

# **EXPLORING BANGKOK BY BOAT**

## **PART 1 THE CHAO PHRAYA RIVER**

**MUCH OF BANGKOK'S HISTORY HAS EVOLVED ALONG THE BANKS OF THE CHAO PHRAYA RIVER.**

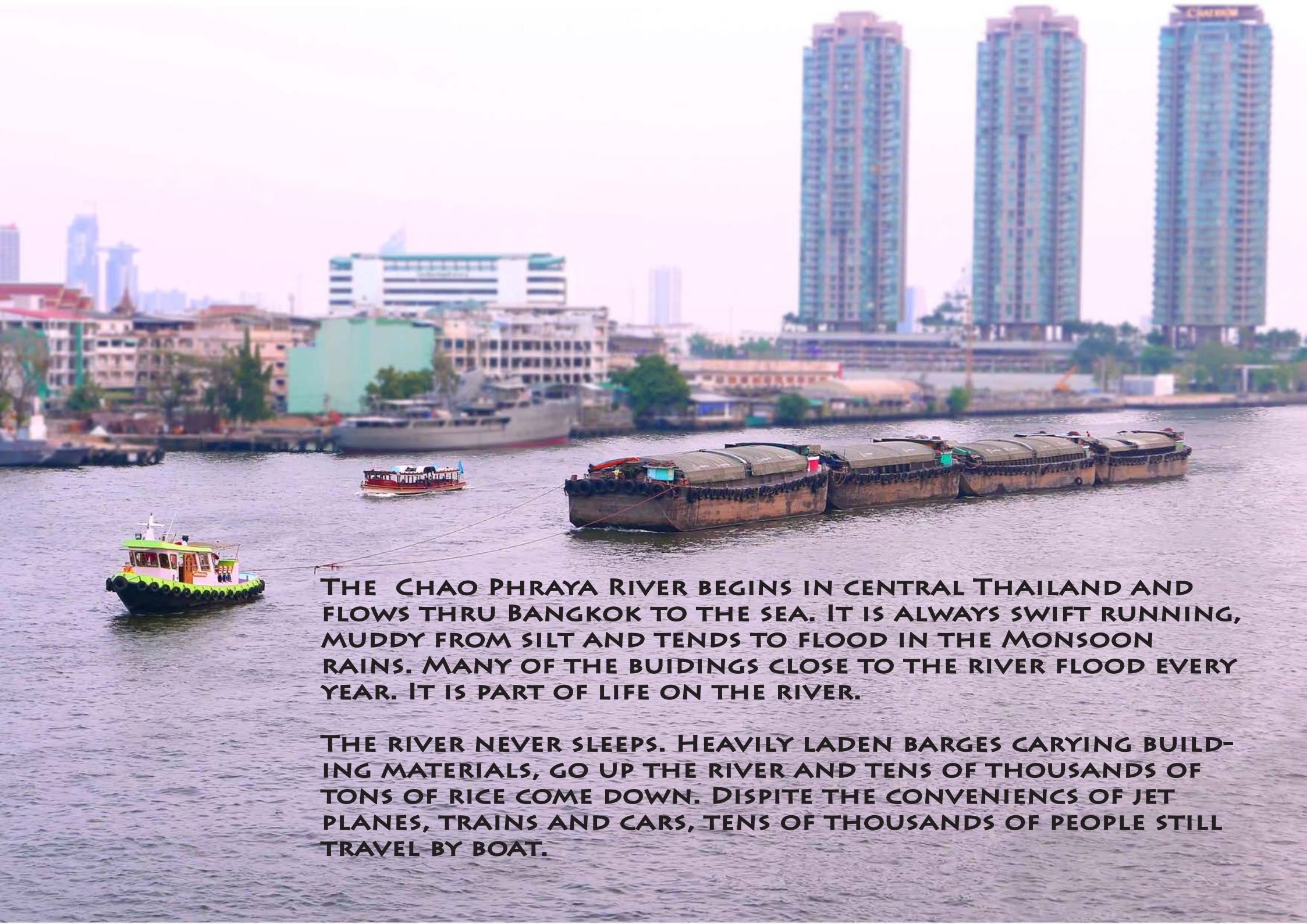
**EVERY DAY YOU'LL SEE COMMUTERS SPEEDING BY ON FAST RIVER TAXIS, OVERTAKING THE HEAVILY LADEN RICE BARGES.**

**BOATS ARE A GREAT WAY TO GET AROUND THE FAMOUS RIVERSIDE AREA WITH ITS MANY HISTORICAL ATTRACTIONS AND TO EXPLORE THE 'KLONGS' (CANALS) FOR A GLIMPSE OF YESTERYEAR.**

**Photos and story by Michael Greenwald**

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**THE CHAO PHRAYA RIVER BEGINS IN CENTRAL THAILAND AND FLOWS THRU BANGKOK TO THE SEA. IT IS ALWAYS SWIFT RUNNING, MUDDY FROM SILT AND TENDS TO FLOOD IN THE MONSOON RAINS. MANY OF THE BUILDINGS CLOSE TO THE RIVER FLOOD EVERY YEAR. IT IS PART OF LIFE ON THE RIVER.**

