Bangkok. You love it or hate it. I come into the first category for purely sybaritic reasons which I shall go into later.

The first time I went there I had tea with Queen Sirikit up at the Palace, an event of monumental grandeur from which, to this day, I have barely recovered. The ceremony, apart from anything else, did serve to introduce me to the Thai love of ritual. The shock of servants walking on their knees with traysful of delicacies and china balanced in their hands was surpassed only by the process being repeated backwards on the way out. I tried this for myself later (minus the crockery) and the most my western legs could manage was an unseemly shuffle from which I suffered houseboy’s knees for days.

The point of bringing this up is not to name-drop but to warn first-timers to Bangkok that this kind of thing can happen. Not always the dropping on knees, of course, though on my last trip the room service waiter actually did pour out tea in the collapsed position, but certainly there is much bowing from the waist and a prayerlike action with the hands which is delightful and capturing. For at least a week when you get home you will be doing the same.

My love affair with Bangkok began when I discovered the Oriental. There are, perhaps, half-a-dozen great hotels in the world, and this is one. Actually I could live there for ever. It has everything to feed the senses and at $28 a night is a snip compared with, say, Australian hotel prices. A more heavenly place on earth in which to unwind would be hard to find. For 100 years the upper classes of the world have bedded down there, and no wonder. "A guest is treated like royalty, not just another traveller," general manager Kurt Wachtveitl is fond of saying. "It is this elite, the people who understand luxury and the finer things of life, at which the Oriental is aimed." Which is me to a T.

In fact, royalty drops in like so much confetti, as do the Rockefellers, the Fords, the Vanderbilts and the Rothschilds too, to give some idea of the clientele. Writers Joseph Conrad, Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham have stayed and, moreover, have suites named after them. After one night in the Somerset Maugham suite I know why David Rockefeller hankers so for it. His wife takes the suite next door because he likes to go to bed early and read and she does not. James Michener was there the other day and stayed in the James Michener suite, which is about the chic-est thing that can happen to a traveller.

A year ago the Oriental threw a bash of monumental proportions: a banquet to celebrate its 100th birthday and to open the New River Wing which cost (no expense spared) $12 million to build. At the time management said one thing which did not worry the developers was the commercial success of their new project. They were convinced there was still a substantial number of travellers from around the world who appreciated the very best, even in these days of mass tourism.

Five hundred people sat down to the $250-a-plate charity banquet, preceded by a reception for 3000. Everything flowed, including Dom Perignon champagne and exquisite food. Queen Sirikit opened the New River Wing with a traditional snip of scissors through satin ribbon. Eartha Kitt snaked inside her ten-million-dollar mink stole and sang "I’m just a poor little girl . . ." Charity benefited by $50,000. What the grocery bill was is but a hazy memory.

Not long after Arndt Krupp von Bohlen, heir to the German arms empire, stayed with his Austrian wife Princess Hatty Aversberg. He kept a low profile. That is, at one dinner party for eight they got through 100 bottles of Dom Perignon at $40 a time, and after 2½ months left with a bill of one million baht ($25 to the $1, you work it out).

The point of this story is to put you off