



Thailand

A Cut Above

Amid Bangkok's babel, Lawrence Osborne finds two suit makers who rise way above the rest to give men the ultimate shopping experience: perfect fit at a laughable price

ALMOST EVERY BANGKOK STREET SEEMS TO OFFER life's three essentials—food, sex, and tailors. Mine does. Soi 51, off Sukhumvit Road near Soi Thong Lor, is where many members of Bangkok's high society have their mansions. And between the karaoke girlie bars for Japanese salarymen is the tailor, the inevitable fixture on any Bangkok soi, or lane. The setup is formulaic. Usually there will be a small window with faded Italian fashion posters suggesting some tenuous connection with the maestros of Milan. Then there will be a knockoff

Armani suit with a vaudeville silk hanky poking out of the breast pocket, and a moth-eaten tuxedo looking like something salvaged from a tomb. In the same window, you will invariably see a Sikh or Jain gentleman in a turban making eloquent hand gestures at you as you walk by. It's almost like being invited into a brothel: a little old-fashioned perhaps, but definitely hospitable.

In the West, the pampering of the male tailor has been lost except to the millionaire. The discreet appointments and flatteries, the languorous measuring and banter of a fitting—these were as indispensable to our grandfathers as a trip to the club. And then,

vestites, and *kuaytiaw nam* noodle bars are the Indian tailors—slightly aloof from the sleaze though offering a free gin and tonic to everyone who walks in off the street.

As a resident, I often come down here to smoke a hookah at one of the Arab cafes on Soi 3 and stare lasciviously at the Sikh clothing. Dozens of tailor joints are crammed side by side: There's Royal Tailors and Gulati's at the corner of Sukhumvit and Soi 3, all Suzie Wong Chinese silk gowns and cummerbunded tuxedos; there's Hermann, offering \$99 suits and \$8 shirts; Ricky's Fashion House, with a flashing Sikh shrine in the back; and the harrowing Harry's Boutique

all. For me, however, every single one takes a backseat to two small, elite Sikh shops on Sukhumvit: Raja's and Rajawongse, who are, strangely enough, cousins. From the outside, both look ordinary and cramped; no neon; no touts standing outside, following you down the street with little red cards that say "If you can wear it we will match it." But they are the most visited tailors in the city—the places where expat insiders go, where the local CIA get their intimidating threads. And I know for a fact that the American ambassador himself has his suits made at both Raja's and Rajawongse.



the clothes. Hand-cut clothes sit on the body like a second skin. Their sensuality makes most stuff bought on Madison Avenue feel like glorified sackcloth. The problem is the cost: A bespoke suit in New York will set you back \$5,000 or more. No rational person spends that on a suit. But in Bangkok the same thing can be had for about \$300.

Bangkok is trying hard to make itself the fashion capital of Asia. Yet prices at the Versace or the Ferragamo inside the Emporium mall on Sukhumvit Road are exactly what they are in New York or London. This is precisely what middle-class Thais want; we *farangs* (foreigners), on the other hand, want just the opposite—a bespoke suit for peanuts and a couple of shirts for \$25.

At the other end of Sukhumvit, therefore, things are far less sleepy than on Soi 51. Between Sois 20 and 2, Asia's latest "Savile Row" is undergoing a boom. This mile-long stretch of urban chaos, shadowed by the concrete pillars of the new Skytrain, is a place long notorious for its hundreds of streetwalkers. The Nana Entertainment Complex of go-go bars is just around the corner on Soi 4, and the infamous Grace Hotel is on Soi 3, suggesting that tailoring and libido go well together. At night, there is a pleasure-seeking pandemonium here no Western urbanite could imagine. And slotted into this morass of street vendors, trans-

on Ruamchitt Plaza, next to the girly pool hall (easy to enter, impossible to exit). There is an entire store devoted to the simulation of Hugo Boss, called—what else?—World Famous Boss and stacked with artful copies of all the latest Boss lines. Its shirts bear World Famous Boss labels that just dodge the copyright laws. There's even a "Versaces." The clothes look more like Brooks Brothers on a bad day, but they're popular with visiting Belarusians.

