



A Taste of Thailand

Photos: Alex Kovach

CLASSIC MOVIES LIKE KICKBOXER, THE BEACH, AND THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN GUN GAVE US A GLIMPSE OF THAILAND, BUT WHY NOT EXPERIENCE THE CULTURE FIRST-HAND? IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL CITY OF BANGKOK.

Finding expensive hotels is easy, but for cheap accommodation, hostel living is the way to go. Not only can you meet other English-speaking travelers, but for 350 Baht (\$11) per day you can stay in an air-conditioned four-person dorm room with internet access, in close proximity to amazing street food, fantastic nightlife, and gorgeous Thai girls.

In addition to motorcycle taxis, the most exciting way to get around in Bangkok is by *tuc-tuc*. These nimble three-wheeled carts blast down side streets, passing narrowly between cars - the sound of the distinctively brash exhaust and blips of the horn filling your ears. You can't help but feel like a little kid, laughing at the sheer lunacy of it all.

Water taxi rides along the Khlong Saen Saeb canal are another novel option, and popular with the locals. As the 50-passenger boat approaches the dock, large waves crash against the sides of the canal while workers stand precariously on the boat's edge, leaping briskly onto the dock to steady the boat for boarding. You find your footing, tuck your head under the tarp, and tumble conveniently into an awaiting seat while the boat surges forward, all in a few seconds. Efficient? Yes. Cheap? Yes. Clean? Well... no.

The canals of Bangkok are severely polluted. You can see it. You can smell it. And



if the tarp on either side of a water taxi isn't pulled up when another boat zooms past, you might even taste it. So not the most pleasant experience, you might think, but the excitement of the city by far outweighs the nasty bits.

Head to the Chao Phraya River for a boat tour of the narrow khlongs and their inhabitants; from the water you will see many Buddhist temples, and Wat Pho is one of the most significant with its enormous reclining Buddha - one of the largest in the world. For more excitement, catch Muay Thai

kickboxing fights at the local stadiums, and experience a key influence on the mixed martial arts world.

Foodies will love Bangkok for its incredibly diverse and overwhelming number of inexpensive markets and street vendors, offering everything from grilled chicken and beef, sushi and Vietnamese pho, to dried cuttlefish and roasted insects. For those craving the normalcy of home, you can find comfort in western style restaurants serving Australian steaks, Indian curries, and Italian pastas.



It should also come as no surprise that Bangkok is home to fantastic nightlife. Foreigners will often find themselves in the tourist-friendly Sukhumvit area, though not in the same way that a trip to Kuta Beach in Bali has you wondering how you somehow arrived in Australia. Bangkok is simply a fun place to party with friendly locals, cheap liquor, and great music.

Start the night off at a street vendor bar. These drink stalls, no larger than a hot-dog cart, come out at night with music and lights to get your energy pumping; the most charismatic of all being a beautifully reconitioned Volkswagen van, painted and glowing a vibrant pink.

Try the Climax club for live bands and dancing, and Bed - an airplane hangar with the main floor and balcony lined with, you guessed it, beds. Spicy is another hot spot favoured by the locals, until 2AM anyway, when the party shifts across the alley to Swing - an after-hours club where you may find yourself dancing the rest of the night, then grabbing one of a line of awaiting taxis from 9AM to 3PM the following day.

The red light districts may also beckon you, where Nana Plaza, Soi Cowboy and Patpong offer countless bars, and up to 12 girls can be dancing at once, their outfits leaving little to the imagination, with each girl donning a numbered tag. Is #37 giving you that look? Then call her over and buy her a drink. Want to go somewhere else? With her? No problem.

Pay the 500 Baht (\$15) bar fine and go out dancing with her, or sit and talk - whatever you like. Anything more than this and it may cost you.

It is no doubt then that women will greatly influence your stay in Bangkok. Thai girls are

only to have a girls' night out. People are typically poor here, so if your Thai wife-to-be can afford a glamorous wardrobe, chances are it is because a nice man bought it for her, one way or another. In contrast, you may come

immediately, while others will leave you wondering; and a select few - especially after a few beers - will have you certain that they are most definitely not. With that body? Those eyes? Yes. Sorry. The general rule: if you have to ask, then she is a man.



THAILAND'S ENTERTAINMENT HUBS NANA PLAZA, SOI COWBOY AND PATPONG ARE INFAMOUS FOR THEIR UNRESTRAINED RED LIGHT DISTRICTS.

exceptionally fun to party with, though working girls will be drawn to any place that brings in the foreigners.

See that beautiful 20-something wearing the sexy dress? She is working. This is not Montreal or Toronto, where cover models slip into their most curvy outfits

across a genuinely friendly girl who is interested in your stories and all that you do, but most crucially because you are the rich North American man who can have a tremendous impact on her economic status.

Ladyboys are another common sight in Bangkok. You will spot most of them

So most of the beautiful girls here then are either workers, lottery players, or not girls at all. All of which are influenced by the country's poverty.

Walk around for a day off the main streets and you will see people living in adjoined corrugated steel shacks on the sides of the canal, their children playing, and neighbours selling food along the railroad tracks; polluted water running under the narrow passages between the homes, meters away from brightly coloured clothes drying on the line, and dogs scavenging for scraps of discarded food.

Even the Sukhumvit main street is lined with a combination of street vendors and stalls selling t-shirts, watches and sunglasses; while groups of ladies stand outside their massage shops, offering you special deals. At night, young girls and ladyboys are everywhere, and will often make very direct attempts to lure you.

Bangkok is definitely an exciting place. The sights, tastes, sounds, and smells will leave a lasting memory. And for travelling on a budget? You can't go wrong.