**THE RIVER NEVER SLEEPS. HEAVILY LADEN BARGES CARRYING BUILDING MATERIALS, GO UP THE RIVER AND TENS OF THOUSANDS OF TONS OF RICE COME DOWN. DISPUTE THE CONVENIENCES OF JET PLANES, TRAINS AND CARS, TENS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE STILL TRAVEL BY BOAT.**

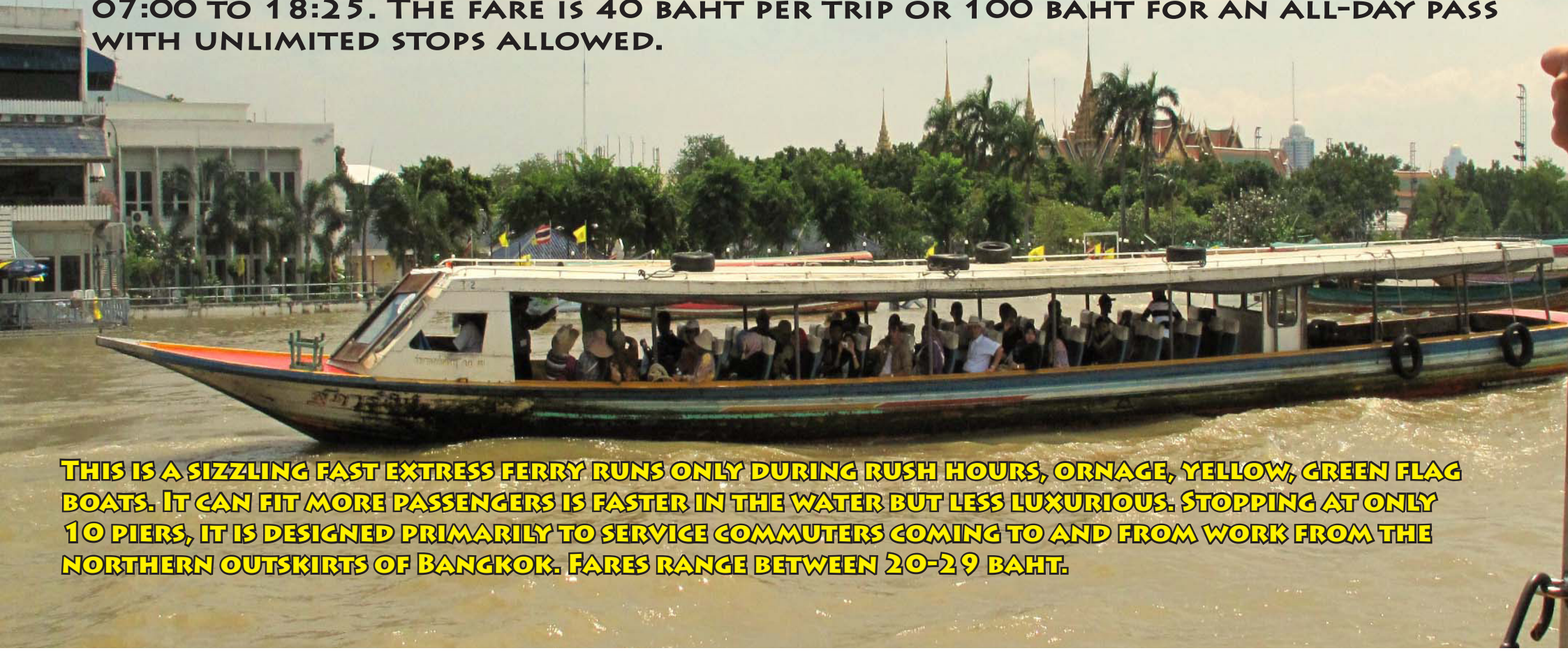


**SEVERAL KINDS OF PASSANGER BOATS RUN ON THE RIVER. FERRIES OR BARGES CAN BE USED TO GO CROSS THE RIVER AT VARIOUS POINTS.**

**THERE ARE DIFFERENT BOATS OFFERING DIFFERENT SERVICES. SOME EXPRESS BOATS ONLY STOP AT THE MAIN PIERS.**

**RIVER TAXIS RUN UP AND DOWN THE RIVER AND COST FROM AROUND 10 BAHT ONE-WAY, DEPENDING ON THE LENGTH OF THE JOURNEY. THE BLUE FLAG CHAO PHRAYA EXPRESS TOURIST BOAT IS PROBABLY YOUR BEST OPTION RUNNING BETWEEN NONTBABURI IN THE FAR NORTH OF BANGKOK TO SATHORN CENTRAL PIER FROM 07:00 TO 18:25. THE FARE IS 40 BAHT PER TRIP OR 100 BAHT FOR AN ALL-DAY PASS WITH UNLIMITED STOPS ALLOWED.**

**THIS IS A SIZZLING FAST EXTRESS FERRY RUNS ONLY DURING RUSH HOURS, ORNAGE, YELLOW, GREEN FLAG BOATS. IT CAN FIT MORE PASSENGERS IS FASTER IN THE WATER BUT LESS LUXURIOUS. STOPPING AT ONLY 10 PIERS, IT IS DESIGNED PRIMARILY TO SERVICE COMMUTERS COMING TO AND FROM WORK FROM THE NORTHERN OUTSKIRTS OF BANGKOK. FARES RANGE BETWEEN 20-29 BAHT.**





THIS A TYPICAL BLUE FLAG TOURIST FERRY TRAVELS AT A LEISURE-  
LY 15 MPH AND STOPS AT EVERY LANDING, ZIG-ZAGGING BACK  
AND FORTH UP AND DOWN THE RIVER. DEPENDING ON THE LO-  
CATION OF YOUR HOTEL THE RIVER FERRY IS CERTAINLY CHEAPER  
AND A LOT FASTER THAN TAKING A TAXI.





