

The City of Angels



Bangkok is one big, crazy city. But as *Norah Casey* discovers, beneath the chaotic veneer you'll find beautiful people, amazing food and the most stunning of sights.



Bangkok is moving fast and everything bar the traffic is surging outwards and upwards.

The city sprawls to over eight million people and my sense is that city planners are few and far between. Futuristic skyscrapers erupting from the sprawling streets seem incongruous in a place teeming with the most revered, sacred spaces of the ancient orient. So it is that you can wander through the most beautiful of timeless temples while gazing upwards at the gleaming, towering office blocks that symbolise growing economic prosperity at the heart of Thailand.

I first went to Bangkok in my twenties when the city was dealing with an influx of displaced elephants and mahouts from the logging industry in Chang Mai. It was surreal to see these large matriarchs, so used to the lush forests, holding up multiple lanes of traffic on the Sukhumvit, oblivious to the cacophony of honking horns. The colours, sounds, smells and the bizarreness

of the city were overwhelming.

Tuktuk drivers pushed picture menus of unspeakable things (almost all involving ping pong balls) and every journey was a near-death experience, ducking and diving around the mad traffic. Bangkok is the second most dangerous city for driving in the world after Libya. In more recent years my husband Richard and I were back and forth to Bangkok in 2010 meeting various Thai publishers and we connected with a wonderful group of Irish ex-pats who had set up the Thai Irish Chamber of Commerce (TICC). There is nothing better in a strange city than having a strong Murphie to help navigate through the tourist veneer to the underbelly of a city. This time I was invited to speak at the inaugural Asia Ireland Awards hosted by Chamber President Paul Scales and the Irish Ambassador to Bangkok, Brendan Rogers. The first recipient was an amazing woman, fellow Dubliner Susan Whelan, the CEO of Leicester City Football Club and Senior Executive Vice President at King Power in Bangkok. While I was there I also spoke to the Irish women's network co-founded by Sharon Jones – a constant companion and guide during my stay. On one memorable day I found myself at her

son's school on the outskirts of Bangkok speaking to the toughest of audiences – some entrepreneurial 11-year-olds of all nationalities who pitched eco-friendly robots to me, *Dragon's Den* style.

CITY OF ANGELS

Thai people tend to shorten words and phrases which is why Bangkok came to be called Great City of Angels, the first four words of the unpronounceable 45-word-long ceremonial name for the city. And it is angelic. There are many sides to Bangkok, so despite the urgency of the crowds and the cars, Thai people are more serene than stressed. Greetings come in the form of the graceful *wai* and the words of welcome *sawatdee*. The lifestyle is also relaxed. A watchword for Thai people is *sabai*, being happy or relaxed. To add emphasis, you are likely to hear *sabai sabai* – roughly translated meaning tranquil or chilled. While getting lost in the *soi* (streets) of Bangkok is a regular occurrence, staying chilled is the only response. This time my schedule was as crazy as Bangkok and thanks to the local Irish, I did more in a few days than on all of my other trips combined.

So, here's how to do Bangkok at speed.

BEST OF BANGKOK

1. The Royal Temples

Bangkok has amazing temples (over 400) and beautiful, historic, monumental palaces that are a must on any visit. I have done the main ones many times and I still find them awe-inspiring. On the itinerary should definitely be the Grand Palace and opposite it on the left bank of Chao Phraya River, the magnificent sparkling spires of Wat Arun, covered in porcelain and colourful glass. The distinctive Temple of Dawn is magical at nighttime when the lit spire glows over the river. Google Bangkok and your screen will be flooded with images of the former home of the Thai King, The Grand Palace, built back in 1782 and the most renowned and revered landmark in Bangkok. Expect to lose hours in the compound in a maze of Buddhist sculptures, mosaics and temples dating back to the foundation of the city. The highlight and most sacred being the 14th century Wat Phra Kaew, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

2. The Reclining Buddha

The 46-metre-long giant reclining gold leaf Buddha is well worth visiting at Wat Pho, one of the largest and oldest temples and home to the original Thai massage. Wat Pho has the largest collection of Buddha images in Thailand and houses the national headquarters and centre of education of traditional Thai medicine and massage. Courses in Thai massage are held in Wat Pho and it is worth taking the time and premium price to experience the best Thai massage at this historically significant place.

