

information

Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok
48 Oriental Avenue, Bangkok 10500, Thailand
Telephone +66 (0) 2 659 9000 Facsimile +66 (0) 2 659 0000
E-mail: mobkk-pr@mohg.com
mandarinoriental.com/bangkok



MANDARIN ORIENTAL, BANGKOK: HISTORY

For over 145 years, travellers have followed the River of Kings to stay at the legendary [Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok](#). A haven of calm on the banks of the river, this iconic hotel has always been a truly remarkable place that understands and knows Bangkok as well as it does its guests. Not only was it the first luxury hotel to open in Thailand, but it was the first to open on the majestic river, the first to have a jazz bar and the first to offer guests a hotel spa.

The beginnings:

In the middle of the nineteenth century, when Thailand was still known as Siam, a rest house for foreign seafarers was established on a large open space belonging to the Privy Purse on the banks of what is today known as the Chao Phraya River. It was to become one of the world's greatest hotels: The Oriental. In 1865 the hotel's original structure was destroyed in a fire and was replaced by the current structure in 1876. It was two Danish sea captains, H. Jarck and C. Salje, who opened The Oriental as the first luxury hotel in the Kingdom of Siam.

By 1881 this modest building had come under the enterprising ownership of H.N. Anderson – the only Dane outside the Thai Royal Family to have been decorated with the Order of the White Elephant by the King of Siam. Anderson appointed Italian architect firm Messrs Cardu and Rossi to design The Oriental hotel, which is today one of Bangkok's proudest and most iconic landmarks. They officially opened their doors on 14 May 1887.

Royalty, Authors and Electricity:

A year after its opening, The Oriental welcomed a soon-to-be-famous young merchant marine officer, Joseph Conrad, the first of many world-renowned novelists to stay in the hotel. Today a suite has been named after Conrad and one of the hotel's much-loved restaurants is even named after his famed book 'Lord Jim's'.

-more-



Page 2

In 1890 His Majesty King Chulalongkorn paid a private visit to The Oriental to assess the hotel's ability to host royal guests. Crown Prince Nicholas of Russia stayed in the hotel in April 1891 and went on to become Tsar in 1894. It was the beginning of a long-lasting relationship between the legendary hotel and Thailand's Royal Palace. The hotel would go on to host other visiting dignitaries, politicians, authors and celebrities, all of whom found some special affinity with The Oriental.

1891 was also a special year as electric lighting was installed. The Times correspondent reported: 'Businessmen and the seafaring community, The Oriental hotel has added to its attractions with electric light which was flashed into every room in the building and shed its soft rays steadily throughout the night.' Two classical statues carrying lamps can still be found today outside the Authors' Wing. These statues are mentioned in English writer Somerset Maugham's book 'A Gentleman in The Parlour'.

In 1892 Louis Thomas Leonowens, son of Anna Leonowens (of Anna and The King of Siam), was to become the hotel's proprietor. Whilst he did not manage the hotel himself, he treated it like a second home, an elegant abode where he could give lavish and elegant parties for his friends.

Carl Edwards, an American from New York, was the next to acquire the hotel, under the management of Madame M. O. Bujault. Together they added a dignified twist to the hotel by way of engaging a Viennese orchestra for musical dinners and, being a bon vivant herself, summoned a new chef straight from France. Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok believes that Madame Bujault would be delighted to learn that all these years later guests of The Oriental can still enjoy live orchestral music nightly and that the hotel is now home to a two-Michelin-starred French restaurant, Le Normandie.

-more-



Page 3

Madame Maria Maire and her husband, Jules Auguste, from the jewellery and watch-making business George Fox & Co, acquired the hotel in 1920 and owned it for the next 22 years. Notable guests during this era included Carl Faberge, who visited throughout the coronation of King Vajiravudh in 1911 and hosted an exhibition of Faberge eggs and his jewellery; Vaslav Nijinsky, who presented the first major performance of Western ballet in Thailand; and authors Somerset Maugham and Noël Coward, both of whom would return many times and both of whom have suites named after them.

