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Bangkok: A city of extremes

Senses feast on the colour, scents and flavours of the Thai capital.



On Yaowarat Rd. in Chinatown, a woman cooks bird nest soup, a delicacy made from dried bird

By **DAVID BATEMAN** Staff Reporter

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BANGKOK, THAILAND-Watching disco lights illuminate the spires of Wat Arun temple from a rooftop bar over the Chao Phraya River, it dawns I am one exceedingly bland *farang*.

This white foreigner, a blob of plaid and blue jeans, is a virgin of the world. Delicious irony, given Bangkok's promiscuity.

It's been 14 hours since [Smiling Albino](#) guide Kob Kachonsittinoppakun melodically greets me "sa-wa-dee-ka," like the do-re-mi scale. She and Canadian expat Andrew Clark, Smiling Albino marketing director, take me on the Canadian-owned company's multi transport tour, ambitiously compressing the city's tourist sights and hidden spots into just one day.

Her lyrical chatter crescendos as she orders juicy pineapple and fried banana from street stalls. Each conversation bursts with sincere exuberance. There's no menu; they're too organized and impersonal.

"People don't spend time inside," says Andrew Clark, Smiling Albino marketing director. "I'm never depressed here because there's so much more interaction. Everything happens on the street."

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Clark first worked in Bangkok as a graphic designer. "I was producing nice burgundy designs. They wanted bright green, like the rice paddies."

Transport routes, which Kachonsittinoppakun negotiates far easier than I can alone, are resplendent, reminiscent of Pride festival parades. Gleaming hot pink taxis. Lime tuk tuks zig-zag and sputter fumes. Rainbow tarpaulin protects rickety, grumbling long-tail boats.

"In Bangkok, you have to guess a lot," she says, deliberating over the correct dock. Without her, this farang gets lost more than Waldo. Google Maps offers little respite. Bargaining with tuk tuk and boat drivers takes more patience than I can muster. Kachonsittinoppakun does it for sport.

On the khlongs (canals), the main highways when this was Asia's Venice 100 years ago, dismembered juice cartons become DIY mailboxes nailed to lonely island trees.

Kids splash worryingly close to a red-handed monitor lizard that clambers from a porch.

A wide straw hat wearing a tiny woman floats past offering beers. For VIPs, Clark plans to have Champagne flutes delivered.

Outside shimmering temples that emerge with no warning, where it's forbidden to fish, throngs of catfish thrash for morsels and soak tourists.

At the Golden Mount, Wat Saket, crystallised flames flick from gilded lacquer roofs. I climb 344 steps beside orange-robed monks to strike a gong three times, hoping to summon a mythical beast. Beneath a 58-metre chedi, a giant bell tipped like a skyscraper, I look over the structureless city.

It's a teenager's bedroom. Piles of buildings thrown here and there. Dabs of colour need a power wash. There's a strange odour in the corner.

Aromas U-turn from stagnant protein shaker to fresh jasmine and coriander at Pak Khlong Talat market.

We walk single file and I become a poor man's Indiana Jones. Instead of dodging rolling boulders, it's stampedes of chuckling Thais wheeling baskets giant enough for them to sit in.

Inside a "sterilized" mall next door, Clark mourns the former lofty dock warehouse destroyed to build another Starbucks.

We reach Chinatown. A strangler fig tree wrapped in tie-dye scarves envelops another tree. At a decadent spirit house, red Fanta bottles and intricate figurines are offered to the land's former inhabitants.

"We show clients a lot. Sometimes they need a place to think," Kachonsittinoppakun says. The 17-year veteran tour guide and former archaeology student swings open clunking doors to uncover a fossil, a 240-year-old ancestral home that's now a café and scuba school.

Cheerful owners look surprised we've found it. It's the kind of down-an-alley-round-a-corner-through-a-door-knock-twice secluded spot everyone loves to call their own.

"I want to shout and tweet about it but I'm afraid I'll destroy it," Clark says.

Sheets of corrugated metal reinforce the roof. Like the strangler fig, new layers suppress old.

"You need a whole life to see Bangkok," Kachonsittinoppakun says. "Five years later, everything's different."

By night, our guide treats Chinatown food stalls on Yaowarat Rd. like an all-inclusive hotel buffet to be abused.

I struggle to finish noodles and make the delightful mistake of mentioning I love duck. Kachonsittinoppakun wheels and orders a plate of it, crispy-lined and pink inside. One of the benefits and faux-curses of this intimate tour is how rapidly Kachonsittinoppakun customises experiences to guests tastes.

"When you meet friends, you ask 'how are you?' We ask 'are you hungry? Have you tried this?'" she explains.

I try bird nest, apparently a dessert delicacy. For me, an ice-cream flavour other than strawberry is bold. Under gentle protest, I slurp the sugary soup of dried bird saliva. It could be worse. It could be the sulphuric durian fruit. Coconut and mango sticky rice cleanses my palette.

We eat mid-stride except at Krua Apsorn. The menu is laminated plastic and dishes cost roughly 160 baht (\$6 Canadian).

Eating family style, I reluctantly share the masaman beef.

"Cooking this is the test of a Thai woman," Kachonsittinoppakun says. "Fifteen spices. I cannot do it."

It's a comforting Sunday dinner stew and punchy Asian curry in one spoonful. The spices don't compete, they complement to an equilibrium.

"Thai food is all about balance," she adds.

Extremes co-exist everywhere else. Massage parlours and Buddhist temples. Murky khlongs and bright decorations. Even our last two stops clash — Khaosan Rd., a year-round student initiation party, and the tranquil bar atop Sala Arun Hotel.

Exhausted, nursing a ginger and lemongrass Thaijito, I look to Wat Arun, a mashup of the Eiffel Tower and a Giza pyramid by night.

Like a virgin partaking a bewildering new experience, Bangkok changes your world view.

Colours seem bolder, innocence is lost, and you just want to do it again, a little better prepared.

David Bateman was partially hosted by Smiling Albino, which did not review or approve any aspect of this story.

When you go

Do this trip: Canadian-owned company Smiling Albino (smilingalbino.com) caters to adventurers, honeymooners, food aficionados, cyclists and high-end tourists, such as rock stars Steven Tyler and Mick Jagger, and Hollywood couple John Krasinski and Emily Blunt. Smiling Albino offers customizable Bangkok, Thailand and Southeast Asia trips starting from \$125 a day.

Get there: Fly from Toronto to Bangkok via several airlines. Air Canada's (aircanada.com) route includes a stopover in Hong Kong.

Get around: It's cheap and easy to travel via bike, train, taxi and motorbike. Khlong boat and tuk tuk are slightly trickier unless you have a guide who can give specific directions and negotiate fair prices.

Stay: At any hotel on the river. Most will have their own personal khlong boat to take you to central areas. If money is no issue, the Mandarin Oriental (mandarinoriental.com) is a good choice. For a reasonable, moderately priced hotel, try the Chatrium (chatrium.com).

Eat: Everywhere. Krua Apsorn and Baan Phadthai for a sit-down meal. Chinatown's Yaowarat Rd. for street food, although tasty on-the-go food is available on every second street corner.

Do your research: The Bangkok section of Thailand's tourism website (tourismthailand.org) offers information on transportation and what to do.

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