3. Floating Markets

The floating markets, made famous by Roger Moore's James Bond in *The Man with the Golden Gun*, with boats piled high with exotic fruit and overlaid with fresh vegetables, are really worth visiting. Top of the list for visitors is Damnoen Saduak but you can also catch this magical spectacle at Amphawa, and Klong Lat Mayom.

4. Jim Thompson's House

The mysterious disappearance of architect, designer and silk magnate Jim Thompson on a hiking trek in 1967 makes a visit to his house another must do on the list. Minutes from the madness of central Bangkok, this peaceful place will transport you back in time. Thompson's home is actually six separate teakwood Thai houses on stilts set among tropical foliage on the Saen Saeb Canal. Thompson's passion for Thai art shines through with Chinese porcelain, ancient scrolls, sculptures and many other treasured artifacts on display.

5. The 'Red Light' District

The seedy side of Bangkok is never too far from the surface and for a slice of Bangkok



Golden Buddhas



The mysteriously disappeared silk magnate Jim Thompson's art-filled house

life take a trip to Patpong where a night market predominantly selling fake brands shares space with illicit bars and night clubs selling sex shows, including the infamous cola bottle and ping pong shows. These two parallel roads, next to Silom Road, Patpong 1 and 2 are big tourist attractions so beware of rip-offs. The web is littered with tales of inebriated backpackers who were caught in various scams. But then, in my opinion, maybe those who frequent the demeaning sex shows deserve to be ripped off. A similar, seedy vibe can be found at Nana Plaza and the smaller and tamer Soi Cowboy which boasts over 40 go-go bars (close to BTS Asoke and MRT Sukhumvit).

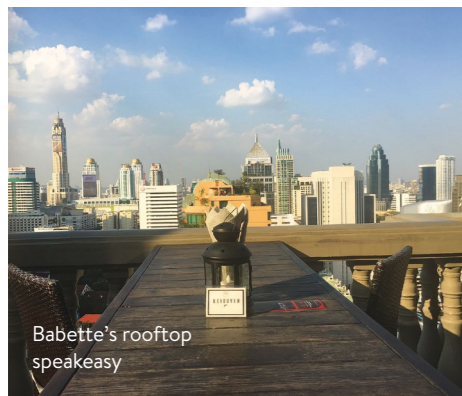
6. Khao San Road

Backpackers flock to Bangkok or more specifically Khao San Road, a crazy strip of bars, market stalls and plentiful cheap accommodation. This time I took a hasty walk through the crowds from one end to the other and not much has changed. Khao San comes alive at night and everything is on sale, from platters of crunchy crickets to sidewalk tattoos, on-street massage, buckets of Thai whiskey (ridiculously cheap),

knock off jeans and t-shirts and hordes of western 20-something-year-olds who mistakenly believe they are experiencing the real Bangkok. Worth a visit but not worth lingering too long.

7. Thai Massage

A Thai massage should be a daily treat with perhaps a foot massage in the late afternoon after a day's sight-seeing. Steer clear of the Khao San Road mass massage beds and head for a local shop. They're plentiful, usually on many floors with foot massage at street level and pressure-point, full-body Thai massage on upper floors. For just €8 for 60 minutes of limb and body loosening you will feel rejuvenated and ready for the next adventure. If you want a step up, try one of the Asia Herb Association places in the city where you will pay a little bit more (circa



Babette's rooftop speakeasy

€13 when I was there) for a guaranteed first-class experience. asiaherbassociation.com

8. Bird's Eye Views

Sky-high dining is the thing to do in Bangkok (I prefer low rise myself). After much debating between the locals who all have their favourite vertiginous venues we headed for the tallest building and the 360-degree rotating viewpoint of the Sky Bar, the 63-storey roof top bar made famous by *The Hangover: Part II* at Lebua State Tower (Lebua.com/sky-bar). The sunset over the river was stunning when I eventually opened my eyes and the Hendricks was definitely better than the movie-inspired Hangoverini cocktail. You can also enjoy the Bangkok horizon at Moon Bar on the 61st floor of the Banyan Tree and, for a more laid back



The Floating Markets of Bangkok

drink and great live music, head to Cloud 47 at the top of the United Center office tower. My own favourite of the trip was Babette's on the 19th floor of Hotel Muse on Langsuan Road, which has great steaks and a real twenties vibe. Afterwards, we headed up to the rooftop Speakeasy for a cocktail with panoramic high-rise views. hotelmusebangkok.com

10. Chatuchak Weekend Market

Markets are great in Bangkok and the massive Chatuchak weekend market is a magnet for over 100,000 visitors weekly. It's overwhelming but well worth the trip with nearly 10,000 stalls selling everything from pets to antique, crafts, furniture, books and food and much more besides.