During Maugham's stay in 1923 he came down with malaria, contracted when travelling overland from Mandalay in Burma. Madame Marie, concerned about having a sick, well-known author in her hotel, sent him to hospital or so he thought 'turned him out'. Maugham never forgot the incident and reminisced in 1960 when he returned for his 85th birthday: 'I was almost evicted from The Oriental because the manager did not want me to ruin her business by dying in one of her rooms'. Recovering from malaria he returned to the hotel, and descriptions of these feverish days spent on the hotel's veranda were to appear later in 'The Gentleman in The Parlour'. It was here that he penned his 'Siamese Fairy Tale', a whimsical tale of a king, queen, nine princesses, nine parrots, one nightingale and some cats. He was to return many more times and is quoted saying he enjoyed joining 'the unofficial club which met every day (except Sundays) in the old bar' where 'a good deal of gossip passed'.

Noël Coward, a frequent guest at The Oriental in the 1930s, wrote: 'It is a lovely place and I am fonder of it than ever.' A lounge area dedicated to this great playwright can be found off The Authors' Lounge.

-more-



Page 4

Alec Waugh was another notable visitor. In his 1969 autobiography he wrote how upon returning to Bangkok, many years after his first visit, he was concerned that he wouldn't recognise anything.

'Whatever else had changed, I prayed that The Oriental would be the same', he wrote. It was to his relief that it hadn't changed, and he went on to say: 'The smiling welcome of the receptionist, Ankana, every bit as elegant as she had been 11 years before'. Khun Ankana was one of the first Thai women to enter the hotel business and she went on to work at the hotel for over 60 years. A room off The Authors' Lounge has been dedicated to her, for her loyalty to the many guests she looked after.

50s and Jim Thompson and Germain Krull enter The Oriental:

During the Second World War, the hotel was leased to the Japanese Army, which used it as an officers' club. The end of the war saw The Oriental enter the modern era under the enthusiastic ownership of a group of six local residents, who each paid USD 250 to buy the hotel. These included Germaine Krull, a former war correspondent; His Royal Highness Prince Bhanubandhu Yugala; a prominent Thai lawyer, Pote Sarasin, who would later become Prime Minister; General Chai Prateepasen;

and two Americans, John Webster and Jim Thompson, the 'Thai Silk King'. Together they revitalised and revived the hotel's former glory and an advert on 12 June 1947 declared the 'Oriental Hotel Open Again - Cuisine Française, Bamboo Bar, European Manager'.

The Bamboo Bar swiftly evolved into the city's first jazz bar, where people gathered to have *sanuk* (fun) until 4am. 'To give it an atmosphere of elegance', Germaine writes, 'I thought the least our

-more-



Page 5

guests could do would be to wear a tie. If anyone arrived without, we gave him one. We made hundreds of ties with the cheapest satin and the children of the Chinese boys painted cocks on them. These ties went around the world as they were collected by visitors and local guests. I bought the most hideous colours I could find. But still, no one objected to wearing a garish orange tie while his partner might be beautifully presented in pink Thai silk.' This is the first reference to the hotel having a dress code and to this day this tradition is honoured. The Bamboo Bar and its live jazz and outstanding cocktails are still loved by all, and 2019 saw it as the only bar in Thailand to make the Asia's Best Bars list.

In 1950 Eleanor Roosevelt arrived at the hotel, as did more authors, including Ian Fleming and Graham Greene. 1956 saw Marlon Brando visit the hotel to see his friend M. R. Kukrit Pramoj, Thailand's famed writer-teacher-actor-banker-statesman, with whom he had co-starred in 'The Ugly American'. In the film Kukrit portrayed the Prime Minister – little did he appreciate that in 1975 he would actually become Prime Minister of Thailand.

James A Michener, the American author of over 40 books including the Pulitzer Prize-winning 'Tales of the Pacific', first visited Thailand (and the hotel) in 1951. The author returned to Bangkok and The Oriental in 1978 and again in 1994, when he wrote: 'Often in years past, the legendary Oriental served as my home away from home. Invariably, it excelled in its fine service and warm hospitality. May it gladden your stay, too'. Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok has also named an area off The Authors' Lounge after this celebrated author.

In 1958 the 10-story Tower Wing (now known as the Garden Wing) was built, considered Krull's greatest achievement, alongside Le Normandie, which opened on the top floor. The restaurant has

-more-



Page 6

since held a reputation for its fine French cuisine and it was awarded two Michelin stars in the guide's inaugural year that it still holds to this day. One of the many problems encountered while constructing this tower was the failure of the arrival of the lift. Even the fact that one of the owners was Prime Minister was no help. A plane had to be chartered to bring the lifts from Switzerland. Once installed they were the Thai Electric Company's first lifts ever installed to go as high as 10 floors.

