



FREE-WHEELING THROUGH HISTORY

When you hit the tourist traps, you should watch out for touts trying to lead you ‘up the garden path’. But on this trip to Damnoen Saduek, the whole idea was to be taken for a ride. Rakau dons his riding britches and takes to the back alleys in search of a little culture and history.



Mae Klong, the center of Samut Songkram, is steeped in history spanning at least the last two millennia. From the Khmer occupation back in the 7th century, Lopburi was considered to be a significant religious and political hub for the Thai people, and has remained so ever since. When the Burmese invasion signaled the close to the golden era of the Ayutthaya period 250 years ago, the Thais rallied on the banks of the Mae Klong River to fight the Burmese and eventually drive them from the kingdom once and for all. In so doing, a new capital and a new Dynasty were founded as General Chao Phaya Chakri rose to the throne. This small river plain is

the seed from which modern Thailand grew...

7:00am was far too early to meet on a Saturday, but there we all were – spot on time in the Dusit Thani hotel car park. It was an hour or so's drive to the Floating

Market, which was ample time to break the ice with our fellow peddlers. For most it was the first cycling trip in Thailand, although surprisingly we all considered ourselves as Bangkok old-hands.

On my only other visit to the Floating Market fifteen years earlier I'd been a prop in a film shoot, but I could've sworn that was a different place. Back then we lamented the over-commercialization, as tourists out-

numbered traders, but now it was almost a joke - this was purely for show. Our coach stopped right in the middle of the paved market, and package group tourists lined the footpaths and special viewing platforms overhead the concrete canals. The disinterested vendors seemed more concerned with their costumes than their wares, and most of the tourists didn't even bother to get in a boat since you could take it all in from the shore. Thankfully, we

almost passed straight through (stopping just long enough for the eager few to snap up some sad photo ops) and hopped on a longtail for the mandatory klong cruise to the point of our ambulatory embarkation.'



I've long since been dulled to the exotic lifestyles of the inhabitants of the quaint dwellings up and down the picturesque klong. In the past I'd marveled at the simple river lifestyle, with teak homes on stilts acces-

sible in the most part only by boats, and lacking in basic items we take for granted (except, of course, for the omnipresent colour TV). But as we snaked our way through the on-coming longtails, all I could think of was the cacophony of bone-jarring exhausts reverberating off the open homes. It was in stark contrast to the idyllic backroads we were about to travel.

Soon enough we emerged on the mighty Mae Klong River – which drains



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the plains of Nakorn Pathom – and pulled into the pier at Wat Ampawan. Thankfully, this was where we bade farewell to the tourist trail, and set out on our real adventure. No maps, and no guide books. Just the smiling faces of the Spice Roads guides who had carefully researched this route.

I was only vaguely aware of the commanding aura of Wat Ampawan Chetiyaram. The matrix of classic trapezium shaped teak buildings were unlike any normal temple dwellings, and it was huge—covering 11 rai in all. But soon enough the historical significance of the compound began to dawn on us. Wat Ampawan is better known as King Rama II Memorial Park and is recognized as the birthplace of the late monarch. It was founded by his father, King Rama I, at the start of the Chakri Dynasty, and it was from here that the elder king had established the new Thai capital on Ratanakosin Island. We really were plumbing the depths of history...

Wat Ampawan now houses a museum which is supposedly one of the best collections of early Rattanakosin style artifacts. For lovers of Thai antiquities, the B20 entrance fee is well worth it, but since time was of the essence, we forewent the cursory temple tour. Instead we slapped on a generous dose of sunscreen (thanks Cameron!) and climbed aboard our trusty steeds for an invigorating acclimatization ride along a picturesque klong.

I recalled my father's animated recitals of "Mulga Bill's Bicycle" as we teetered along the precipice on an unfamiliar mechanical beast. The cracked and rutted path was the local community's main thoroughfare. On one side we had a 6-foot drop into the deep dark klong below. On



the other side, a row of teak shops, replete with locals going about their business. For them cyclists were still a novelty since they smiled cheerily and waved as we almost rode right over them. And as if that wasn't enough to worry about, every few yards we had to duck beneath the low-slung booby traps of overhead awning poles – it was all I could do to ride, look up and down, and take photos all at once.

After a kilometer or so up the narrow path we doubled back to a point on the river just above the temple, and caught a ferry across to another equally ordinary, yet equally extraordinary temple.

Whereas most famous temples ooze wealth, Wat Bang Khae is quite austere. It was also built during the reign of King Rama II, and its walls, ceilings, windows and the mounts for the Buddha images are all crafted in intricately carved teak. Even the elaborate murals depicting the Buddhist teachings are crafted in teak.

Back on the bikes, we got our first taste of countryside as we headed inland across a 100m long rickety bridge to a site all but forgotten, yet immediately recognizable to any suburban housewife with a penchant for Thai soaps. The popular show 'Kasataya' simulated the garrison fort here at Bang Kung, where the Thai army mustered its resistance against the Burmese under the short reign of King Taksin (who was ultimately deposed due to his megalomaniac tendencies, and was beaten to death in a velvet sack giving rise to the Chakri Dynasty). In other words, this was the spot upon which Thailand regained its pride and its empire.

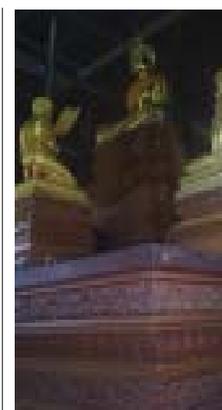
There's a monument to the troops, and the remains of 18 sites are marked out, but the focal point is the temple, which has been literally swallowed up by a towering banyan tree. From the



outside you can barely discern the original temple walls now covered in thick trunks, while the green and orange tiles of the roof have been replaced by a canopy of leafy branches. But the well-worn tracks of Buddhist pilgrims and tourists have ensured the prosperity of the towering Buddha shrined within.

Our thirst for the epic thus quenched, we remounted and headed through the shade of the flourishing plantations and coconut groves back to the river, stopping only briefly to pick fresh lychees on the roadside while the stragglers caught up. We stopped for lunch overlooking the river at one of the most unusual sites in this strong Buddhist enclave. A magnificent 100-year old gothic inspired church, which would not have looked out of place in Paris, Rome or London. Pramaebangkerd, or Church of the Holy Virgin Mary, boasts towering wooden ceiling frescos supported by solid marble pillars surrounding exquisite stained glass. The church apparently supports a vibrant Catholic parish.

We were cycling during the last few days of the great drought, and I was intrigued at the rich irrigation and aquaculture in the area. It was clear that here water was in abundance, as fields were being freshly hoed and filled to grow crops like Aloe Vera, which clearly requires a constant supply of water. Even during the hottest hours of the day we felt fresh and cool, thanks to the shade and the temperate surroundings. We continued through several more temples and villages, and all too soon found ourselves back at the floating market. By now it was well after midday, and the tourists had departed, and we could almost imagine what it must have been like as a vibrant and thriving market at the start of the Chakri Dynasty. This journey had taken us on a whirlwind trip through time.



Special thanks to Spice Roads Tours, whose excellent equipment and organization made this trip a breeze. In all we covered 32km in a little over 4 hours. The trip costs B1,900 per person, and includes all transportation and entry fees, bike, helmet, water bottle, plus lunch and snacks on the way. For more details contact Spice Roads; tel 0 2712 5305, info@spiceroads.com.



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