The image shows the interior of a ferry. Rows of red and yellow plastic seats are arranged on both sides of a central aisle. Several passengers are seated, including a woman in a green top, a man in a white shirt, a man in a green shirt, a woman in a pink shirt, a woman in a blue shirt talking on a phone, and a man in a blue shirt. The ferry has a white interior with metal support poles and handrails. Large windows on the right side provide a view of the water. The text is overlaid on the lower left portion of the image.

**REST ASSURED, THESE BLUE FLAG FERRIES ARE USUALLY PACKED, STANDING ROOM ONLY, BUT THEY ARE NUMEROUS AND ARE "RIVER BUSES," WITH DIFFERENT ROUTES, SOME HEAD UP RIVER AND SOME DOWN.**





THIS IS A TYPICAL LANDING, WITH A FLOATING DOCK THAT CAN PITCH ABOUT A BIT WHEN THE RIVER IS CHOPPY. THERE IS A STEWARD TO HELP PASSANGERS BOARD. NOT FOR THE TIMID. THE FERRIES ONLY DOCK FOR 2-3 MINUTES.





**THERE ARE CROSS-RIVER BARGES FOR WHICH YOU PAY A SMALL FEE, ABOUT 8 US CENTS. SHUTTLE BOATS ALSO GO DIRECT TO HOTELS LIKE THE MILLENNIUM HILTON, MENAM RIVERSIDE HOTEL, MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL AND THE MARRIOTT RESORT. THIS ELEGANT, MAGNIFICENTLY-MAINTAINED FERRY TAKES PASSENGERS TO THE PENINSULA HOTEL**









**THIS GORGEOUS OLD RICE BARGE HAS BEEN MADE  
INTO A HOUSEBOAT**



WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE GRAND PALACE, THE OFFICIAL RESIDENCE OF THE KINGS OF SIAM 1782-1925 AND A WORLD HERITAGE SITE. IT IS A "MUST SEE" AND THERE IS A FERRY LANDING NOT FAR AWAY.

BANGKOK BECAME THE NEW CAPITOL OF THAILAND AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF THE OLD CAPITOL, OF AYUTTHAYA, IN 1767. THE GRAND PALACE WAS COMPLETED ABOUT 12 YEARS LATER. THE KING, HIS COURT, AND HIS ROYAL GOVERNMENT WERE BASED ON THE GROUNDS OF THE PALACE. NOTE: WOMEN HAVE TO WEAR LONG SLEEVES AND A DRESS. SHORT SLEEVES AND SHORTS ARE PROHIBITED BUT IF YOU ARE CAUGHT UNAWARE, YOU CAN RENT SUITABLE GARMENTS ACROSS THE STREET.





THE GROUNDS OF THE GRAND PALACE ALSO HOUSED THE THAI WAR MINISTRY, STATE DEPARTMENTS, EVEN THE MINT. THE PALACE IS THE SPIRITUAL HEART OF THE THAI KINGDOM.





ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE GRAND PALACE IS THE CITY PILLR, A MAGNIFICENT SHRINE WELL WORTH SEEING, FULL OF STATUES OF THE BUDDHAS.





IN ADDITION TO THERE ACTUALLY BEING  
A GOLDEN PILLAR INSIDE THE CITY PILL-  
LAR THERE ARE MANY REPRESENTATIONS  
OF THE BUDDHA.





THE OLD GUN MUSEUM IS NEXT TO THE CITY PILLAR, WITH A FINE VIEW OF THE GRAND PALACE. SOME OF THESE OLD CANONS GO BACK TO THE EARLY 1600S. WELL WORTH A STROLL THRU THE GARDEN. THE BUILDING IS MILITARY HEADQUARTERS AND NOT OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.





