

One night in Bangkok

Bangkok is characterised by vibrant street life, a plethora of temples and a host of spicy bites. Giselle Whiteaker hits the highlights in the Thai capital.



Clockwise from top left: Golden Buddhas at Wat Pho; a flavour-packed dish at nahm; street food is a common sight; tuk tuks awaiting passengers



The extensive arterial road network that stretches from Bangkok International Airport, delivering visitors into the heart of the Thai capital, is the first sign that Bangkok has expanded more than a little in the decade or so since my last visit. Buildings that touch the sky dot the urban jungle and the Bangkok metro zips along an elevated track before diving underground. The city stretches on forever, the horizon masked by architecture that seems to be filling the gaps in each neighbourhood like the odd-shaped blocks in a game of Tetris.

Around 45 minutes of fast-moving traffic later, we turn into a long driveway, the footpath bordered by walls of living greenery. A turn to the right and we pull up at the entrance to the COMO Metropolitan Bangkok. The hotel has been quietly occupying this somewhat hidden corner of Bangkok's Central Business District since 2003, its unassuming, minimalist façade belying the serenity inside.

My bags are whisked into the lobby while I follow at a slower pace, passing the glass columns topped with gnarled branches laced with tiny, pink, orchid-like blossoms that flank the pathway to reception. I'm guided to a lounge seat, handed a refreshing beverage and a



Top: The COMO Metropolitan Bangkok

Above: A minimalist chic room at the COMO Metropolitan Bangkok

delightfully chilled towel, and a few moments later, administration efficiently completed, I am escorted to the elevator and introduced to my rather palatial room.

The hotel's 169 guestrooms are decorated in a calming, contemporary style, with dark Makha wood floors, framed black and white abstract prints at the head of the

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Top: The hotel pool
Above right: Stupas at Wat Pho
Above: Every dish at nahm is packed with flavour

bed. A mustard rug delineating the lounge area provides a pop of colour. There's a plate of fresh tropical fruit and a trio of Thai sweets waiting on the coffee table. Through the window, the sun is bathing the towers in burnished gold, a patch of greenery the only hint that a swimming pool awaits below.

I have a mere 24 hours in Bangkok, so after a quick refresh, I head out to reacquaint myself with the city. Some change is immediately apparent – there are more cars and fewer motorbikes, with more motorbike helmets in use. Towering accommodation blocks are watched over by smiling security guards. Modern metro stations and a maze of overpasses line the busy streets. Other things remain the same – brightly coloured tuk tuks still trundle the streets; motorbike taxis beseech passers-by; street vendors line the pavements, selling everything – from fresh coconut water, chilled and decorated with slivers of young coconut flesh to bowls of spicy noodle soup wafting their aromas along the streets. Overhead, immense tangles of electrical wires loop in organised chaos. I duck down the alleyways, becoming delightfully lost, finding a canal with shady trees and a small roundabout constructed around a large yellow statue of a Transformer, there for no

discernible reason. Another roundabout is constructed from old motorcycle parts, a mechanical dragon rearing its head at the centre.

Much wandering later, nearing the Grand Palace complex, rows of tuk tuks await their tourists, who have donned hastily purchased sarongs to protect their modesty so they are allowed to enter the palace grounds. I continue past the glittering spires and golden stupas, making my way into the crumbling wooden over-water shack that funnels passengers onto the ferry that crosses the Chao Phraya River. Wooden planks are haphazardly balanced on a line of sandbags down the centre aisle. The tide is high and waves are washing through the gaps in the floorboards. I let the dirty water splash over my feet so I can offer my arm to an elderly lady with a walking stick as she crosses the sandbag bridge, her grateful, crinkle-eyed grin a lovely reward.

Our destination is Wat Arun, the ferry banking mere steps from the entrance to this temple, known for its 80-metre-high Khmer-style tower, which is decorated with a mosaic of colourful Chinese porcelain, once used as ballast on ships from China. The grand pagoda is overseen by ferocious Chinese warrior sculptures that serve as guardians of the temple. Surrounding the temple are perfectly manicured gardens and a scattering of



Clockwise from above: Delectable dishes at nahm; the reclining Buddha at Wat Pho; nahm restaurant

structures, from the Ordination Hall to a temple housing the sacred golden Niramitr Buddha statue.

Back on the eastern bank of the river, I stroll to Wat Pho, one of my favourite temples in Bangkok. Despite the high volume of visitors Wat Pho entices, it's a peaceful place. Away from the main pavilion, which I'm saving for last, open doorways lead to courtyards with more open doorways, leading to more courtyards, as if modelled on an Escher painting. Wandering at whim, I find rows of Buddha statues, gold leaf flapping in the breeze; forests of colourful mosaic stupas; large golden statues; schoolchildren giggling as they sit in the shade to eat lunch. I spend hours here, enjoying the sunshine and the ambience.

Before departing, I remove my shoes and step into the main pavilion. Inside, an enormous buddha reclines along the entire length of the building, face upturned. The image, covered in gold leaf, is 15 metres high and 46 metres long. Visitors drop coins into a row of brass alms bowls along one wall, while others jostle for the best views. From his tightly coiled crown of hair to the bottom of his mother-of-pearl inlaid feet, the Buddha is a rather awe-inspiring sight. No matter how many times I visit Bangkok, this statue always makes me pause.

As the day starts to wane, I purchase a plastic token and board the Blue Line of the metro, which deposits me back in the neighbourhood of the COMO Metropolitan Bangkok. This is the moment I've been anticipating. I have a reservation at the hotel's Michelin-starred nahm restaurant, which occupies the ground floor of the hotel, overlooking the outdoor pool.

Nahm is known for using robustly flavoured ingredients – garlic, shrimp paste, chillies, lemongrass – to create modern Thai fare, and every bite of the ten-course heritage set menu is a flavour explosion. Chef Pim's creativity and passion for authentic Thai flavours shines through dishes like mango and dried-fish salad with sweet fish sauce dressing; savoury coconut relish with charcoal-grilled catfish, Krachai wild ginger and fresh vegetables; and a sweet combination of bites that represents the life cycle of coconut. This is Thai food at its very best. It deserves every star.

Come morning, after a delicious breakfast overlooking the pool, I'm on my way. It may have only been one night in Bangkok, but it's been full of flavour – in every way. ■

For more information about COMO Metropolitan Bangkok, see www.comohotels.com/thailand