11. MBK Centre

A trip to the gigantic, eight-storey, low-price MBK, also called Mahboonkrong, in the Siam area next to the National Stadium BTS, will take hours. Most tourists get lost in this shopping Mecca for designer fakes,

cheap souvenirs and all manner of electronic goods. Brush up on your haggling skills and be prepared to be subsumed by the lure of shiny tat. It's infectious.

12. The Flower Market

I would move to Bangkok for the flowers alone. The local women I was with were stocking up on beautiful roses (50 for a euro) and gorgeous lilies as we wandered through the fragrant, frantic home of all things botanical. The flower market on Maharat Road, also called Pak Klong Talad, comes alive in the early hours of the morning. The distinctive Buddha offerings of white and orange flower chains were piled high as all generations from children to grandparents patiently threaded the delicate, tiny flowers for worshippers.

13. Lumpini Park

Lumpini Park is Bangkok's Central Park and a great place to leave the city without leaving the city. Catch one of the evening dance workouts or early morning Tai Chi.



Everything's for sale at the Bangkok markets

9. Visit Chinatown

My new-found companions from the Irish women's group in Bangkok took me on a nighttime tuktuk tour. There were six of us spread over three tuktuks screeching through the crazy traffic as we hurtled towards Yaowarat, the pulsing heart of the city's Chinatown. It was the last night of the Chinese New Year and the narrow walkways lined with street-side restaurants and packed stalls were crowded with families. It was one of the highlights of my trip. Yaowarat road is full-on. Horns blaring amid a cacophony of bang snaps, noisy toys designed to frighten away the fearsome New Year dragon, Nian.

Glaring neon signs at odds with the bright red Chinese lanterns and festive bunting, competing street-food vendors steaming, frying and basting all manner of strange meats with every nook and cranny filled with rickety tables and folding chairs for waiting diners. The street food is fantastic here, we ate pad thai for a few euros,

slurped steamed coconut puddings for dessert and bought pineapple on sticks to eat on the go. We weaved our way along narrow paths lined with trestle tables packed with hongbao, red envelopes for 'lucky money' given to children for Chinese New Year. I bought a pile to take home for my son Dara who loved that tradition from our time in China.

During the day you can dive into the many labyrinthine laneways to bag a bargain. Head to Sampeng in Soi Wanit 1 for a real slice of flea market life and expect to get lost for an hour or so.

If you don't fancy going by tuktuk, get to Chinatown by the Chao Phraya River Express and get off Ratchawong Pier or use the underground (MRT) to Hualamphong station.



Chinatown – a real high point



16. Tat Bat (alms giving)

I got up very early one morning and headed out onto the streets to witness for the first time the Buddhist tradition of Tak Bat the morning alms-giving to the saffron-robed monks who head out from the temples usually between 5am and 7am. This is well worth the early morning start. The monks walk barefoot in single file with the most senior monk going first, each carrying a large silver bowl. There is a serenity and beauty to the ritual of the giving of rice and other food gifts by lay people, many of whom get up early to cook the offering. The procession passes along rows of people kneeling, head bowed in humility waiting to place the rice silently in the monks' alms bowl. It is a deeply meaningful religious interaction and is central to the core Buddhist belief in giving back and gaining merit for the afterlife. For their part the monks return to the temple to share out the

offerings, eating this first meal of the day in silence. I just observed the spectacle as only the spiritual should take part in this tradition. Unfortunately, some tourists don't take the time to understand the rules of this ritual and inadvertently show disrespect. Some 95 per cent of Thai people practice Theravada Buddhism, more a spiritual way of life than a religion. Senior monks are highly revered in Thailand, you'll see pictures everywhere, on street stalls, cafes even our tuktuk driver had many adorning the walls of his carriage. Make a plan to get up early, it really is worth it. You can see the monks almost everywhere in the early morning but for guaranteed viewing head to the beautiful marble temple of Wat Benchamabophit in the Dusit district where the monks head out around 6am onto Nakhon Pathom road.



The unique tradition of Tat Bat

You can stroll around marveling at the park's resident water monitor lizards (crocodile-like creatures but non-meat eaters!) or row a boat on the lake.