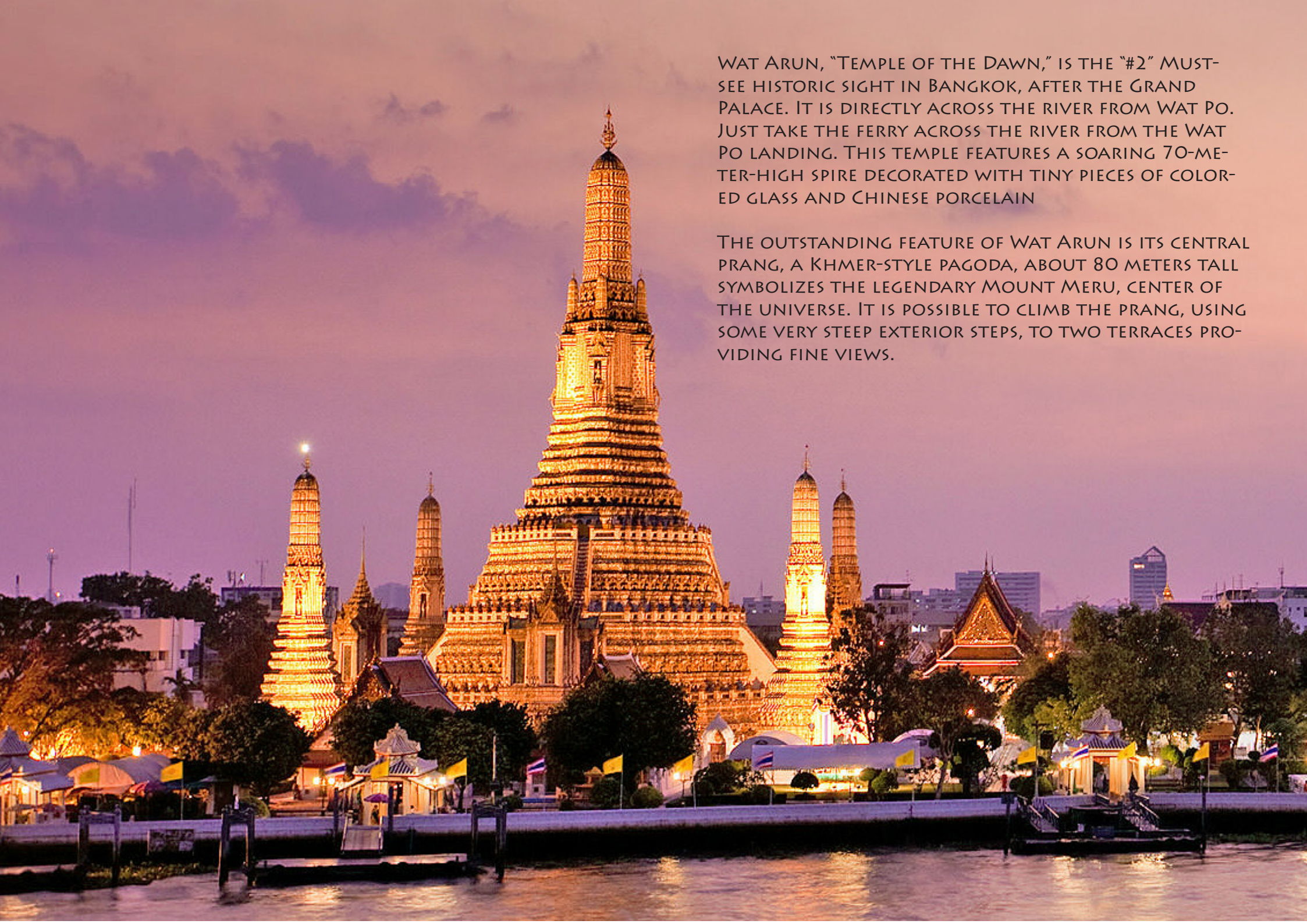


NOT FAR FROM THE GRAND PALACE IS PROBABLY THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE LANDMARK OF THAILAND, EVERYONE PHOTOGRAPHS THE 37-METER LENGTH BUT BECAUSE THE ROOM IS NOT DEEP, YOU CAN'T STAND BACK FAR ENOUGH TO GET A GOOD SHOT, THE PICS NEVER TURN OUT WELL. I ALWAYS LOVED THE SERENE FACE BEST, SUPPOSEDLY OF THE LORD BUDDHA AS HIS DEATH APPROACHED. WAT PO IS HOME TO MORE THAN ONE THOUSAND BUDDHA IMAGES. AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CAPITOL OF AYUTTHAYA, THE REMAINS OF THE STATUE WERE MOVED TO BANGKOK IN 1788



WAT ARUN, "TEMPLE OF THE DAWN," IS THE "#2" MUST-SEE HISTORIC SIGHT IN BANGKOK, AFTER THE GRAND PALACE. IT IS DIRECTLY ACROSS THE RIVER FROM WAT PO. JUST TAKE THE FERRY ACROSS THE RIVER FROM THE WAT PO LANDING. THIS TEMPLE FEATURES A SOARING 70-METER-HIGH SPIRE DECORATED WITH TINY PIECES OF COLORED GLASS AND CHINESE PORCELAIN

THE OUTSTANDING FEATURE OF WAT ARUN IS ITS CENTRAL PRANG, A KHMER-STYLE PAGODA, ABOUT 80 METERS TALL SYMBOLIZES THE LEGENDARY MOUNT MERU, CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE. IT IS POSSIBLE TO CLIMB THE PRANG, USING SOME VERY STEEP EXTERIOR STEPS, TO TWO TERRACES PROVIDING FINE VIEWS.





