

Bangkok's River of Kings

Bangkok's long-neglected river is returning to its glory days — and remains the heart of the city.

By TONY PERROTTEY APRIL 28, 2016

When Somerset Maugham staggered from the Bangkok train station one steaming day in 1923, he knew exactly where to head: the Chao Phraya — the River of Kings — whose fresh breezes and open skies were even then a relief from the intensity of the Thai capital. Feeling the onset of malaria, Maugham checked into the Oriental Hotel, where verandas overlooked the busy waterfront. As his temperature climbed to 105 degrees, the writer, soaked in sweat and addled by hallucinations, overheard the Oriental's owner telling his doctor that it would be bad for business if the author should die on the premises.

Maugham's verdict on Bangkok would make a brutal TripAdvisor review today. In his travel memoir "The Gentleman in the Parlor," he reviled the city's "dense traffic," its "ceaseless din," its "insipid" cuisine and "sordid" houses. The Thais, he declared petulantly, are "not a comely race."

But once he recovered, Maugham experienced a rush of euphoria at the waterside setting. He watched the parade of barges, sampans and tramp steamers pass by with "a thrill of emotion," and conceded that the wats, the gilded and glittering temple complexes rising along the river, made him "laugh out loud with delight to think that anything so fantastic could exist on this sombre earth."

I had a taste of Maugham's extreme reactions as I sat in Bangkok's nefarious traffic trying to get to the river on the first morning of a recent

trip, although I was addled by nothing more dangerous than jet lag from the epic 21-hour flight from New York.

Laden with literary reference, the Oriental — now the Mandarin Oriental, although nobody calls it that — is still the obvious introduction to the Chao Phraya, which has in recent years returned to its status as an escape from the city's urban chaos. The colonial-era edifice where Maugham stayed is now called the Author's Wing. Although overshadowed by a 1970s addition, its exterior looks much as it did when it opened in 1887 and astonished the city with its luxurious imported carpets, Parisian wallpaper and electrified chandeliers. And the setting has not lost its soothing effect.

I pulled up a chair feet away from the “liver-coloured water swirling by,” as another famous guest, Noël Coward, put it. A parade of ferries, barges and steamboats still battles the surging currents, while islands of vegetation float past, washed downriver from the jungles of the northern provinces. It was a step back into a leisurely past, worlds away from the explosive neon energy of the central city.

It's no secret that, despite recent political disorder, Bangkok has emerged as the unofficial capital of Southeast Asia. Everyone from Swedish aid workers to Vietnamese I.T. specialists prefers to live there and commute around the region to less dynamic cities.

The most alluring consequence for travelers has been the revival of the Chao Phraya, which was once the heart and soul of Bangkok. It was by its shores that the sumptuous royal district was built in the 18th century and, although Thailand is one of the few Asian countries never to be colonized, where European powers erected their legations and warehouses in the 19th.

It was along the river that Bangkok's first road was built (an elephant track that became known as the New Road) and where a raucous Chinatown sprang up. The river was then so alluring that Bangkok was affectionately called “the Venice of the East,” a serene warren of canals, floating markets and stilt houses.

But after World War II, the focus of Bangkok moved north and east. The river districts fell into decay, their waters polluted. Travelers mostly stayed away and visited the waterfront as part of a day trip to the famous wats. It is only over the last two or three years that the river has been rediscovered by bohemian Thais and intrepid expats, creating a mix of decay and contemporary chic that evokes an Eastern New Orleans.

“The Chao Phraya is a lifeline of history, culture and spirituality,” said David Robinson, director of Bangkok River Partners, founded in 2013 to help coordinate the revival. “It’s changing but keeping its traditions. There are roast duck and congee shops there that are 100 years old.” The novelist Lawrence Osborne, who moved here from New York three years ago, agreed: “The modern city was thrown up over the last 40 years in gimcrack style. It looks like it might collapse any moment. You don’t feel that at all by the river — there’s a real sense of continuity.”

The parallels to New York’s adventures in urban renewal are not lost on Thai preservationists. Last year, Bangkok River Partners invited Joshua David, the co-founder of the High Line, to speak at a conference. He became fascinated by the Chao Phraya. “The river allows you to experience Bangkok in a completely different way,” said Mr. David, now president of the World Monument Fund. “An amazing variety of watercraft is still used by local communities and will take you to places you would never imagine existed.”

To me, the river also made Bangkok seem manageable. Over years of travel in Asia, I had somehow failed to venture outside its airport, in part because I was daunted by the prospect of navigating a megalopolis of over 8.5 million people that can seem like an alternate set from “Blade Runner.” But the idea of exploring by water made Bangkok more human-scale. I decided to spend my time entirely on the river to reimagine its golden age.

My inspiration would be less the jaundiced Maugham than Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski, a Polish sailor soon to be renowned as the author Joseph Conrad, who found himself in 1888 frequenting the Oriental Hotel

saloon for a little over two weeks, chatting with the barflies, as was his wont, “of wrecks, of short rations, and of heroism.”

