

Grand Tour ~ Thai High



Smiles, heads bowing, hands in prayer, staff members greet us with the traditional Thai welcome *Sawat-dii kha* (for women), *Sawat-dii khrap* (for men). We are entering the lobby of the hotel reputed to be the best in the world, the Peninsula Hotel in Bangkok for a four day stay.

It's an auspicious time to be in Bangkok— our hotel is filled with royalty including numerous Kings and Queens, the Emperor of Japan and the Sultan of Brunei. Three days of festivities are underway to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the ascension to the throne of the beloved monarch King Bhumibol (King Rama IX). (The ceremonies, the most elaborate in a decade, will culminate in a procession of royal barges past the King's Palace, and the appearance of the golden *Suphannahongsa*, the largest of the royal barges, 148 feet long, manned by 50 oarsmen.)

Stepping out on our balcony we find our friends Don and Mary Kelly next door viewing the city and canal twenty floors below. Mary slices open a strange purple fruit called a mangostein (pure ambrosia!), as I propose we take advantage of the hotel's "Culinary Journey" a progressive dinner through the hotel's restaurant venues for only \$65 a person.

It begins in the Lobby Terrace with a *Crystal*, the hotel's signature cocktail of raspberries and Champagne served in a martini glass accompanied by crisp durian chips and a quartet playing live jazz.

Our next stop is *Thiptara*, the hotel's waterfront Thai restaurant where we savor a Pomelo Chicken Salad with Arugula and watch the festively lit ferry boats motoring back and forth across the canal from the hotel dock.

“How to describe this unlikely view?” we wonder.

“Picture the Four Seasons Wailea resort in Maui perched on the Grand Canal in Venice, with the lighted skyline of Manhattan in the distance.”

We are escorted into *Jester's* which specializes in fusion cuisine, for dramatically presented main courses of Seared Fish on Asparagus with Kaffir Lime Leaf Emulsion, then finish our feast outdoors at the River Café with an elaborate dessert buffet, the highlights of which are Chocolate Mousse served in Chinese soup spoons and topped with fresh Currants, Ginger Cream Brulée, and Earl Grey Double Chocolate Cake.

The next morning, the River Café offers an inviting, luxurious breakfast buffet, a stunning array of all the usual fruits and breakfast dishes plus Miso and several other soups, a pitcher of luscious banana smoothies, flaky whole wheat croissants served with wildflower honey dripping slowly from a honey comb, steamer baskets of dim sum (steamed dumplings with dipping sauces) and various shrimp and vegetable stir-fries. We ask ourselves, “Why do we eat the same boring breakfast foods when dishes like these are so much lighter and healthier?”

In a hotel cooking class we learn the flavors in Thai cuisine are balanced to maintain harmony in a dish. Thus the mildly hot sharpness of chiles and spices in a curry dish is toned down with the sweetness of coconut cream, which also enhances the tastes of other delicate ingredients and herbs such as lemon grass and fresh mint.

Another great culinary discovery is the elegant pre-set menu served at *Sala Rim Naam*, next door in the Oriental Hotel Spa, followed by a spectacular performance by traditional Thai dancers.

Over the next few days we take a hour-long private tour of the klongs (canals) in a long-tail boat spewing a rooster tail flume of water behind amid waving people in stilt houses, Buddhist temples, market boats filled with fruits and vegetables. And, for shopping, we take advantage of the hotel's fleet of air-conditioned Mercedes with driver for only \$28 an hour.

On our last night in Bangkok we indulge our curiosity about the brightly lit dome on a tall rooftop across the canal. The concierge tells us it is the *Sirocco* Restaurant and its famous *Sky Bar* with a view of all Bangkok. Exiting the elevator on the 63rd floor, we step into the most astonishingly exotic dining venue we've ever seen, greeted by live music from a floating bandstand. The round bar, eerily perched out on the edge of the building, is lit from within and continually changes color.

“It's like Batman's Gotham City—surreal and sci-fi!” says Mary, a fantasy buff. And, indeed, while eating dinner we see large bats soaring around the dome—Batman's Lair with real bats!

The setting becomes even more other-worldly as thousands of tiny hot air balloons carrying lit candles floats past the building, a finale to the King's celebration. We marvel at the graciousness of everyone we meet, and what is most astonishing is how the face of every Thai lovingly lights up when they mention “My King.”

So, is the Bangkok Peninsula the best in the world? Probably so! We'll continue our search and keep you posted.

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