

# Trains, Boats and Planes ...

by Verne Maree

... plus vans, rickshaws, tuk-tuks and even – on one adrenaline-fuelled ride – a motorbike taxi through Bangkok's heart-stopping traffic. Smiling Albino's new travel adventure **Bangkok 1910** showed us how much more than shopping and cut-rate boob-jobs this magnificent city has to offer.

**L**ike most expats, Roy and I visited the Thai capital during our first year in Singapore and did the highlights. We traipsed around the **Great Palace** (despite the blandishments of the ubiquitous con-men who tell you that it's closed, but their cousin in a conveniently nearby tuk-tuk will take you to another temple ... via a rip-off jewellery store), rode the **Skytrain**, sweltered along with 400,000 others who throng the enormous **Chatuchak** weekend market, gaped at the **Patpong** working girls and boys, did a dinner cruise on the **Chao Praya River**, and explored the **Thonburi** side in a long-tailed boat.

A couple of years later came a Bangkok shopping marathon with a girlfriend: three excruciating days of soul-less malls and ruthless bargaining. Life was too short for this; I'd just about done Bangkok, I decided – until I heard about Bangkok 1910.

Why 1910? It's the year of the death of the hugely revered Rama V, who during his 42-year reign abolished slavery and polygamy, made state visits to Europe and introduced a modern telephony system and a railway system, amongst other advances. Much of the charm of that era has been obscured by development, and the aim of Bangkok 1910 is to introduce you to the half-forgotten sights, secret places and hidden communities that tell the fascinating story of this ten-million-strong city's history.

If it's history you're after, the **Oriental Mandarin Bangkok** is your obvious choice. Bangkok is full of good-value hostelries at all price levels, but if your budget can take it, this one won't disappoint you.

The first luxury hotel in Siam, this five-star beauty opened in 1887. This was long before the access road was built, and the original structure – now the **Authors' Lounge and Wing** – was approached by boat from the river. Whether you're lucky enough to be staying at the hotel, it's a must to take high tea, or just a tea or coffee, in the white-and-green oasis of the lofty-ceilinged Authors' Lounge. On weekdays, a guitarist strums; weekends host a pianist on the white baby grand. It's a must, like having a Singapore Sling at Raffles.



**Clockwise from top right:**  
The Authors' Lounge; the River Terrace; the magnificent Noel Coward Suite



**Top:** Phra Sumen Fort  
**Bottom:** Our guide Air negotiates all tuk-tuk fares

## Day One

Friendly guide Air meets us at the airport and takes us to the sublime **Oriental Mandarin**. In our beautifully comfortable room, with a view of the myriad craft that ply the **Choa Praya River**, we find a “nostalgia pack” from Smiling Albino, including pre-stamped postcards, maps and vouchers for massage.

Tonight is a walking journey around the Old City, **Rattanakosin Island**. A long-tailed boat ferries us from the hotel jetty to the **Memorial Bridge**, crammed on weekend nights with teenagers intent on seeing and being seen. From this vantage point, we survey the old fresh market below, before descending to wander its ancient alleyways.

Dinner is at **Chakrabongse House**, a magical, tucked-away sort of place that you’d never stumble across on your own. This erstwhile home of Prince Chula, one of the sons of Rama V, has an unobstructed view of **Wat Arun** on the Thonburi side of the river; it also has six rooms that you can stay in.

Today happens to be a public holiday (Chakrabongse Day), the 99th anniversary of the death of Rama V. We stop at the **City Pillars Shrine**, from which all distances to Bangkok are measured, and admire the wonderfully lit **Great Palace**. Lovely – no glaring heat, no cunning touts.

Our guides – Daniel, the co-owner of Smiling Albino and his lovely Thai sidekick Air – are fearless

and indefatigable. A hair-raising tuk-tuk ride sees us careering madly along increasingly congested streets to the **Rama V monument**, where it seems the whole city is converging. The enormous square is filled with devotees, each couple, family or group on its own square of groundsheet with its own candlelit shrine; in the centre, ceremonial chanting, singing and dancing.

