time of research.

National Theatre (Map p130; ☎ 0 2224 1352; Th Na Phra That; admission 50-100B) Near Saphan Phra Pin Klao, the National Theatre hosts monthly performance of the royal dance traditions of *lakhon* (a play) and *khohn*. Unfortunately, the advertisements for these events are printed only in Thai on placards outside the gates of the theatre. Occasionally the Bangkok Tourist Division (p106) can provide an English-language calendar.

Patravadi Theatre (Map p130; ☎ 0 2412 7287; www.patravaditheatre.com; 69/1 Soi Tambon Wenglang 1; tickets 500B; ☎ performances vary) Next to the Supatra River House in Thonburi, this open-air theatre is Bangkok's leading promoter of avant-garde dance and drama. Led by Patravadi Mejudhon, who is a famous Thai actress, the troupe's performances blend traditional Thai arts and folk tales with modern choreography, music and costumes. A free river shuttle picks up patrons at Tha Mahathat, near Silpakorn University; reservations for performances are recommended.

Sala Rim Nam (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2437 3080; Oriental Hotel, Soi 38/Oriental, Th Charoen Krung; tickets 1850B; ☎ 7-10pm) The Oriental Hotel's affiliated dinner theatre is a Thai-style teak pavilion. Readers rave about the hour-long classical dance performance, but give the food a mediocre rating, a common trait of many dinner theatres; reservations are recommended.

Thailand Cultural Centre (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2247 0028; www.thaiculturalcenter.com; Th Ratchadaphisek btwn Th Thiam Ruammit & Th Din Daeng; subway Thailand Cultural Cen-

tre) Occasionally, classical dance performances are held at this venue featuring a concert hall, art gallery and outdoor studios. International dance and theatre groups are also profiled, especially during the International Festival of Dance & Music (p148). Call for upcoming events as the website doesn't carry an up-to-date schedule.

Dusit Palace Park (p132) also hosts daily classical dance performances.

Muay Thai

Thai boxing's best of the best fight it out at Bangkok's two boxing stadiums: **Lumphini Stadium** (Sanam Muay Lumphini; Map p127; ☎ 0 2251 4303; Th Phra Ram IV; subway Lumphini) and **Ratchadamnoen Stadium** (Sanam Muay Ratchadamnoen; Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2281 4205; Th Ratchadamnoen Nok; bus 70, 503, 509). For the past two years there has been much talk about plans to move the Lumphini Stadium to a new location south of central Bangkok, but a date for the move has yet to be set.

Tickets at both stadiums cost 1000/1500/2000B for 3rd class/2nd class/ringside; advance reservations are needed for ringside seats. Be forewarned that these admission prices are exponentially more than what Thais pay, and the inflated price offers no special service or seating. In fact, at Ratchadamnoen Stadium, foreigners are sometimes corralled into an area with an obstructed view. As long as you are mentally prepared for the financial jabs from the promoters, you'll be better prepared to enjoy the real fight.

Ringside puts you right up on the central action but amid a fairly subdued crowd where gambling is prohibited. Second-class seats are filled with backpackers and numbers runners who take the bets from the crowd. Like being in the pit of a stock exchange, hand signals fly between the 2nd- and 3rd-

SHRINE DANCING

Stumbling across the minor-chord cacophony of a *lakhon kae bon* (commissioned shrine dance) can be an unexpected visual and cultural treat and a release from the ever-present self-consciousness of being a tourist. At **Lak Meuang** (p110) and **Erawan Shrine** (p135) worshippers whose wishes have been granted hire dance troupes in gratitude. Although many of the dance movements are the same as those seen in *lakhon*, these relatively crude performances are specially choreographed for ritual purposes, and don't represent true classical dance forms. But it is colourful – the dancers wear full costume and are accompanied by live music.

Also keep an eye out in the newspaper for announcements of temple fairs, where folk dance performances such as *li-keh* (folk dance) and *lam tát* (drama), are performed.

class areas communicating bets and odds. The 3rd-class area is the rowdiest section. Fenced off from the rest of the stadium, most of the die-hard fans follow the match (or their bets) too closely to sit down. If you're lukewarm on watching two men punch and kick each other, then 3rd-class offers the diversion of the crowd.

Fights are held throughout the week, alternating between the two stadiums. Ratchadamnoen hosts the matches on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday at 6pm and on Sunday at 5pm. Lumpini hosts matches on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday at 6pm. Aficionados say the best-matched bouts are reserved for Tuesday nights at Lumpini and Thursday nights at Ratchadamnoen. There is a total of eight to 10 fights of five rounds a piece. The stadiums don't usually fill up until the main events, which usually start around 8pm or 9pm.

There are English-speaking 'staff' standing outside the stadium who will practically tackle you upon arrival. Although there have been a few reports of scamming, most of these assistants help steer visitors to the foreigner ticket windows and hand out a fight roster; they can also be helpful in telling you which fights are the best match-ups between contestants. (Some say that welterweights, between 135lb and 147lb, are the best). To keep everyone honest, though, remember to purchase tickets from the ticket window not from a person outside the stadium.

As a prematch warm-up, catch a plate of *kai yâang* (grilled chicken) and other northeastern dishes from the restaurants surrounding the Ratchadamnoen Stadium.

SHOPPING

Bangkok excels in one major category when it comes to shopping: cheap stuff, not luxury goods. The tradition of bargaining and Thailand's well-honed sense of fun is elevated to elation in the markets where a simple purchase can be all smiles and compliments.

BIG FAT WARNING!

Be sure to read about the pitfalls of shopping in Bangkok (p750) before setting out on a spree. Amid all the bargains are a number of cleverly disguised rip-off schemes – caveat emptor!

The difficulty is finding your way around since the city's intense urban tangle sometimes makes orientation difficult. A good shopping companion is *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok*, with annotations on all sorts of small and out-of-the-way shopping venues and *tàlàat* (markets).

Antiques

Real Thai antiques are rare and costly. Most Bangkok antique shops keep a few authentic pieces for collectors, along with lots of pseudo-antiques or traditionally crafted items that look like antiques. The majority of shop operators are quite candid about what's really old and what isn't.

River City Complex (Map pp118-19; Th Yotha, off Th Charoen Krung; ☞ many stores close Sun; river ferry Tha Si Phraya) Near the Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel, this multistorey shopping centre is an all-in-one stop for old-world Asiana. Several high-quality art and antique shops occupy the 3rd and 4th floors. Old Maps & Prints offers one-of-a-kind rare maps and illustrations, with a focus on Asia. Although the quality is high, the prices are too, as many wealthy tourists filter in and out.

Oriental Place (Map pp124-5; Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung) Near the Oriental Hotel, this subdued shopping centre is well stocked for discriminating collectors knowledgeable about Southeast Asian antiques.

Department Stores & Shopping Centres

Bangkok may be crowded and polluted, but its department stores are modern oases of order. By no accident, the Skytrain stations often have shaded walkways delivering passengers directly into nearby stores without ever having to set foot on ground level.

One pesky tradition is that shop assistants follow you around the store from rack to rack like the lonely new girl at school. This is the definition of Thai 'service' rather than an indication that they've sniffed you out as a shoplifter. Be sure you're satisfied with an item as returns are an unimported phenomenon.

Most shopping centres are open from 10am or 11am to 9pm or 10pm.

Mahboonkroong (MBK; Map pp128-9; ☞ 0 2217 9111; cnr Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai; Skytrain National Stadium) Capturing the spirit of Thailand's outdoor markets into comfy air-con, MBK is a Bangkok teen's home away from home. On any given weekend, half the city can be found here

combing through an inexhaustible range of small stalls and shops or shuffling (sometimes tentatively) up and down the escalators. This is the cheapest place to buy contact lenses, mobile (cell) phones and accessories, and name-brand knock-offs.

Playground! (Map pp122-3; ☞ 0 2714 7888; www.playgroundstore.co.th; 818 Soi 55/Thong Lor, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Thong Lor to red soi bus) This concept mall is street-smart cool in a neighbourhood that's not alternative enough to get it. Graffiti art, J-pop vinyl dolls, manga: Bangkok has fully embraced street art. The hulking building balances commerce on the periphery with large central spaces dedicated to alternative art exhibits or performance spaces.

