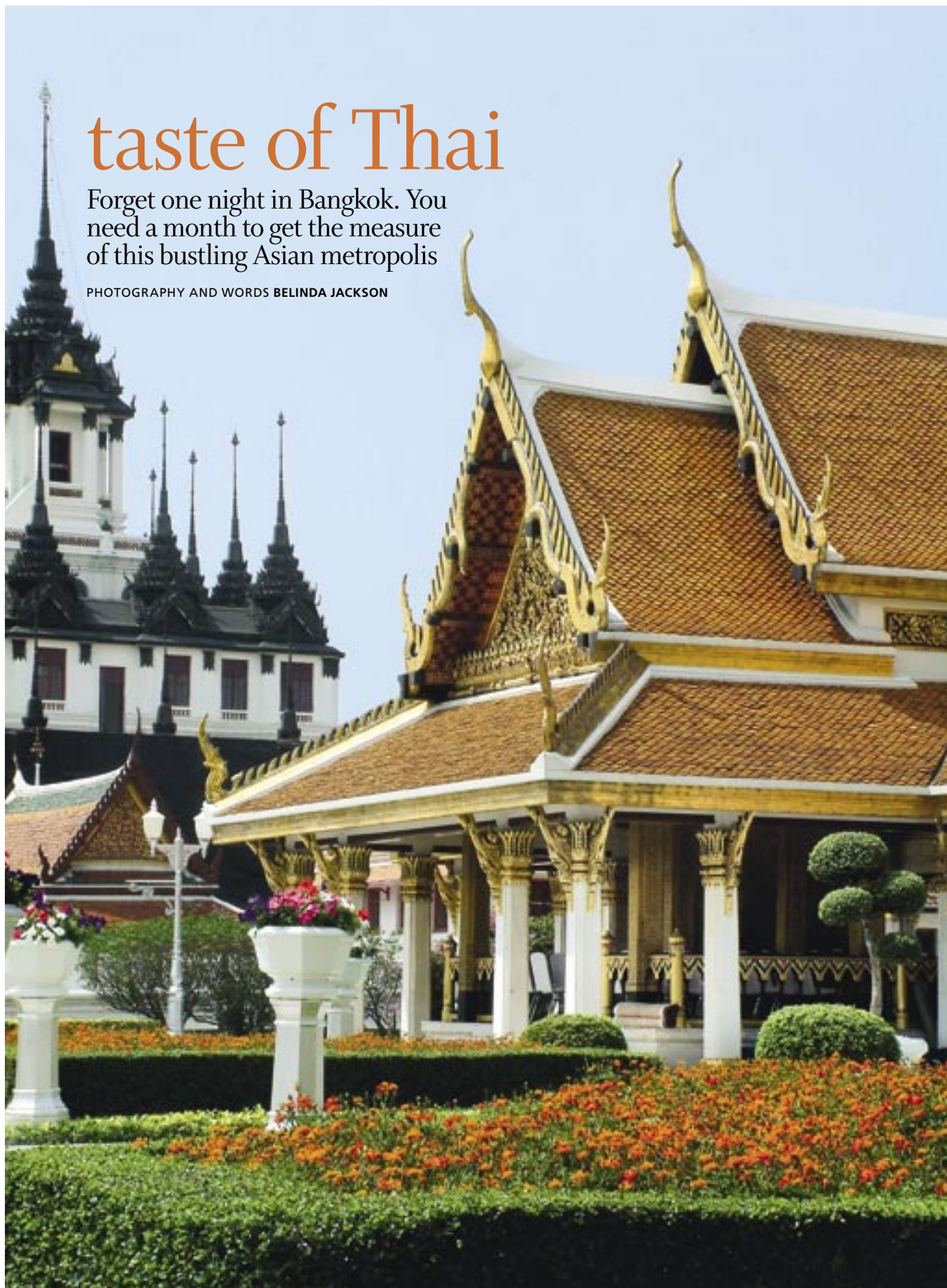


taste of Thai

Forget one night in Bangkok. You need a month to get the measure of this bustling Asian metropolis

PHOTOGRAPHY AND WORDS **BELINDA JACKSON**





INSIDE INFO

MONEY MATTERS A\$1 = about 30 baht. Iced coffee on the street costs about 30 cents and a 500ml bottle of water about 30 cents.

ESSENTIAL BUY Silk, of course. It's everywhere, from the modestly priced offerings at all the markets right up to the doyen of silk traders, Jim Thompson (www.jimthompson.com) – the silks are spectacular, and priced accordingly. But if you don't have a ticket to Thailand, visit the new Melbourne store, (03) 9510 5210.

DON'T LEAVE WITHOUT... having a drink at the Moon Bar. Head to the Banyan Tree hotel and take the lift to the flat-topped roof – 61 floors up, you can look out over the city, or use the bar's telescope to spot the stars, cocktail in hand. Open from 5pm to midnight, it's the most romantic spot in the city. Book a table beforehand, (0011) 66 2 679 1200, www.banyantree.com.

