



Uptown whirl, Downtown Bangkok

# A tale of two Thailands

Sky-top restaurants, sleek new hotels - seven years after the crash, Thailand is booming. **Austin Bunn** reports on the country's exhilarating, unsettling growth spurt

ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF Bangkok's outrageously busy **Pantip Plaza** shopping mall - in a riot of video-game demos, ringing mobile phones and computer gear bonging to life - a Buddhist monk wants my advice about an iBook. 'Is this a good buy?' he asks, in his indelibly Thai-orange robe and sandals. When I register surprise (are monks even allowed to shop?), his face beams with delight. Buddhism teaches that the source of human suffering is our attachment to the impermanent, like

Windows 98 or those laptops that have a nipple in the keyboard. Though Pantip Plaza is a giant altar to the transient, the problem isn't buying, the monk explains to me. It's becoming attached to what you own. 'The pain comes from wanting to have, wanting to be,' he says, laying one hand on my arm and the other on his new, gleaming machine. But won't the computer distract him from his meditation? He answers, 'Don't worry - it won't have internet.'

Seven years ago, Thailand had the dubious distinction of serving as the pin

that popped the Asian economic bubble. A roaring real estate market in the 1990s transformed Bangkok, christening new malls like Pantip at a fevered pace. But developers overspent and the investment firms that supported them racked up staggering debts. In 1997, after forcibly closing 16 finance companies, the Thai government became the first in the region to call in the International Monetary Fund for a bailout, a move that kicked the Thai baht (and, soon enough, the rest of Asia's currencies) into free fall. Afterwards, abandoned

projects - skyscrapers and block-long shopping districts - littered Bangkok with the remains of this boom-era arrogance: eerie concrete shells lined with exposed steel rods like raw nerve endings. But Pantip, long surrounded by these husks, is now one of the anchors of the city's audacious 'crucible of construction', a run of hotels, shopping complexes, residential and office buildings in the Ploenchit and Ratchadamri roads area. Pantip, now finished, is one of four gargantuan construction efforts (vacancies are at an all-time low), along with 40 upscale apartment building projects in the core of the city and a new \$2.7 billion international airport.

The culture of the crash has come to an end and in its place Thailand has found a way to square its boundless energy with its undeniable poise. A decade ago, tourists came for an almost Disneyland-in-Asia experience, a taste of the bubble; now resorts are targeting sophisticated visitors who want to see beyond flashy exoticism to Thailand's traditional (and everyday) elegance. Conservative prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a former policeman turned telecom tycoon, has cracked down on drug dealers and on Bangkok's roiling nightlife. He has also helped guide the country to one of the highest growth rates of Southeast Asia (6.7 per cent in 2003) and reignited the stock market. Tourism to northern Thailand, considered the Napa Valley of the country, is climbing. The only potential brake to this upswing is the fear of terrorism, as Muslim extremists have made violent incursions in the remote, southern part of the country.

But in Bangkok, the lived experience of this economic resurgence is the sense that the city is transforming beneath your feet. The week I arrive, an outdoor restaurant named **Sirocco** has opened on the vertiginous roof of a skyscraper left unoccupied since the crash. 'It's been six or seven years since there's been anything in the building,' says Deepak Ohri, the general manager of the restaurant. 'Now we've got a Mediterranean restaurant, a whisky bar, a champagne bar and oyster bar all on the 63rd floor and we're doing twice the business we thought.' At that height, the city goes quiet below and lays out like one more delicacy on the tables, next to the steaming Phuket lobster and

tuna roulade. Sirocco is booked solid for weeks so **Sky Bar**, a glass outcropping perched at the very edge of the roof, serves as the observation deck. They say the sublime is the beautiful plus fear. No doubt: the strongest dish on the menu at Sirocco is delirious, intoxicating vertigo. But this place appears to me to be the pinnacle of Thailand's new soaring ambition: to overcome the failures of the past by embracing transience with possibility - single malt and lamb served al fresco in the sky.

Historically, Thailand is the only country among its neighbours never to

and the various film adaptations of Anna Leonowens' memoir of her experiences as a governess at the Siamese court are considered insulting and have been banned here since 1956. 'And that was the Jodie Foster version!'

The 35-year-old Edwards, then, is something of a provocateur in Bangkok, part of the team that designed one of the city's youngest, hottest and least traditionally 'Thai' nightspots, the one-and-a-half-year-old **Bed Supperclub**. Bed is a hovering fuselage far from the hotels and tourist zone. Diners and cocktail drinkers (typically, Bangkok's



have been colonised, largely because its rulers skillfully negotiated treaties with both England and France and purposefully westernised the country. Thailand's beloved kings learned English and how to drive on the wrong side of the road. All along, Thailand has marketed its traditions well - almost too well. 'Westerners come here looking for massage spas, smiling girls in silk wraps, and all the swoopy roofs on the houses,' Bangkok-based designer Scott Edwards told me. 'And for the most part, Thailand has built up a "Thailand" that is precisely what the tourists came to see.' But if Thailand exoticises itself for tourism - by far the country's largest industry - the country keeps the caricatures in check. 'Last year, the police found a guy selling a DVD of one of the versions of *The King and I* and they threw him in jail,' my friend (and Bangkok resident) Willi Pascual told me. Thais deeply respect the monarchy,

young entrepreneurs and high-end travellers) lie on immaculate white beds while they survey the *Barbarella*-like interior. It's a spectacular, Eero Saarinen-inflected environment that would be 'impossible to build in North America', says Edwards, because of the strict building regulations in the United States. It's the same with Sirocco, whose low, translucent railing is the only thing standing between you and a 63-floor drop. 'We wanted to say to people that Bangkok architecture doesn't have to be self-referential,' explains Edwards. 'We wanted to prove you didn't need the swoopy roof.'

THE MOST OBVIOUS EFFECTS of the strong economy can be found along Thailand's pristine but vulnerable coastlines, where dirt-road fishing communities are making the leap to resort destinations inside mere months. Leaving behind the