Siam Center & Siam Discovery Center (Map pp128-9; cnr Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai; Skytrain National Stadium & Siam) These linked sister centres feel almost monastic in their hushed hallways compared to frenetic MBK, just across the street. Siam Discovery Center excels in home décor with the whole 3rd floor devoted to Asian-minimalist styles and jewel-toned fabrics. Attached Siam Center, Thailand's first shopping centre built in 1976, has recently gone under the redesign knife for a younger, hipper look. Youth fashion is its new focus, with weekend fashion shows occupying the central atrium.

Siam Paragon (Map pp128-9; ☞ 0 2610 8000; Th Phra Ram I; Skytrain Siam) The biggest, newest and glitziest of Bangkok's shopping malls, Siam Paragon is more of an urban park than shopping centre. Astronomically luxe brands occupy most floors, while the majority of shoppers hang out in the reflecting pool atrium or basement-level food court.

Central World Plaza (Map pp128-9; ☞ 0 2635 1111; Th Ratchadamri & Th Phra Ram I; Skytrain Chitlom) After being left behind in the mall race, this behemoth box has gutted itself and transformed from ho-hum shopping mall to extrahuge 'lifestyle' scene. The new above-ground walkway to the shopping centre helps to funnel in heat-stroked pedestrians.

Gaysorn Plaza (Map pp128-9; cnr Th Phloenchit & Th Ratchadamri; Skytrain Chitlom) A *haute couture* catwalk, Gaysorn's spiralling staircases and all-white halls preserve all of fashion's beloved designers under museum-curatorship style. Thai fashion leaders occupy the 2nd floor, while the top floor is a stroll through chic home décor.

Central Department Store (Map pp128-9; ☞ 0 2655 1444; 1027 Th Ploenchit; Skytrain Chitlom) Generally regarded as the all-round best for quality and selection, Central has 13 branches in Bangkok in addition to this chi-chi flagship. If you're curious about local hooks, look for Thai designers such as Tube and the Thai cosmetic brand Erb.

Emporium Shopping Centre (Map pp122-3; 622 Th Sukhumvit, cnr Soi 24; Skytrain Phrom Phong) You might not have access to the beautiful people's nightlife scene, but you can observe their spending rituals at this temple to red hot and classic cool. Robust expat salaries and trust funds dwindle amid Prada, Miu Miu, Chanel and Thai brands such as Greyhound and Propaganda.

Pantip Plaza (Map pp128-9; 604 Th Phetchaburi; Skytrain Ratchathewi) North of Siam Square, this is five storeys of computer and software stores ranging from legit to flea market. Many locals come here to buy 'pirated' software and computer peripherals.

Fashion & Textiles

Bangkok is a fashion-conscious and fashion-generating city. Local designers have cultivated a high-fashion scene that can compete on the international catwalk. More affordable looks are exhibited by the city's trendy teens who strut their distinctive 'Bangkok' look in the various shopping areas.

Siam Square (Map pp128-9; btwn Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai) This low-slung commercial universe is a network of some 12 *soi* lined with trendy teenage boutiques, many of which are the first ventures of young designers. Soi 3 and 4 are

FLOWERING TROUBLE

Forming floating carpets where birds alight and garbage collects, water hyacinths are the *femme fatale* of Bangkok's river environments. This invasive species was imported to Thailand by Rama V's wife after a visit to Indonesia. The plant was originally intended as a decorative flower for the palace ponds but soon escaped to the river frontier, where it clogs waterways and spreads into virgin territory. One promising industry for this aquatic weed is to dry the stalks and weave them into furniture and rugs, which are sold in furniture stores and shopping centres throughout the city.

the primary shopping areas for cute flouncey dresses. The varying weekend product promotions are usually filled with giddy 'model girls' and breakdancers.

Mae Fah Luang (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2658 0424; www.doitung.org; 4th fl, Siam Discovery Center, cnr Th Phayathai & Th Phra Ram I; Skytrain Siam) For a royally funded project, Mae Fah Luang ventures into impressive fashionable realms with its feminine cotton suits and skirts. The handmade cotton and linen come from villages formerly involved with poppy production.

Fly Now (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2656 1359; 2nd fl, Gay-sorn Plaza, cnr Th Ploenchit & Th Ratchadamri; Skytrain Chitlom) A long-standing leader in Bangkok's home-grown fashion scene, Fly Now creates feminine couture that has caught the eyes of several international shows.

Jaspal (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2658 1000-19; Siam Center, cnr Th Phayathai & Th Phra Ram I; Skytrain Siam) Cute snappy basics define this home-grown label that is slowly maturing beyond its Thai shores. There is also a branch at the Emporium Shopping Centre (Map pp122-3).

Greyhound (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2261 7121; www.greyhound.co.th; 2nd fl, Emporium, Th Sukhumvit, btwn Soi 22 & 24; ☎ 10.30am-10pm; Skytrain Phrom Phong)

Streetwear for people who have drivers and dual citizenship, Greyhound is a local lifestyle brand that includes the spin-offs Playhound and Grey, as well as Greyhound Cafe (p165). There is also a branch in Siam Center (Map pp128-9).

Jim Thompson (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2632 8100; www.jimthompson.com; 9 Th Surawong; ☎ 9am-9pm; Skytrain Sala Daeng, subway Silom) The company credited with creating an international market for Thai silk is now solidly positioned with the tastes of the middle-aged mamas. Bolts of fabric, silk scarves and neckties, and table accessories are all of the highest quality. Beware of touts hanging around this store trying to divert customers to another shop that pays commissions.

Handicrafts & Décor

The tourist markets have tonnes of factory-made pieces that pop up all along the tourist route. The shopping centres sell products with a little better quality at proportionally higher prices, but the independent shops sell the best items all round.

Silom Village Trade Centre (Map pp124-5; Soi 24, Th Silom) Behind the Silom Village Inn, this

arcade of compact shops sells souvenir-quality reproductions, including teak carvings, textiles, *khohn* masks and ceramics. The pace is relaxed and rarely crowded.

Narayana Phand (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2252 4670; Th Ratchadamri; Skytrain Chitlom, khlong taxi to Tha Pratunam) A bit on the touristy side, this huge warehouse is a government-operated enterprise funnelling run-of-the-mill knick-knacks to the masses. No haggling is necessary at this place.

Suan Lum Night Bazaar (Map p127; cnr Th Withayu & Th Phra Ram IV; ☎ 6pm-midnight; bus 13, 17, 76, 106, subway Lumpini) This government-backed bonanza is a great night-time activity for shoppers, families, groups, teenagers, you name it. At the time of writing, Suan Lum Night Bazaar was slated for closure and the land set for redevelopment. Due to several court battles and the popularity of the market, some suspect that the eviction notice given to night bazaar vendors may go unheeded. We aren't sure when the bazaar will be completely dismantled (and secretly hope that this stellar attraction remains intact).

Rasi Sayam (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2262 0729; 82 Soi 33/Daeng Udom, Th Sukhumvit; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat; Skytrain Asoke) Rasi Sayam sells charming wall hangings, *benjarong* (Thai ceramics), basketry and pottery that are made exclusively for this shop by handicraft villagers.

Nandakwang (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2258 1962; 108/3 Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Nana) A branch of a factory shop from northern Thailand, Nandakwang specialises in high-quality folksy woven-cotton handbags, totes and table linens. There are also some cute stuffed animals. There is also another branch in Siam Discovery Center (Map pp128-9).

Taekee Taekon (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2629 1473; 118 Th Phra Athit; ☎ 10am-5pm; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Representing Thailand's main silk-producing regions, this charming store has a beautiful selection of table runners and wall hangings. Alongside silk products, you will also find small examples of celadon pottery and blue-and-white china.

Protaganda (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2664 8574; 4th fl, Emporium, btwn Sois 22 & 24, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Phrom Phong) This nouveau design shop proves that toilet humour is universal. The signature character, Mr P, who appears on drinking glasses, ashtrays and table lamps is a 3-D cartoon character who pokes fun at all the things our mothers' told us were impolite. There is another branch in Siam Discovery Center (Map pp128-9).