14. Tuktuks, Trains & Motorbikes

If you want to avoid sitting in the permanent rush hour traffic, then take the Bangkok



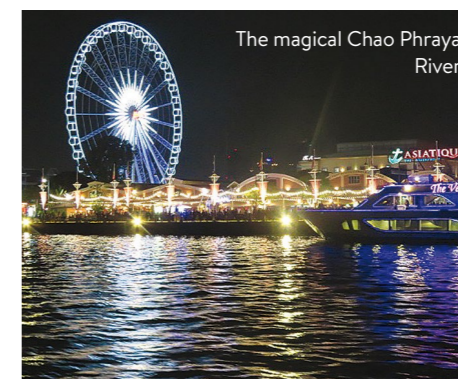
Take a tuktuk

Mass Transit System otherwise known as the BTS Skytrain. It's really easy to use, cheap, efficient and air-conditioned. Once you've mastered it you will never venture forth in a car or at least limit taxi journeys to and from Skytrain stops. There is also an underground MRT which links from the train station at Hua Lamphong all the way north to Chatachak. Locals will jump on the back of a motorbike for cheap and quick traffic dodging journeys but you'll be taking your life in your hands. Tuktuks are fun, worth doing once, but not that convenient for long journeys. Agree a price beforehand and hold on tight.

15 Take a River Cruise

Cruising the Chao Phraya River is magical at night even more so when you glide gracefully in a beautiful restored wooden rice barge, past the luminous spectacles of the city's glittering architectural gems. My companion for the evening was Mayo woman Marion Walsh Hedouin, the VP for Marketing and

Public Relations at Minor Hotels based in Bangkok. She cut her PR teeth working for six years with celebrity chef Alain Ducasse and is an incredible business woman. Hers is a truly global family. Her French husband Steve works 5,000 miles away in Dubai commuting as often as possible, while she juggles being mum to two small children with her high-powered role with one of the most prestigious international hotel groups (owner of Anantara, Four Seasons, St Regis to name but a few). We boarded the Manohra Cruise from the beautiful Anantara Bangkok Riverside and settled into two hours of fine dining and great conversation as we floated along the River of Kings. This is a feast of the senses with the timeless wonders of Bangkok stretched out over the riverside while inhaling the scents of lemongrass and lime and the tingling tastes of Thai cooking. A definite must do if you're visiting the city. manohracruises.com; bangkok-riverside.anantara.com



The magical Chao Phraya River

to get around. My corner executive suite was spacious and had a bath with a stunning view of the city, a great walk-in wardrobe, fast wi-fi and a well-equipped desk which meant I comfortably stayed in touch with the office. Best of all, a small little red elephant adorned the pristine white duvet when I arrived so I was already a little in love with the ethos of the hotel. I checked in effortlessly at the executive level on the 24th floor which is also home for breakfast and complimentary sundowners. The Diplomat Bar in the expansive three floor atrium lobby had great music and a buzzy atmosphere – I know because a group of us Irish took it over one night! This is an urban hotel with lots of extras – a larger than usual spa (Seasons), a well equipped gym, roof top running track, two tennis courts, a neo-classical Chinese restaurant and KiSara, a traditional Japanese restaurant with teppanyaki tables. The Conrad team was, as always, super efficient and friendly from the front desk staff to those that served us the night of the gala dinner. It's just right in so many ways. **III**

Price for a double room for two at the time of going to press was €135 per night. Check the website for prices. Conradhotels3.hilton.com



Poolside at The Conrad

17. Stay at the Conrad

I did and it was the perfect spot for my hectic, action-packed few days. The Conrad is very close to the Irish Embassy (right across the road) and was the venue for the main reason for my visit – guest speaker at the inaugural Asia Ireland Business Awards Dinner. The Phoen Chit BTS Station, was just a short walk away so it was really easy

Cooking *with* Poo

The best experience of Bangkok was in one of the city's more notorious slums cooking with a woman called Poo.

Cooking with Poo is the unlikely name of a fantastic cooking experience with an inspirational woman from the slums of Bangkok. Her real name is Saiyuud Diwong, but she goes by the pet name Poo, short for Chompoo which means rose apple in Thai. Poo grew up in Bangkok's largest and most notorious slum, Klong Toey (also spelled Khlong Toei), a square mile of reclaimed swamp-land that is home to over 100,000 people. She eked out a living working long hours cooking street food, but the price of rice rocked in 2007 forcing her out of that meagre existence.

