

Thailand's Tre

A vibrant blue and gold Thai guardian spirit statue (Kinnara) with multiple arms, set against a golden, textured background. The statue is highly detailed with intricate patterns and colors, including blue, gold, and green. It has a fierce expression and is holding a tall, ornate crown. The background is a golden, textured wall with a repeating pattern of stylized, winged figures.

This Southeast Asian nation is loaded with adventure, shopping opportunities and luxurious accommodations

by Ginger Taggart



asures

From the lapis waters surrounding its islands to the gilded exteriors of its temples to the emerald landscape of its northern hill-tribe territory, Thailand resembles a gem-encrusted treasure chest. Yet the country's real riches lie inside. Thailand is a land brimming with welcoming hosts and landmark life experiences. During 10 remarkable days, I visited four of the country's tourism cornerstones. Here are some of my most treasured memories — and suggestions for how you might make a few of your own.

Bangkok

Any Thailand itinerary is bound to include at least one night in Bangkok. The capital city is Thailand's gateway, distinguishing itself from the rest of the country's restful aura with pulsing nightlife and an extraordinary selection of high-end hotels, spas and shopping destinations.

Bangkok's showpiece is the Grand Palace. The magnificent complex commands attention with golden spires that pierce the downtown skyline. If you go, be sure to visit the Temple of the Emerald

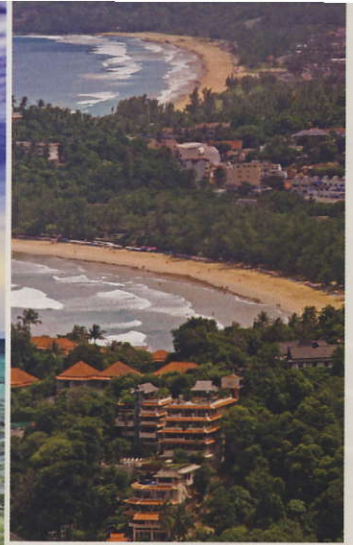
Buddha, Thailand's most sacred site.

My favorite Bangkok attraction was the Damnoen Saduak Floating Market — a collection of vendors selling their wares on water, from individual boats. The market was outside the city, but easily reached with a day tour. After an hour-long bus ride, I boarded a long-tail boat that barely rose above the water's surface as we sped through narrow canals.

Upon my arrival, I was greeted with an explosion of color, spicy aromas and shouts of friendly hawking. My eyes feasted on the



Long-tail boat in a tranquil bay



scene as I drank fresh, sweet coconut milk (purchased from a passing canoe for 30 cents). Boats clogged the buzzing river and overflowed with fruit, souvenirs, camera-clicking tourists and cooking stations. I marveled at women who deftly prepared intricate spring rolls while they paddled through crowded waterways.

If cultural shopping is on

your agenda, visit the museum of Jim Thompson (the American credited with relaunching the Thai silk industry after World War II) and his separate five-story outlet. Here's a tip for serious shoppers: Bring measurements if you need upholstery, draperies or bedspreads. You'll save a bundle on fabulous Thai silk home furnishings and souvenirs.

Phuket

The idyllic islands dotting Thailand's southern coastline resemble a string of pearls, and they've been carefully cultivated to attract visitors. While some prefer less-developed islands, I chose to visit the isle most traveled: Phuket.

Equal in land size to Singapore, Phuket is a full-throttle tourist playground that features scuba diving, sailing, golf, kayaking, spas and miles of sandy shores. Although beach destinations flourish worldwide, what sets Thailand apart is its marriage of island paradise with luxury resorts that are infused with charming hospitality.

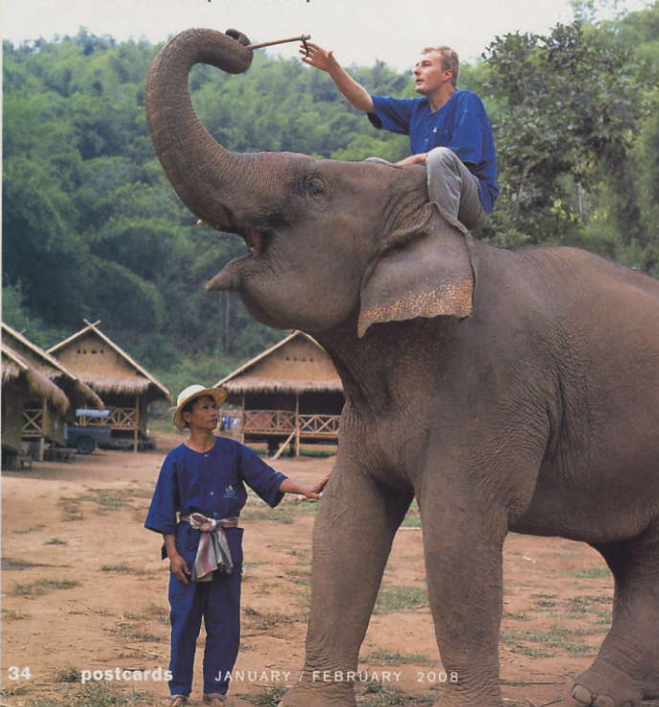
To find your perfect Phuket accommodations, consult your trusted Carlson Wagonlit Travel expert. In a heavily developed region such as Patong, I suggest a resort with private beach access. For ultimate romantic luxury, try the

Banyan Tree. The resort's recreational amenities create the standard high-end impression, but the property earns acclaim for its two hallmarks: sensational accommodations and a soothing spa.

