

# Bangkok mellows out

## World's most visited city adds romantic, wholesome attractions

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO POSTMEDIA AUGUST 23, 2014

Bangkok is becoming the world's on-trend vacation wonderland. The charismatic capital of Thailand has been a frenetic crossroads of Asia for decades and new lifestyle features have made it the most visited city in the world in recent years. In spite of civil unrest during the past few years, according to both the World Tourism Organization and Forbes magazine, Bangkok welcomes approximately 15 million travellers annually, edging out London and Paris.

It's easy to see why. Even in this gentle Buddhist society, the classic attractions are earthy and lusty: A sultry climate, thrilling Thai cuisine, an epic nightlife and the notorious painted women and naughty "ladyboys" of the world's oldest profession.

But there is a kinder, gentler vibe. Bangkok always will have sex appeal, but with a recent surge in luxury hotels and condos, it is evolving into a sophisticated Miami-style playground for vacationers from Asia, Australia, Europe and North America. That includes more than 220,000 visitors a year from Canada, most repeaters.

And why not? Food, hotels, spa treatments and local shopping cost 60 to 70 per cent of their equivalents in Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver. Taxis are downright cheap and for less than \$1 you can beat the traffic on scooter cabs, three-wheeled tuk-tuks or the shiny, efficient BTS Skytrain. On the upscale trend, the new Bangkok also boasts of TV celebrity chefs, a thriving contemporary art scene and wine tastings of luscious reds and perky whites from southern regions.

Bruce Saunders, who hails from Ottawa, visited Thailand a decade ago and fell in love with the country.

Then he fell for Saijai "Da" Sirisakolwan and they have been exploring Bangkok ever since. This trip was a celebration, so they showed me and my pal a mellow, romantic and even wholesome side of the city, different from the honky-tonk bars and backpacker colonies that defined the city decades ago.

Da started our journey at Pak Khlong Talat, the 24-hour flower market where an armload of orchids, jasmine or lotus blossoms costs less than \$3. Red roses are favoured by women, even in faroff Thailand, but if you wish to show your guy love and respect, a garland of aromatic jasmine is the thing. Suitably bedecked, we moved on.

**THE RIVER** The Chao Praya River is Bangkok's most prominent thoroughfare for all things touristic and commercial. It has been cleaned up considerably in the past few years, but it always will be dark from the soil that flows from the rivers in the northern highlands.

At Thachang Pier near the Grand Palace, we hailed a gondola-like motorboat whose captain, Tarn Bunnoklub, is privy to at least one marriage proposal a month.

For about \$30 an hour, we meandered along the klongs (canals) that branch off the Chao Praya and glimpsed many slices of life from these narrow, residential "water streets." The houses ranged from rickety wooden shanties built on stilts up to elaborate Thai mansions whose carved teak roofs peeked over dense groves of mango and palm trees.

We also passed Buddhist temples along the klongs, where orange-robed monks feed fish that have been rescued from markets, symbolic gestures by the faithful to ensure good health and a long life. We joined in, bought a loaf of bread for 10 cents and fed the fish, too. It was a small, simple gesture of nurturing life in a huge, whirling Asian city.

THE NIGHT Bangkok looks beautiful after dark, when the muddy Chao Praya sparkles with the lights of barges and the constant flow of vehicles on the roads is a rainbow of colours.

Once notorious for its seductive and sensual side, the city now gets downright wholesome at Asiatique, The Riverfront, a stylish bazaar with shops and restaurants in a converted shipyard. Asiatique is a popular after-work place for lovers and friends to stroll along the breezy promenade, stopping for mango smoothies, coconut ice cream and lychee cocktails.

Asiatique's centrepiece is a splendid white Ferris wheel that soars so high you'll be hugging your partner like mad. If you dare to look out, the views are splendid. Asiatique also is the perfect place for gifts of inexpensive Thai silks, carved Buddhas and fun fashions.

Perhaps Bangkok's most dramatic panorama is from the astonishing Has ooding caused hardship for you this summer? SkyBar - the unique nightclub where Bradley Cooper

The Canadian Red Cross is here to help. and pals frolicked in the movie The Hangover Part II. The pinnacle of We are working in ood-aected communities across modern nightlife in Bangkok, Sky

Saskatchewan. To nd out how we can help meet basic Bar rocks a quarter-kilometre high, jutting out from the domed needs as you recover, call us at: 1-888-953-3463. roof of the Lebua Hotel.

THE FOOD Thai cuisine is complex and mysterious, sweet and salty and as delicate as silk, yet as intense as the sun. Like Bangkok.

Classics include papaya and pomelo salads, satay skewers, pad Thai, curries with rice noodles and spicy tom-yum soup of giant shrimp, ginger, lemon grass, basil, coriander and chilies.

Among the special dishes are soft-shell crab, tiger cakes, fish cakes, sea bass and pork belly.

The international spotlight is on two Michelin-starred chefs. Australian David Thompson creates the finest traditional Thai cuisine at Nahm, the chic restaurant in the Hotel Metropolitan by COMO, Bangkok. And Henrik Yde-Andersen from Denmark blends East and West at Sra Bua by Kiin Kiin at the luxurious Siam Kempinski Hotel Bangkok. This is a formal feast with wine pairings, molecular preps and delicacies such as scented lotus root, five-spiced pork, lobster tempura, foie gras and braised beef.

The Mandarin Oriental Hotel, an 1876 landmark on the banks of the Chao Praya, represents history, prestige and romance. The moonlit Riverside Terrace lays on an extravagant buffet of Thai seafood and crackling barbecued duck and lamb. And a must-see is the Mandarin Oriental's Author's Lounge, a sumptuous white Colonial tea room named for its one-time literary habitués including Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and Noel Coward. Bangkok is famous for its street food and there's a brilliant new shortcut to the best-of Thai. The newest of the enormous indoor shopping malls, the \$600-million Central Embassy, opened in May with astounding food halls dishing out an irresistible array of Thai food.

## IF YOU GO

Special offers for North America at [www.bookthailandnow.com](http://www.bookthailandnow.com) and [www.honeymooning-inthailand.com](http://www.honeymooning-inthailand.com). More information, including daily updates on Bangkok's civil-political situation, at [na.tourismthailand.org](http://na.tourismthailand.org) or 416-614-2625.

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