Phu Fa (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2650 3311; cnr Th Sukhumvit & Soi 7; Skytrain Nana) This new outlet sells products from HRH Princess Srindhorn's economic development programme for rural villagers. The Thai-made products are mainly kid-friendly: notebooks, change purses and hand-woven Karen textiles.

Gems & Jewellery

Although it is common wisdom that Thailand is a bonanza for gems and jewellery, the risk of a rip-off is much greater than finding bargain bling and spotting a fake is nearly impossible without sophisticated training and equipment. Many visitors arrive with visions of gemstones and leave with coloured glass. Be sceptical of recommendations from tük-tük drivers, hotel staff, strangers on the street and even from fellow travellers (who might be in denial about being ripped off). If you don't buy expensive jewellery at home, then don't start a collection

SOUVENIRS THAT LAST

Looking for something that will have a longer shelf life than the average street-stall souvenir or a shoddily tailored suit? It will cost you a bit more but Thai contemporary art is inexpensive for the art world, with typical prices between US\$3000 and US\$5000. And if art collectors continue to look East, canvases from Southeast Asia will soon join the exhibition halls alongside China and India, turning relatively unknown names into famous acquisitions. But for the average art buyer in Thailand, most look for what they like. Here are a few commercial galleries to start:

100 Tonson Gallery (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2684 1527; www.100tonsongallery.com; 100 Soi Tonson, Th Ploenchit; Skytrain Chitlom) Atmospheric gallery focusing on painting, sculpture and mixed media.

Gallery F-Stop (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2663 7421; www.galleryfstop.com; Tamarind Café, 27 Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; ☎ 11am-11pm; Skytrain Asoke) Southeast Asian-themed photography with approachable prices.

H Gallery (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 1310 4428; www.hgallerybkk.com; 201 Soi 12, Th Sathon, beside Bangkok Bible College; ☎ noon-6pm Wed-Sat; Skytrain Chong Nonsi) Leading commercial gallery for emerging Thai abstract painters.

Jamjuree Art Gallery (☎ 0 2218 3708; Jamjuree Bldg, Chulalongkorn University, Th Phayathai; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-6pm Sat & Sun; Skytrain Siam) Modern spiritual themes and brilliantly coloured abstracts from emerging student artists.

Kraichitti Gallery (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 1623 8284; Sunset Street Complex, Th Khao San; ☎ 3-11pm; bus 53, 511, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) An ambitious intersection of photography and entertainment in an elegant 100-year-old home smack dab on Th Khao San.

Thavibu Gallery (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2266 5454; www.thavibu.com; 3rd fl, Silom Galleria, 91/91 Th Silom; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sat, noon-6pm Sun; Skytrain Chong Nonsi) Paintings by artists from Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar; much of the gallery's business is done online.

Surapon Gallery (Map p127; ☎ 0 2638 0033; Tisco Tower, 1st fl, Th Sathon Neua; Skytrain Sala Daeng) Unique contemporary Thai art.

THE WAR ON THE GEM SCAM

We're begging you, if you aren't a gem trader, then don't buy unset stones in Thailand – period. Countless tourists are sucked into the prolific and well-rehearsed gem scam in which they are taken to a store by a helpful stranger and are tricked into buying bulk gems that can supposedly be resold in their home country for 100% profit. The expert con artists (part of a well-organised cartel) seem trustworthy and convince tourists that they need a citizen of the country to circumvent tricky customs regulations. Guess what, the gem world doesn't work like that, and what most tourists end up with are worthless pieces of glass. By the time you sort all this out, the store has closed, changed names and the police can do little to help. Want to know more or want to report a scam? Visit www.2bangkok.com and navigate to the 'Gem Scam' page for five years' worth of tracking the phenomenon, or go to **Thai Gems Scam Group** (www.geocities.com/thaigemscamgroup) for photos of touts who troll the temples for victims. The tourist police can also help to resolve some purchase disputes but don't expect miracles.

in Thailand. Stick to the bangles if you need a souvenir adornment.

Markets

Quintessential Thailand and all its do-it-yourself entrepreneurial spirit can be found among the city's markets, occupying unused alleys or treacherous sidewalks. Most vendors are women who raise their children alongside a stall packed with an odd assortment of plastic toys, household goods and polyester clothes mixed with knock-off designer watches and bags. Even more interesting are the food markets where Thais forage for brightly coloured tapioca desserts, spicy curries and fruits that look like medieval torture devices.

ALL-PURPOSE MARKETS

Chatuchak Weekend Market (Talat Nat Jatujak; Map pp114-15; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat & Sun; Skytrain Mo Chit, subway Chatuchak Park) This is it, the big one you've heard about. The behemoth of Thai markets where everything imaginable is for sale – from handmade silks from the provinces, extra-small fashion for the art-school fashionistas, fighting cocks and fighting fish, fluffy puppies and every imaginable souvenir. Although variety is its claim to fame, the market's speciality is clothing. Don't forget to try out your bargaining skills.

Plan to spend a full day, as there's plenty to see, do and buy. But come early to beat the crowds and the heat. If everything starts to inexplicably suck, then you are suffering from dehydration and need a pitstop at one of the many food stalls. There is an information centre and a bank with ATMs and foreign-exchange booths at the Chatuchak Park offices, near the northern end of the market's Soi 1, Soi 2 and Soi 3. Schematic maps and toilets are conveniently located throughout the market.

There are a few vendors out on weekday mornings, and a daily vegetable, plant and flower market opposite the market's southern side. One section of the latter, known as the Aw Taw Kaw Market, sells organically grown fruit and vegetables, and is a good spot for tasty duck curry.

Sampeng Lane (Map pp118-19; Sampeng Lane/Soi Wanit 1, Chinatown; river ferry Tha Ratchawong) This wholesale market runs roughly parallel to Th Yaowarat, bisecting the two districts of Chinatown and Phahurat. Pick up the narrow artery from Th Ratchawong and follow it through its many manifestations – hand-

bags, homewares, hair decorations, stickers, Japanese-animation gear, plastic beeping keychains. As the lane cuts across into Phahurat, fabric shops, many operated by Indian (mostly Sikh) merchants, start to dominate. Unless you're shopping for a grassroots import-export group, Sampeng is more for entertainment than for purchases.

Nakhon Kasem (Map pp118-19; Th Yaowarat & Th Chakrawat; river ferry Tha Saphan Phut) Also known as the Thieves Market because this area used to specialise in stolen goods, Nakhon Kasem has gone legit with industrial-sized cooking equipment, spare electronic parts and other bits you didn't even know could be resold. For the budding entrepreneur, all the portable street-stall gear for frying bananas, making *phat thai* or grinding coconuts is sold here.

Phahurat Market (Map pp118-19; Th Phahurat & Th Triphet, across from Old Siam Plaza; river ferry Tha Saphan Phut) The Indian-fabric district prefers boisterous colours, faux fur, neon sparkles and everything you'll need for a Halloween costume or a traditional Thai dance drama. Deeper into the market are cute clothes for kids and good deals on traditional Thai textiles.

Pratunam Market (Map pp128-9; cr Th Petchaburi & Th Ratchaprarop; ☎ 8am-6pm; khlong taxi to Tha Pratunam) Considered the in-town version of Chatuchak, Pratunam is a tight warren of stalls trickling deep into the block. Cheap clothes, luggage, bulk toiletries, market-lady sarongs and souvenirs are just a few options.

Banglamphu Market (Map pp120-1; Th Chakraphong, Th Tanao & Th Tani; ☎ 9am-6pm; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Spread out over several blocks, the Banglamphu market attracts a no-nonsense crew of street vendors selling snacks, handbags, brassieres, pyjamas, household items and *phuang malai* (Thai flower garlands). You may never come here on purpose, but passing through invariably leads to a purchase.

Soi Lalaisap (Map pp124-5; Soi 5, Th Silom; ☎ 8am-6pm; Skytrain Chong Nonsi) The 'money-melting' street has a number of vendors selling all sorts of cheap clothing, watches and homewares during the day. Regular perusers say that imperfections from name-brand factories often appear in the stacks.