We wind up the day with a nightcap at the buzzy row of bars and restaurants in **Pra Atit Street**, which boasts some of the few remaining examples of early 20th-century shophouses. It’s opposite the strikingly lit **Phra Sumen Fort**, one of fourteen European-style forts built to defend the Great Palace and the Old City.

## Day Two

Apart from food, **Chinatown** (or Sampeng or Yaowarat) is famous for its **Gold Street**, which sees a turnover of 10 million baht a day. Its residents are the descendants of the Chinese community that was bodily moved here in the 1780s by the authorities to clear for development what is now Rattanakosin Island, says Daniel, and those who arrived as part of a mass migration from China in the early 20th century, the end of the Qing Dynasty.

I'm initially horrified by the buckets of live turtles and other aquatic creatures for sale, but to my relief they're not for consumption. We're in the middle of an annual ten-day **vegetarian fast**, explains Air, in recognition that the collective human stomach is "the world's biggest animal cemetery" – you're supposed to buy the

animals to release them into the river, thereby "making merit" for yourself.

At the **Thian Fah Foundation**, established for needy Chinese immigrants, I admire a 400-year-old statue of Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy (inexplicably, to me, in Indian dress), and Air shows me how to say my prayers in the traditional way.

There's much to be said for independent travel, but I'm becoming increasingly keener on having a well-informed guide. Following Air into a warren of **Chinatown alleys**, I know that without her we would never have seen this aspect of the city. Here's a communal kitchen area with a traditional charcoal stove; there a shared ablution facility; restaurants, warehouses and provision shops. Not much has changed here in the

past 100 to 150 years, she points out – except that the floors used to be dirt, and chickens and rats ran around freely.

We stop in for iced coffee at the eighty-year-old **Easae Coffee Shop**, where a couple of dozen men of similar vintage while away the hours in desultory chat. Do they regard themselves as Chinese Thai, I wonder. "Very much so," Daniel replies. "They're proud of that distinction."

With the rest of the day at leisure, Roy and I take a taxi to the recommended Ruen Nuad for the best Thai massage of our lives, and later to **Vertigo**, the rooftop bar and restaurant at the Banyan Tree. Though pricey, at about S\$550 for our six-course degustation meal with wines to match, the view is memorable and the food outstanding.

**Left to right:**  
Candle attendant at Chinatown temple; brothers at the doorway of their Chinatown home; the art of threading at a pavement beauty salon





### Day Three

Scott and Bow are our guides for the rest of the trip. A ninety-minute drive in a mini-bus southwest of the city takes us to the province of Samutsongkram, and the charming **Tha Kha floating market**. According to Scott, this is the most authentic of its type you're likely to see.

For 15 baht (about 65 cents) I devour a bowl of delicious "boat-noodles", full of fat, fresh bean sprouts and chilli, served straight

from a boat to where I squat on a four-inch-high wooden "stool" on the canal wall. Inevitably, I then burn my greedy tongue on griddle-hot desserts.

This is canal country – no less than 391, says Scott – and home to endless acres of a type of coconut palm that can survive in the brackish, swampy terrain. A cool cruise takes us to the home of a local village chief, and then to a traditional **palm-**

**sugar factory**. Did you know that the stuff is made from nectar painstakingly collected from coconut tree flowers, boiled up over a series of smoky fires and then beaten till it's thick? After all that, it goes for 25 baht (about a Singapore dollar) per kilogram. We taste the fresh nectar; it's not bad, but would be vastly improved by some ice-cubes, fresh mint and a couple of shots of rum.

After a half-hour drive south to a **mangrove forest conservation centre**, we boat out through reclaimed forest into the **Gulf of Thailand** to a large bamboo structure on stilts above the water, based on the ubiquitous fisherman's shacks we can see in the distance. There, on mats and cushions, we tuck into a magnificent seafood picnic brought along with us from the shore.

