



A new BTS skytrain route to the other side of the Chao Phraya river is the perfect reason to explore the calmer side of Bangkok

GOING GREEN



IF THE SLEW OF TRENDY CLUBS, FANCY RESTAURANTS AND SWANKY HOTELS THAT COSMOPOLITAN BANGKOK HAS TO OFFER ISN'T ENOUGH TO TEMPT YOU, there's an equally charming part of the Thai capital on the west bank of the Chao Phraya river that's sure to delight.

Thonburi, the former Thai capital (1769 to 1782), is the antithesis of the bustling city centre – think Buddhist temples, floating markets and decades-old communities where the pace of life goes by at the speed of a sand barge.

The opening of the new BTS skytrain route over to Thonburi (Krung Thonburi and Wong Wian Yai stations) is the perfect reason to explore the greener side of Bangkok. Because all of its charms are nestled away in the labyrinth of barely there walkways, the best way to appreciate the views once you're there is on a bike.

SpiceRoads (www.spiceroads.com) offers half (20km) or full-day tours (40km) of Old Bangkok. The half-day tour, which I opted for, starts from Pra Arthit pier and ends at the Khlong Mayom floating market.

Led by a trained guide, I am taken through ancient communities by the river and over railway tracks to Jiam Sangsajja bronze factory (+662 424 1689) in Ban Bu community, a place from where handmade alms bowls and water containers are usually



THONBURI TIPS

To cross over to Thonburi from Bangkok, take the BTS and get off at Krung Thonburi or Wong Wian Yai station.

Passengers can cross over to the Thonburi side on the BTS free of charge from now until August 12. For more information visit www.bts.co.th

ON YOUR BIKE

Enjoy stopovers at floating markets, local temples and old communities as part of the cycling tour



commissioned by the wealthy families of Bangkok.

In a trip that's reminiscent of a tour of the hutongs (small alleys) of Beijing on a rickshaw, cyclists find themselves happily canvassing through the quaint alleys that weave through local homes, allowing them a rare glimpse of what's going on inside them.

The trip is peppered with interesting stopovers; the Suwannaram Ratchaworawihan temple, which dates back to the Ayutthaya period; and the Taling Chan floating market, which will leave you salivating with its cornucopia of local delicacies on offer including tod mun goong (shrimp paste patty), kanom jeen (rice noodles with curry) or sweetcorn topped with fresh coconut shavings.

Just a few clicks further is Khlong Mayom floating market (+66 2 422 4270) – the ideal place to enjoy authentic meals the ancient Thai way. Vendors set up shop by the pier where

they prepare everything from noodle soup, som tum (Thai papaya salad) and guay jup (rice flake noodles) from their wooden boats.

After lunch, jump off the saddle and explore the nearby area on foot where you can ask for a quick tour of the nearby lotus farm where Chuan Chuantr, the market's founder, acts as your personal guide. Don't forget to feed some bananas to the water buffaloes on the way back (you can buy a bunch from one of the vendors on boats).

"My aim is to preserve the traditional Thai way of life for the younger generation to admire," Chuantr says.

"The floating market, the lotus farm, even the buffaloes – they are all a part of our heritage that is fast disappearing."

The half-day tour ends with a cruise along the canals on a longtail boat which takes you to a charming orchid farm. Avid horticulturalists are encouraged to take some home with them at bargain prices.

After a visit to Thonburi and its floating markets it's easy to understand how Bangkok earned its reputation as the "Venice of the east". ☺

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