

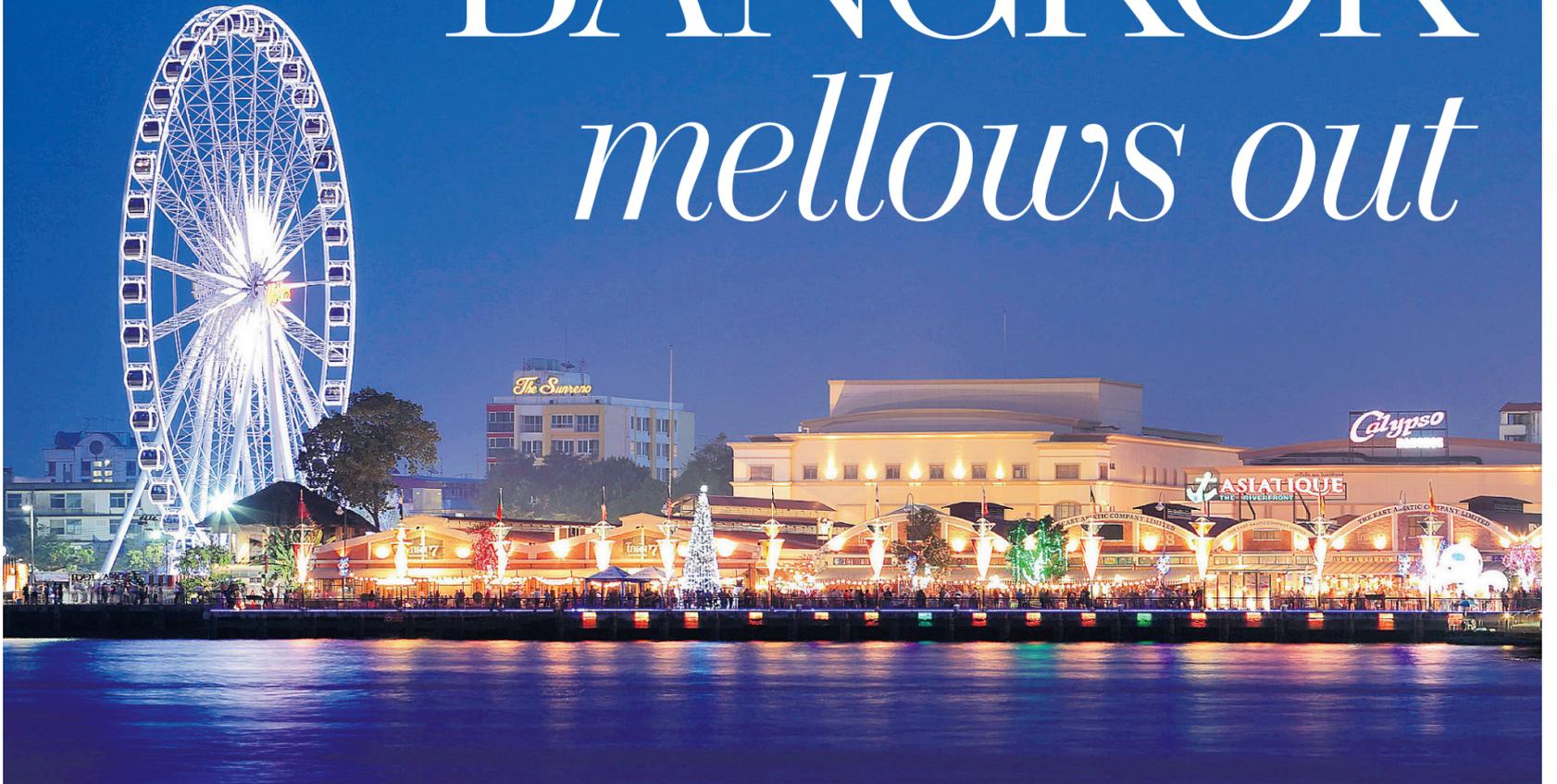
Metropolitan is an oasis of cool in Thailand. Page h7

TRAVEL



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BANGKOK *mellows out*



TOURISM AUTHORITY OF THAILAND

Symbolic of a romantic, wholesome new side of Bangkok, Asiatique is a stylish riverfront bazaar with shops and restaurants in a converted shipyard.

ROCHELLE LASH
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

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

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 or-



LEBUENA HOTELS AND RESORTS

Bangkok looks beautiful after dark. The pinnacle of modern nightlife in the city is Sky Bar, which rocks a quarter-kilometre high, jutting out from the domed roof of the Lebuena Hotel.

chids, jasmine or lotus blossoms costs less than \$3. Red roses are favoured by women, even in far-off 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 Bun-nooklub, 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.

IF YOU GO:

Special offers for North America at www.bookthailandnow.com and www.honeymooning-in-thailand.com. More information, including daily updates on Bangkok's civil-political situation, at na.tourismthailand.org or 416-614-2625.

Metropolitan by COMO, Bangkok: www.comohotels.com/metropolitanbangkok

Mandarin Oriental Bangkok: www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok

Sra Bua by Kiin Kiin at Siam Kempinski Hotel Bangkok: www.kempinski.com/bangkok

Khao San Road is now a tourist trap, Page H3



COMO HOTELS & RESORTS

Michelin-starred chef David Thompson has brought Thai cuisine to new heights at Nahm in the Metropolitan by COMO Hotel, Bangkok.