Khlong Toey Market (Map pp122-3; cr Th Phra Ram IV & Th Narong) Beside Bangkok's port, this market is the cheapest all-purpose choice proffering regional food stuff, fresh meat and kitchen supplies.

FLOWER & PLANT MARKETS

Pak Khlong Market (Map pp118-19; Th Chakkaphet & Th Atsadang; ☎ 8am-6pm; river ferry Tha Saphan Phut) Near the river and the mouth of Khlong Lawt, Pak Khlong is the city's largest wholesale flower source. The colourful displays of baby roses and delicate orchids are endless and so inexpensive that even a cement-cell dweller on Th Khao San could afford a bouquet. Pak Khlong is also a big market for vegetables.

Thewet Market (Map pp116-17; Th Krung Kasem, off Th Samsen) You'll find a good selection of tropical flowers and plants available at this low-key market creating a temporary garden near Tha Thewet.

Talat Phahonyothin (Phahonyothin Market; Map pp114-15; Th Kamphaengphet; Skytrain Mo Chit, subway Chatuchak Park) The city's largest plant market is opposite the southern side of Chatuchak Market.

TOURIST MARKETS

The souvenir sellers have an amazing knack for sniffing out what new arrivals want to haul back home – perennial favourites include raunchy T-shirts, *mon khwan* (traditional Thai wedge-shaped pillow), CDs and synthetic sarongs. Not all tourist markets are created equal: porn is hard to come by on Th Khao San but plentiful on Th Sukhumvit; and hemp clothing is noticeably absent from Patpong.

Th Sukhumvit Market (Map pp122-3; Th Sukhumvit btwn Soi 2 & 12, 3 & 15; ☎ 11am-10.30pm; Skytrain Nana) Knock-offs bags and watches, stacks of skin-flick DVDs, Chinese throwing stars, penis-shaped lighters and other questionable gifts for your high-school-aged brother dominate at this market peddling to package and sex tourists.

Th Khao San Market (Map pp120-1; Th Khao San; ☎ 11am-11pm; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) The main guesthouse strip in Banglamphu is a day-and-night shopping bazaar for the serious baht purchaser. Cheap T-shirts, 'bootleg' CDs, wooden elephants, hemp clothing, *mon khwan*, fisherman pants and other goods that make backpackers go ga-ga. Ask around to find out which of the vendors sell the best-quality CDs.

Patpong Night Market (Map pp124-5; Patpong Soi 1 & 2, Th Silom; ☎ 6pm-midnight; Skytrain Sala Daeng) Drawing more crowds than the ping-pong shows, this market continues the street's illicit lean-

ings with a deluge of pirated goods. Bargain with intensity as first-quoted prices tend to be astronomically high.

Tailors

Although Bangkok's diplomatic corps provides a steady clientele for the city's established tailors, the continuous supply of tourists provides a lot of 'fresh meat' for the less-scrupulous businesses. Common scams usually involve those wily *tuk-tuk* drivers who deliver customers to shops that pay commissions, thus driving the cost of the work far beyond its normal value. Other reported problems involve shoddy workmanship and inferior fabrics.

But often the real problem is that the customers don't know enough about formal attire to be savvy shoppers; many see the price tag and think it is about time to get a suit makeover. This is the ideal formula for getting less than what you paid for. If you don't normally wear suits at home, then Thailand is no place to learn. Instead stick to fun accessories – a silk robe, a Chinese-style dress – items that will remind you of your trip but don't require fine fabric or craftsmanship.

If you've flown to Thailand wearing a suit, then you're a good candidate for sartorial circles. Spend time courting a tailor, as it is one of those old-world relationships not well suited for the modern stopwatch. Before you engage a tailor on a big custom job, assess their workmanship by looking at pieces in progress or commissioning them to copy a small item of clothing. Wear the piece for awhile to make sure it can withstand wear and tear before returning with business.

Once you find a tailor you trust, the next hurdle is selecting quality fabric. Be especially wary of claims of 100% cotton, which is usually a blend of the real stuff and a synthetic. Most wools are imported from Italy and England, but the stocks at many tailor shops are synthetic blends from factories outside Bangkok. Good-quality silk, on the other hand, is plentiful. If the tailoring shop doesn't offer fabrics to your liking, you can supply your own material from another source.

Shirts and trousers can be turned around in 48 hours or less with only one fitting. But no matter what a tailor may tell you, it takes more than one or two fittings to create a good suit, and most reputable tailors will ask for two to five sittings.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Bangkok is a major centre for international flights throughout Asia as well as being Thailand's domestic hub.

Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Map p187; ☎ 0 2723 0000; www.bangkokairportonline.com), the much anticipated new and improved airport, 30km east of Bangkok in Nong Ngu Hao (Cobra Lake) area of Samut Prakan Province, began commercial international and domestic service in September 2006 after several years of delay. The airport is designed to handle 45 million passengers a year with expansion plans to accommodate up to 100 million passengers. Once the airport is up to full capacity, it will be the largest in Asia and able to handle Airbus A380s (555 seats). The airport name is pronounced 'soo-wanna-poom', and it inherited the airport code (BKK) previously used by the old airport at Don Muang.

After September 2006 Bangkok's former international and domestic **Don Muang airport** (☎ 0 2535 1111; www.airportthai.co.th), 25km north of central Bangkok, was retired from commercial service, only to be partially reopened five months later to handle overflow from Suvarnabhumi. As of March 2007, Don Muang began servicing some domestic carriers and at the time of writing was being used by the following carriers: One-To-Go, Nok Air and PB Air, as well as the domestic services of Thai Airways International (THAI). At the time of writing it was unclear if Don Muang would fulfil this role permanently or only until construction and safety problems at Suvarnabhumi were resolved. Be advised that his situation could change prior to or after publication.

For a list of domestic and international airlines serving Thailand, see the Transport chapter (p756).

AIRLINES

The following are carriers that service domestic destinations; a few also fly routes to international destinations. For a list of international carriers, see p755.

Air Asia (☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com; Suvarnabhumi airport) Bangkok to Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Hat Yai, Phuket, Surat Thani, Narathiwat, Udon Ratchathani and Udon Thani.

Bangkok Airways (☎ 0 2132 0342; www.bangkokair

.com; Suvarnabhumi airport) Bangkok to Chiang Mai, Phuket, Ko Samui, Sukhothai, Trat and Trang.

Nok Air (☎ 1318; www.nokair.co.th; Suvarnabhumi Airport) Bangkok to Chiang Mai, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Hat Yai, Udon Thani and Phuket.

One-Two-Go (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2229 4260, call centre 1126; www.fly12go.com; 18 Th Ratchadaphisek) Domestic arm of Orient Thai; flies from Bangkok to Surat Thani, Phuket, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Hat Yai and Krabi.

PB Air (☎ 0 2261 0220; www.pbair.com; Suvarnabhumi airport) Bangkok to Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Lampang, Nan, Sukhothai, Nakhon Phanom, Roi-Et, Buriram and Nakhon Si Thammarat.

THAI (www.thaiair.com) Silom (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2232 8000; 485 Th Silom); Banglamphu (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 6 1111; 6 Th Lan Luang) Operates domestic air services to many provincial capitals.

Bus

Bangkok is the centre for bus services that fan out all over the kingdom. For long-distance journeys to popular tourist destinations, it is advisable to buy tickets directly from the bus companies located at the bus stations, rather than through travel agents in tourist centres, such as Th Khao San. See Bus Safety (p763) for tips on common transport scams.

BUS STATIONS

There are three main public bus terminals. Allow an hour to reach all terminals from central Bangkok.

Northern & Northeastern bus terminal (Map pp114-15; ☎ for northern routes 0 2936 2852 ext 311/442, for northeastern routes 0 2936 2852 ext 611/448; Th Kamphaeng Phet) is just north of Chatuchak Park. It's also commonly called *sàthaanii maw chit* (Mo Chit station). Buses depart from here for northern and northeastern destinations such as Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat), Ayuthaya and Lopburi. Buses to Aranya Prathet also leave from here, not from the Eastern bus terminal as you might expect. To reach the bus station, take Skytrain to Mo Chit and transfer onto city bus 3, 49, 77 or 512.