A local customer and fan of her food worked for an Australian charity and along with some friends helped to set her up with cookery classes. With no English, and just the tiny front room of her house, the school has become world famous even if it was for all the wrong reasons initially. Her book *Cooking with Poo* won the world's oddest book title in 2012 with newspaper column inches devoted to the unlikely Thai cook book to receive the dubious honour. The publicity paid off however, and some time later Jamie Oliver posted the cover of the book on Instagram. *Cooking with Poo* became a bestseller and Poo herself headed off on publicity tours in Australia and Britain where she cooked with Jamie and now features on his YouTube Chanel.

Poo is a remarkable entrepreneur who has overcome huge hurdles in her life including a fire a few years ago that all but destroyed her dream. Her school was rebuilt next door to her house in Klong Toey and she employs a small army of local people. Her success has also sparked other women to launch their own home-based enterprises which Poo sells at the end of each class.

The day begins with a pick-up in an air-conditioned van next to Emporium, which is beside to Phrom Phong BTS station.

First stop is the Klong Toey Market where we met the smiling, no-nonsense Poo, who was as excited about the tour as though it were her first time. My advice is to skip breakfast before the trip to Klong Toey Market because this is a full-on assault of the senses. Park your western sensitivities at the door and dive right in.

There was a kerfuffle at the entrance as a man tried to weigh five live chickens, which I thought would be impossible, but he did it and reached a price with the disgruntled buyer. Stacked high around him were tiny wooden crates packed with more chickens waiting a similar fate. As we wandered through the tables were laden with overflowing basins of insects. Poo shouted down to show me a horned bat – a tiny black creature, obviously a delicacy. Within seconds she was pointing out the hundreds of frogs jumping and squirming under nets with a stoic, weathered man skinning them alive on the slab.

My eyes were just adjusting to the horror when she whirled me around to see crates of catfish wriggling and fighting for air and, next to them, bright yellow plastic tubs of eels wriggling for freedom. The meat cleaver sliced mercilessly to separate heads from tails as women haggled over the fattest and longest and the right price.

A constant steam of runners, pulling huge baskets to replenish the stalls, fight for space with the motorbikes and dawdling customers so dodging and weaving between gaps in the stalls becomes an art form.

It was a relief to get to the vegetables and mounds of watermelons and I lingered as long as possible at the sweet-smelling flower stalls because as we delved further into the labyrinth of passageways we hit the sounds of the fierce chopping of meat and the stench and the heat became overpowering.



The charismatic Poo

This is inner city Bangkok with not a tourist in sight and without Poo I would never have ventured in. The prices were a tiny fraction of the supermarkets and my companion Sharon stocked up on strawberries, vegetables, freshly made spring rolls and homemade sauces for that night's speech to a gathering of business women at the Ambassador's residence.

Poo's kitchen is small and functional and she takes 12 students every day, six days a week. Being in this part of Bangkok so close to the high rise office blocks and five-star hotels is surreal. So close and yet miles away from what most visitors experience in Bangkok. Over the course of a few hours, in aprons emblazoned with I Cooked With Poo and I Liked It, we chopped chilies, holy basil and coriander, tore lime leaves, sliced galangal and mashed up spices to create heavenly, aromatic food. We cooked up a storm – coconut soup with chicken (*tom kha gai*), pomelo salad (*yam som o*), pad thai and sampled my absolute favourite, mango with sticky rice.

She's a charismatic teacher, scolding with a smile when you get it wrong (often thumbs up when you get it right). She's a beacon of hope and success in this part of the world and it was a great experience in so many ways to take part in her little school. A word of advice: Only book directly with Poo on her website, she is struggling with charlatans trying to dupe tourists out of money who think they are booking with her. The cost is 1,500 Thai Baht (circa €40). cookingwithpoo.com



Flying in style

So what's it like flying business class with the world's top airline? Read on to discover a whole new world of travel.



The best part about being a travel writer is the amazing places you get to experience, the worst part is often the journey to get there. So the idea of faster planes has always appealed to me.