The fantastic years with Mandarin Oriental:

In 1967 the hotel was purchased by the Italthai group by chairmen Mr Giogrio Berlingieri and Dr Chaijudh Jarnasuta. When Dr Chaijudh called his friend Mr Berlingieri to tell him, 'There's a hotel for sale', the response was, 'Forget it', until he retorted, 'It's The Oriental hotel'. The response then was: 'Why didn't you say so? Of course, we'll buy it'. All it took was two telexed messages and a meeting that lasted 35 minutes for an agreement to be reached. Their aim was to once again make The Oriental one of the best hotels in the world. In 1972, The Oriental entered into a partnership with Mandarin International Hotels Limited, owner of The Mandarin hotel (in Hong Kong). The two hotels became the flagship properties of what is now Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group.

When land adjacent to the hotel became available for purchase, the owners seized the chance to plan something dramatic for The Oriental. In 1976, three years after work started, the 350-room River Wing was constructed for a total of 300 million Thai baht. It was opened on 12 April 1977 by HM Queen Sirikit exactly 100 years after The Oriental first opened its doors. The hotel now offered 406 guest rooms, with 850 staff looking after guests' needs. One guest described the hotel as 'A city. The new Oriental Hotel is a city within a city, a landmark stops on the Chao Phraya highway', whilst another said, 'A hotel it not, just a home away from home; it's an adventure

-more



Page 6

in luxurious living’.

Graham Greene, Gore Vidal, Norman Mailer, Wilbur Smith, Barbara Cartland and John le Carré - who penned ‘The Honourable Schoolboy’ in one of the hotel’s sumptuous suites - are just a few of the famous authors who have found inspiration whilst staying at The Oriental. Each of these writers also has suites named after them in the hotel, honouring them as both guests and celebrated authors.

To further respect all the literary greats who have stayed at the hotel, the hotel wanted to bestow recognition on the best writers in the ASEAN region and so it launched the prestigious S.E.A. Write Awards in 1979, presided over by HM Queen Sirikit. This annual event has been hosted in The Oriental every year since – always honoured by a member of the Thai Royal family.

An estate was acquired across the river and 1983 saw the celebrated Sala Rim Naam restaurant open its doors, followed by The Oriental Thai Cooking School, the first cooking school in Bangkok, in 1986, and the Fitness Centre. 1990 saw The China House open its doors, whilst The Oriental Spa, the first spa within a hotel property in Bangkok, opened in 1993 in an exquisite teak mansion. Today it is the only spa in Thailand to have been awarded 5 stars by Forbes Travel Guide. In 1992 the first Mandarin Oriental Shop opened - today there are four other Mandarin Oriental Shops across the city catering to Bangkok’s discerning gourmands.

Seeking to encourage people to join the hospitality industry and concerned about a lack of trained hoteliers in the city, The Oriental launched in 1991 Thailand’s first apprenticeship program (OHAP), which is still run by the hotel today.

-more-



Page 7

In 2008 The Oriental hotel formally changed its name to Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok.

In 2016 the Authors' Wing and Garden Wing completed an extensive renovation, and 2019 saw the completion of the largest restoration in the hotel's history with a USD 90-million loving transformation of the River Wing rooms and suites, restaurants and swimming pool – further enhancing the hotel's standing as one of the finest in the world.

Internationally renowned designer Jeffrey Wilkes oversaw the overall design of the new River Wing. Wilkes, who has worked previously with the hotel, took his inspiration from not only the hotel's illustrious history and rich Thai culture but also from the river. Bespoke fabrics by local artisans, skilfully crafted furniture, rich Thai-produced Jim Thompson silks and unique design details reflect the spirit of Bangkok and the hotel's iconic history.

Today 1,300 staff provide a 4:1 staff-to-guest service ratio, the highest in the city. With an average of 14 years of service, each colleague's dedication to delivering a unique service experience to every guest is unparalleled as they continue to look after guests and be part of this iconic hotel's history.

A book detailing the vivid history of this legendary hotel, 'The Oriental Bangkok', is available for purchase at The Oriental Boutique and in the hotel's guest rooms and suites for guests to enjoy. Those wishing to learn more about the hotel's illustrious history can also visit 'The Oriental Journey', a permanent exhibition on the first floor of the hotel's Garden Wing.

-end -

For further information, please contact:

Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok

Patty Lerdwittayaskul (patty@mohg.com)

Director of Communications

Tel. +66 (0) 2 659 9000 ext. 7201

www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok