

Boat ride to the other Bangkok

For Carl Thompson, an afternoon with a teacher turns into an education



Away from the new: a long-tailed boat makes its way through the old city

On the crowded streets outside Hualamphong Station one morning, I was accosted by a stranger offering to show me a good time. Nothing unusual in that, of course – already that day I'd been approached by a dozen others, touting everything from hotel rooms and tuk-tuk rides to the kind of diversions that many readily associate with the Thai capital.

But something about my present companion was different. Introducing himself as Arthit, former Bangkok resident and now history teacher in Chiang Mai, he told me he was there to deposit his luggage at the station before catching the overnight train home after a conference – well, that seemed to fit. And rather than steer the conversation around to a sales pitch, he listened to me telling him how I was loving Thailand but had little hope of experiencing traditional Thai life in this vast, chaotic city.

"So you haven't been out to the khlong?" he asked. "If we're both at a loose end, why don't I take you there?" I still feared this encounter would end up in yet another jewellery shop or (worse) draw me into a rigged card game, but I couldn't summon the energy for another quarrel. The man must have been in his sixties – could he really be such a threat? And besides, I hadn't the faintest idea what a "khlong" might be, and I was curious.

We boarded a bus and headed out through the Chinatown and Banglamphu districts, with Arthit knowledgeably describing the Thai school system; if this was a scam, it was certainly an elaborate one. We left the bus at the Tha Chang pier on the Chao Phraya river, and he ushered me into a long-tailed river-boat and instructed the driver to make for the Khlong Bangkok Noi – an area of canals, I realised at last. Minutes later, the persistent voice of doubt in my head was silenced by the sheer beauty of what was unfolding around me.

This simply could not be the same city.

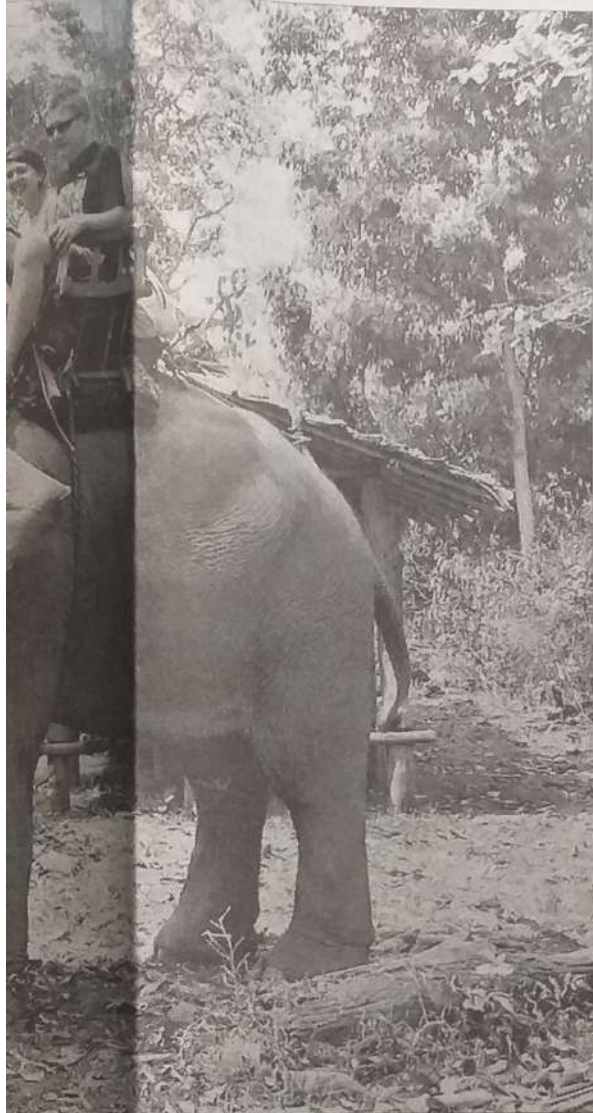
The high-rise blocks were replaced by wooden stilt houses; traffic noise softened to birdsong; floating markets materialised where shopping centres had been; people wore smiles, not masks against pollution. Coconut and mango trees stood everywhere; rambutans, mangosteens and jackfruit grew wild. Washing hung alongside Thai flags and royal emblems, marking the birthday of the King.

The people paddling by in kayaks were clearly living just as generations of their ancestors had lived. Gliding under stone bridges, I noticed that women would wait for us to pass below, while men carried on walking. Arthit explained how they were obliged to do this, since we might be Buddhist monks. He himself, in common with many Thai males, had spent time as a Hinayana monk at one of the country's 32,000 monasteries. Here, life was dedicated to the study and application of hundreds of commandments in an effort to reach nirvana and break the cycle of birth and rebirth. Arthit couldn't say how many times he had lived through the cycle before, or how close he was to his ultimate destination.

He did, however, know plenty about the 100 or so temples that line the canals. The main sanctuary of Wat Suwannaram, a royal monastery built during the reign of Rama I, houses some fine 19th-century murals of Buddhist deities. Wat Chi Pakhao was once home to a celebrated poet. Then there was the ancient Wat Kaeo Fa, constructed in the Ayutthaya style; and Wat Amphawan, with its ornate wooden scripture hall in the middle of a pond.

All too soon, our driver turned us back towards the new city; but an afternoon with the teacher had indeed been an education, and what's more had restored my faith in human nature. We parted with promises to keep in touch.

Seconds later, a beaming man appeared and offered to take me to his brother's shop. I went without hesitation, and left with a small wooden canal boat as a souvenir of an unforgettable place.



Children at play: a white Karen woman avoids the camera

alk with a trip... famous for... swifts "and a... by a bamboo... Pai to Mae Ho... n, shrouded in... is become the... north since... too big and

at Doi Kong Mu... Son, with its... ck took Carolina... burning incense... cracker moth... Be good with... to be number... Meanwhile I... massage parlour... rubs, ...d stroking.

Hill-tribe trekking was steamier and more plodding than treks I've done in temperate climes (some of our gang, wanting a taste of the Thailand of Alex Garland's novel *The Beach*, had wisely combined this trip with a few days of post-trek surf and sunshine). But I can't imagine a better introduction to Thailand or indeed to Asia. Travellers to this region have always looked for some essential spirit and the hill-tribe area has it all: temples, opium plantations, ancient musical traditions and the most hospitable people on earth.

The villages were the most self-sufficient, industrious, cohesive communities I've ever come across, anywhere. It didn't quite convert me to Buddhism, but I was certainly entranced by it.