Every one- or two-bedroom Banyan Tree villa is surrounded by a privacy wall, creating an oasis of seclusion for glass-walled bedrooms and other living spaces set amidst scenic lagoons. The ambiance subtly blends nature, romance and sensuality. Infinity swimming pools, incense menus, flower-filled sunken tubs and in-villa massage cabanas add to the resort's allure.

During my visit—merely a daytime site inspection—I sampled the spa for an unforgettable Burmese massage. Slipping off stress as easily as the shoes I left by the door, I entered a double-massage-bed garden pavilion. The setting juxtaposed nature with artful Asian design. An impressive backdrop

Anantara Resort elephant camp



© Anantara Resorts

of flowers, fountains and stone sculptures heightened the masseur's calming influence. While drifting into semiconsciousness, I realized that if relaxation were a living creature, it would call this place home. The Banyan Tree spa has 25 treatment villas, which also are available in overnight packages that include treatments, yoga and meals. I wonder: Is it possible to obtain permanent residency?

Golden Triangle

I forged my centerpiece Thailand memory in the country's northernmost region, dubbed the Golden Triangle. Here, the Mekong River resembles a thick, brown ribbon that barely divides the borders of Thailand, Laos and Burma.

During my time in the Golden Triangle, I savored unique, three-country views from several memorable vantage points. The first was the much-photographed infinity swimming pool of the Anantara Resort. Amidst waters that seemed to flow into the horizon, I peacefully drank in the scenery.

The Anantara's main draw is an elephant camp offering mahout (elephant guide) training for small groups via one- or three-day packages. The experience was phenomenal. I rode a giant elephant bareback through bamboo forests along Burma's coastline. It was a struggle to stay atop the creature as it swam in muddy waters.

After morning training, we trekked to a summit that provided an extraordinary panoramic view.

All resort guests are encouraged to visit the Anantara's elephant camp for animal interaction. On one memorable morning, I assisted with feeding duties. An adorable, 2-month-old baby elephant curiously wrapped its trunk around my forearm, perhaps mistaking it for a piece of bamboo. I was not surprised later, when I learned that a BBC television program included the mahout training experience among its Top 10 Trips of a Lifetime.

For a perfect finale to my Golden Triangle stay, I sampled the Anantara's Cleopatra rose-petal milk bath in a sunken tub upon a private outdoor balcony. I gazed at the stunning surrounding terrain as the sun completed its caress of the horizon.

Chiang Mai

Thailand's second-largest city, Chiang Mai, features a kaleidoscope of activities. Shopping flourishes here in Thailand's handicraft center. My mind — and suitcases — nearly exploded as I visited factories specializing in Thai silk, gems (particularly jade and Burmese rubies), hill-tribe crafts, teakwood carvings, celadon pottery and handmade, Oriental parasols. Bargain hunters should visit the sprawling Night Bazaar, where haggling is an art form.

Next, see the 600-year-old Wat Doi Suthep



Wat Doi Suthep temple in Chiang Mai

temple, which rests on a mountain summit overlooking the city. It offers stunning photo opportunities.

Recreational activities in Chiang Mai include river trips on bamboo rafts, elephant trekking, mountain biking, spas, and massage or cooking courses. I sampled the *Smart Cook* Thai cookery school. I received an educational market visit, a five-course cooking lesson and a take-away recipe book for \$22. The engaging course earned its name as it transformed this kitchen novice into an informed creator of gourmet souvenirs.

It's no surprise that Thailand is often called the Land of Smiles. Visit this treasure-filled destination, and you'll often break into a grin. Moreover, the memories you create will help your smile remain radiant long after you return home.

WE RECOMMEND

Abercrombie & Kent's 12-day Thailand tours visit **Bangkok, Chiang Mai** and **Phuket**. Packages start at \$6,290 per adult and include such unique activities as painting with elephants and exploring Phuket's caves by sea canoe. For more information, contact your Carlson Wagonlit Travel expert.

To put together an independent vacation to Thailand, ask your Carlson Wagonlit Travel expert about **Travel Bound**. Travel Bound offers a range of moderate to luxury hotels and sightseeing opportunities.



— *Ginger Taggart is an extensive world traveler and a frequent contributor to Postcards.*