

Travel

Better by bike

Bangkok's teeming streets might seem poorly suited to cycling, but Anthony Sattin finds a two-wheeled tour is the ideal way to explore

What does Bam know that I don't? That's the question I keep mulling over as my taxi crawls through the Bangkok rush hour. There are cars in front and many others behind, cars overhead and a long, long line of them below. Welcome to the city of angels.

I think of Bam when I see a cyclist weaving through the traffic, a single mobile person in a gridlocked city. What I know is that cycling in Bangkok sounds mad and probably is mad. But Bam is part of a road safety campaign to persuade Thais, and children in particular, to wear helmets when they ride. The fact that he is an orangutan from the Dusit Zoo means the campaign has grabbed the headlines, helping Bam get his message across. He also seems to have created a spike in the number of cyclists. So having wasted another hour or two sitting in the taxi, I decide I'm going to cycle in Bangkok.

I have cycled in London, Paris and New York. I have ridden through Chianti and the Languedoc, have pedalled across Hyde Park Corner on a regular basis and now I am going to tackle Bangkok. The strange thing is that once I have made the decision, I start seeing cyclists all over the place. Two even ride past the front of the St Regis Hotel as I step out of the airport taxi. I am about to say something about riding on the pavement when I realise that half of it has been turned into a cycle lane.

Two more cyclists are waiting in the back of the minibus that comes to collect me that afternoon. A dozen people have signed up for the Bangkok Sunset Tour: Americans, French, a couple of Brits, an Australian. Most are like me, out on two

From my taxi I see a cyclist weaving through the traffic, a single mobile person in a gridlocked city

wheels in Bangkok for the first time and hoping for a gentle ride around some of the city's prime sights.

The two Thai guides, Woody (a man) and View (a woman) are inside with Bam: the first thing they hand out are helmets, then lights, reflector vests and newish Trek bikes. All good but a little too slow and it means that I'm not going to see the sun set behind Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn, because it is already dusk when we free-wheel down from the Golden Mount.

If riding in Bangkok by day seems foolhardy, riding by night seems suicidal. That's what I think as we head out on to one of its major roads towards the Democracy Monument. But, as we ride, I realise that much of the traffic moves slowly and cyclists are still enough of an oddity for people to notice them.

The Khao San Road has acquired legendary status as the place where Leonardo DiCaprio hears about a beachside paradise in the film *The Beach* (2000), and a million and more backpackers have since come to find fun or fulfilment. I have been down it several times but have never ventured into the warren of dingy passages that run off its main artery, as we do now. There are stir-fry cafés, massage parlours, T-shirt stalls and then clearer air as we reach the river, taking a riverbus towards the Temple of the Dawn, a Buddhist shrine as old as the city itself and one of Thailand's most famous buildings. I don't know what it looks like at dawn, when the early sun is said to catch the porcelain dishes set into its spire (I've never been up that early) but it has a dreamlike quality in the reddish night. We stop for half an hour, long enough to wander



Freewheeling
Clockwise, from main picture: local crafts; taking care crossing Bangkok's busy roads; a floating market; quiet backstreets; Thai street food

BESPOKE BIKES

Two-wheel ride, five-star style

Only a few years ago, doormen at five-star hotels would turn their noses up at anyone arriving by bike. But today even the smartest city hotels are falling over themselves to welcome cyclists. Several have even invested in their own fleets of bikes so that guests can explore the surroundings under their own steam.

Last month 45 Park Lane in London began offering guests free use of its 10 monogrammed Brompton bikes, and is also promoting Sunday "bike and brunch" packages to non-residents (allowing them to borrow a bike for free to work up an appetite). In New York, the

Mark hotel has commissioned a bespoke bike fleet, with black-and-white striped liveries designed to echo the hotel's decor. It also offers picnic baskets – with food



Bespoke bike at the Mark hotel

from Jean-Georges Vongerichten – which fit on the back of the bikes so that guests can have lunch in Central Park.

The Mark is following the lead of the Morgan Hotel Group (whose properties include the Sanderson and St Martin's Lane in London, Clift in San Francisco, Delano in Miami and Mondrian New York), which introduced bikes across its portfolio last May, as well as the Nolitan, also in New York, which offers both bikes and skateboards.

However the idea isn't entirely new – the Grand Hotel du Cap-Ferrat first offered bikes to guests in 1908.

around, to look out on to the river and its restless traffic, and to watch a crowd of Buddhists chanting at the foot of the *chedi*, a sacred mound-like structure.