## **KHAO SAN ROAD (PHRA ARTHIT PIER, N13 )**

**THE LANDING FOR KAHO SAN ROAD IS NEXT TO A DELIGHTFUL PARK, WHICH IN ITSELF IS A GREAT PLACE TO RELAX, ESPECIALLY IF YOU GET THERE AROUND SUNDOWN. THE FAMOUS KAO SAN ROAD WALKING STREET IS RIGHT DOWN THE BLOCK.**

**NORMALLY WE DISTAIN BLATANTLY TOURISTIC SHOPPING BUT UNQUESTIONABLY KAO SAN IS FUN! THE STREET IS SURROUNDED BY SIDE STREETS WITH SMALL HOTELS AND MANY RESTAURANTS. TRUE THEY ARE TOURISTIC, EXPENSIVE AND THE FOOD JUST FAIR, BUT A GREAT PLACE TO DRINK A FEW BEERS AND WATCH THE CROWD GO BY. NO VISIT TO BANGKOK IS COMPLETE WITHOUT GOING THERE. IT IS A MAJOR TOURING AREA THAT MAY END UP TAKING THE ENTIRE EVENING.**

**PACKED INTO A 1 KM LONG STRIP ARE COUNTLESS BUDGET GUEST HOUSES AND MID-RANGE HOTELS, INTERNET CAFES, SWANKY BARS AND CLUBS, RESTAURANTS, MASSAGE PARLOURS, TRAVEL AGENTS, BOOKSHOPS, MARKET STALLS, TATTOO SHOPS AND MUCH, MUCH MORE.**

**KHAOSAN IS QUITE UNLIKE ANYWHERE ELSE IN BANGKOK, IT'S ALSO POPULAR WITH LOCALS, ESPECIALLY YOUNG HIPSTERS AND ART STUDENTS.**

**KHAOSAN SHOPS SELL HANDCRAFTS, PAINTINGS, CLOTHES, PIRATED CDS, DVDS, AND SECOND-HAND BOOKS, PLUS MANY USEFUL BACKPACKER ITEMS.**

**IN GENERAL ITEMS ON THIS TOURIST STREET ARE OVERPRICED—BUT INTERESTING. THERE ARE MANY PUBS AND BARS ON SURROUNDING STREETS. ONE THAI WRITER HAS DESCRIBED KHAOSAN AS "A SHORT ROAD THAT HAS THE LONGEST DREAM IN THE WORLD."**

