

# TRAVEL

Where to stay when you visit the best places on earth. Edited by Nigel Bowen.

## The Thai life

**T**he 'Land of Smiles' hasn't had much to grin about of late. In the space of just over a decade, Thailand has had its currency collapse (kicking off the Asian Financial Crisis), been hammered by a tsunami that left thousands dead and seen its democracy degenerate into chaos, with protesters shutting down Bangkok's airports in late 2008. Front pages full of killer waves, Molotov cocktail-chucking rioters and stranded travellers delivered a king hit to the country's tourism industry from which it is still struggling to recover.

Yet, throughout its various travails, Thailand has remained as enchanting as ever. The mouthwatering food, vibrant nightlife, golden temples, lavish palaces, spectacular beaches, bustling markets, elegant resorts and friendly natives — they're all still there. And the chances of running into any sort of grief while visiting are minuscule. If you're one of the many Australians with an abiding love of Thailand who's been spooked out of visiting recently, perhaps it's time you manned up and headed back.

### A-LISTER BOLTHOLE TRISARA

To understand Trisara you need to speak to the man who designed, manages and part owns it. Fortunately, that man, Trisara group director and general manager Anthony Lark, is always on hand to greet guests when they arrive.

Lark, an Australian, made Amanpuri (located down the road from Trisara) the showbiz and corporate elite kicked back at during the '90s. "When I was running

Amanpuri, the owner told me: 'Pretend that this is your house and you're having friends come to stay with you,'" Lark responds when I ask how he attracts the movers and shakers.

"What would you do? You'd have someone there to pick them up at the airport, you'd be here to greet them when they arrived, you'd make sure you checked out their room to ensure everything was in order before they went to it, you'd share your experiences of the place with them. You'd serve them food you'd eat yourself at home.

"At the time Amanpuri started, all the most famous resorts were large hotels like Hamilton Island. Amanpuri was a small residential hotel being run almost like a Japanese ryokan. It didn't even look like a hotel — there were no signs, no room numbers. And guests loved the unpretentiousness — some of the wealthiest people in the world went there to dress down."

In 2000, in partnership with a couple of wealthy backers, Lark got the opportunity to build his own dream resort — in effect, to out-Amanpuri Amanpuri. Since opening in 2004, Trisara has been showered with awards from the likes of *Condé Nast Traveller* and luxe bible the *Robb Report* and graced with the presence of ▶



**Waterworld:** All villas and residences at Trisara come with an ocean view and (at least) one 10-metre pool. The resort also boasts a huge common-use pool and private beach.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

**ACCOMMODATION:** 22 one-bedroom pool villas, 12 ocean-view pool rooms, three ocean-view spa suites and two two-bedroom oceanfront pool villas, plus 18 two-to-five bedroom residences that are privately owned but rented out while their plutocratic lords and masters are elsewhere. We stayed at a one-bedroom pool villa, a kind of miniature beach house with its own 10-metre infinity-edge pool, ocean view, teak sundeck, outdoor shower, huge bath and wi-fi connection. We thought it was

the height of luxury — until we went on a tour of one of the five-bedroom residences that came equipped with two enormous pools, its own dedicated staff and dining pavilions with majestic views of the Andaman Sea.

**FOOD:** If you're the unadventurous type there's western cuisine on offer but you'll probably want to try some dishes that you won't find on the menu of your local Thai takeaway back home, such as Phuket yellow noodles or crispy cotton fish. Like

everything else at Trisara, dining is unpretentious. You can plop yourself down either inside the restaurant or in the al fresco area abutting the beach and huge common-use pool. The staff always magically know who you are, so there's no rigmarole about giving your room number or signing off on bills.

**BAR:** Despite its inviting ambience, the bar across from the restaurant never seemed to attract much custom. Perhaps because Trisara's clientele are more the type to

down a bottle of Penfolds Grange or Louis Roederer Cristal Rosé (both on the room service wine list) in their villa than sip cocktails in the bar.

**BEST IN SPA:** Forget the usual suspects and go native with the 'Thai Heritage'. It's a Thai herbal steam, scrub and wrap followed by a Sukhothai massage, which clears blocked energy channels in the body's meridians.

