

bangkok

At water level and street level, Thailand's capital remains an intoxicating mix of sights and sounds, but Sarah Murray finds the city's ultra-chic are getting their thrills high-rise.

In a theatre filled with the rhythmic beat of drums, dancers leap energetically to the sounds of eastern stringed instruments and western classical violins. The style is an inventive fusion of delicate Thai hand and foot movements and contemporary western dance – choreographer Manop Meejamrat's trademark at the celebrated Patravadi Theatre.

Welcome to today's Bangkok, where the exquisite creative traditions of this magical country are being woven into a contemporary culture that is hip, edgy and highly seductive. This always vibrant and exotic city is now attracting luxury weekend escapees from urban hubs such as Hong Kong and Singapore with its chic fusion eateries, open-air bars perched on top of skyscrapers and standards-setting hotels.

In Bangkok's modern journey of self-discovery, the Patravadi Theatre is ahead of the rest. Its founder, Patravadi Mejudhon, and her colleagues have long been at the cutting edge of contemporary Thai culture, with a mission to preserve Thai classical dance while keeping it relevant and alive. "She's extraordinary – she really makes things happen," says Daniel Safer, a New York-based director who spends much time working with the theatre. "Her goal is making sure every

single piece works for Thais as well as for an international audience."

Set in a delightful leafy complex by the Chao Phraya River, getting there by boat affords a taste of one of Bangkok's great joys – the river, with banks lined by a fascinating jumble of gleaming tower blocks, rickety wooden houses and Buddhist temples. Alive with packed ferries, high-speed longboats and low-slung cargo vessels, the river cuts through the sticky humidity of the city and allows it to breathe.

From the jetty, the narrow path leading to the Patravadi Theatre winds through a small market in a sleepy neighbourhood pleasantly removed from the noise and chaos of the rest of the city. For a taste of more traditional Thai dance, the Supatra River House restaurant, in a charming wooden building next door to the Patravadi Theatre, stages performances at weekends with the river as a backdrop.

The river's edge was where, until recently, most visitors stayed, at hotels such as The Oriental and The Peninsular. However, a growing number of boutique hotels are clustering around Sathorn Road – a street

at the heart of downtown Bangkok near the city's main shopping areas.

In a towering skyscraper, the Banyan Tree's grey exterior may not be the most inviting structure ever conceived, but this should certainly not deter potential visitors. Inside is a sophisticated designer establishment whose emphasis on the luxurious spa experience – a selection of invigorating herbal shower scrubs are presented to guests on arrival – makes this a great place to wind down after a long flight or rigorous business trip.

The advantage of staying in a skyscraper becomes evident when heading up to the top

floor and the spectacular open-air restaurant, Vertigo. The humidity is dispersed by warm breezes and the city spreads out below in a dazzling show of lights.

Right next to the Banyan Tree sits the city's trendiest designer hotel, The Metropolitan, sister to its London namesake. With its vast and sparsely furnished lobby, its Shambhala spa, a stylish restaurant called Cy'an and the much talked about Met Bar, the hotel is both hip and grand. And because it was converted from a low-rise 1970s building that once housed the

YWCA (former badminton courts are now vast penthouse suites), The Metropolitan also possesses a genuine retro chic few other Bangkok hotels can muster.

The designer spirit of The Metropolitan is at work in the city's newest shopping district, Soi Thonglor, off Sukhumvit Road. With the Skytrain running above much of it, Sukhumvit is one of the city's main arteries and, along the many narrow *soi* that shoot off the main street, is a buzzing hub for shops, hotels and chic restaurants as well as leafy expat residences.

At Playground, located in an industrial steel and concrete space with giant beanbags scattered across the main floor, the

Above: get a river view of the city aboard a longboat. Below: then relax while you eat at Bed Supperclub.

