



A tuk-tuk zooms through Bangkok

buy thai

TEXT ROSALYN PAGE

TEXTILES, FASHION,
FOOD, TECHNOLOGY,
HANDICRAFTS AND
JEWELLERY – THAILAND'S
BANGKOK AND CHIANG
MAI ARE A BIG SPENDER'S
DREAM COME TRUE

THAILAND IS ALIVE with shopping opportunities. The vibrant capital, Bangkok, offers everything from the sensory overload of crowded markets to squeaky-clean shopping centres complete with piped music, fashion labels and designer prices. Here the choices of transport are as varied as the shopping experiences – from the airconditioned comfort of the BTS Skytrain to the city's smoke-puffing tuk-tuks. Then there's the cooler and more relaxed city of Chiang Mai in Thailand's north – famed for its markets and with plenty to offer the avid shopper.



Traditional baskets are carried past more modern weavings

THE HEART OF BANGKOK'S SHOPPING IS SIAM SQUARE – TAKE THE SKYTRAIN AND DON'T EVEN CONSIDER CROSSING THE MANICALLY BUSY ROADS – WALKWAYS KEEP YOU HIGH ABOVE TRAFFIC AND FUMES

Bangkok

Malls and stores

The Emporium (BTS Phrom Phong), on Thanon Sukhumvit, is the ideal place to shop for designer homewares and fashion. The Central chain has a number of stores in the city that specialise in Thai homewares, while Peninsula Plaza (153 Th Ratchadamri, BTS Ratchadamri) stocks Louis Vuitton, Hermès and Versace.

For Thai and Southeast Asian art and antiques, it's hard to go past River City (Th Yotha, Bangrak). The best Thai silk can be had at Jim Thompson's House (9 Th Suriwong, Silom) or stores in The Emporium and Central. Find silverware shops near The Oriental Hotel (48 Th Oriental, BTS Saphan Taksin). Beware scams when buying jewellery; stick to stores at hotels such as The Dusit Thani, the Bangkok Marriott and the Regent, or shops in River City.

The heart of Bangkok's shopping system is Siam Square. Take the Skytrain to either Chitlom or Siam and don't even consider crossing the manically busy roads. Walkways keep you high above traffic (and fumes) and make getting from A to B simple.

For glittering interiors and piped music, venture to the World Trade Centre, where you'll find jewellery, leather, clothing and the odd souvenir shop. It also houses Zen, Central and Isetan stores. The Gaysorn Plaza, opposite, offers designer fashion, and Japanese department store Sogo in the Amarin Plaza stocks European shoes and accessories, as well as antiques, sculptures and jewellery.

Big-name brands feature heavily in the Siam Discovery Centre and Siam Centre, with names including Levi's, Donna Karan, Kookai and Mambo. Habitat has a store here, as do Bang & Olufsen and make-up giant MAC. On the opposite corner is the seven-floor mall, Mahboonkrong, or simply MBK. The music's loud and the service can be a little brash, but the choice is vast – wallets, belts, jeans, bags, cosmetics, jewellery and travel goods.

On the other side of Th Phayathai is a treasure trove of small shops and boutiques. On Th Phetburi, Pantip Plaza is packed with everything technological – CDs, DVDs, mobile phones, computer software, hard drives, printers, scanners and CD burners.

Markets

You won't get far in Bangkok before stumbling across a market. Locals and in-the-know expats explore the alleys between BTS Chong Nonsi and Th Convent for bags, clothes and shoes.

Street stalls along Sukhumvit start at around 11am and operate until about 10pm, selling all manner of lingerie, T-shirts, games and souvenirs. The footpaths around Th Silom (BTS Sala Daeng) come alive after dark with stalls selling CDs and sarongs.

At the Chatuchak weekend market (BTS Mo Chit), nearly 9000 stalls sell handmade furniture, fighting fish, silk cushions, tableware and plenty more. Polite elbows come in handy for the human bottlenecks, as does a smile during price negotiations.

Pratunam Market, just off Th Ratchadamri, is a great place to buy wholesale clothing, and Nailert (or Nai Loet) Market, opposite, is a smaller version of the weekend Chatuchak markets.