**RATES:** From \$900 to \$8000 per night, plus 18.7 per cent service charge.

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everyone from Hillary Clinton, to Roger Federer, to Björn Ulvaeus from ABBA.

“Those kind of people come here and ask me on day one: ‘No-one is going to hassle me, are they?’ I tell them ‘Nuh,’” laughs Lark. “A few days later they’ll ask me, ‘Has anybody said anything about me?’ and I’ll tell them, ‘Nuh’. A few days after that, they’ll come up to me and say, ‘You know, if anyone wants a photograph or autograph, I’m available...’”

The secret of Trisara’s success is that all guests get the rock star treatment. “I wanted to create a resort where there were no second-class citizens,” Lark says. “All the villas and residences here face the sea. Every room has, at least, its own private 10-metre pool. We got the best teak and marble in. Neil Perry is a friend of mine, so I got him in as a consulting chef. And privacy was paramount — no-one can see into your villa and no-one, including paparazzi, is going to bother you here.”

Indeed, Trisara is so impressive that there’s not much reason to venture outside its gates. Want to do yoga or Pilates? There are highly qualified instructors on hand. Has seeing all those blissed-out Buddhist monks inspired you to want to learn to meditate? There’s an expert around for that too. Thai cooking’s more your thing? Have a one-on-one tutorial with one of the resort’s top chefs. Got some aggression you need to vent? How about some Muay Thai (Thai kickboxing) lessons? And there’s also an enormous library of DVDs, books and CDs (you can download the latter on to one of the iPods the resort supplies to plug into the stereo at your villa).

One thing you can’t experience without going offsite is Phuket’s spectacular coastline and neighbouring islands, which have provided locations for films such as *The Man With The Golden Gun* (Phang Nga Bay) and *The Beach* (Phi Phi). Depending on how much coin you want to shell out, Trisara has an armada of yachts, catamarans and speedboats at its disposal to ferry you around both the well-known attractions and the more obscure and unspoiled bays and beaches.

Unfortunately, Phuket’s interior is rather less inviting. Phuket Town is a tourist trap with about as much charm as Kuta, while the island’s other major hub, Patong Beach, is basically Patong by the sea. If you’re not interested in budget bespoke suits made by Indian tailors or temptingly cheap tooth-whitening treatments provided by Thai dentists, the only good reason to leave the Trisara (‘third garden in heaven’ in Sanskrit) is to dine at the island’s handful of superb restaurants, such as Lotus Seafood, the Supper Club and Joe’s Bar.

## SIAMESE GRINS SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, BANGKOK

There’s no politically correct way of putting this so I’ll just come out with it. One of the rarely acknowledged but shamefully addictive attractions of Thailand is the fawning deference so frequently displayed by the locals — or at least those employed in the service sector — towards foreign tourists. Thailand is one of the few Asian nations never to have found itself under the heel of a European power yet the master-servant interaction between *farang* (Westerner) and Thai borders on the colonial.

I was reacquainted with this dynamic when our car pulled up to the Shangri-La’s lobby at

3am and we stepped out to be greeted by a welcoming party of no fewer than six people, all of whom immediately started *wai-ing* (bowing in the traditional Thai manner), presenting us with garlands of flowers and apologising profusely for our delayed flight and the lateness of our arrival — something they bore no responsibility for.

I’d been in the country for not much longer than an hour and I already felt like *Mad Men*’s Don Draper. (That all the most breathtakingly beautiful Thais seem to be employed in the hospitality sector just makes the experience of being endlessly feted all the more ego-enhancing.)

The Hong Kong-based Shangri-La chain launched four decades ago with a business plan based on providing luxury accommodation with an Oriental overlay throughout the Asia Pacific. Its first hotel, built in Singapore, featured acres of landscaped gardens, elegantly appointed guest rooms and an unabashedly Asian aesthetic. Subsequent hotels, including the one in Bangkok, have followed that template. Located among a cluster of five-star hotels on the banks of Bangkok’s Chao Phraya river, the Shangri-La Bangkok somehow manages to make you feel like you’re staying in a laidback tropical resort rather than in the middle of one of Asia’s most frenetic cities.