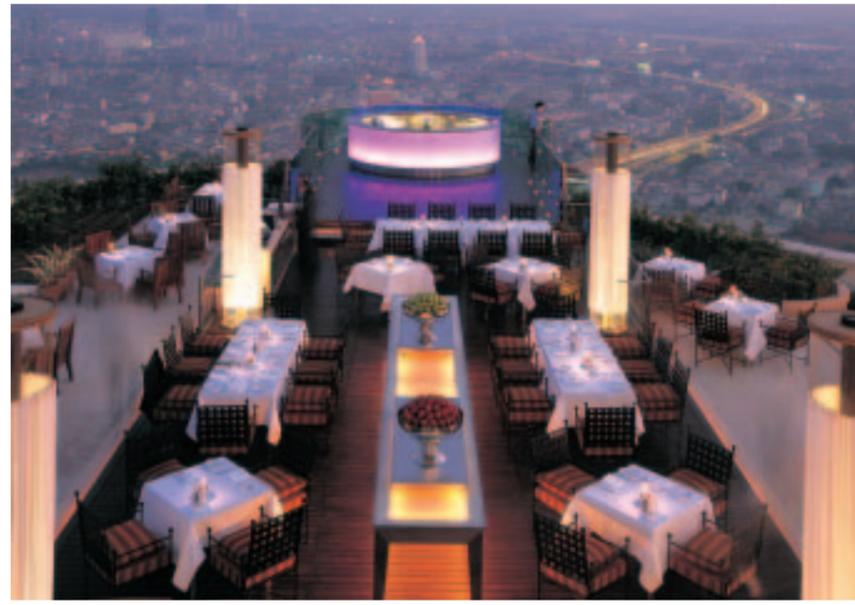


city's new designer confidence is exemplified. What's on offer here is light years from the dowdy silk suits and carved wood furniture of Silom Road's boutiques. Here, fashion and lifestyle are represented by Eva Solo kitchenware, designer luggage, stationary and urban fashions. It's a new look for Bangkok but one young, affluent Thais are embracing enthusiastically.

While in Soi Thonglor, don't miss Geo, a quirky store in H1, a modern mall in glass and steel. This whimsical outlet, owned by photographer Sakchai Guy and designer Metta Tantisajjatham, takes the garden as its theme – walls are lined with intriguing cases of mounted butterflies and beetles. But, as well as high-end pruning shears and ceramic pots, Geo also stocks handbags, stationary and other accessories, many decorated with extraordinary abstract photographic images of exotic flowers.

In the rush to embrace the new, however, some of Bangkok's older establishments should not be neglected. The Sukhothai remains one of the world's most exquisite hotels with a quality of service that is impeccable. Designer Ed Tuttle's modern Thai minimalist vision is played out in sparse spaces enriched by fabulous silk wall coverings, subtle lighting (small candles are lit at night) and a restrained selection of carvings and Buddha statues.

The Sukhothai is another resident of Sathorn Road and, five minutes walk east is another reason for picking the district as



shoppers from dozens of food stalls. It might seem strange advice to those seeking luxury, but in Bangkok, when it comes to eating, the best places are often on the street and the most unassuming looking eateries produce true delicacies. A huge variety of dishes is available, from coconut curries to satays and spicy green papaya salad, but look for the stalls that seem to

The city's designer confidence is creating a new look that young, affluent Thais are embracing enthusiastically.

a base – late night shopping for inventive accessories, trinkets and handicrafts. Small shops bulge with everything from eccentric beach bags to funky sets of lamps and with almost 3,000 small booths open until midnight, a visit to Suan Lum Night Market is a great alternative to trekking out to the more famous Chatuchak Market. The atmosphere is fun and, since the market was originally established to support local artists, young designers often emerge from within these booths.

At the front of the market, spicy snacks and other dishes are served up to hungry

getting the freshest food.

Humble surroundings might do well for lunch or a snack, but when it comes to classy dining Bangkok establishments give the great culinary centres of the world a run for their money. And while the exquisite fusion flavours that creative chefs are bringing to the city's eateries are intoxicating, what makes the latest breed of restaurants so appealing is the fact that the food is not the only attraction.

The design of many of these newer restaurants makes dining an aesthetic as

well as a culinary experience. Bed Supperclub – a restaurant and bar where the activity of eating or drinking often becomes secondary to that of people watching – is one of the highlights. Encased in a bizarre pod that looks as if it just arrived from outer space, the high-design, split-level interior – all white curves and plastic surfaces – is the place to be seen. Lounge on one of the restaurant's beds to sample the Thai fusion delectations of Dan Ivarie, an award-winning American chef known for the creative magic he works with a vast array of Asian flavours and ingredients.

The embrace of Thai culture that Ivarie gives expression to in his cooking is part of a tradition that can be traced back to his famous compatriot, Jim Thompson – the US businessman who established his famous silk company in Thailand after the second world war. The home Thompson created is now one of Bangkok's best loved museums. It is a feast for the eyes, with exquisite textiles and rare art works housed in the collection of teak houses he transported from across Thailand. The museum is located in a leafy suburb next to a *klong* – one of the canals that were once the main form of transport in Bangkok.

After touring the house, don't miss the shop. Thompson's name has evolved

Above: banish vertigo with a martini at Sirocco's gravity-defying bar. Left: Jim Thompson's passion for silk lives on at his stores. Below: fusion dance performed at the Patravadi Theatre.

into a luxury brand – with several outlets in the city – offering the gorgeous shimmering silks for which Thailand is known, as well as scarves and handbags.

Another less well visited but entrancing teak house is the former home of Mom Rajawongse Kukrit, who was an influential politician from a princely family. The charming thing about this house – another a collection of teak structures filled with Thai antiques and art works – is that it feels as if its owner is still living there. For while the house and garden are bewitching, the numerous kitsch porcelain dogs and family photographs in each room

paint an endearing picture of the man himself.

It is possible to get an even more intimate taste of life inside these traditional teak structures at Face, a beautiful complex of restaurants in small wooden houses with cushioned alcoves. It includes The Face Bar, Hazara (an Indian restaurant), Lanna Thai (a Thai restaurant) and a spa. Return to a more contemporary dining experience at Eat Me, near Sathorn Road, a smart but relaxed interior that is also a gallery. Try scrumptious dishes such as crab and rocket salad with mango coriander gazpacho or spicy chicken breast with lemongrass and couscous.