Eastern bus terminal (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2391 2504; Soi 40/Ekamaj, Th Sukhumvit; Skytrain Ekamaj) is the departure point for buses to Pattaya, Rayong, Chanthaburi and other points east. Most people call it *sàthaanii èkkà mai* (Ekamaj station).

Southern bus terminal (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2435 1200; Hwy 338/Th Nakhon Chaisi & Th Phra Pinkao, Thonburi) handles buses south to Phuket, Surat Thani

and closer centres to the west, such as Nakhon Pathom and Kanchanaburi. This station is known as *sàthaanii saai tái mai* (Sai Tai Mai) and is in Thonburi. To reach the station, take bus 30 (for Banglamphu), 516 (for Thewet), 507 and 511 (for Pak Nam), and 170 and 127 (for Mo Chit). Although there are plans to move the terminal further out of town, there is still no official word on when this will happen.

Train

Bangkok is the terminus for the main rail services to the south, north, northeast and east. See p768 for information about train classes and services.

Hualamphong station (Map pp118-19; ☎ 0 2220 4334, general information & advance booking 1690; Th Phra Ram IV) handles services to the north, northeast, east and south. Bookings can be made in person at the advance booking office (just follow the signs; open from 8.30am to 4pm). The other ticket windows are for same-day purchases, mostly 3rd class. From 5am to 8.30am and 4pm to 11pm, advance bookings can also be made at windows 2 to 11. You can obtain a train timetable from the information window.

Hualamphong has the following services: shower room, mailing centre, luggage storage, cafés and food courts.

Smiling 'information' staff will try to direct all arrivals to a travel agency in the mezzanine level, which will arrange transport on a commission basis. To skip the charge, make all

TAXI TO NOWHERE

In most large cities, the taxi drivers are usually seasoned navigators familiar with every out-of-the-way neighbourhood. This is not the case in Bangkok where many a displaced farmer finds himself ploughing the city streets in a metered taxi after a failed rice crop. Further complicating matters is the language barrier: most street names are multisyllabic requiring acrobatic tone variations that if mispronounced will induce confused head scratching. Even borrowed words from English have their own peculiar Thai pronunciation. To ensure that you'll be able to return home, grab your hotel's business card, which will have directions in Thai.

arrangements at ticketing windows on the ground floor.

To get to the station from Sukhumvit take the subway to the Hualamphong stop. From western points (Banglamphu, Thewet) take bus 53.

Bangkok Noi station (Map p130; next to Sriraj Hospital, Thonburi) handles services to Nakhon Pathom, Kanchanaburi and Nam Tok. The station can be reached by river ferry to Tha Rot Fai. Tickets can be bought at the station.

GETTING AROUND

The main obstacle to getting around Bangkok is the traffic, which introduces a 45-minute delay to most daytime outings. This means advance planning is a must when you are attending scheduled events or arranging appointments.

If you can travel by river, canal or Skytrain from one point to another (ie avoid the roads), it's always the best choice.

To/From the Airport

The following ground transport options are allowed to leave directly from the airport terminal to in-town destinations: metered taxis, hotel limousines, the airport express bus, private vehicles and private buses. If there are no metered taxis available curbside or if the line is too long, you can take the airport shuttle to the taxi stand at the public transport centre.

The public transport centre is 3km from the airport terminal and includes a public bus terminal, metered taxi stand, car rental and long-term parking. A free airport shuttle running both an ordinary and express route connects the transport centre with the passenger terminals.

Metered taxis are available curbside from the Suvarnabhumi airport terminals and from the taxi stand at the public transport centre. Typical metered fares from the airport: 200B to 250B to Th Sukhumvit, 250B to 300B to Th Khao San, and 500B to Mo Chit. Toll charges (paid by the passenger) vary between 20B to 60B. Do note that there is also a 50B surcharge that is added to all fares departing from the airport, payable to the driver. You can hail a taxi directly from the street for airport trips, or you can arrange one through the hotels or by calling ☎ 1681 (which charges a 20B dispatch surcharge). A taxi trip from the Don Muang airport into the middle of Bangkok should cost you around 200B to 300B, plus tolls (40B

plans to revive these water networks. There are a few Bangkok khlong taxis, operated by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, that traverse Khlong Saen Saep from Banglamphu to Ramakamhaeng. The canal service is the quickest option for travelling across town during rush hour between Banglamphu and points east. A few useful stops include: Tha Withayu (Map pp128–9) for the Nai Lert Hotel; Tha Pratunam (Map pp128–9) for Pratunam market; Tha Ratchathewi (Map pp128–9) for Asia Hotel; and Tha Phan Fah (Map pp120–1) for Wat Saket. Fares cost 8B to 16B and service runs from 6am to 7pm. Be warned, though, that this is extreme Bangkok. The canal is seriously polluted and passengers typically hold newspapers over their faces to prevent being splashed by the stinky water. Climbing in and out of the boats can be a little tricky and shouldn't be attempted when decked out in heels and pearls.

Two new *khlong* services between Thonburi and Bangkok have been added for commuters. Boats travel between Daokanong in Thonburi to Tha Sathon in Bangkok between 6.20am to 8am and 3.45pm to 6pm Monday to Friday and cost 15B. Boats travel between Phetkasem in Thonburi to Saphan Phut in Bangkok between 7.30am to 8am and 3.45pm to 6pm Monday to Friday and cost 15B.

Bus

The city's public-bus system, which is operated by Bangkok Metropolitan Transit Authority (BMTA), is the best option for reaching Chinatown, Banglamphu, Thewet, Dusit and other areas not serviced by Skytrain. The buses are also a lot cheaper than the newer public transport options, but are also subject to the hassles of traffic. Air-con bus fares typically start at 10B or 12B and increase by increments of 2B, depending on the distance. Fares for ordinary (fan) buses start at 7B or 8B. Smaller 'baht buses' ply major *soi* and cost 5B.

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 mid-morning.

Bangkok Bus Map by Roadway, available at Asia Books (p104), is the most up-to-date route map available. The following bus lines are useful for tourists travelling between Banglamphu and Siam Square area:

- Bus 15: Tha Phra to Sanam Luang with

stops at MBK, Th Ratchadamnoen Klang (accessible to Th Khao San) and Sanam Luang (accessible to Wat Phra Kaew).

- Bus 47: Khlong Toei Port to Department of Lands with stops along Th Phra Ram IV, MBK, Th Ratchadamnoen and Sanam Luang.
- Bus 73: Huay Khwong to Saphan Phut with stops at MBK (connect to Skytrain), Hualamphong (connect to train or subway), Chinatown and Saphan Phut (connect to Chao Phraya Express).

Car & Motorcycle

For short-term visitors, you will find parking and driving a car in Bangkok more trouble than it is worth. Even long-term expats typically opt for a chauffeured car rather than battling the Buddhist approach to driving. If you need private transport, consider hiring a car and driver through your hotel or hire a taxi driver that you find trustworthy.

If you're not dissuaded, cars and motorcycles can be rented throughout town, including such international chains as **Avis** (Map pp128–9; ☎ 0 2255 5300; 2/12 Th Withayu). There are more rental agencies along Th Withayu and Th Petchaburi Tat Mai. Some also rent motorcycles. Rates start at around 2000B per day, excluding insurance. An International Driving Permit and passport are required for all rentals.

Skytrain

The most comfortable option for travelling in 'new' Bangkok (Silom, Sukhumvit and Siam Square) is the *rót fai fáa* (Skytrain), an elevated rail network that sails over the city's notorious traffic jams. The Skytrain has revolutionised travel in the modern parts of Bangkok. Trips that would have taken an hour now take 15 minutes. Another advantage of the Skytrain is that it offers a pleasant bird's-eye view of the city, allowing glimpses of greenery and historic architecture not visible at street level.

So far two lines have been built by the **Bangkok Mass Transit System Skytrain** (BTS; ☎ 0 2617 7300; www.bts.co.th) – Sukhumvit and Silom lines. There were ambitious plans to extend the system but these got tied up in political infighting between Bangkok's municipal government and the Thaksin administration. With the new government have come renewed pledges to undertake the extensions.

