



The far side

VENTURE TO THE WEST BANK OF BANGKOK'S CHAO PHRAYA RIVER AND DISCOVER A CITY WHERE LIFE IS LIVED ON HIGH AND AT STREET LEVEL

WORDS KRYSIA BONKOWSKI

Bangkok can sometimes feel as though it is straining against its seams, stuck in a madcap race to grow ever higher and wider. In the boisterous Thai capital, skyscrapers face off and suburbs sprawl to the horizon. One of the few constants is the Chao Phraya River, a sluggish

ribbon haphazardly dividing Bangkok in two. This natural boundary marks the furthest many tourists – and even locals – ever venture.

The east bank is home to some of Bangkok's most famous sites: the warrens of Chinatown, the Grand Palace, Wat Pho and backpacker

haven Khao San Road. Few visitors venture west over the river, to the districts of Khlong San and Thonburi, but this sprawling area offers a tantalising taste of Bangkok – one touched by the frenetic modernisation of the greater city, yet still protecting pockets of traditional street life. >>

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A hi-so favourite



The city's lifeblood

Chao Phraya may be known as the River of the Kings, but it's the freeway of the everyman. The water is a throng of activity, criss-crossed with ferries, water taxis, leisure boats and behemoth barges. It also feeds the *khlongs*, or canals, running like arteries throughout Bangkok. While the Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS) now extends into Thonburi, the waterways remain one of the most enjoyable ways to explore the west bank.

The river's public 'buses', the Chao Phraya Express Services, are recognisable by their coloured flags. While the blue-flagged tourist boat may be tempting, the orange flag service is cheaper, more frequent and stops at more places. The service barrels along upriver, with shrill whistles announcing quick, hull-crunching stops. Piers are numbered north from the east bank Saphan Taksin BTS/ Sathorn, with number one as the first stop north. Using the express, cross-river ferries and khlongs, it's possible to explore a great swathe of the area without ever navigating a traffic jam.

Heading up river

Pay your 15 baht and chug north to stop number 10, Wang Lang Pier. The crowds filter off the boat into Wang Lang markets, a favourite of local workers and students where stalls, carts and hole-in-the-wall stores whip up street food from around Thailand. Decide on your menu – a fiery *som tam* (green papaya salad) with *moo tod* (fried pork) maybe, or *hoy tod* (an oyster omelette) followed with *khanom krok*, a bite-sized coconut custard. A five-course feast here would cost less than \$20.

Once you've had your street-food fill, make your way to Thonburi's most famous attraction – Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn. A 20-minute



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The Never Ending Summer. ABOVE: Wat Arun. TOP LEFT: Baan Silapin Artist's House.





walk south from Wang Lang, or two stops downriver on the Express Boat then over on a three-baht ferry, this riverside temple predates modern Bangkok. In this serene setting, monks in saffron robes wander the landscaped grounds, and the sun bounces off Chinese porcelain shards decorating the 82m-tall central spire. Access to the complex is free, but a small fee is asked to see the central temple.

Although it's just to the south and in an equally commanding riverfront location, you're likely to share Wat Kalayanamit solely with local worshippers. The temple, constructed during the height of Thai and Chinese trade relations in the 1800s, blends the architecture of the two nations. Inside is one of Thailand's largest indoor Buddhas. Reaching 15 metres, it rests in a space hung with ornate chandeliers.

The hi life

Street food might rule Bangkok, but its residents dearly love a rooftop bar, especially those of the 'hi-so' set (the nickname for Thai high-society kids). As developers look west, high-rises climb to

match cross-river peers, some with their own rooftop sanctuaries. To discover one of the newest, board the free shuttle ferry at Saphan Taksin Pier to Anantara Riverside Resort, and cut through to its sister property Avani Riverside Hotel.

In this sleek, contemporary hotel, every room faces east towards Bangkok's bustle. Attitude bar and restaurant, next to the infinity pool on the 26th floor, is a hi-so hotspot. A tapas-style menu picks its favourite Asian ingredients and influences – think grazing plates inspired by street food, or rock lobster with greens from Anantara's rooftop hydroponic garden. Afterwards, kick back with a cocktail from the inventive list and watch Bangkok light up.

Best of both worlds

Hi-so and street life meet in Khlong San, a riverside suburb encircled by Thonburi. Take the Chao Phraya Express to Si Phraya (stop 3), and hop on the cross-river ferry to Khlong San pier. The Khlong San night market is a curious mix of counterfeit hipster fashion and street food, again with barely a tourist in sight. Pull up a plastic stool between school kids and businessmen and order a bowl of beef noodle soup – it will be 50 baht (around \$2) well spent.

To check back in with the hi-so crowd, duck next door into the cavernous Millennium Hilton. Take the elevator to the 32nd floor for a drink on the open-air deck of ThreeSixty, a slick rooftop bar making the most of the hotel's waterfront position.

Don't get back on the boat without exploring the pier-side Jam Factory, part of the Creative District spanning Khlong San and Bang Rak across the river. Prominent Thai architect Duangrit Bunnag took on a derelict warehouse and >>





transformed it into a cultural hub containing his practice, design store Anyroom, fashion label Lonely Two Legged Creature, bookshop and café Candide and two restaurants.

The Jam Factory is tempting a trendy, young crowd across the river. On balmy evenings, creatives and expats gather under Bodhi trees in the courtyard for arthouse film screenings, live music and gallery openings, or to browse art and design at the Knack Market on the last weekend of every month. Restaurants Summer House Project and The Never Ending Summer look like an equatorial answer to downtown Manhattan – with dangling tropical plants softening exposed ceiling rafters, expanses of glass and polished concrete floors.

Life on the water

While street markets and hi-so venues are by no means exclusive to the west bank, delve further into Thonburi and you'll see a different Bangkok. Thonburi is cut through with khlongs carved out from the Chao Phraya. These canals were once central to city life – locals lived over them, fished in their depths, shopped at floating markets and ate from floating vendors (street-food favourite 'boat noodles' got

its name from this watery origin). Largely filled in or covered in the rest of Bangkok, the khlongs remain largely intact throughout Thonburi.

After the fall of the ancient Thai capital Ayutthaya in 1767, King Taskin briefly made Thonburi the capital, until King Rama II moved it across the river to modern-day Bangkok. Thonburi remained independent of Bangkok until 1971, and this perhaps sheltered a more traditional way of life.

Venture back to Anantara Riverside Resort and explore the canals with the Khlong Gurus tour. The English-speaking 'gurus' offer a local's perspective on the khlongs (peppered with trademark Thai quick wit). Accessed via tiny locks off the Chao Phraya, the calm rhythms of the khlongs unfold you almost instantly. The longtail boat, bow bedecked with fake floral garlands, glides past temples, crumbling factories, school yards, mansions, lopsided houses and overgrown orchards, occasionally startling huge water monitors lazing under banana palms. The tour stops off at Baan Silapin Artist's House, a creative collective in a traditional stilted house. Take a moment to soak up the quiet



Floating vendors ply their trade on the khlongs. ABOVE: Attitude bar at the Avani Riverside Hotel.

canal with its row of quaint wooden homes. It's a moment of calm those on the other side of the river might never realise they've missed. ✈️

Krysia Bonkowski was a guest of Avani Riverside Hotel.

Travel info

Jetstar has great low fares to Bangkok from Melbourne.

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