Bangkok's Chinatown is home to the stalls of Sampeng Lane, the Thieves Market (Nakhon Kasem) and the Indian market (Phahurat), which is *the* place to buy in bulk. Goods available include everything from Indian textiles, kitchenware and clothing to toys, plastics of all description, produce and flowers. Excellent sightseeing, sensory and shopping value.

In the evening, there's the Suan Lum Night Bazaar, opposite Lumpini Park, and the infamous Patpong Night Market (amid seedy girlie bars), full of souvenirs and fake watches and clothes.



AS THE SUN SETS, TH CHANG KHLAN COMES ALIVE TO THE SOUNDS AND SIGHTS OF THE CHIANG MAI NIGHT BAZAAR – YOU’LL FIND YOURSELF GOING BACK NIGHT AFTER NIGHT FOR SHOPPING AS MUCH AS SIGHTSEEING



Parasols make a dazzling display in Chiang Mai

Chris Mellow/Conner Planet Images

Chiang Mai

Malls and stores

Kad Suan Kaew (Th Huay Kaew), outside the gated part of the city, is a shopping complex with a branch of Central department store, clothing and shoe shops, and a vast number of smaller market and boutique alleys. The Airport Plaza also offers a broad range of retail options, including the Robinson Department Store and duty-free shopping. For something more esoteric, search the abundance of smaller specialty stores dotted throughout the city.

The riverside area along Th Charoenrat includes Sop Moei Arts, which specialises in hand-woven fabrics. HQ Papermaker, located on Th Samlan, has exceptional handmade paper, while Mengrai Kilns, off Th Arak, offers fine celadon ceramics.

For a leisurely shopping stroll, start at the top of the Tha Phae Gate and make your way along Th Tha Phae towards the river, browsing all the way. Near the gate you’ll find a number of shops selling Thai antiques and giant Buddhas (shipping and handling are arranged on the premises). From there, you’ll pass stores selling everything from silver jewellery, books and herbs to wonderful tribal art and textiles from all over Southeast Asia. If you’re after an excuse to break up the trip with refreshments, stop at one of the many restaurants and cafes along the route.

Markets

The end of Th Tha Phae puts you within striking distance of the Warorot Market and the Lamyai Market. These markets – as well as the streets around Th Wichayanon and Th Praisan – are a maze of stalls and shops that are a hive of activity during daylight hours. Bags, shoes, sarongs, spices, plastics, kitchenware and jewellery can be found by the truckload in this area.

There is also a host of textile shops selling a huge range of Thai fabric and knitwear made into everything from caps to change purses. Buy some fabric and have an outfit made to order, or buy an entire roll and become an importer. Even the footpaths are crammed with stalls selling underwear, jumpers, jeans and bags. You won’t go hungry or thirsty with the selection of 10-baht trolleys selling hot corn on the cob, coconut juice or pad thai.

As the sun sets, Th Chang Khlan comes alive to the sounds and sights of the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar. You’ll find yourself going back night after night for shopping as much as sightseeing. The Night Bazaar runs along Th Chang Khlan from Soi 1, Th Tha Phae to Th Si Donchai, and includes innumerable stalls, malls and pavilions. From silk cushion covers, lamps and clothing to textiles, antiques, Thai artefacts and crafts, silver jewellery and 100-baht CDs, the Night Bazaar has, as they say, something for everyone.

Chiang Mai’s nocturnal shopping options extend to the market that stretches east along Th Tha Phae from the Tha Phae gate every Sunday night. The road is closed to all motorised traffic, and buskers and Hmong women selling intricate silver jewellery wander through the throng of shoppers. On offer here are more local handicraft items, such as earrings, leather wristbands, hand-stitched handbags and clothing. There’s also an abundance of stalls offering freshly squeezed orange juice, grilled seafood and chicken, and sugared strawberries.

* For more information, contact the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), Level 2, 75 Pitt St, Sydney, NSW, phone (02) 9247 7549, www.tourismthailand.org.