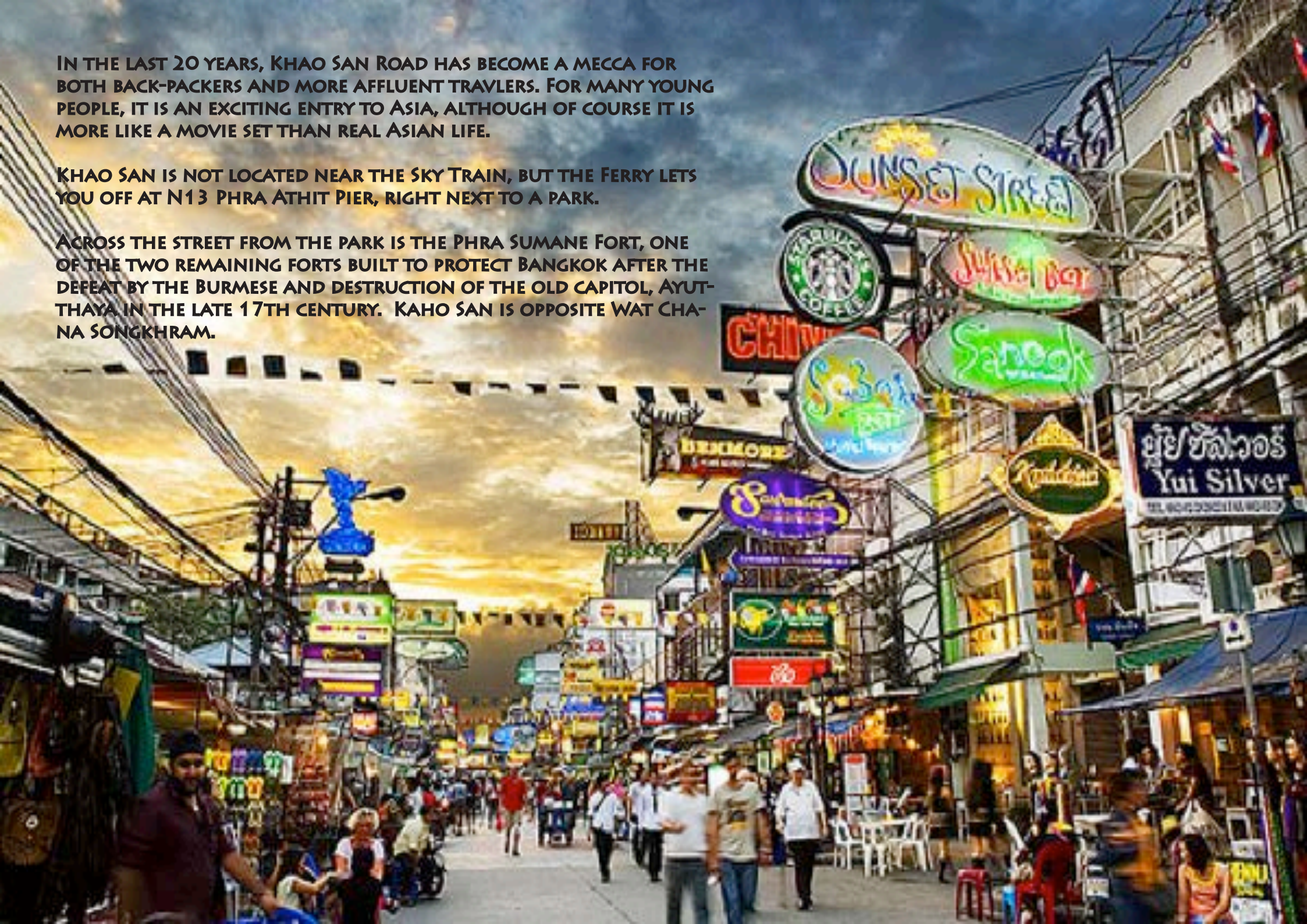




IN THE LAST 20 YEARS, KHAO SAN ROAD HAS BECOME A MECCA FOR BOTH BACK-PACKERS AND MORE AFFLUENT TRAVELERS. FOR MANY YOUNG PEOPLE, IT IS AN EXCITING ENTRY TO ASIA, ALTHOUGH OF COURSE IT IS MORE LIKE A MOVIE SET THAN REAL ASIAN LIFE.

KHAO SAN IS NOT LOCATED NEAR THE SKY TRAIN, BUT THE FERRY LETS YOU OFF AT N13 PHRA ATHIT PIER, RIGHT NEXT TO A PARK.

ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE PARK IS THE PHRA SUMANE FORT, ONE OF THE TWO REMAINING FORTS BUILT TO PROTECT BANGKOK AFTER THE DEFEAT BY THE BURMESE AND DESTRUCTION OF THE OLD CAPITOL, AYUTTHAYA IN THE LATE 17TH CENTURY. KHAO SAN IS OPPOSITE WAT CHANA SONGKHAM.











**THE WANG LANG MARKET IS NOT JUST FOR TOURISTS BUT IS WELL-ATTENDED BY THE LOALS AS WELLL. FIND BAR-GAINS ON SHOES, BAGS, ACCESSORIES, VINTAGE & SECOND-HAND CLOTHING CAN BE FOUND AT RIDICULOUSLY LOW PRICES. THE MARKET IS WELL-KNOWN FOR ITS WIDE VARIETY OF DELICIOUS SOUTHERN-STYLE FOOD AND YOU CAN GET TAKE-AWAY TO EAT WHEN YOU GET BACK ON THE FERRY.**



**A SHORT WALK FROM THE WANG LING PIER TO THE FAMOUS ROYAL BARGE MUSEUM TO SEE THE CEREMONIAL ROYAL ROWING BARGES MADE FROM HUGE TEAK TREES, USED BY THE ROYAL FAMILY WHEN THEY LIVED ON THE THONBURY SIDE OF THE RIVER AND HAD TO ROW ACROSS TO REACH THE PARLIAMENT.**









CHINESE BUDDHISTS DO NOT EAT BEEF AND UN-  
QUESTIONABLY PORK IS THE DOMINANT MEAT  
OIN THAILAND. MOST FOOD STANDS SELL SOME  
FORM OF PORK BUT FEW HAVE AN ELEGANT  
PRESENTATION LIKE THIS ONE, BECAUSE THIS  
REQUIRES A HUGE OVEN.





# CHINATOWN

**A TOOK-TOOK RIDE FROM RATCHAWONG PIER, THE CHINATOWN DISTRICT IS ONE OF THE OLDEST AREAS OF BANGKOK, BUILT IN THE 1780'S. ONE OF ITS MAIN STREETS, CHAROEN KRUNG, WAS ACTUALLY BANGKOK'S FIRST PAVED ROAD.**

**THE AREA GOT A SOMEWHAT SEEDY REPUTATION WITH MANY PAWNSHOPS AND A FONDNESS FOR GAMBLING. THE THIEVES MARKET, IS SLIGHTLY NORTH OF THE WESTERN END OF SAMPENG LANE, SO NAMED BECAUSE THIS WAS WHERE STOLEN GOODS USUALLY TURNED UP. IT'S NOW A GOOD AREA FOR LOOKING OR BUYING THAI OR CHINESE ANTIQUES.**

**UNQUESTIONABLY, CHINATOWN IS MOST INTERESTING JUST AFTER SUNSET, WHEN COUNTLESS SHOPPERS STROLL THE STREETS, WHICH ARE ABLAZE WITH UNUSUAL SIGNS, FOODS AND SMELLS.**

**READ MORE ABOUT CHINATOWN IN OUR "FABULOUS CHINATOWN" BROCHURE.**



## **PART 2**

# **THE THORNBURY CANALS**

BUILT BY KING IV TO GET FROM HIS HOME IN THORNBURY TO THE ROYAL PALACE, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, THE THORNBURY CANAL WAS THE ONLY ACCESS TO THE THORNBURY AREA UNTIL THE MID 20TH CENTURY, WHEN THE FIRST ROADS WERE BUILT. BEING A DELTA, WITH MANY STREAMS AND SMALL RIVERS, IT WAS EASY TO BUILD CANALS AND THESE BECAME THE STREETS OF THORNBURY. THERE ARE STILL MANY PLACES IN THORNBURY THAT STILL HAVE NO ROADS.

SO, IT IS POSSIBLE TO TAKE A LONG-TAIL BOAT BACK INTO THESE CANALS AND STEP BACK INTO AN EARLIER, MORE TRANQUIL, MORE LEISURELY AGE AND USUALLY COST ABOUT \$12-15 USD/HOUR. HIRE A LONG-TAIL BOAT. NEGOTIATE THE PRICE.



