



# freewheeling through bangkok

It isn't hard to escape from the urban jungle, finds John Borthwick,  
who seeks out Bangkok's more tranquil byways.

**The idea of** pedalling a bicycle in Bangkok was, for me, right up there with riding pillion behind Evel Knievel: a two-wheel stunt I'd never contemplate if I valued a long life. Nevertheless, here I am, casually propelling a mountain bike past lush and tranquil rice fields without any sense of impending doom and, surprisingly, with no car in sight.

No, I'm not freewheeling through outback, rural Thailand. In the distance, the high-rise hedge of Bangkok's apartments, hotels and office blocks thrusts at the sky while five other tourists and I breeze along towards a place I like to think of as Bangkok's Brigadoon. We're on the outskirts of the city, on our way to an island (*koh*) known as Koh Kret that sits in a kink in the Chao Phraya river, just 20 kilometres north of the Thai capital's centre.

Our one-day ride, run by a company called Spice Roads, is far from taxing, covering only about 25 kilometres, with a support vehicle picking us up and dropping us off at our Bangkok hotels; there's no tourist accommodation on the island.

Led by our guide, a smart young Thai woman named Moh, we saddle up, don helmets and block-out, and head towards our first stop: a Buddhist temple whose golden *cheddi* towers overlook the restless river. Then we're invited into a village primary school, where we soon become the cause of some gleeful commotion, especially when the kids ask my age and I answer *roi ha-sip*, Thai for 150. We ride on, along increasingly untamed banks, heading for a ferry wharf and, along the way, passing mushroom farms and old teak houses.

The sun beats down as we wait for

the local ferry at Ban Bua Thong. We Westerners – three Germans and two Brits, plus myself – are happy to sit in the sun, catching a few rays.

At another riverside temple, Wat Klang kret, we pay respects to a graceful, golden Reclining Buddha. Thais are big on fortune-telling in all its forms, frequently "checking their luck" with astrologers, monks, palmistry pundits, even foot-readers, so it comes as little surprise to find Thai worshippers here indulging in a spot of personal futurology. In this case, they shake numbered sticks from a cylinder, then consult an interpretative text. I join in, drawing stick Number Seven, which I interpret from a printed, bilingual sheet. My one-size-fits-all prophecy declares, "Good luck approaching. Lost items recovered. Affectionate loving care interchanged. Patient recovering."

Main: A buddha at Wat Toae near Ko Kret Island  
Opposite page: Figurines on Mon pottery



With all bases covered, I'm ready to pedal on, to the timewarp settlement ahead. We wheel our bikes onto the little ferry that chugs across the Chao Phraya River and, minutes later, step ashore on Koh Kret, in the province of Nonthaburi. This river-moated island is that very rare thing, anywhere in the world: a car-free realm.

In 1722, the island was cut from an ox-bow bend in the river and became a refuge to members of the Mon tribes that once dominated

whose housing ranges from wooden shacks to substantial houses, shaded by palm trees and blessed by ramshackle Buddhist temples. Bangkok's version of Brigadoon is this island without cars, bling malls, taxis and *tuk-tuks* – but at the end of the day, you can leave, knowing the spell will stay intact.

There are 20 pottery workshops on the island, located in places with poetically evocative names: Pottery Village #1, near Wat Poramai Yikawat, and Pottery Village #6. Koh Kret is

platters and figurines of Buddhas and frogs. Prices start very low for the smallest pots and incense holders but can rise to thousands of *baht* for larger, more ornate works.

We pedal on, stopping for a lunch of sticky rice and fruit and, later, at the island's main temple, Wat Poramai Yikawat, for Mon snacks. The wat itself is 200 years old and features murals and fine stucco work, but it's the food that grabs the attention of most Thai visitors. We line up with them for *khao cher* –



central Thailand. Ever since, they have retained their distinct identity, becoming renowned for their skill at the potter's wheel and the resulting earthenware and terracotta creations.

Koh Kret is roughly square in shape, extending for about two kilometres along each side; you can walk around it in about two hours. We're here to ride, following the paths that criss-cross the island, many of them level, concrete causeways built a metre or so above the tidal flats. We cruise along them, with jungle to the left, hamlets to the right and mangroves all around.

The Mon once dominated the land mass we now call Thailand. Some 1500 of them now live on this island, clustered in seven small villages

Above: Cycling the byways of Koh Kret island  
Right: A banana tree in full flower

known particularly for *kwan raman*, an unglazed red-black clay that is sometimes carved with intricate patterns. From time to time, Moh halts us and we duck into a ceramic artist's studio or a pottery factory shed. In one such shed, workers are busy throwing perfectly formed, identical pots on whirring potter's wheels. Other workers pack trays of fresh, unfired pots into large, vitrified brick ovens known as "turtleback kilns".