The Sukhumvit line terminates in the north of the city at the Mo Chit station, next to Chatuchak Park, and follows Th Phayathai south to Siam interchange station at Th Rama I and then swings east along Th Ploenchit and Th Sukhumvit to terminate at the On Nut station, near Soi 81. There are plans to extend this line 5km southeast to Soi 107, Th Sukhumvit.

The Silom line runs from the National Stadium station, near Siam Square, and soon after makes an abrupt turn to the southwest, continuing above Th Ratchadamri, down Th Silom to Th Narathiwat Ratchanakharin, then out Th Sathon until it terminates next to the foot of Saphan Taksin on the banks of Mae Nam Chao Phraya. There are plans to extend this line a further 4.5km over the river into Thonburi.

Trains run frequently from 6am to midnight along both the lines. Fares vary from 10B to 40B, depending on your destination. Ticket machines at each station accept 5B and 10B coins only, but change is available from the information booths. The staffed booths are also where you buy value-stored tickets. Brochures available at the information booths detail the various commuter and tourist passes.

Once through the ticket gates, follow the signs for the desired line and terminus. You can change between the two lines at the double-height Siam station, in front of Siam Square and Siam Center. Free maps of the system are available at all Skytrain station ticket booths. All trains are air-conditioned, often heavily so.

Subway

Bangkok's first subway line opened in 2004 and is operated by the **Metropolitan Rapid Transit Authority** (MRTA; ☎ 0 2624 5200; www.mrta.co.th). This calls the subway *rót fai tái đin* or 'Metro'.

The blue line connects the minor train station of Bang Seu, in the northern part of the city, with Chatuchak (with access to the Mo Chit Skytrain station), Thailand Cultural Centre, Sukhumvit (with access to Asoke Skytrain station), Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre, Lumpini Park, Silom (with access to Sala Daeng Skytrain station) and terminates at Hualamphong train station. There are plans to extend this line from Bang Seu across Mae Nam Chao Phraya into the Bang Yai district. Future extensions will

connect Hualamphong to Chinatown and Thonburi.

Trains operate 6am to midnight and cost 15B to 39B, depending on distance. To pass through the fare gates, buy a magnetised coin from the ticket window or automated dispenser. At the end of the journey, the coin is inserted into the gate slot for exiting.

One main advantage with the subway is that it has made the train stations (Hualamphong and Bang Sue) more accessible from eastern city points. If travelling south into Bangkok by rail, many passengers shave an hour off the trip into Hualamphong by disembarking at Bang Sue and catching the subway to their final in-town destination.

Taxi & Motorcycle Taxi

Tháeksii miiitôe (metered taxis) were introduced in Bangkok in 1993 and have signs on top reading 'Taxi Meter'. The set price is 35B at flag fall for the first 2km, then 4.50B for the next 10km, 5B for 13km to 20km, and 5.50B for any distance over 20km, but only when the taxi travels at 6km/h or more; at speeds under 6km/h, a surcharge of 1.25B per minute kicks in. Freeway tolls – 30B to 40B depending where you start – must be paid by the passenger. Fares to most places within central Bangkok cost 60B to 80B.

A 24-hour **phone-a-taxi** (☎ 1681) is available for an extra 20B. Taxis are usually plentiful except during peak commute hours, when bars are closing (1am to 2am), or when it is raining and your destination requires sitting in too much traffic.

Taxis that hang around tourist centres typically refuse to use the meter and will quote an exorbitantly high rate. You are more likely to find an honest driver if you walk out to a main thoroughfare.

At the mouth of the *soi*, motorcycle taxis camp out to deliver passengers the last few kilometres home; a *soi* trip is usually 10B. Motorcycle taxis can also be hired for longer journeys as a time-saving antidote to gridlock; fares in these instances are about the same as *túk-túk*, except during heavy traffic, when they may cost a bit more.

Riding on the back of a speeding motorcycle taxi is a close approximation to an extreme sport. Keep your legs tucked in – the drivers are used to carrying passengers with shorter legs than those of the average Westerner and they pass perilously close to other vehicles while weaving in and out of traffic. Women

wearing skirts should sit side-saddle and gather any extra cloth to avoid it catching in the wheel or drive chain.

Túk-Túk

Good luck getting a fair shake from a túk-túk if you're new in town. These drivers have a knack for smelling crisp bills and will take you and your wallet far beyond your desired destination. Beware of túk-túk drivers who offer to take you on a sightseeing tour for 10B or 20B – it's a touting scheme designed to pressure you into purchasing overpriced goods. Despite the pitfalls, túk-túk rides are still beloved by new arrivals. Surviving the hassles, the hairpin turns, and the suffocating exhaust are all part of a quintessential Bangkok experience that keeps the city from becoming an adult-sized Disneyland with no hard edges.

Although it seems unlikely, túk-túk do serve a very useful purpose besides hassling tourists. Locals use the three-wheelers when their destination is closer and cheaper than a metered-taxi flag fall or when gridlock requires a more nimble vehicle. Unfortunately the recent rise in petrol prices means that túk-túk quotes often start at 100B, sometimes even 200B, making it difficult to negotiate a fair price.

AROUND BANGKOK

If you're itching to get out of the capital city, but don't have a lot of time, consider a day trip to some of the neighbouring towns. At Bangkok's doorstep are all of Thailand's provincial charms – you don't have to go far to find ancient religious monuments, floating markets, architectural treasures and laid-back fishing villages.

NAKHON PATHOM

นครปฐม
pop 120,657

Nakhon Pathom is a typical provincial Thai city, with Phra Pathom Chedi as a visible link to Nakhon Pathom's claim as the country's oldest city. The town also proudly wears its first-born status within its name, which derives from the Pali 'Nagara Pathama' meaning 'First City'. At one time Nakhon Pathom functioned as the centre of the Dvaravati kingdom, a loose collection of Mon city states that flourished between the 6th and 11th centuries

AD in Mae Nam Chao Phraya valley. Some historians speculate that the area may have been inhabited before India's Asokan period (3rd century BC), as there is a theory that Buddhist missionaries from India visited Nakhon Pathom at that time.

Although the town is quite sleepy, it is an easy destination to see everyday Thai ways and practise your newly acquired language skills on a community genuinely appreciative of such efforts.

Sights

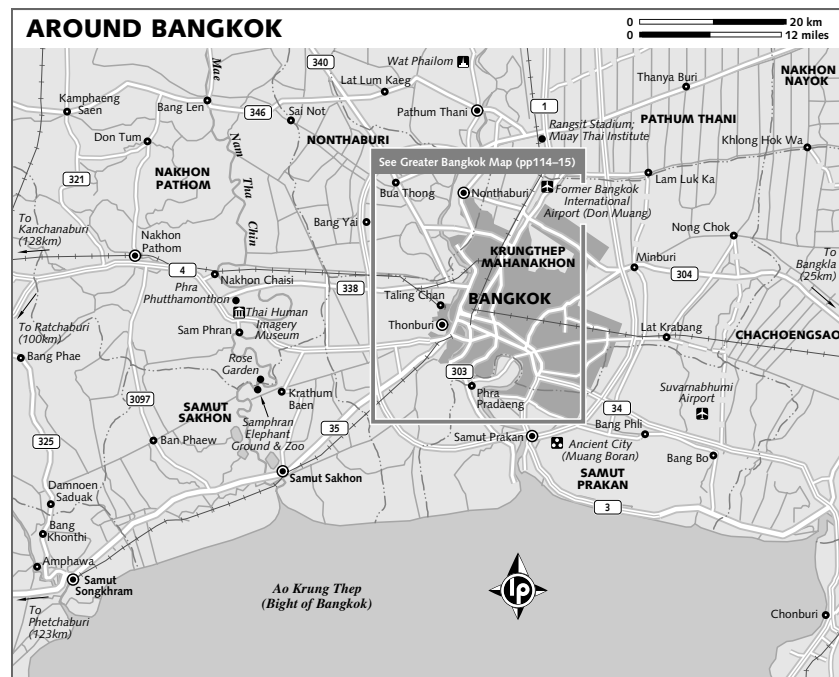
In the centre of town, **Phra Pathom Chedi**, rising to 127m, is the tallest Buddhist monument in the world. The original stupa, which is buried within the massive orange-glazed dome, was erected in the early 6th century by Theravada Buddhists of Dvaravati (possibly at the same time as Myanmar's famous Shwedagon stupa). But, in the early 11th century the Khmer king, Suryavarman I of Angkor, conquered the city and built a Brahman *prang* (Hindi/Khmer-style stupa) over the sanctuary. The Burmese of Bagan, under King Anawrahta, sacked the city in 1057 and the *prang* lay in ruins until Rama IV (King Mongkut) had it restored in 1860. The temple is best visited on weekends when local families come to make merit.

