

Bangkok

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DYNAMIC BANGKOK ISN'T ALL SHINY SHOPPING MALLS AND GRIDLOCKED TRAFFIC.

WRITER, PHOTOGRAPHER, AND INQUISITIVE EXPAT DANIEL ALLEN LEAVES THE CAR BEHIND TO EXPLORE SOME OF THE SIAMESE CAPITAL'S LESS-FREQUENTED NEIGHBOURHOODS.







BANGKOK BIKE RENTAL

Launched in November last year, the **Green Bangkok Bike Project** is now in its pilot stage. Similar to London's 'Boris Bike' scheme, two docking stations in the city centre now offer bikes to borrow and rent. The plan is to have 50 such stations and 500 bicycles dotted around Bangkok by the end of this year.

Using these green bikes is incredibly cheap. The first 15 minutes of use are free, the next 45 minutes cost 10 baht, eventually rising to 80 baht for between six to eight hours of use, and 100 baht beyond that. Rental fees are paid by electronic smart cards.

With its multi-lane expressways and abundance of massive concrete infrastructure, Bangkok might not seem like the world's best place to abandon your vehicle. To the pleasant surprise of many visitors, however, there's a lot more to the city's thoroughfares than trucks, taxis, and tearing *tuk-tuks*.

In a quest to leave Bangkok's traffic behind, I soon find myself surrounded by outlandishly verdant scenery. Only a five-minute long-tail boat ride across the sluggish waters of the **Chao Phraya River**, a million miles and 50 years back in time from the tower blocks and fume-laden streets of downtown **Sukhumvit**, is the island of **Bang Kra Jao**.

Nourished by the Chao Phraya, one of Thailand's major waterways, much of Bang Kra Jao is still smothered in dense jungle. Complete with mango plantations, coconut groves, and its very own market, Bang Kra Jao is Bangkok's tropical

take on New York's Central Park. With only a handful of proper roads, the principal means of exploration is via an intricate maze of concrete pathways, raised on stilts above the shallow backwaters.

Cycling the streets of New York, Beijing, and London, I've shot countless photos on two wheels before. Biking the narrow pathways of Bang Kra Jao, however, is a slightly more challenging proposition. With a one-metre drop on either side into riverine ooze, not to mention the occasional low-slung creeper overhead, the US\$5,000 camera hanging round my neck suddenly seems a little vulnerable.

"You can always get off and walk," says my guide Tao with a grin, managing to turn his head, speak English, and perform 90° turns on his bike at the same time. "There's no shame in walking." I make a note to remove 10 baht from his tip.

Carefully avoiding itinerant dogs and mopeds, Tao and I head deeper into Bang Kra Jao, passing single-storey homes, ornate temples, and even a well-manicured park. Tao explains that the six local *tambon* (districts) have enchanting titles such as Water Lily, Fish Cage, and Honey, which all seem suitably bucolic.

→ The World Meteorological Organization names Bangkok as the globe's hottest city, with an annual mean air temperature of 28°C.



Those who visit Bang Kra Jao at the weekend will invariably stop at **Bang Namphueng**, one of Bangkok's most appealing bazaars. Taking a welcome break from the saddle, I wander through this 'floating' market, which overflows from a leafy central canal onto the nearby banks. Unlike other Bangkok markets there's a real authentic flavour here, with only a handful of other foreigners perusing the eclectic range of merchandise.

Pineapple, pomelo, tangerine, and banana – the overloaded canoes of Bang Namphueng offer a technicoloured array of fruit. Vendors in bamboo hats vie for the best canal-side position, as Thai locals exchange crumpled notes for bags of juicy produce. Busy chefs in waterborne kitchens service row upon row of covered tables, as a Buddhist monk in iconic orange garb blesses passers-by with a gentle sprinkling of water.

Tao and I take a seat in one restaurant and are soon feasting on mussel pancakes and curried elephant ear (a large-leafed local plant), both culinary treats for which Bang Kra Jao is rightly renowned. It's the perfect way to recharge the batteries after our afternoon ride through the island's steamy, jungle-clad interior. The best thing is, there's not a car in sight.

