

## TORONTO STAR

### Easy riding through traffic-choked city

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[CAROL PEREHUDOFF](#)

BANGKOK, Thailand—"You've got to catch the light just right," says my guide Daniel Fraser. "It's all about the texture."

It's hard to imagine the cluttered indoor market near Tha Tien Pier looking glamorous but he's right. When the light slants in at a particular angle, the stalls of dried grains and shrimp are bathed in a golden glow.

I've done a lot of tours before but never one concerned with nuances of light. It's all in the details, according to Fraser, a Calgary-born ex-pat and co-owner of Smiling Albino, an upscale Thai travel company for "people who don't like tours."

An enthusiastic young entrepreneur, who once worked for the Thai Royal Family, Fraser feels the city has an elusive quality most visitors miss. Texture, light, time of day — it all comes into play. Of course the motorcycle taxi spices things up.

I've signed up for a Bangkok Multi-transport excursion, a unique way of sightseeing while checking out some ingenious solutions to Bangkok's infernal traffic congestion.

As an added bonus I'm also learning to see Bangkok — literally — in a whole new light.

Our first mode of transport is an insider's favourite — a public water bus down the Saen Saeb Canal. These bargain-basement ferries, smaller than the ones that ply the Chao Phraya River, are a quick, noisy and sometimes wet way of getting from the downtown shopping district to the historical area of Ratanakosin, where some of Bangkok's best sites are located.

As we get out of the boat and ascend the steps to the street, Fraser throws me a challenge. "Are you game for a motorcycle taxi?"

He motions to a taxi stand where a group of drivers is standing around in bright orange vests. I'm all for living dangerously, but this is pushing it. Bangkok is a teeming city of 10 million. Its streets can be an obstacle course of bikes, scooters, carts, cars, buses and the occasional elephant. Still, it's tempting to embrace the Easy Rider within.

It's a good thing Fraser has promised to include a couple of bars on this day trip, I'm thinking as I strap on a helmet, because Bangkok's traffic chaos may drive me to drink. I get on behind the driver and we go sailing down the Royal Avenue, a short route extending from the winged Art Nouveau Democracy Monument to the Grand Palace and Wat Pho Temple. My fears fade as we whip down the road and I'm deposited safely outside the palace. Score one for risk-taking. The Grand Palace is Bangkok's premier sight, a glittering spread of golden spires, mythical figures and ornate detail. Built by King Rama I in 1782, the same year Bangkok became the capital, the palace no longer houses royalty but remains the spiritual centre of the country. At its heart is the Emerald Buddha, a 66 centimetre-high Buddha made of jade (or jadite or jasper, depending on whom you ask). This highly revered image was discovered in 1432 hidden under a coating of stucco. In the 1500s it was carried off to Laos, but retrieved by General Taksin in 1778, making it a symbol of national pride.

It's late afternoon when Fraser deems it the correct time to visit Wat Pho, one of the largest and oldest temples in the city.

It was the home of Thailand's first official centre for public education; and early massage instructions can still be seen carved into stone slabs.

"Most people miss out by coming too early," Fraser says as we wander through the grounds past sunlit Buddhas and pagoda-like tiled stupas. "Late in the day, when the light hits the double-glazed tiles on the roofs, it's spectacular."

Even more spectacular is the temple's massive Reclining Buddha, a 46-metre gilded figure, its prone position representing his passage into Nirvana. Gazing at the giant feet inlaid with mother-of-pearl makes me think of stopping for some foot reflexology at the temple's famous massage school; but it's time to move on, to the pier on the Chao Phraya River where a private long tail boat, like a motorized gondola, is waiting to whisk us through the canals of Thonburi and Bangkok Noi (little Bangkok).

Fraser must be in heaven in these Venice-like waterways because there is texture galore. Modern mansions and traditional teak houses are jammed up beside shacks on stilts. Pink bougainvillea bursts over stone fences. Kids wave and jump off porches into the river. An elderly man bathes, scooping water over his arms. By the end of the ride I feel we've covered plenty of ground but no trip to Bangkok would be complete without trying a tuk-tuk. These three-wheel scooter taxis with flimsy

awnings and rear passenger bench are notorious traffic hazards; but give me one over a motorcycle anytime.

We roar through the steaming humid air over to the State Tower, Bangkok's second-highest building. Taking the highlife to the extreme is the Sky Bar at Sirocco Restaurant, a rooftop patio on the 64th floor. It's a dizzying sight as the sun sinks over the hazy city, the high-tech bar slowly changes colours and a thin transparent barrier is the only buffer between us and a triple somersault down to the streets below.

After Sirocco, it's downscale all the way as we take the Skytrain, Bangkok's efficient rapid transit system, over to an ex-pat institution, Cheap Charlie's Bar on Sukhumvit Soi 11. Actually, this tiny watering hole isn't so much a bar as an over-decorated counter hugging a road. "It's the only place you can get hit by a car while sitting in a bar having a drink," Fraser says cheerfully as cars careen around the alley, narrowly missing oblivious drinkers. I squeeze back on my bar stool, keeping well inside the pavement's yellow line — the only thing preventing me from becoming road kill.

I knew Bangkok traffic would drive me to drink. I just didn't realize it would be while I was sitting down.

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*Carol Perehudoff is a Toronto-based freelance writer whose trip was subsidized by the Tourism Authority of Thailand*

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