From there, we follow the river downstream on a path shared by cyclists and pedestrians, cross a bridge to the all-night flower market for a drink and a snack and then ride to another monastery, Wat Pho, famous as the home of medicinal Thai massage. The place is deserted and magical, its roofline glittering. Huge statues loom in the dark, the temple bells silent in the still night, a perfect place to end the ride.

I am out again the next morning, just myself and a guide. What seemed foolhardy the day before now seems a very good idea. It is Sunday morning, and even the main streets are calm. Tao, my guide, leads me back along the riverside path and through a park where some older Thais are doing tai chi. We are overtaken by a man in Lycra on a racing bike and slow down when we reach the hospital where King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the world's longest-reigning monarch and a long-term invalid, has been cared for since 2009. From there, we cross the river again to the west side, to Thonburi.

The tour theme is Bangkok of Old – "old" in this case being a slower way of life. Thonburi is less developed than downtown Bangkok, and less protected. When the city flooded during the previous monsoon, it was Thonburi that suffered the most. Tao points out a dark line running along the walls of many houses, the only obvious indicator of the flood damage suffered by most people on this more residential side of the river.

We follow that dark line along paths between houses, heading into countryside. It is a ride that gives an insight into the peace and simplicity of life here: before there were highways and flyovers, the residents moved along a network of canals. Most of the central ones have been covered over but Thonburi's network is still in use and we follow it, sometimes beside the water, sometimes on narrow lanes between houses. At one point, we cycle along a thin raised dyke between fields of flood-ravaged banana plantations. I have read tales in online chatrooms about these raised dykes – people falling off their bikes and into the fields or crashing into oncoming bikes. It is only when we come out on to a wider road that I have the courage to ask Tao whether he has ever lost anyone into the fields or water. His silence suggests that he has.

We cycle 20 miles that morning and reach Taling Chan "floating" market ready for lunch. The market is actually on land beside the canal and we order steamed fish, stir-fried spicy noodles, satay sticks, vegetables from the wok and a pile of other delicious dishes, although Tao still looks disappointed when I decline the home-made ice cream at the end. Most of Bangkok's floating markets are overrun with tourists but not this one: I don't see another *farang* (foreigner) while there. I don't see an orangutan either. But I am thinking about Bam as I pedal back into town, helmet on my head, smile on my face, the Sunday gridlock ahead of me.

Hot properties with bike routes on the doorstep, *House & Home*, page 10

Details

Anthony Sattin was a guest of Abercrombie & Kent (www.abercrombiekent.co.uk), which offers three nights bed and breakfast at the St Regis Bangkok, including a bike tour of new and old Bangkok, from £395pp. Spice Roads (www.spiceroads.com) runs cycle tours in and around Bangkok, as well as across south-east Asia. Its daily Bangkok Sunset Ride costs Bt1,650pp (£33) and the day-long Bangkok of Old ride costs Bt2,650.

Aboriginal originals

Among the caves and catacombs of Arnhem Land, in Australia's far north, are a series of haunting ancient art galleries. By Amar Grover

As the strong "Top End" sun rose higher in the clear sky, Wilfred Nawirridj, my Aboriginal guide, patiently led me up a faint trail between boulders and rocks. We were clambering up Injalak Hill on the fringes of Gunbalanya, a one-time cattle station turned Anglican mission and now small Aboriginal town.

Eventually we paused by a huge boulder and a smooth pale section that had sheared off long ago. Among the ochre paintings of fish and other animals stood the distinctive outline and stripes of a thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger. Now almost certainly extinct in its last stronghold, Tasmania, they probably haven't lived up here in the Northern Territory for two or three millennia.

Remote, raw, Arnhem Land starts where the famous Kakadu National Park ends. Among the most untouched of Australia's wilds (and with the almost mythological-sounding Gulf of Carpentaria and Arafura Sea for company) its scattering of Aboriginal communities – mostly along the tropical coast – have been left to themselves more than anywhere else. Named after a 17th-century Dutch explorer's ship, Arnhem Land defied virtually all attempts to make it "useful", so its declaration as an Aboriginal reserve in 1931 – all 97,000 sq km – was not genuinely altruistic.