BEST WAY TO INDULGE Any treatment – at the Art & Science Medical Spa, so you can experience their wild herb-infused, detoxifying lemon grass and turmeric saunas. Call (0011) 66 2 253 1010 or visit www.smedspa.com.

TRAVEL FACTS For more information, call the Tourism Authority of Thailand, (02) 9247 7549 or visit www.thailand.net.au.

Bangkok by day is full of earnest intentions and industrious activity. The keen visitor to Thailand's capital carries a check list. Massage and a quick spin around the colossal reclining gold Buddha (around 46 metres long) at Wat Po temple: check. Snapshot of bustling monks on errands: check. Stop to see the hawkers selling sweet strawberries or tart salads along the roadside: check. Dart across city in little motorbike-drawn tuktuks that jostle for space with sleek Mercedes and fume-belching old minibuses: check. Shop: check, check and, oh, check again.

Shopping isn't so much an art form as a bodily function in Bangkok. The options run from the strip of sparkling super-malls with skating rinks and high-rise car dealerships (how do they get them up there?) to the immersion in Thai culture that is the street market. Night market, day market, weekend market – the rollcall includes Suan Lum night market; the flower markets near Wat Po; Chatuchak, the weekend must-see; or Patpong for the bad faux-designer handbags, sunglasses and the "My mum went to Bangkok and all I got was this lousy T-shirt" T-shirts.

But by night, to quote the song *One Night In Bangkok*, written by ABBA's Björn and Benny, Bangkok really is your oyster – the playground of South-East Asia. Come sundown, the city steps out of its workday clothes and sensible walking shoes, slaps on some glittery eyeshadow and a pair of impossibly high heels and prances out into the night, handbag swinging.

Bangkok may be better known for the bawdy go-go bars of Patpong and the enthusiastic gay nightclub

THIS PAGE (Left) The giant gold Buddha at Wat Po. (Right) Guides wait under parasols at the Jim Thompson museum. **OPPOSITE PAGE** (Left) A father and daughter pray at an altar in Chinatown. (Right) The daily vegetable markets near Wat Po.

strip, Soi Cowboy, but the noughties has seen the rise and rise of sleek lounge bars and restaurants, perched on the uppermost floors of the city's many skyscrapers. While the traffic still swarms below, they offer a welcome retreat with the most stunning views in town, from the beautiful night scenes glimpsed at Sirocco, the flowing Chao Phraya river below the rooftop beer garden at River City mall, or the open-air Moon Bar, 61 dizzying floors above street level. Here, we perch at the cocktail bar up in the clouds, and we're reminded of the name the Thais call their capital city, Krung Thep, or 'City of Angels'.

Bangkok's full name is actually the longest city name in the world. It roughly translates as the "City of Angels, the great city, the residence of the Emerald Buddha, the impregnable city (of Ayuthaya) of God Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the happy city, abounding in an enormous royal palace that resembles the heavenly abode where the reincarnated god reigns, a city given by Indra and built by Vishnukarn". Phew!

It's the first thing schoolkids learn to recite, and takes a good minute to roll off the tongue. After a few pandanus-infused cocktails, I guarantee you, it's virtually impossible.

The Thai people, says my guide Poom, are intensely superstitious. Temples abound in Bangkok, numbering around 400. One is where you pray for children, >

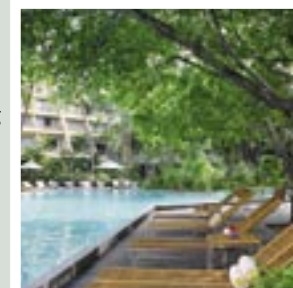
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HOT HOTELS

BUDGET Ibrik Resort Just three bedrooms make up the tiny hotel on the Chao Phraya river. The rooms are a calm, cool white with a hint of local colour from silk cushions and throws. The river hotel also has a sister of the same size in the city. From A\$110/double, call (0011) 66 2 848 9220 or visit www.ibrikresort.com.

MID-RANGE Swissôtel Nai Lert Park Set on three hectares of rainforest, the appeal of this hotel (right) lies outside not within. Little bridges curl over the lagoons and pathways meander among tropical flowers. The hotel has 338 rooms, each with a balcony over the gardens. From A\$180/double, call (0011) 66 2 253 0123, 1800 121 043 or visit www.nailertpark.swissotel.com.

BLOW THE BUDGET The Metropolitan The 171-room hotel, near Lumpini Park (think night markets!), is celestial and whiter than a dentist's dream. Designer hotelier Christina Ong taps into her Asian background with dark timbers, high white ceilings and fabulously textured carpets, rugs and bed linen to create a sister hotel to London's Metropolitan. From A\$310/double, call Leading Hotels of the World, 1800 222 033, (02) 9377 8444 or visit http://metropolitan.como.bz.