The flashiest tailor on the row is Lucky and Oscar, which boasts a slab of red stone sidewalk gold-tooled with diagrams of various pockets, cuffs, and collars. The glass doors are covered with gold words: *Browse! Enjoy! and Welcome* in seven languages. Of D'Emperor and Ever Rich and Milano there is little to say except that even in Bangkok you cannot get two good suits, four good shirts, and three free ties for \$108.

Anyone who lives in the city for a while develops a kind of tailor obsession, a stubborn devotion to favored sartorial haunts. It is more acute—and irritating—than bar connoisseurship. There are those who say that the best tailor in Bangkok is Art's, a Chinese shop on Silom which does suits for about \$1,000, astronomical by Bangkok standards; others decry the rip-off and point to Milan's, on Sukhumvit, less costly but still high in quality. And there are the shops attached to the grand hotels, often in plush underground malls. I have tried them

BOBBY GULATI IS POSSIBLY the most elegant man on Sukhumvit Road. In his late thirties, a slightly curved human beanpole with huge brown eyes and a precarious but subtly arranged purple turban studded with multicolored tailor pins, he runs his small shop on Soi 4 off Sukhumvit with his father, master tailor Raja Gulati. For American tourists, Raja's is synonymous with Bobby. As soon as a cop from Arkansas or an air-conditioning salesman from California walks in the door, cringing from the heat, the quick-witted Bobby welcomes the man by his first name, not missing a beat, even if he has not been to Bangkok in five years. Bobby walks smoothly toward the customer, shakes his hand, and calls over one of his Thai assistants. The latter makes a *wai* greeting, hands raised to the nose. "Beer or gin and tonic?" he inquires. Then Bobby takes over. "Have you grown a little fatter or are your measurements on file still valid? Still with single vents?" The client is stunned. Our tailor knows our body better than a masseuse, sometimes better than a lover. "I have perfect name recall for every customer. Web site, no; I have a database in my head of thousands of names."

The shop is one narrow room lined on both sides with bales of fabric. To the right stand the Egyptian cotton shirt materials, perhaps 200 of them, and to the left the imported Italian and British suit wools and cashmeres. In a cramped seating area, clients leaf through sample books of 150- and 180-count British or Italian wool suit fabrics, men huddled with their wives, letting the latter dictate. American men, Bobby says, are insecure about ordering handmade clothes: The easy off-the-rack consumer shopping is gone; a man has to exert his own taste, or lack thereof. Color, texture, cut, and styling must all be determined by the client himself. For the American male, adrift in a world of logoed baseball caps and Tommy Hilfger shorts, the prospect is daunting: They bring their wives along to make sure they do not make asses of themselves. Thus they are

steered harmlessly away from windowpanes and jazzy stripes and nudged toward suaver Armani fabrics with subtle weaves.

On the other hand, the place itself is very American Male. It looks like a Brooklyn social club of 20 years ago—trophies on the wall, beer and salted peanuts. The walls bristle with signed portraits of American generals, diplomats, and White House officials—plaques and badges from just about every U.S. government department and armed service, even the National Rifle Association, of all things. The Navy Seals, the Marines, the DEA, the Border Patrol, the Council on Foreign Relations. I wonder aloud where the IRS is. Do they all get their suits made here? “As a matter of fact,” says Bobby, pausing slightly, “they do.” Sure enough, a large contingent of jarheads have just arrived and are having themselves fitted in front of two mirrors in a cramped corner of the store. Raja, his turban off to reveal a tiny mound of gray hair suspended by pins, is explaining to them that in a military uniform one doesn’t have to move about. One just stands still, so the thing can be tight and stiff around the torso. A normal suit, on the other hand—and he makes a swooping, balletic gesture with both hands and legs, as if shoveling imaginary snow. It has to swing, to be smooth and fluid. You have to be able to dance in it, lounge in it—make love to women in it. “Yeah,” the jarheads say. “A suit, you see, is not like other clothes,” Bobby continues. “A suit is a gentleman.”