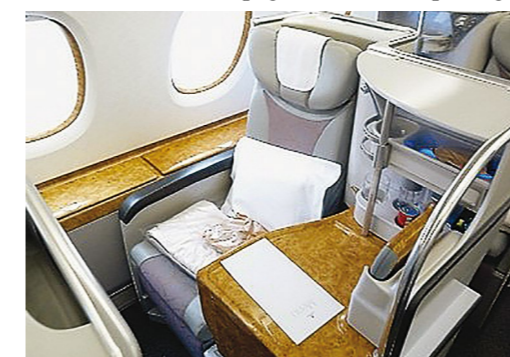
Unless by some miracle you are travelling front of plane. Then quite frankly I find it hard to disembark. Emirates Business Class could easily outdo other airlines' first class experience. Last year, Emirates was awarded Best Airline in the World by Skytrax and it's a four-time winner. The business class experience starts from the moment you are picked up by your personal chauffeur. On arrival at the airport, stress free check-in, fast-track passes, and luxurious lounges make for a seamless transition from airport arrival to airplane boarding. I was flying Dublin direct to Dubai on a Boeing 777-300 and then onwards to Bangkok on the luxurious A380.

The pampering began on board with a glass of chilled Champagne to ease the pre-flight

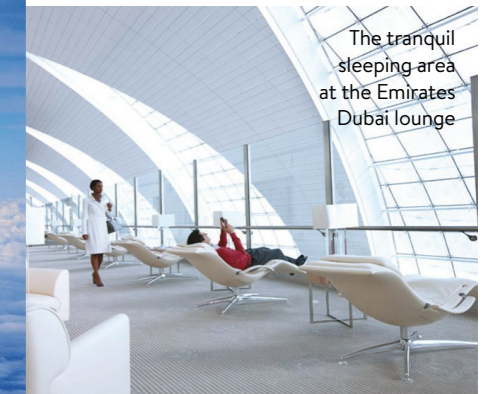
nerves. And as I settled into the comfortable privacy of my own little business class pod, complete with personal mini-bar and plush seats with inbuilt massage settings, there was just enough time to choose which movies to watch on the world class ICE entertainment system (the screens are four times bigger than in economy). Emirates is justly proud of ICE – it has won the world's best inflight entertainment system for 12 consecutive years.

The staff were attentive and efficient, immediately demonstrating the various features of my personal space from where to store my bags and shoes, plug in my laptop and recline my bed fully when I wanted to sleep. After take-off, the wi-fi was available free of charge for the first hour, just enough time to clear the emails before settling into Bridget Jones' Baby (finally) and a wonderful lunch of smoked chicken and beetroot salad, followed by the chef's recommendation of the traditional aromatic and flavoursome lamb machbous served with cucumber raita, perfectly matched with a glass of robust 2007 Château Langoa Barton from Bordeaux.

When it was time to sleep, one of the cabin crew fitted a mattress to my seat adding an extra layer of plushness to the bed which was a nice touch. I slept really well on-board (which never happens) beneath the starry night-sky of the pioneering mood lighting which eases your body clock into the local time zone.



Top class food in the sky



The tranquil sleeping area at the Emirates Dubai lounge



A chic bar at 30,000 feet

A word about the super deluxe Emirates amenity kit which is a significant step above other airlines, presented in a lovely silver wash bag complete with a range of Bvlgari eau de cologne, face and body lotions and a range of toiletries.

At Dubai, Emirates has a number of lounges with the enormous business class lounge space offering a series of seating areas. Full bar, Champagne, premium wines from the Emirates cellars and the continuous service at hot and cold buffet stations mean you can eat whatever dishes suit your in-transit time zone. You can even switch off and take a nap in the comfort of full length lounge chairs complete with pillow and blanket, take a shower between flights or book a spa treatment.

I charged my phone while catching up on emails and enjoyed some comforting pasta and a glass of Moët & Chandon. Once the flight was called I boarded straight from the business class air bridge in the lounge area which was pretty cool.

My window seat on the A380 offered even more privacy and a chance to experience the full range of the ICE inflight entertainment system with multiple channels featuring new releases, classic movies, television shows, box sets and pod casts. I was well rested from the first leg of the journey so I stretched my legs and headed to the on-board lounge which was buzzy with chatter from the other premium customers and enjoyed a G&T with a Scottish couple heading off on their honeymoon in Thailand. Stretching out for another pre-landing nap I rather wished the journey could go on a bit longer.



Settling in to the business class pod

Emirates operates two daily departures from Dublin to Dubai with onward connections to two points in Thailand – Bangkok and Phuket and over 150 other destinations. Fares from Dublin to Bangkok in Business Class start from €2,346 and Economy Class start from €559 (promotional fare). emirates.ie