CITY SECRETS

BEST SHOPPING STRIP Rama 1 Road is the strip for the shopping malls. The newest, Siam Paragon in Ploenchit, is wall to wall with lush shops including the budget fashion label Zara, and Jimmy Choo for shoes. Stationery freaks will drool over the leather-bound notebooks in the main department store.

BEST MARKET Chatuchak market, held every weekend, is huge (9000 stalls!), so grab a map. It's divided up into sections that specialise in everything from pedigree lapdogs to kitchen utensils. You'll find well-priced silks from Thailand and its neighbours, door fittings in European and Asian styles, and cushions galore. Anything you see at other markets will be cheaper here, but haggling is still the way to go.

BEST HOMEWARES STORE Mae Fah Luang Foundation is an interiors store under the patronage of HRH the Princess Mother. Near the Suan Lum night market, the shop sells handicrafts made by ethnic minority groups from northern Thai villages. Profits go back to the region, providing an alternative to income by prostitution and opium manufacturing. The catalogue includes hand-woven carpets, textiles and baskets in the distinctive designs of Thailand's northern tribes. Call (0011) 66 2 658 0424 or visit www.doitung.org.

< another is for the victims of car accidents, a third for love, and so on. For a few baht, a group of young women, who are called wish dancers, will translate your thanks to the gods into song, swaying while they sing.

Thais are optimistic, too. In Thailand, says Poom, if you step in dog poo, it's lucky because it doesn't happen every day. I think she might be teasing me because she's got this funny little smile on her face. But then, she always has a funny little smile on her face. What's more, she continues in my education of all things Thai, her country people are obsessed with food. If they're not planning their next meal, they're talking about the one they've just finished. "Yes, we can eat," says this mistress of understatement, herself a prodigious eater.

Thanks to Poom, treats are constantly finding their way into my hands. A clear plastic bag filled with iced coffee, made thick, hot and sweet with condensed milk and poured over ice cubes. A piece of spiced fish in a parcel of banana leaves. A salad of crispy fish skin, fried garlic and bean sprouts. Bags of sour green mango served with a skewer and a chilli and salt dipping mix, which sets the tongue curling and the fillings squealing.

"Hot, sweet, sour, salty," she parrots, pointing to the condiments dish in front of us at yet another restaurant. "Chilli, sugar, vinegar, fish sauce." I spoon just a modest helping of each onto my noodle soup, leaving Poom to up-end the containers for an eye-popping amount of chilli and sugar. She's got a hot sweet tooth, it appears.

THIS PAGE (Left) Chatuchak's covered weekend market. (Right) Tuktuks on a collision course. **OPPOSITE PAGE** (Left) Sculptures of Thai girls in traditional poses. (Right) The ornate portals and roofs of Wat Po.

The streets are awash with food vendors, with tiny food carts stationed everywhere, even in the car parks of the big restaurants, just in case patrons feel peckish on the journey home. When the bars close at midnight or 1am, foreigners head to their hotels to continue drinking, while Thais, according to Poom, go out to eat... again.

And why not? The food is fantastic. The fact that Thai restaurants are surely the largest growing industry in Australia hasn't escaped Bangkok's notice, either. The city has done a great job capitalising on our love of anything involving lemon grass and coconut – from curries to cocktails, there are innumerable ways to enjoy the flavours that define a nation.

We treat ourselves to a cocktail at the urbane Met Bar, ordering the *tomyumtini* – a gin martini infused with lemon grass, lime leaves and chilli that kicks like a mule. The next day, I shop for fabrics in a lemon grass-scented haze emanating from numerous burners, followed by a delightful herb-infused sauna at the rather clinically named Art & Science Medical Spa. The steam room is scented with wild lemon grass and turmeric, said to detox and purify the skin and the soul. Bonus points for not coming out smelling like a green curry.

Gently baked, we wander out through the foyer to see a seriously famous Thai starlet swish in with her escort for some R&R. She is tall, slender and absolutely drop-dead beautiful. Maybe this treatment might work after all... ■

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DINING OUT

STREET EAT Grab a spicy green mango salad (*yam ma muang*) from any of the street vendors on the side of the road. Chopped green mango, lemon grass, bean shoots, peanuts and fresh green herbs dressed with the four staples of Thai cookery: hot (chilli), sweet (sugar), sour (rice vinegar) and salty (fish sauce). Attune your tastebuds and enjoy!

MID-RANGE Ban Khun Mae (Mother's House) – experience traditional Thai, just like someone else's mum used to make. The view from the small, rustic timber house includes the rushing SkyTrain and Siam Square's shopping malls, but inside, it dishes up a tangy pork larb salad and a sensational deep-fried baby crab. Save room for the petit fours (right). Call (0011) 66 2 658 4112.

BLOW THE BUDGET Cy'an, the Metropolitan hotel's in-house restaurant, where Rockpool-trained Australian chef Amanda Gale serves up a seafood-dominated menu with flavours that draw on her surroundings with a dash of Mediterranean ingredients. What to choose? Her favourites are the blue-cod carpaccio, lemon, olive, caper and parsley salad, and the lime and ginger soufflé.