Opened in 1986, it has just had a \$60m reboot that saw most of its public areas extensively refurbished. More a mini-city than a hotel, along with the standard facilities (spa, gym, business centre, pool, tennis and squash courts), the 801-room behemoth boasts its own florist, barber, 24-hour clinic, shopping arcade and limousine service.



**Clockwise from top:** Shangri-La’s swimming pool, Angelini Restaurant and Bar, Shangri-La at night, speciality suite bathroom, NEXT2 Restaurant, the presidential suite.

Any flophouse that has a spare corner to put a massage table in has jumped on the spa bandwagon in recent years, but the Shangri-La group is an industry leader, having put a huge amount of research, thought and money into developing its CHI spas, envisioned as sanctuaries of tranquillity and inspired by the architectural principles of Tibetan temples. When I show up for a treatment, I’m met by the spa’s manager who explains the spa’s philosophy (it draws heavily on Chinese medicine, which holds that there is a universal life force — *chi* — that governs people’s wellbeing) and conducts a brief consultation to get a sense of my fitness and to determine which of the five elements — wood, fire, earth, metal or water — I am. After that, I’m ushered into the fanciest spa treatment room (actually, interlinked series of rooms) I’ve ever seen, complete with heated marble plinth to lie on and a capacious flower-filled bath to soak in.

As resort-like as the Shangri-La feels, you’re going to want to leave its salubrious confines

sooner or later to experience the exotic delights Bangkok has to offer. If you’re a first-time visitor you’ll want to check out the major landmarks: the Grand Palace; the National Museum; Chinatown and the temples Wat Arun (with its 82m high Khmer-style tower) and Wat Pho (home of the 46m long and 15m high Reclining Buddha).

Central World Shopping Complex, a brief ride on the city’s shmick new Skytrain from Shangri-La, is the largest shopping mall in South-East Asia. The prices don’t seem to be any cheaper than Australia, but there’s lots of splendid shops — both high-street and high-end — that currently have little or no presence in Australia. And if you’ve got the slightest interest in textiles, make sure you stop by Jim Thompson House, or at least visit one of the many Jim Thompson stores scattered throughout the country. Thompson, an American expat, helped revitalise Thailand’s silk and textile sector after WWII, and produced the costumes used in *The King and I*.

With the possible exception of Amsterdam’s Rosse Buurt, Bangkok’s Patpong is the world’s most notorious red-light district. Everything you’ve ever heard about it is true, so make sure to set aside at least one night to take in its go-go bars, ladyboy cabarets and, ahem, innovative displays of ping pong prowess. ☑

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## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

**ACCOMMODATION:** Rooms fall into 20 different categories from deluxe rooms to presidential suites, which are divided between the hotel’s Shangri-La Wing and its more exclusive Krungthep Wing.

**FOOD:** Shangri-La boasts an embarrassment of culinary riches. Salathip, a triptych of exquisite teak pavilions on the bank of the river, is the flagship eatery.

The dishes are the kind you’d expect at a Thai restaurant, but are prepared with enough inventive verve to be intriguing. If you want Chinese go to Shang Palace, while indecisive types can head to the eclectic buffet at NEXT2.

**BAR:** If you’re after somewhere buzzy to eat and drink, head to Angelini Restaurant and Bar, which boasts a chill-out terrace

lounges and live entertainment area. It’s also got Italian food that, appropriately enough, is like an Angelini (little angel) crying on your tongue.

**BEST IN SPA:** The ‘Sense of Place Ritual’. As the name suggests, this two-hour-long treatment is based on traditional Thai treatments and involves getting moisturised with lotus milk soak, exfoliated with black

jasmine rice, covered with white clay, honey, sesame seeds and milk, immersed in a warm petal-filled bath, gently pounded with a herbal poultice then massaged by not one but two sets of dexterous hands. By the end of it all you’re sure to be sensing that you’re in a very happy place indeed.

**RATES:** \$200 to \$340, plus a 17.7 per cent service charge.

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