Please see BANGKOK, Page H2



MANDARIN ORIENTAL BANGKOK

The historic landmark hotel, Mandarin Oriental Bangkok, offers dining and entertainment on the banks of the Chao Praya River, the city's main thoroughfare.

BANGKOK Just as exotic, intense and mysterious as Thai food

CONTINUED FROM H1

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 SkyBar — the unique nightclub where Bradley Cooper and pals frolicked in the movie *The Hangover Part II*. The pinnacle of modern nightlife in Bangkok, Sky Bar rocks a quarter-kilometre high, jutting out from the domed 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.

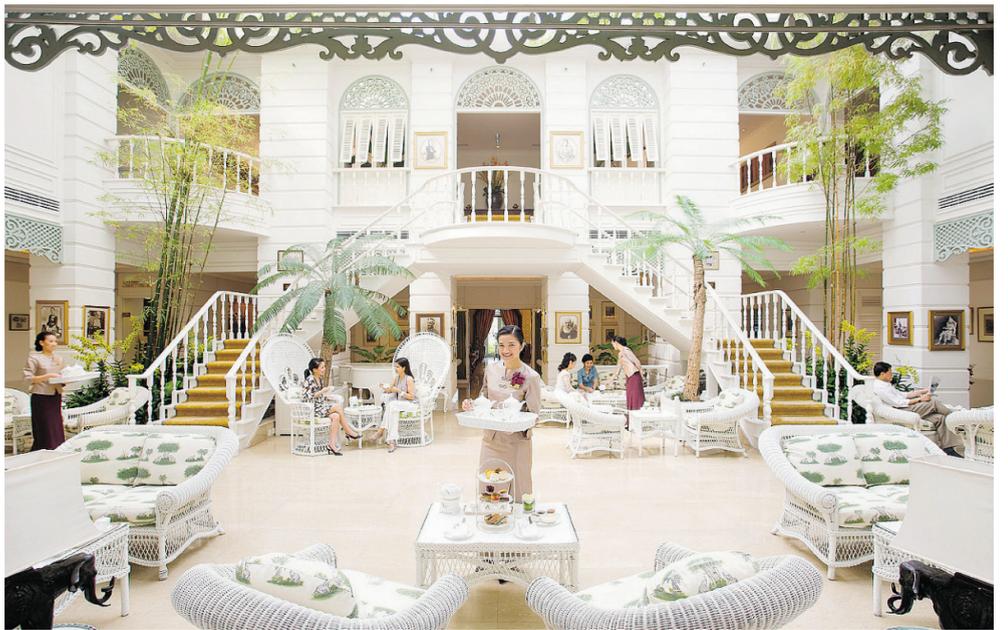
Classics include papaya and pomelo salads, satay skewers, pad Thai, curries with rice noodles and spicy tom-yum soup of giant shrimp, ginger, lemon grass, basil, coriander and chilies. Among the special dishes are soft-shell crab, tiger cakes, fish cakes, sea bass and pork belly.

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 (which is the subject of our *Checking In* column today). 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 foods.



MANDARIN ORIENTAL BANGKOK

The Authors' Lounge at the landmark hotel, Mandarin Oriental Bangkok, is named for its one-time habitués including Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and Noel Coward.



TOURISM AUTHORITY OF THAILAND

Vivid blossoms at Pak Khlong Talat, the 24-hour flower market where an armload of orchids, jasmine or lotus blossoms costs less than \$3.



P. NANNARAT

The writer braves a scooter to skirt through Bangkok's notoriously confusing traffic.



AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Get a data plan before you go on holiday, get a local SIM card or rely on free Wi-Fi.

Top 5 common mistakes to avoid when travelling

MARK STACHIEW
POSTMEDIA NEWS

Some travel errors are embarrassing, but others can cost you a lot of money or even be harmful to your health.

Here is some advice on things to avoid the next time you go. You want to make your holiday memorable, but not because it was a disaster:

1. Going bankrupt from roaming charges

A lot of us have become reliant on our cellphones when we travel, but beware of the

high cost of accessing networks.

You could return to find a five-digit bill waiting for you.

Either get a data plan before you go, get a local SIM card for your phone or put your device into airplane mode and rely on free Wi-Fi when you can find it.

2. Not reading the fine print on cancellations

Life sometimes gets into the way of the best-laid travel plans which means you might have to cancel a flight or hotel reservation.

You can usually cancel a hotel booking with enough notice, but sometimes you have to pay in advance for that great rate, which means you won't get your money back.

As for airline tickets, it's rare that you can get a refund, so think about getting cancellation insurance. Always read the fine print.

3. Trying to do too much

If you tried to do every activity and visit every attraction, you could end up exhausting yourself and your family.

Be realistic about how

many things you can do during the time you are away. Remember, holidays are about relaxing, not checking off items on a to-do list.

4. Booking your hotel too far away

You might have found a great deal on a hotel in New York only to discover that it will take a 60-minute commuter train ride to get into the action in Manhattan.

Pay attention to where your hotel is and take into account how far away it is from the places you want to visit.

Your holiday time is precious. Don't waste it commuting in another city.

5. Packing too much

We all tend to overpack when we travel, but some of us go overboard. If you're checking in two bags when you fly, chances are you are bringing too much stuff.

Pare down your list and save room for the souvenirs you want to bring home.

If you find you are missing something that you should have packed, chances are you can buy a replacement.