Unless you're flying in, one of the simplest entry points is via Cahill's Crossing on the East Alligator River. The crocodile warning signs and exhortations

do not swim set the tone, as do the river's tidal tables, which govern when you should and shouldn't drive across. Driven by my keen guide Hamish Clark, we bumped along a well-graded track, skirting creeks and verdant marshland, and edged closer to the so-called "stone country" and the great rocky ramparts of the Arnhem Land Plateau.

Clark was familiar with much of the art and some sacred sites. We paused for breakfast on an elevated outcrop and watched the twin-humped brow of a "saltie", or saltwater crocodile, patrol the adjoining billabong.

Later, we pulled up at the Injalak Arts & Crafts Centre, a vital conduit and

thriving shop front for regional artists and artisans, where I was introduced to Nawirridj. About 3,000 visitors come here annually and all need Arnhem Land permits – readily obtainable from the Northern Land Council back in Kakadu or Darwin. There is

We crouched in deep overhangs as another eerie world unfolded

talk of their abolition but Anthony Murphy, who runs the Injalak Centre, is adamant the system has helped protect local culture as nowhere else.

The ancient galleries in nearby Injalak Hill and the modern one at the centre satisfy most tourists' curiosity about Arnhem Land. My focus was the Mt Borradaile region – only about 25 miles north but since the 4WD road there was doubtful because of recent rains and deep mud, we backtracked to Kakadu to fly in.

Perhaps only by flying can one appreciate the sheer wildness and inhospitability of this terrain.

Swampy flatlands and mangrove-lined creek systems are sporadically ruptured by the sandstone outliers of the main plateau.

Banking just short of Mt Borradaile, the pilot aimed our Cessna at a dusty rectangle cut from a sea of green and down we went. A ramshackle Land Rover jolted out of the bush to take us to Davidson's Camp. Max Davidson – former buffalo hunter turned celebrated guide and tour operator – was instrumental in opening this pocket of Land. Originally he used to shoot out here, often with Charlie Mangulda, an Aboriginal elder and the area's senior traditional owner. Mangulda knew of some art

sites from childhood but together they stumbled across more.

One day, about 20 years ago, Davidson happened to gaze up at an outcrop that stopped him in his tracks. Hidden in a deep overhang stretched a large and extraordinarily beautiful image of a rainbow serpent, among the most important of ancestral beings. "From that day I stopped being a hunter and began exploring," Davidson told me, "and Charlie was happy to share his people's culture." Indeed, Mangulda's permission was needed to bring in visitors and, because Borradaile was registered as a sacred site, additional permits were (and still are) required.

Today some visitors come as much for the fishing and a spot of hunting. Yet it's the incredible wealth and concentration of art in time-forgotten sites that truly distinguishes the Mt Borradaile area.

According to Dr Josephine Flood, an eminent Australian archaeologist, author and former head of the Aboriginal environment section of the Australian Heritage Council, much of it is very well preserved, in part because so few tourists come here so the sites have not become "worn" like many in Kakadu.

Davidson says he's still finding more. I spent three days in his simple camp (basic but comfortable enough tents, communal dining block, showers and toilets) content not to be distracted by the trappings of luxury but elated at feeling a bit like Indiana Jones.

Each morning and afternoon I went with articulate guides to visit magical and haunting sites, first driving and then walking through woods and across low bare ridges. We crouched in deep overhangs or beside dim crevices as another eerie world unfolded – spirit figures, ancestral beings and animals. We clambered into catacomb-

like caves that even now have a few skulls and scattered bones on their sandy floors, and even skeletons wrapped in paperbark lying on little wooden platforms. There is also "contact period" art depicting early European riggers and Timorese boats, along with 19th-century hunters' relics, from rusty metal matchboxes to a Martini-Henry rifle and crumbling bark beds.

As for sacred Mt Borradaile, visitors are only ever taken to a few spots at the base of the hill. Most of it – and I was told its distinctive, almost horse-shoe-shaped, amphitheatre hides numerous burial grooves and scared sites – remains off-limits to all but its rightful owners. Sadly, most of them have now faded away, taking their strange stories and arcane knowledge with them.

Details

Amar Grover was a guest of Tourism Australia, www.australia.com, Lord's Kakadu and Arnhemland Safaris, www.lords-safaris.com, and Davidson's Arnhemland Safaris, www.arnhemland-safaris.com



Fishing Boys at Mukkamukka billabong, Arnhem Land Alamy

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