Conrad had taken over command of an Australian ship, the Otago, but was stuck in Bangkok waiting for his crew to recover from tropical illnesses — an experience that is reworked in his novel “Lord Jim” and the shorter works “The Shadow-Line,” “Falk” and “The Secret Sharer.” Although he had his life savings of 32 pounds stolen by his Chinese steward (who thoughtfully brushed and folded his clothes before disappearing), Conrad still felt fondly toward Bangkok, and never forgot its “gorgeous and dilapidated” temples, or the city’s “vertical sunlight, tremendous, overpowering, almost palpable, which seemed to enter one’s breast with the breath of one’s nostrils and soak into one’s limbs through every pore of one’s skin.”

As Conrad would surely agree, if the river traffic was hypnotic to watch, it was more satisfying to join. The variety of watercraft churning between the bobbing jetties was bewildering, ranging from high-speed long tail boats to private vessels and public ferries. I found the ferries definitely the most exotic, if not always the most comfortable. In peak hours, crowds squeezed into the sweltering below-decks like sardines, with yellow-robed monks and dapper businessmen alike jostling for elbow room while harangued by boat workers with megaphones, who bellowed “Go down! Go down! Go down!”

There are no continuous walkways along the river, so I made surgical strikes from the piers on foot, ducking in and out of laneways to the lapping waves. All along the right bank stood poetic ruins. The splendid 1887 offices of the East Asiatic Company sat vacant and awaiting rescue, while the stately Old Customs House had become a fire station sprouting greenery from gaping cracks. Catholic cathedrals and European embassies staggered on in crumbling glory, while the iron pins used to moor steamers that Conrad may have used quietly rusted.

One crooked lane led to the river temple where albino elephants were

cremated, another to the sacred slab upon which Thai royals could be executed. (It was forbidden for royal blood to be spilled, so a bag was placed over the victim's head and he was cudgelled to death — a considerate gesture.)

And yet, around every corner, ventures of startling modernity were sprouting: boutique hotels, restaurants and bars, often housed in small antique buildings, alongside a pioneering art gallery called Speedy Grandma or a bespoke furniture store like P. Tendercool. A new “Creative District” is even being marked out by the city on both sides of the river to promote local talent.

Its marquee site is the Jam Factory, a renovated warehouse complex set around a grassy courtyard with a high-end restaurant called the Never Ending Summer, all designed to appeal to natives first, tourists second. “Our real ambition is to get Bangkokians back to the river,” said Mr. Robinson of River Partners. “Travelers will follow. People want authenticity.”

To get a sense of the potential for the grandiose historic structures, I headed a few minutes away to Sathorn Road on the back of a motorbike-taxi. A century ago, this was the Fifth Avenue of Bangkok, lined with the palatial mansions of Thai sea merchants. Today, a lonely vestige from 1896, the House on Sathorn, is dwarfed on three sides by glassy skyscrapers. Originally the residence of a rice baron, it survived the demolition blitz that has ravaged Bangkok since the 1960s because it housed the Russian Embassy. The landmark reopened last year after a multimillion-dollar renovation as a glamorous restaurant and event space and has become a symbol of a new spirit of preservation.

“It has been an epic journey,” said Christine McGinnis, then the director of the Bangkok office of the United States design company AvroKO, which has overseen the project since 2008. “If this house was a child, it would be speaking and in school by now.” Construction problems included dealing with the ghost of the first owner's mistress, who regularly

spooked workers by overturning paintings she didn't like during the night. ("It's Thailand; there is always a story," Ms. McGinnis said, laughing.)

Working with the city's Fine Arts Department, the designers had to maintain the building's historic integrity while making it commercially viable. Its Corinthian columns have elephant motifs carved into their wooden pediments; the color scheme is drawn from the Royal Thai costume, but the tapestries and artworks are all by contemporary local artists.

Afterward, we strolled back to the nearby pier to catch ferries in different directions. "Everyone is getting back to the river," Ms. McGinnis said. "Everyone is getting inspired."

"There is definitely a new interest in preserving Thai history," said Dan Fraser, a Canadian expat who qualifies as a walking atlas to forgotten Bangkok, as we plunged by foot along the dark waterfront of the Talat Noi ("small market") neighborhood. Here, the streets were built only broad enough to allow two rickshaws to pass, while shoulder-width alleys snake to the docks. "Wealthy Thais are coming back from trips to Europe, looking around and asking, 'What have we done? Why are there so many 7-Elevens,'" Mr. Fraser said. "For the first time, people are openly admitting that unchecked development has all but destroyed Bangkok."

Even a year ago, the conventional wisdom was that the river is thriving by day but dead after dark. All that has changed — if you know where to look. At least that was what I had been assured by Mr. Fraser, who has one of the most colorful résumés in the Thai expat world. He first arrived 15 years ago to tutor the children of the royal family in English and tennis, and he later achieved minor celebrity status as the star of Thai-language TV shows exploring local culture and food "through the eyes of a foreigner."