On the eastern side of the monument, in the *bòt*, is a Dvaravati-style Buddha seated in a European pose similar to the one in Wat Phra Meru in Ayuthaya. It may, in fact, have come from there.

Also of interest are the many examples of Chinese sculpture carved from a greenish stone that came to Thailand as ballast in the bottom of some 19th-century Chinese junks. Opposite the *bòt* is a **museum** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), which contains some interesting Dvaravati sculpture and lots of old junk. Within the chedi complex is **Lablæ Cave**, a manmade tunnel containing the shrine of several Buddha figures.

The wat surrounding the stupa enjoys the kingdom's highest temple rank, Rach-avoramahavihan; it's one of only six temples so honoured in Thailand. King Rama VI's ashes are interred in the base of the Sukhothai-era Phra Ruang Rochanarit, a large standing Buddha image in the wat's northern *wihān*.

Southeast of the city stands **Phra Phutthamonthon**, a Sukhothai-style standing Buddha designed by Corrado Feroci. At 15.8m, it is



reportedly the world's tallest, and it's surrounded by a 400-hectare landscaped park that contains sculptures representing the major stages in the Buddha's life (eg a 6m-high dharma wheel, carved from a single slab of granite). All Bangkok-Nakhon Pathom buses pass the access road to the park at Phra Phutthamonthon Sai 4; from there you can walk, hitch or flag a *sāwngthāew* into the park itself. From Nakhon Pathom you can also take a white-and-purple Salaya bus; the stop is on Th Tesā across from the post office.

Thai Human Imagery Museum (☎ 0 3433 2607; admission 250B; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-6pm Sat & Sun) contains an exhibition of lifelike resin sculptures. A group of Thai artists reportedly spent 10 years studying their subjects and creating the figures, which fall into four categories: famous Buddhist monks of Thailand, former kings of the Chakri dynasty, Thai lifestyles and chess playing. The museum is outside town at the Km 31 marker on Th Pinklao-Nakhon Chaisi (the highway to Bangkok). Any Nakhon Pathom-Bangkok or Salaya bus can drop you off here.

Eating

Nakhon Pathom has an excellent market along the road between the train station and Phra Pathom Chedi; its *khāo laam* (sticky rice and coconut steamed in a length of bamboo) is reputed to be the best in Thailand. There are many good, inexpensive food vendors and restaurants in this area.

Getting There & Away

Nakhon Pathom is 56km west of Bangkok. The city doesn't have a central bus station, but most transport arrives and departs from near the market and train station.

Air-con buses 83 and 997 leave from the Southern bus terminal (in Thonburi) for Nakhon Pathom (41B, one hour, frequent departures). To return to Bangkok, catch one of the idling buses on Th Phayaphan, a block from the train station. Buses to Damnoen Saduak floating market (bus 78, 30 minutes) leave from the same stop, departing every 30 minutes. You can also wave down Samut Sakhon-bound buses (bus 402, 30B, 45 minutes) at this stop.

Nakhon Pathom is on the spur rail line that runs from Thonburi's Bangkok Noi station to Kanchanaburi's Nam Tok station. Until recently, it was a minor commuter line, but because a portion of the line is part of the historic 'Death Railway', built by WWII prisoners of war during Japanese occupation, rates for foreigners have increased under a tourism-promotion scheme. Ordinary trains (3rd class) leave Thonburi (Bangkok Noi) for Nakhon Pathom at 7.40am and 1.45pm (100B, approximately 1¼ hours) en route to Kanchanaburi and Nam Tok. The return train leaves Nakhon Pathom at 8.55am and 4.20pm.

There are also more frequent (and affordable) trains from Bangkok's Hualamphong station (from 35B, two hours) throughout the day.

FLOATING MARKETS

ตลาดน้ำ

The photographs of Thailand's floating markets – wooden canoes laden with multicoloured fruits and vegetables, paddled by women wearing indigo-hued clothes and wide-brimmed straw hats – has become an iconic and alluring image for the kingdom. It is also a sentimental piece of history. In the past 20 years, Thailand has modernised, replacing canals with roads, and boats with motorcycles and cars. The floating markets, which were once lively trading posts for produce farmers and local housewives, have crawled ashore, an evolutionary step shared with humans.

The most heavily promoted floating market is **Damnoen Saduak** (☎ 7am-4pm Sat & Sun), little more than a souvenir market catering to tourists. But it is one of the most accessible markets from Bangkok and is ideal for those who haven't yet filled their suitcases with touristy gifts. Damnoen Saduak is 104km southwest of Bangkok between Nakhon Pathom and Samut Songkhram. Air-con buses 78 and 996 go direct from the Southern bus terminal in Thonburi to Damnoen Saduak (82B, two hours, every 40 minutes from 6am to 9pm). Most buses will drop tourists off directly at the piers that line Th Sukhaphiban 1, which is the land route to the floating market area. The going rate for boat hire is about 300B per person per hour. A yellow sawngtháew (5B) does a frequent

loop between the floating market and the bus stop in town.

A closer descendant of the original floating markets, **Taling Chan** (☎ 7am-4pm Sat & Sun) offers less of a sales pitch than Damnoen Saduak. On the access road to Khlong Bangkok Noi, Taling Chan looks like any other fresh market busy with produce vendors from nearby farms. But the twist emerges at the canal where several floating docks serve as informal dining rooms, and the kitchens are dugout canoes tethered to the docks. Many local Thai families come to feast on grilled shrimp, noodles and river fish all produced aboard a bobbing boat. Taling Chan is in Thonburi and can be reached from Bangkok's Th Ratchadamnoen Klang or Th Ratchaprasong via air-con bus 79 (16B, 25 minutes). Long-tail boats from any Bangkok pier can also be hired for a trip to Taling Chan and the nearby Khlong Chak Phra.

Another riverside market, atmospheric **Talaat Ban Mai** (☎ 7am-6pm Sat & Sun) originated 100 years ago as a bustling trading centre in Chachoengsao Province. Today the old-fashioned wooden shophouses teetering on the river bank are mainly a weekend attraction for local Thais prowling for good eats. Many of the businesses are owned by the second and third generation of ethnic Teochew Chinese who had originally migrated to Thailand's central plains in search of work. The story of these immigrants is a classic success tale: many arrived with only a suitcase and a few coins in their pocket, but laboured on the farms and factories with enough diligence to secure a merchant future for their children and a university education for their grandchildren. The market's Chinese heritage is continued in the foods on offer, such as *kitay chai* (Chinese dumplings stuffed with green vegetables) and *galorchi* (sweet tapioca patties deep fried and patted in sugar).

The market can be reached by túk-túk from Chachoengsao bus or train station. A more scenic venture is via a **boat tour** (☎ 0 3851 4333; adult 100B; hourly from 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) along Mae Nam Bang Pakong, which begins from Wat Sothon Waram Worawihan in Chachoengsao town. From November to February, this brackish river is full of striped catfish that entice hungry dolphins from the Gulf of Thailand. Chachoengsao is 80km east of Bangkok and accessible by train from Hualamphong station (15B to 40B, two hours, hourly departures). Buses from Bangkok's Ekamai bus sta-

tion leave for Chachoengsao (90B, 1½ hours, frequent departures).

SAMUT SAKHON

สมุทรสาคร

pop 68,398

Samut Sakhon is popularly known as Mahachai because it straddles the confluence of Mae Nam Tha Chin and Khlong Mahachai. Just a few kilometres from the Gulf of Thailand, this busy port features a lively market area and a pleasant breezy park around the crumbling walls of **Wichian Chodok Fort** (Hwy 35). A few rusty cannons pointing towards the river testify to the fort's original purpose of guarding the mouth of Mae Nam Tha Chin from foreign invaders. Before the arrival of European traders in the 17th century, the town was known as Tha Jin (Chinese pier) because of the large number of Chinese junks that called here.