**YOU CAN HIRE BOATS AT:**

**THA CHANG FERRY PIER NEAR THE GRAND PALACE, PIER AT THE RIVER CITY SHOPPING COMPLEX, SATHORN PIER**

**THE BOAT DRIVER IS NOT A GUIDE. HIS ENGLISH MAY BE LIMITED, BUT HE WILL KNOW THE MAIN SPOTS. ASK TO EXPLORE 'KLONG BANGKOK NOI' AND 'KLONG BANGKOK YAI'.**





**A WOMAN SELLING HOME-MADE STRAW HATS ROWS HER BOAT FROM HOUSE TO HOUSE. OLD-TIMERS SELL NEARLY EVERYTHIG, INCLUDING FULLY COOKED MEALS BY BOAT.**





Home Artist's







THIS BARGE CAME MORE THAN 100 KM DOWN THE RIVER TO SELL THESE HAND-MADE POTTERIES. THE BOAT IS DRIVEN BY A 125 CC BRIGGS AND STRATTON LONG-TAIL ENGINE. THE BROWN POTS ARE WATER CISTERNS AND THE RED ONES ARE DECORATIVE TROPICAL FISH BOWLS.



THIS BARGHE IS LAYING ALONG-SIDE A TOURIST FLEA MARKET







MAN HANDS UP A FULLY COOKED MEAL TO WAITING CUSTOMER

























SOME PEOPLE CALL THESE OLD, PRE-WW II RAMSHACKLE HOUSES BUILT ON THE CANAL, "STILTSVILLE." MANY OF THE PILINGs ARE MADE FROM RUBBER TREES AND THE LATEX PRESERVES THEM. BUT THE MODERN HOUSES ARE USUALLY BUILT EITHER ON CEMENT PILES OR A CEMENT SLAB IS POURED ON ROCK FILL.





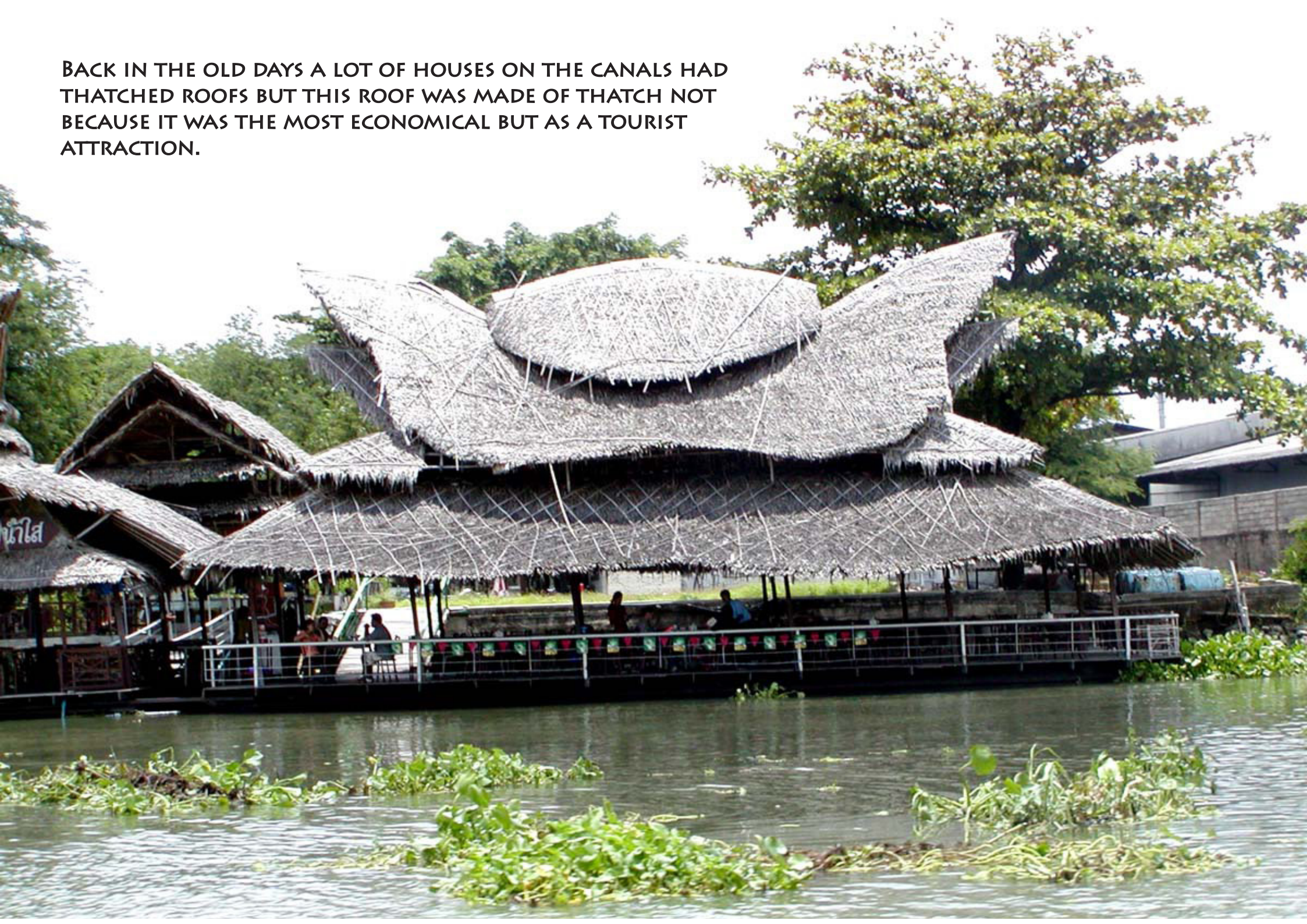
**SOME SAY ONLY THE HAND OF GOD KEEPS SOME OF THESE PLACES FROM FALLING DOWN  
AND I THINK THEY ARE RIGHT.**