The riverfront at night is his ideal stamping ground. "This used to be the real core of the city," he said, as we zigzagged from the old Portuguese district toward Chinatown. "But since the 1960s, people have wanted to get away from here. So development has bypassed this area altogether, which is

perfect for me. It's maintained its Old World charm."

In Talat Noi, the alleys were dark and deserted, but concealed secret worlds. Behind one screen door lay a bar with a broad wooden porch opening directly onto the river and decorated with mismatched retro furniture as if for a backyard barbecue. On the edge of Chinatown, a carved portal marked Teens of Thailand turned out to be the entrance to a bar by that name, with a dozen rickety seats and erotic photographs hanging on distressed concrete walls.

"Bangkok had no gin bar!" said Niks Anuman-Rajadhon, the bar's co-owner, who sported a black T-shirt and a pompadour Elvis would have envied, as he concocted a batch of martinis with fresh pomegranates. "Every city has to have one, so I thought, let's do it! We got about 30 gins together — including Bangkok's own Iron Balls — and started experimenting."

Before long, the night began to feel like the premise for "The Hangover Part IV." I had not the slightest idea where we were — "even if we'd used a ball of twine, I doubt we could retrace our steps," Mr. Fraser said happily — when we heard the haunting strains of traditional Thai music coming from what seemed to be a dilapidated merchant's mansion.

Shouldering open the door, we found an establishment called Tep Bar, whose interior was lined with century-old worn teak and crowded with arty Thais; the ambience lay somewhere between a speakeasy and an opium den. The bar's co-owner, Kong Lertkangwarnklai, was so excited that a pair of farang (foreign) explorers had arrived by accident that he insisted we sample an array of ya dong, ancient whiskey infused, he said, with 20 exotic herbs.

A half-dozen shot glasses materialized on a sumptuous golden tray adorned with mango pieces and pickled grapes. "Technically, ya dong is medicine," Mr. Kong said, pushing the potent spirits forward. As I knocked the first glass back, I had a sudden vision of myself waking up in an alley with my memory of the night erased, perhaps with a tattoo across my

forehead and a monkey on my shoulder.

Dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt and sporting the suggestion of a goatee, Mr. Kong seemed an unlikely cultural revolutionary. But he said that he had given up a successful career in advertising for this attempt to keep Thai history alive — which starts with the bar's name, a nod toward the Thai title for the city, Krungthep, roughly, "City of Angels."

"Everyone in Bangkok is trying to be someone else," he said. "But what about our roots? Why are we throwing everything away?" At first, the retro impulse behind the bar, which Mr. Kong opened last year, felt like a quixotic gamble, he recalled. "Nobody believed in us. They thought the location, the concept, everything would fail! They didn't think Thai people would come to such a place." The bar was packed with a crowd that seemed spellbound by the music (enhanced, no doubt, by the ya dong).

It was about 3 a.m. when I wandered back to a lonely pier, staring out at the inky waters reflecting the lights of passing barges. A decade from now, Mr. Robinson, of the Bangkok River Partners, predicted, the Chao Phraya would be transformed but still be recognizable. "Our vision is of a cleaner river, with more walkable areas, enriched with creative industries and renovated warehouses and clusters of art galleries you can visit without sitting all day in a taxi," he said. "But at the same time, all the old roast duck shops and congee stores will still be there. They'll just be 10 years older."

Even Somerset Maugham would have to approve.

If You Go

Navigating the River

An excellent resource for finding out the latest on the ever-changing waterfront is the website of the **Bangkok River Partners**, bangkokriver.com.

Where to Stay

The grande dame of Bangkok hotels, the **Mandarin Oriental**, is celebrating its 140th anniversary this year with a major renovation. Even if you can't afford to stay there, a meal on the veranda, high tea in the Author's Lounge or a cocktail in the Bamboo Bar are rites of passage; 48 Oriental Avenue; mandarinoriental.com/bangkok; rooms from \$340.

The most theatrical recent addition to the waterfront is **The Siam**, an over-the-top resort owned by the family of the Thai rock star and actor Krissada Sukosol Clapp and filled with antiques from their collection, many of which are like enigmatic objets d'art — rusted musical instruments from the Jazz Age, stuffed crocodiles dancing on their hind legs; 3/2 Thanon Khao, Vachirapayabal, Dusit; thesiamhotel.com; rooms from \$393.

Among newer boutique hotels by the river, the **Sala Rattanakosin** is a standout for its proximity to wats, or temple complexes, and outdoor restaurant views of the Wat Arun, temple of dawn; 39 Maharat Road, Rattanakosin Island; salaresorts.com/rattanakosin; rooms from \$84.

A River Crawl

To savor the lesser known corners of the riverfront, track down the **Teens of Thailand** cocktail lounge (76 Soi Nana; facebook.com/teensofthailand), the **Top Bar** (69-71 Soi Nana) and **Samsara Cafe and Meal** (which can be best be located via a map link on its Facebook page).

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