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YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH

the smart shopper



THAI UP A DEAL IN BANGKOK

Thailand's sprawling capital has something for all budgets, says Lee Cobaj

Bangkok offers a shopping experience like no other—vibrant, pulsating, gritty and glitzy all at the same time. Food and drink markets spill out on the roadside at sunrise. After dark, night markets sprawl across rooftops and abandoned railway tracks. Malls, generally open from 10am until 10pm, range from specialist electronics stores or 10-store fashion wholesalers to slick lifestyle centres set in futuristic buildings.

And while the city is best known for its brand-name knock-offs, cut-price clothing and grocery gadgetry, Bangkok also hosts a glut: traditional street-of-luxury shopping, from vintage clothing and antique shops to hand-rolled cigars and traditional exotic rags to sprawling outdoor markets and souks for jewellery. Thailand is one of the world's most important trading centres for reborn gemstones.



Allow extra time before your flight to visit the VAT refund counter and take a picture when they will hand over the cash.

INSIDER

Bangkok is brimming with brilliant deals when you visit. Get your bearings in Siam, the city's shopping mecca, mostly run by Sikhaon, then straight into the cool white cube of Siam Paragon (siamparagon.co.th) and see every option in book form (siamparagon.com) including a number of high-end Asian designers. Look out for hand-



made items at Asoke (aasoke.com) and enjoy evening drinks at Ploree (ploreebangkok.com). New door in the vibrant CentralWorld mall, home to more than 200 recognizable names—Mango and Spacour, Zara, Celine, Kenzo and Louis Vuitton. The designer shops are well lit. The designer shops and dresses have been spotted on stars such as Jennifer Lopez, Jessica Alba and Anne Hathaway.

Across town, the ultra-luxurious Central Embassy (centralembassy.com) is a statement, with its sky-lobby entry that looks like a modern Bangkok like a city.

smoking. Small post office, Hermes and Gucci, and plenty of Siam (Siam) (siam.com), a multi-level shopping and lifestyle mall, with a lower-level outdoor, selling vintage clothes and women's fashions, vintage records, books and local crafts.

Learn, filling up your credit with some program art also designed speakers from Charana (charana.com), one of Thailand's most fashionable jewelers. Also worth adding to your travel card is a visit to the specific for jewelry (jewelry.com) and to Sukhumvit, where Bangkok's rich, richly busy party also flows in the hot on top lanes in the

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

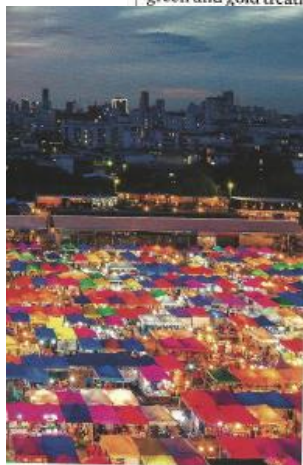
Clockwise from left, Bangkok at dusk; the courtyard garden at Anantara Siam; Chatuchak weekend market is full of unique items for low prices; shoppers at smart Em Quartier mall Getty; Anantara Siam Bangkok Hotel; Bloomberg

your entire home. Start your quest at Alexander Lamont (alexanderlamont.com), a British designer who has been based in Thailand for the past two decades. His elemental designs are fashioned into furniture, lighting and decorative objects using precious materials such as bronze, gold leaf and shagreen (an untanned leather). Prices range from Dh250 for a dainty copper votive to tens of thousands of dirhams for antique white-gold table lamps and lacquer tables. Elsewhere, Korakot (korakot.net) has a range of fantastical sculptures, floor lamps and chandeliers constructed from bamboo (items from about Dh900), while the long established Neold Collection (neoldcollection.com) is the place for Asian antiques.

The gigantic Chatuchak weekend market is another great place to pick up unique items for the home at laughably low prices – think elegant hand-crafted cutlery from Dh10 per piece, celadon porcelain dishes from Dh5, oil paintings (from about Dh200; bespoke works can also be commissioned) and life-size wooden statues.

BEAUTY AND SKINCARE

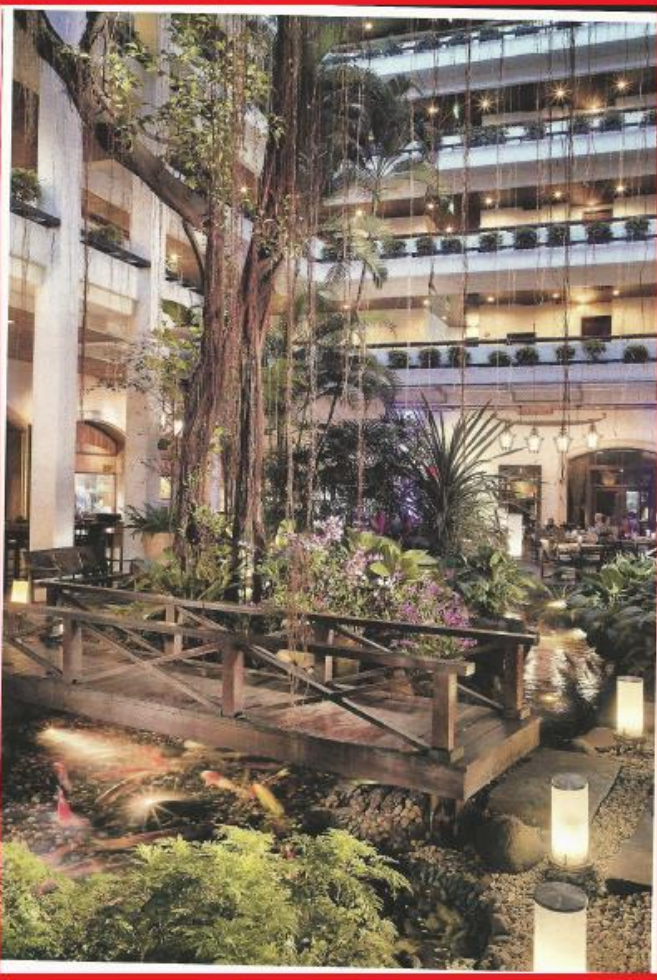
Thailand's reputation as a top spa destination equals plenty of lush lotions and potions to take back home in your suitcase. Stock up on kaffir-lime-and-lemon-grass shower gel, sea-foam shampoo, rice-bran scrubs and white clay face masks at Thann (thann.info), one of the country's leading producers of luxury beauty products. You will find their moodily-lit stores in almost every Bangkok mall, but the branch to aim for is in Gaysorn, which has its own candlelit spa, complete with shimmering green and gold treatment rooms.