BACK IN THE OLD DAYS A LOT OF HOUSES ON THE CANALS HAD THATCHED ROOFS BUT THIS ROOF WAS MADE OF THATCH NOT BECAUSE IT WAS THE MOST ECONOMICAL BUT AS A TOURIST ATTRACTION.







THIS BEAUTIFUL OLD RICE BARGE HAS BEEN MADE INTO A FLOATING HOME





I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED THIS LITTLE SHACK ON THE THRONBURY THE MOST. IT IS A SUPREME COMBINATION OF HUMBLENESS AND MAJESTY, NOT SO MUCH A RENOUNCING OF TECHNOLOGY AS AN IGNORING OF IT.

IF YOU LOOK CAREFULLY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BUILDING YOU CAN SEE THE BACK WALL, WITH DAYLIGHT BETWEEN THE PLANKS. BUT, YOU CAN ALSO SEE FROM THE HANGING SHELLS AND FLOWERS THAT SOMEONE LOVES THIS PLACE AND ITS SPIRIT IS ALIVE. THE LOVE HAS TRANSFORMED IT FROM A PILE OF PLANKS INTO SOMETHING THAT MAY NOT BE ALIVE BUT HAS SOME OF THE QUALITIES OF LIFE.





TO ME, THIS GRINNING DEMON, LEFT, LOCATED IN THE FLOATING MARKET IN NORTHAMBRI, SYMBOLIZES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WESTERN CULTURE AND THAT OF THAILAND.

FOR WESTERNERS, TIME IS LINEAR AND FLOWS IN ONLY ONE DIRECTION. THE PAST MAY BE INTERESTING BUT IT IS DEFINITELY "THE PAST."

TIME FOR THAIS MIGHT BE BETTER REPRESENTED BY THE CONTENTS OF A CIRCLE. TIME IS "EVERYTHING." THERE IS NO BARRIER BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT. THAI BUDDHISM MAKES THIS DYNAMIC. BUDDHISM IS ITSELF VERY ANCIENT, PRECEDING CHRISTIANITY BY 500 YEARS.

BUT THE THAI GODS, DEMONS, WINGED SERPENTS AND COMPOSITE ANIMALS COME FROM THE HINDU RELIGION THAT PRECEDED BUDDHISM BY 1,000 YEARS AND THE PEOPLE ALSO WORSHIP SPIRITS, OF THE LAND, IN TREES AND ROCKS, AN ANIMISM THAT PROBABLY GOES BACK TO THE CAVE MAN. AN OLD TREE, RINGED WITH CLOTH AND FESTOONED WITH OFFERINGS TELLS ONE THAT SPIRITS DWELL WITHIN.

THE DEMON (LEFT) IS A CLASSIC CREATURE FROM HINDUISM, BUT IS WEARING SUNGLASSES, A WRISTWATCH, A CAMERA AND HOLDS A CELL PHONE. THE OLD BLENDS SEAMLESSLY WITH THE NEW.

ALSO, THAILAND HAS A LONG HISTORY AND IT HAS BEEN FULL OF WAR AND UNCERTAINTY. THE FALL OF THE KINGDOM IN 1763 IS A BLOW STILL REMEMBERED. SO, THAIS LIVE MORE IN THE PRESENT THAN WESTERNERS BECAUSE THEY SEE THE FUTURE AS UNCERTAIN.





IT IS HARD TO DEFINE WHAT ONE COMES AWAY WITH FROM A TRIP UP THE THORNBURY. THE CANAL HAS CALLED ME BACK AGAIN AND AGAIN.

I ALWAYS THINK THE PRESENT IS THE BEST AGE TO LIVE IN, WITH IT FABULOUS IMPROVEMENTS IN MEDICINE THAT HAVE EXTENDED LIFE AND ENDED SO MUCH PAIN, BETTER NUTRITION AND THE STAGGERING MIRACLES OF COMPUTERS AND TECHNOLOGY.

BUT EVERY TIME I TRANSIT THE THORNBURY CANAL I AM REMINDED THAT THE ONE THING WE GAVE UP TO HAVE SO MUCH IS **TRANQUILLITY**. YOU CAN SEE THAT TRANQUILLITY IN THE FACES OF THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE THERE.

I DO NOT THINK TRANQUILLITY IS JUST "IN THE MIND." I THINK IT IS WHAT ONE FINDS ALONG A LAZY CANAL TRAPPED IN TIME.

---MICHAEL