A few kilometres west of Samut Sakhon, along Hwy 35, is the Ayuthaya-period **Wat Yai Chom Prasat**, which is known for the finely carved wooden shophouses on its *bôt*. You can easily identify the wat by the tall Buddha figure

standing at the front. To get here from Samut Sakhon, take an orange westbound bus (15B) heading towards Samut Songkhram from the bus station; the wat is only a 10-minute ride from the edge of town.

Getting There & Away

Samut Sakhon is located 28km southwest of Bangkok.

Air-con bus 976 (79B, 1½ hours) from the Southern bus terminal in Thonburi leaves for Samut Sakhon throughout the day. Buses also frequently run between Samut Sakhon and Samut Songkhram (ordinary/air-con 20/27B, one hour).

Samut Sakhon is nearly midway along the 3rd-class Mahachai Shortline train route that runs between Thonburi's Wong Wian Yai station (see boxed text, below). The fare costs 10B and there are roughly hourly departures and returns from 5.30am to 7pm.

SAMUT SONGKHRAM

สมุทรสงคราม

pop 34,949

MAHACHAI SHORTLINE

Sometimes it is all about the journey, rather than the destination. This is certainly the case for taking the Mahachai Shortline to the string of gulf-side towns southwest of Bangkok. The adventure begins when you take a stab into Thonburi looking for the **Wong Wian Yai train station** (Map pp116-17; Th Taksin; bus 37). Just past the traffic circle is a fairly ordinary food market, which camouflages the unceremonious end of this commuter line.

Only 15 minutes out of the station and the city density yields to palm trees, small rice fields and marshes filled with giant elephant ears and canna lilies. There's lots of peaking into homes and shops where locals go to pick up odds and ends or a shot of rice whisky for the morning commute.

The wilderness and backwater farms evaporate quickly as you enter Samut Sakhon (Mahachai). This is the end of the first segment, so work your way along the road that runs parallel to the train tracks through a dense market of fishermen's boots and trays of tentacled seafood to the harbour pier. The harbour is clogged with water hyacinth, which forms floating islands for fish-hunting cranes and bug-chasing birds. Just beyond are the big wooden fishing boats, pregnant with the day's catch and draped like a veiled widow with fishing nets. Boarding the ferry, you have to jockey for space with the motorcycles, which are driven by school teachers and errand-running housewives.

Once on the other side, take a right at the first intersection, follow it all the way through the temple and past the drying fish racks to the train tracks and turn right to reach the station. This is Ban Laem, from where trains continue on to Samut Songkhram (Mae Klong).

Ban Laem is a sleepy little station that keeps up a convincing charade that no one has ever come or gone from here. Along the route to Samut Songkhram, the wilderness is so dense that it seems the surrounding greenery might gobble up the train tracks, so that the middle of nowhere stays that way. You'll be surprised once you reach the bustling city of Samut Songkhram by this back-door entrance.

Commonly known as Mae Klong, this provincial capital lies along a sharp bend in Mae Nam Mae Klong and just a few kilometres from the Gulf of Thailand. Due to the flat topography and abundant water sources, the area surrounding the city is well suited to the steady irrigation needed to grow guavas, lychees and grapes. Along the highway from Thonburi, visitors will pass a string of artificial sea lakes used in the production of salt. A profusion of coconut palms makes the area look unusually lush, considering its proximity to Bangkok.

Samut Songkhram is a fairly modern city with a large market area between the train and bus stations. The sizeable **Wat Phet Samut Worawihan**, in the centre of town near the train station and river, contains a renowned Buddha image called Luang Phaw Wat Ban Laem.

At the mouth of Mae Nam Mae Klong, not far from town, is the province's most famous tourist attraction, a bank of fossilised shells known as **Don Hoi Lot**. The type of shells embedded in the bank come from *hăwy lăwt* (clams with a tube-like shell). The shell bank is best seen late in the dry season (typically April and May) when the river has receded to its lowest level. To get to Don Hoi Lot you can hop on a blue *săwngthăew* (15B, 15 minutes) in front of Somdet Phra Phuttalertla Hospital at the intersection of Th Prasitwatthana and Th Thamnimit. Or you can charter a boat from Tha Talat Mae Klong, a scenic journey that takes about 45 minutes.

Wat Satthatham, 500m along the road to Don Hoi Lot, is notable for its *bôt* constructed of golden teak and decorated with 60 million baht worth of mother-of-pearl inlay. The inlay covers the temple's interior and depicts scenes from *jataka* in murals above the windows and the *Ramakian* below.

King Buddhalertla Naphalai Memorial Park (museum admission 20B; ☎ park 9am-6pm, museum 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) is dedicated to King Rama II, who was a native of Amphoe Amphawa. The museum is housed in traditional central-Thai houses set over two hectares, and contains a library of rare Thai books, antiques from early-19th-century Siam and an exhibition of dolls depicting four of Rama II's theatrical works (*Inao*, *Mani Phichai*, a version of the *Ramakian* and *Sang Thong*). Behind the houses is a lush botanic garden and beyond that, a drama school. To get to the park take

an Amphawa-bound blue bus (12B) to Talat Nam Amphawa, then walk over the bridge and follow the road that goes through the gardens of Wat Amphawan Chetiayaram.

Getting There & Away

Samut Songkhram is Thailand's smallest province and is 74km southwest of Bangkok. Buses from Bangkok's Southern bus terminal to Damnoen Saduak also stop in Samut Songkhram (68B, 1½ hours, frequent) near the train station and down the street from the Siam Commercial Bank. There are also daily buses to Samut Sakhon (ordinary/air-con 20/27B, one hour, frequent). Taxis and local buses park at the intersection of Th Ratchayat Raksa and Th Prasitphatthana.

Samut Songkhram is the southernmost terminus of the Mahachai Shortline. There are four departures to Samut Songkhram (10B, one hour, approximately 7.30am 10.10am, 1.30pm, 4.40pm) and four return trips (6.20am, 9am, 11.30am, 3.30pm). See the boxed text (p189) for more information. The train station is located on Th Kasem Sukhum where it terminates at Th Prasitphatthana, near the river.

SAMUT PRAKAN

สมุทรปราการ
pop 378,694

At the mouth of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, where it empties into the Gulf of Thailand, Samut Prakan (sometimes referred to as Meuang Pak Nam) smells fishier than the ocean. Most residents' lives revolve around fishing; motorcycle taxi drivers mend fishing nets while waiting for a fare or vendors shoo flies from crates of iced ocean dwellers.

The city's name means Ocean Wall, a reference to **Phra Chula Jawm Klao Fort**, built around 1893, 7km south of the provincial hall.

Erawan Museum

พิพิธภัณฑ์เอราวัณ

Both an architectural and religious attraction, the **Erawan Museum** (☎ 0 2371 3135; www.erawan-museum.com; Soi 119 Th Sukhumvit; adult/child 150/50B; ☎ 8am-3pm) is a five-storey-high sculpture of Erawan, Indra's three-headed elephant mount from Hindu mythology, built by Khun Lek Viriyapant, the same benefactor and cultural preserver who built the Ancient City (below). The sculpture comprises three levels symbolic

of the underworld, the earth, and Mt Sumeru and the heavens. Inside the building is a collection of sacred antiques that attract many merit makers.

The museum is 8km from Bangkok's Eka-mai bus station and any Samut Prakan-bound bus can drop you off; just tell the driver your destination (Chang Sam Sian).

Ancient City

เมืองโบราณ

Billed as the largest open-air museum in the world, **Muang Boran** (☎ 0 2323 9253; www

.ancientcity.com; adult/child 300/200B; ☎ 8am-5pm) covers more than 80 hectares of peaceful countryside and is littered with 109 scaled-down facsimiles of many of the kingdom's most famous monuments. The grounds have been shaped to replicate Thailand's general geographical outline, with the monuments placed accordingly.

Visions of Las Vegas and its corny replicas of world treasures may spring to mind, but the Ancient City is architecturally sophisticated – a preservation site for classical buildings and art forms. It's also a good place for undis-

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