The Gulatis’ English is flawless, the Indian accent slight, and their Thai is native, since they were born here. Raja’s father migrated to Thailand from the Punjab after India’s Partition in 1947, and they lived in Udorn in the north, where a large U.S. Air Force base opened during the Vietnam War. At first, the Gulatis ran a textile shop, purveying zippers and buttons for the pilots flying missions into Vietnam, but they quickly realized that making whole uniforms would be more lucrative. “And from a uniform to a suit,” Bobby says, “was a small leap.” In 1973, they moved to Bangkok.

When Raja’s opened on Soi 4 in the ’80s, it was filled with offices. It wasn’t until the 1990s that the Nana complex opened right next to Raja’s, causing the windows to be virtually buried in a vortex of skin-filled open-air bars and the joyously insalubrious commotions of the Nana Hotel, opposite. The NEC, as it’s known, is a warren of dozens of themed girlie bars on three floors, a

compact Sodom and Gomorrah guarded by Ganesh shrines for sexual good luck. It bills itself as “the sex capital of the world.” The Gulatis don’t especially mind.

The Sikh tailors are also a perfect illustration of the global economy: They have dispensed with traditional marketing, operating nimbly through word of mouth and the Internet, and fuse Thai labor costs with Indian entrepreneurship to produce that \$300 suit. In an article about Raja’s in *Worth*, the American journalist Walter Russel Mead wrote, “This is a story . . . about how the information revolution is reshaping the world, a small if low-tech example

have chosen a fabric, you are free to browse through albums of suit styles. You can pick a Classy Double-Breasted Notch style, a Classy Demetrios Black Cutaway Peak style, or simply say *British* and explain that you want it cut slim and close to the body (needless to say, they’ll also copy anything you bring in—including that World Famous Boss shirt you’ve always coveted). You are then surrounded by the assistants, who spread-eagle you in the middle of the store and run their tapes against you. Behind a small screen, a Thai woman seated at a typewriter watches the whole proceeding. The measurements are written down in a sloppy notebook—where they will remain, one supposes, as long as Raja’s is in business. Measured, one sits down with a gin and tonic and considers the shirt angle. You can design precisely the shirt you want: double cuffs with buttons, any desired collar, shape, length, width. Like the suit, the shirt will be measured to fit your body exactly. “You know,” Bobby says, “men are always in clothes that do not really fit them. I see it all the time. Off-the-rack clothes cannot fit you. It is much easier for women—they have more choices. But men are wearing these designer clothes just because they want to look younger. Well, it doesn’t work. We have lost the art of male clothes—or it has become too expensive for ordinary mortals.”

You might think, from all the military and embassy paraphernalia on the walls, that a Raja suit would be a bit stuffy, a little right wing. But such is not the case. The Gulatis will cut any suit you want. I want a modern Savile Row look, and I get it. Within a week, I am wearing it around town, and I am inclined to believe that it looks a cut above the designer stuff around me. No one would say “Is that a Raja suit you’re wearing?” but it’s the outside of a suit that matters, not its label. Either way, I realize with limitless gratitude that I will not be venturing onto Madison Avenue ever again.

I am beginning to enjoy the ritual: the passing of hands over my limbs, the nips and tucks

of how disseminated information transfers power from institutions and middlemen to individuals.” However that may be, many a tourist does the simple math. You could book a flight from New York to Bangkok on Thai Air, stay for a week at the Marriott around the corner, get three bespoke Italian wool suits and 12 custom-made shirts, and still spend about \$2,000 less than the price of a single tailormade suit back home.

I decide to go for a 180-count Italian fabric, dark navy with subtle stripes. There must be a hundred or so Italian wool samples, and leafing through them is like sifting through hypothetical versions of yourself. For a man, it is the ultimate shopping experience: no locomotion, no fatigue, no sales assistants, a beer in hand. After you