OFFBEAT BAZAARS

Roses, jasmine, lilies, marigolds, chrysanthemums, orchids, daisies, carnations, and birds-of-paradise – at 9 o'clock in the morning I'm overwhelmed by the diversity of blooms for sale at Bangkok's **Pak Khlong Talat** flower market. With stalls spilling out onto the nearby streets, the kaleidoscope of natural hues is dazzling, while a rich perfume of botanical scent hangs on the air.

Throughout Bangkok, nothing rivals the city's flower markets – of which Pak Khlong Talat is the largest – for vibrancy. By the very nature of the products for sale, it's all about colour. Wandering inside, it's as though a child's painting set has exploded and the result captured for sale.

Pak Khlong Talat is a beehive of human activity. Men move large wicker baskets of flowers on hand-drawn carts – from delivery trucks to wholesalers, from wholesalers to smaller vendors, and from vendors to people's cars and mopeds. Workers everywhere compose flower arrangements, thread jasmine and marigolds into garlands, freshen up bouquets with water, and sort through huge mounds of petals.

Thorsang Supachaiyakit is a young stallholder selling orchids and lilies. "My father used

AYUTTHAYA

Situated just north of Bangkok, this ancient city was once the Thai capital, but governance ended abruptly in AD 1767 when it was sacked by a marauding Burmese army. Despite the destruction, the splendour of the ruins still evokes Ayutthaya's former stature, beauty, and cultural importance.

Start your visit at **Wat Yai Chaimongkol** temple, its towering central stupa so large that it is slowly sinking into the ground, before moving on to **Wat Phra Mahathat**, the ancient city's symbolic heart, now famed for the tree roots that enmesh its Buddha relic.

Your company Spice Roads run guided tours of Ayutthaya as well as the cycle tours of Bang Kra Jao. www.spiceroads.com




**BY THE
NUMBERS**

1,430

The number of Thai islands. Thailand is a beach-lover's paradise, with countless strips of powdery sand, not to mention pristine coral reefs and world-class diving locations.

8.68m

The number of Facebook users in Bangkok, according to Facebook statistics website Socialbakers. Developing Asian countries like Thailand and Indonesia have provided the most explosive growth for the social networking site in recent years.

200,000

There are more than 20,000 Buddhist monasteries in Thailand, and approximately 200,000 monks. A man cannot become a monk until he reaches the age of 20. He can remain a monk for as long as he wishes, even if for just one day.



to grow vegetables," she says. "Then he gave the land to me and I started to grow flowers. I think flowers are a lot prettier, and everyone always wants them, especially for the temples."

Within walking distance of Pak Khlong Talat are two more of Bangkok's less-frequented markets. **Sampeng** is a typical, traditional open-air market, and one of Bangkok's biggest, cheapest, and most popular places to buy wholesale products.

Compared to the relative spaciousness of Pak Khlong Talat, at first I find the close confines and crowds of Sampeng a little disorientating. The market is jam-packed with Thai shoppers, street food carts, and transport dollies, all scurrying through a seemingly everlasting sprawl of jewellery, souvenirs, and random bric-a-brac.

"The trick in Sampeng is just to go with the flow," says long-term Bangkok resident Struan Robertson. "Stop and shop whenever you see something that catches your eye; otherwise move with the crowd and enjoy the ride. Dried squid, kebabs, taro chips, freshly squeezed juice... this is also a great place to sample Thai snack food."

Walking onward from Sampeng, I reach the heart of **Chinatown**, which extends from an arch on Yaowarat Road past Sampeng Market to **Pahurat**, known locally as **Little India**. The area is a bewitching mass of small markets, temples, restaurants, medicine shops, and myriad other small businesses. With its gentle bends, Yaowarat Road is said to resemble a dragon's back, and is therefore considered auspicious by the local Chinese.

After a lengthy spell of window shopping, I finish my mini-tour with a delicious, streetside lunch of smoked duck, stir-fried clams, and grilled taro root, all washed down with a bottle of fresh pomegranate juice. A Bangkok taxi ride awaits, but in this car-crazed city, it's been good to leave the old jalopy behind, if only for a morning. 🚗