Before dinner, however, cocktails are an essential part of the new Bangkok experience, and attracting much attention is

Sirocco, on the roof of

the 63-storey State

Tower, a preposterous

domed

skyscraper. The

place is also an

al-fresco eatery,

but not to be

missed are drinks at

the restaurant's bar, which is perched on top of one of the four columns that cling to the building's the corners.

Here vertigo really kicks in.

But after calming the nerves

with a stiff martini, the

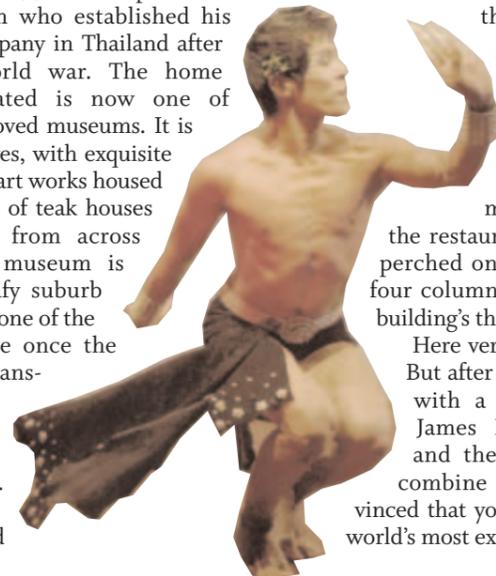
James Bond atmosphere

and the spectacular view

combine to leave you convinced

that you are in one of the

world's most exciting cities. ♦



THE HIT LIST

HOTELS

Prices are for two people sharing a double room, including breakfast.

Banyan Tree Bangkok, 21/100 South Sathorn Road (00662-679 1200, www.banyantree.com); from £121. **The Metropolitan**, 27 South Sathorn Road (00662-625 3333, www.metropolitan.com.bz); from £140. **Sukhothai**, 13/3 South Sathorn Road (00662-344 8888, www.sukhothai.com); from £131.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS

Prices are for a three-course meal for one with half a bottle of wine.

Bed Supperclub, 26 Soi Sukhumvit 11 (00662-651 3537); £29. **Cy'an**, at The Metropolitan, 27 South Sathorn Road (00662-625 3333); £52. **Eat Me**, 1/6 Soi

Pipat 2, off Convent Road, Silom (00662-238 0931); £29. **Face**, 29 Sukhumvit Road, Soi 38 (00662-713 6048); £35. **Met Bar**, at The Metropolitan, 27 South Sathorn Road (00662-625 3398).

Sirocco, The Dome at State Tower, 1055 Silom Road (00662-624 9555).

Vertigo, at Banyan Tree Bangkok, 21/100 South Sathorn Road (00662-679 1200); £52.

SHOPPING

Geo, H1, Soi Thonglor, Sukhumvit Soi 55 (00662-381 4324). **Jim Thompson** (main store), 9 Surawong Road (00662-632 8100). **Playground**, Soi Thonglor,



Sukhumvit Soi 55 (00662-714-7888).

Suan Lum Night Market, at the intersection between Rama IV Road and Wireless Road.

SIGHTS

Jim Thompson House (pictured left), 6 Soi Kasemsan 2, Rama

I Rd (00662-216 7368), daily, 9am-5pm.

MR Kukrit's House, 19 Soi Phra Pinit, South Sathorn Road (00662-286 8185), Sat-Sun, 10am-5pm. **Patravadi**

Theatre, 69/1 Soi Wat Rakang, Arun Amarin Road, Siriraj (00662-412 7287/8, www.patravaditheatre.com).

Supatra River House, 266 Soi Wat Rakhang, Arun Amarin Road, Siriraj (00662-411 0305).

LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

As an excellent tonic to the new and the hip, head out to the ancient Thai capital, **Ayutthaya**, about an hour's drive or 90 minutes by train north of Bangkok. Destroyed by the Burmese in the 18th century, the monumental remains of temples and palaces, set on an island at the confluence of three rivers, provide a highly romantic impression of what must have once been a powerful metropolis.

WHEN TO GO

It's hard to escape Bangkok's sticky humidity and fiery temperatures, but from November to February, the heat

subsides to make for a more pleasant climate. Avoid April, the hottest month, and October, the wettest.

HOW TO GET THERE

Sarah Murray travelled courtesy of **Thai Airways International** and **Royal Orchid Holidays** (020-8875 9191), which offer four-night packages at the hotels referred to in this article, from £809 per person. She stayed as a guest of **Banyan Tree Bangkok**, **The Metropolitan** and **Sukhothai**. **Thai Airways International** (0870-606 0911; www.thaiairways.co.uk) flies direct from London Heathrow to Bangkok twice daily except Thursdays, from £605. **British Airways** (0870-850 9850; www.ba.com) flies daily direct from London Heathrow to Bangkok from £673.