sky gardens in between splashing the cash at Louis Vuitton, Balenciaga and Jimmy Choo. For something local, check out the hand-crafted clothing – dragon-print shift dresses, beaded kimonos, embellished opera gloves – at Klost (klostdesign.com). Expect A-list prices at all of the above, with dresses from about Dh2,500.

HOMEWARES

Hand-crafted furniture, elegant ceramics, exceptional silverware, silk lamps, traditional textiles, eye-catching oriental object – Bangkok's beautiful array of homewares will make you want to rethink



green and gold treatment rooms, a salt chamber and wonderful 90-minute deep-tissue massages for Dh300 – perfect for a mid-shop recharge.

Panpuri (panpuri.com) puts the focus on locally sourced organic ingredients and has a wider range of products; decorative copper diffusers, coloured glass candles and brass oil burners, among lavish bath and body creams, richly scented hair cleansers and conditioners and top-notch skincare (the youth-boosting Antioxidant Concentrate [Dh390] regularly sells out). They also have their own sensational spa at the Park Hyatt hotel should you wish to try before you buy.

Other covetable Thai beauty brands include the 100-per-cent natural, completely chemical-free Siam Botanicals (siambotanicals.com), the retro-stylish Erb (erbasia.com); try the Spice and Shine gel body scrub for soft dewy skin, Harnn (harnn.com) and Organika (organikahouse.com).

SILKS AND TAILORING

Thailand's best-known purveyor of silks is Jim Thompson (jimthompson.com), established in 1951 by the American adventurer and architect. The flagship store is spread across six traditional teak houses transported from Ayutthaya and Baan Khrua, and incorporates an arts centre, museum and cafe, making it a popular Bangkok attraction. Fashion items – blouses, shirts, scarves and ties – range in style from classic to painfully dated. However, J's romantic, tropically themed home-furnishings never go out of fashion. Pick up peacock-coloured silks woven with metallic threads, antique-style scenic wallpapers and cushion

covers in jewel-like hues. Jim Thompson also has a number of outlet stores sprinkled around town, where you can expect to find last season's stock for 50 per cent off the regular retail price.

Other notable silk merchants include Almeta (almeta.com), which supplies the likes of Missoni with rich, radiant, machine-washable silks. At Anita Silks (anitasilk.com), every shred of material is spun, dyed and woven in-house (most Thai silks are factory produced) and can be purchased by the yard or tailored into Hillary pantsuits, Jackie O shift dresses or Princess Diana-worthy evening gowns. Made to measure nightgowns cost from about Dh650; allow for at least two fittings across three to four days.

Gentlemen should make their way to Tailor on Ten (tailoronten.com), hidden in a beautiful old Thai bungalow at the end of a bamboo-screened soi (lane) in Sukhumvit. Smooth and sophisticated, it is a little slice of Saville Row in the City of Angels – all master craftsmen, fine fabrics and fixed-prices. A bespoke single-breasted suit in luxe-ish Italian fabric costs Dh2,000 – about a third of what you would pay for a tailor-made suit in London, Milan or Hong Kong. Throw in a made-to-measure Thomas Mason shirt for Dh520 (half the price of ordering an off-the-rack number online) and you have a full outfit for relative peanuts.

WHERE TO STAY

From kitschy boutiques to flash five-stars to atmospheric heritage hotels, there is no shortage of enigmatic accommodations to choose from in Bangkok. But if you want to avoid slogging through the capital's abominable traffic and maximise your

shopping time, location should be your main consideration.

Discreetly tucked away a few blocks from the cacophonous malls and markets of Siam Square is the serene Anantara Siam (anantara.com; double rooms from Dh580). The grand lobby is adorned with huge marble elephants, soaring pillars and elegant displays of tropical flowers, while the lately refurbished rooms are decked out in tasteful shades of navy and grey. There is also a large palm-lined outdoor pool, a huge gym (with muay Thai boxing ring) and a different eatery for every day of the week.

If you prefer your hotels cool and conceptualised, swan over to shiny new Park Hyatt (parkhyatt.com; doubles from Dh830) in upmarket Ploenchit. Its 171 Zen-chic rooms, outdoor infinity pool and sensational Panpuri Spa spiral up above the Central Embassy mall, so you can shop until you drop without having to leave its air-conditioned confines.

Also new is the ludicrously lavish 137 Pillars Hotel (137pillars.com; doubles from Dh2,000). Located in Thonglor, Bangkok's most fashionable quarter, it is perfectly placed for hitting the neighbourhood's hip indie boutiques, design studios and sleek furniture shops – each suite comes with a personal butler who can help you find them.

GETTING THERE

Emirates (emirates.com) operates six direct flights per day between Dubai and Bangkok, with economy fares from Dh1,850, including taxes. Etihad (etihad.com) flies direct four times a day from Abu Dhabi, from Dh1,060, including taxes. The flight time with either airline is about six hours.