Accommodation is at the family-friendly **Amphawa Resort**

**and Spa**, which, Scott tells us, is the best accommodation in the area. Apart from its reasonably priced standard rooms, it also has more spacious pool villas with whirlpool spa baths and plunge-pools. In the morning, you can join the locals at the riverside pool in offering alms to the monks from a nearby monastery, and then tuck into a good Western breakfast.

As dusk falls, we head off by boat to **Amphawa Floating Market**. Along the way, we linger at the

shoreline to marvel at thousands of fireflies glimmering from trees and bushes like Christmas lights. The atmospheric market stretches along both sides of a broad canal. Authentically restored and open only on weekends, it attracts thousands of Bangkokians who travel the 64 kilometres from the city to revel in its traditional ambience. Though we drink beer and nibble snacks along the way, we still manage to do justice to a good meal at one of the many canal-side restaurants.

*Clockwise from top right: Seafood picnic at a bamboo structure out in the Gulf of Thailand; Local monks receives alms from hotel guests*



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## Day Four

The last day is spent navigating the canals by boat to discover Amphawa's age-old charm. We drop in to visit Chiang, a third-generation **Chinese pharmacist** (below left). Apart from electrical wiring, nothing much seems to have changed in this shop during the past century.

At **Wat Chulamane** (below right), Bow helps us make an offering at the central shrine; and the woman in charge presses gold leaf onto our foreheads and prays for our safe travels. The place is famous for an outstanding pavilion of gold-embellished teak, but the highlight for me is the ecstatic wiggling of a clutch of tiny turtles that swim off to freedom after I release them into the canal; 100 baht very well spent.





Thailand's answer to the root-entangled Ta Prohm in Cambodia's Angkor is **Wat Bang Kong**, a small temple overgrown with fig trees. It's on the site where the Thai army fought and won its first battle against the Burmese after the 1767 fall of the original Thai capital, Ayutthaya.

We get to the huge **railway market** of the provincial capital, **Maeklong**, just in time to witness the arrival of the train that – four times a day – drives right through the middle of the market. After a

warning horn sounds, stallholders who are literally on the track pull back their goods, their awnings and their children to let the iron beast charge through.

We board the train to travel along a railway line laid in 1905 (one of Thailand's earliest), and are told that this swampy countryside, once polluted by chemicals from injudicious prawn-farming in the 1970s and 1980s, has been restored to health by closing down these farms and re-introducing the

traditional salt-farming. From the station at the fishing town of **Mahachai**, bicycle rickshaws convey us to the old wharf where big boats deliver their catch daily – as they have been doing for hundreds of years – to a fascinating market, gleaming with serried rows of seafood and redolent with the stench of dried fish. Scott buys a kilogram of live, blue-legged king prawns for the equivalent of six or seven Singapore dollars, to fry with garlic for his dinner. Lucky man!

***Clockwise from top:** The train thunders through Maeklong's railway market, where wares are sold right next to the track; Wat Bang Kong*

This was a trip of huge contrasts, from the cool luxury of the Mandarin Oriental to the hot, smelly underbelly of Bangkok; from the complex rituals of temple-visiting to the natural wonderland of mangrove forests and twinkling fireflies. Even if you've been to Bangkok, chances are you haven't seen *this* Bangkok. We're glad we have. **31**

**Smiling Albino** was set up more than ten years ago by two Canadians, Scott Coates and Daniel Fraser. This small, original company prides itself on providing out-of-the-ordinary experiences custom-designed for its clients' needs. Having begun in Thailand, it has expanded into Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Nepal. The rather peculiar name refers both to the royal albino elephants that are revered throughout this part of the world, and Thailand's being known as the Land of Smiles. [www.smilingalbino.com](http://www.smilingalbino.com)



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