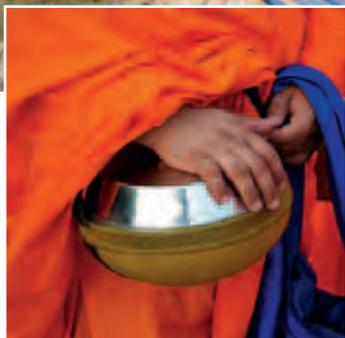
Shopping draws many visitors here and soon, my companions' backpacks are stuffed with well-wrapped bowls,

rice, served with fragrant water and side dishes – and *tod mun pla nor gala* – a ginger-spiced fish cake.

We check out a chaotic little museum near the *wat* crammed with Mon memorabilia and family heirlooms, intricate ceramics and bric-a-brac. By then, we're all keen to get back in the saddle. We weave among Mon houses, across causeways, past paddies, orchards and flowerbeds, and via potteries and galleries until we



Left: Mon pottery worker  
Below left: A monk with his alms bowl in early morning



reach the island's northernmost point.

The temperature is wok-hot, even out here in the middle the river, so we stop for a breather beside a small pagoda that splits the Chao Phraya's current like a ship's prow. The ancient structure, encrusted with decades of marzipan-like whitewash, sags precariously towards the river. "It's melting like chocolate in the sun," says Martin, one of the German riders.

Towards the end of our journey, we stop at a family-run pottery gallery to watch sculptor Khun Tanong Chai Mahi carve a complex, Buddhist mythological scene onto the raw surface of a large earthenware pot. It's a timeless scene: an artisan working slowly on an infinitely intricate narrative scene.

He tells us it will take him at least two weeks, full-time, to finish carving this depiction of the Buddha's enlightenment – and that the resulting pot may well crack when fired in the kiln.

"What do you do if that happens?" I ask.

With true Buddhist – or Brigadoonist – equanimity, he sighs, "I just stare at the sky for about two hours. Then I start again." •

**Photography by John Borthwick and the Tourism Authority of Thailand**

## travelfacts

### gettingthere

Thai Airways flies from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth to Bangkok. For bookings, phone 1300 651 960 or visit [www.thaiairways.com.au](http://www.thaiairways.com.au). Other airlines that fly between Australia and Thailand include Emirates (phone 03 9940 7807 or visit [www.emirates.com/au](http://www.emirates.com/au)), Jetstar (phone 131538 or visit [www.jetstar.com](http://www.jetstar.com)), Qantas (phone 13 1313 or visit [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)) and Singapore Airlines (phone 13 1011 or visit [www.singaporeair.com.au](http://www.singaporeair.com.au)).

### gettingaround

Creative Holidays, phone 1300 747 400 or visit [www.creativeholidays.com.au](http://www.creativeholidays.com.au)  
Essence of Asia, phone 1300 365 355 or visit [www.essenceofasia.com.au](http://www.essenceofasia.com.au)  
Explore Holidays, phone 02 9423 8080 or visit [www.exploreholidays.com.au](http://www.exploreholidays.com.au)  
GAP Adventures, phone 1300 796 618 or visit [www.gapadventures.com/v&t](http://www.gapadventures.com/v&t)  
Infinity Holidays, phone 131 600 or visit [www.flightcentre.com.au](http://www.flightcentre.com.au)  
Intrepid Travel, phone 1300 364 512 or visit [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)  
Jetstar Holidays, phone 13 1538 or visit [www.jetstar.com.au/holidays](http://www.jetstar.com.au/holidays)  
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### wheretostay

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Plaza Athénée Bangkok, phone +66 2 650 880 or visit [www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)  
Shangri-La Hotel, Bangkok, phone +66 2 236 7777 or visit [www.shangri-la.com](http://www.shangri-la.com)  
The Sukothai Bangkok; for reservations, call Leading Hotels of the World on 1800 222 033 or visit [www.sukhothai.com](http://www.sukhothai.com)  
The Westin Grande Sukhumvit, phone +66 2 207 8000 or visit [www.westin.com](http://www.westin.com)

### whattodo

Spice Roads' one-day Koh Kret tours depart Wednesday and Saturday mornings. Phone +66 2 7125305 or visit [www.spiceroads.com](http://www.spiceroads.com)  
Non-cyclists can join the Chao Phraya Express Boat's Sunday tour of Koh Kret. Visit [www.chaophrayaboat.co.th](http://www.chaophrayaboat.co.th)

### furtherinformation

Tourism Authority of Thailand, phone 02 9247 7549 or visit [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)