

Artful lodges

Thais are reinventing their capital's accommodation scene, offering smaller, more intimate hotels where their creativity can run free
Text and photographs by Leisa Tyler

BANGKOK, THE FRIENDLIEST OF WORLD capitals, has long been renowned for its hospitality. The cordial and generous treatment that its guests invariably receive is the reason why increasing numbers of visitors flock to the city every year.

It is also a city that constantly reinvents itself, continuing to surprise even those who visit often. There is no better example of this than in the design movement that has swept through the capital in recent years, and which is now making its presence felt in the accommodation scene.

Spurred on by the city's growing multiculturalism, several innovative Thais are reinventing its lodging scene by creating designer hotels, modelled on European-style pensions and B&Bs. With only a handful of rooms per property, these hotels are small and intimate, while their highly individual designs encapsulate the ambience of the city, past and present. The result is a more authentic and personalised experience for visitors.

Gobe Boonang pioneered the trend in 2004 when she opened Ibrik Resort by the River, a rustic three-room property perched on the edge of the Chao Phraya River. "When I travel I make a point of staying in B&Bs. They are so much more intimate and allow you more of an insight into a culture than big hotels do."

Right: A room at Seven. Opposite: Wat Arun temple viewed from the Sky Bar at the Arun Residence.



The past two years have witnessed an explosion of small boutique hotels in the city. Pysin Sanguanpiyapand's sleek six-room property, Seven, is the latest. The Thai-born political scientist had no previous experience in the hospitality industry, but having spent many years living abroad, she felt that

she had a good idea of what foreigners would want.

"Many of my European friends just don't like staying in big hotels," she says. "They are fine for work, but for holidays many people want something more personal — funkier and more like a friend's house."

Seven

"I wanted to merge the old world and the new: Thai but with a European twist," says Sanguanpiyapand of her new, six-room hotel, converted from an old town house in the heart of Sukhumvit Road. Employing the services of some of the country's most celebrated designers, including Komsuree Komintre and landscape designer Piyachanok Wijarn (who also did Leonardo DiCaprio's boutique hotel in Belize), she has achieved a very East-meets-West look. Seven colours in seven rooms (the seventh room being the lobby) correspond to the seven colours of the Thai week, but each room is made contemporary with the inclusion of LCD screens, wireless Internet, rain showers, private balconies and iPod docks, while floor-to-ceiling Eastern-inspired murals add another blaze of colour.

Even better are the perks, including free drinks and snacks from the rooftop bar (great for watching the Skytrain zoom past as the sun slips behind the surrounding skyscrapers). Guests are also given a mobile phone with pre-paid simcard on check-in. Stored in the memory are details for the best restaurants and bars in town (Pilin's boyfriend is Mason Florence, publisher of the city's hippest monthly magazine, *Bangkok 101*) so you'll never be short of places to party. **3/15 Sukhumvit 31; tel: [660] 2662-0951; www.sleepatseven.com; Introductory rates from US\$75.**

Arun Residence

Piyanuj Ruckpanich says she was stunned by the view when she came across the dilapidated Thai-style house that is now Arun Residence. It's easy to see why. Rising above the Chao Phraya, it has a bird's-eye view of 19th century Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn. During the day the river bustles with river taxis and barges plying their way back and forth; at night it falls quiet and the golden lights of the temple sparkle across the water. Watching the sunset from the Sky Bar is a magical experience.

The five rooms are cosy and rustic in burnt yellow and wood, all with big windows that overlook the water. Splurge on the Arun Suite, an attic room with a



spacious balcony and sublime views of the temple. Wake up to freshly squeezed orange juice and perfect scrambled eggs. But bring your earplugs — the river taxis start at 5.30am and the suite's thin wooden walls do little to stifle the sound of their buzzing engines.

The hotel is perfectly located for first-timers to the capital — only steps from Wat Po, the Grand Palace and Pak Klong Talat, Bangkok's famous flower market. **36-38 Soi Prato Nok Young, Maharat Road; tel: [660] 2221-9158; www.arunresidence.com; Double rooms from US\$95.**

Ibrik Resort in the City

For her second hotel, Boonang chose a dashing white house tucked into a small lane off Sathorn Road. Ideally situated next to a BTS stop, it's close to the action but also quiet enough to be a retreat. Three big, airy rooms, called Ruby, Amethyst and Emerald, are stylish and cosy with four-poster beds, chaise lounges, Japanese bathtubs and floor-to-ceiling windows (Emerald even has its own outdoor sitting area — lovely for breakfasts). But it does not have English-speaking staff and could use a few more modern amenities. Also, keep the hotel's number at hand as very few taxi drivers know where it is.

235/16 South Sathorn Road; tel: [660] 2211-3470; www.ibrikresort.com; Double rooms from \$US110.

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