

Thonburi's waterways

Andrew Spooner visits the old Thai capital.

It's the side of Bangkok few travellers visit, yet Thonburi was the original Siamese capital a full 15 years before the ancient Thai kings moved their palace across the river to its present location.

Separated from the rest of Bangkok by the mighty Chao Phraya River, Thonburi, the forgotten half of the Thai capital, is by far the most authentic part of it and, with its network of canals and *khlongs* and low-rise cityscape, more closely fits Bangkok's long-abandoned reputation as 'the Venice of the East' than its over-developed neighbour.

You can find genuinely warm and friendly locals here, still living a unique canal-side lifestyle. While the houses on stilts that cluster along the sides of the *khlongs* may look archaic, properties here are highly sought after and land prices are high. Some are palatial homes to wealthy middle-class Thais, others are nothing more than shacks, providing simple homes to working Thai families.

Pick up a *hang-yao* or longtail boat from near the Saphan Thaksin Skytrain station on the Bangkok side of the river, and take a tour deep into Thonburi's *khlong* system. Here you'll get a glimpse into the *khlong*-side lifestyle, with local floating markets and boat-based noodle stalls delivering their food from house to house. It's an enchanting ride into the past. **t**



Andrew Spooner is the author of *Footprint Travel Guides Thailand Handbook* and *Southeast Asia Handbook*. Footprint

are offering *Traveller* readers a 40 per cent discount on all of their guidebooks. Visit www.footprinttravelguides.com and enter 'trav11' in the coupon code at the checkout, to receive the discount.

As 'luck' would have it

Pimalai resort on the island of Koh Lanta prides itself on its food. Its senior sous chef is 36-year old **Yutthapong Phangsri**, known as **Luck**. He has spent 17 years cooking in Thailand and abroad. He spoke to **Simon Ramsden**.



Why are you a chef?

I think maybe I was a hungry person in a previous life.

What is the Thai attitude to food?

Historically, food was regarded as a means to stay alive, and not so important.

People would just wait around for the coconuts to drop off the tree, then eat them – an easy life was regarded as more important than fancy food.

But in the last century, the Thai attitude to food changed. Firstly, during the wettest part of the rainy season it isn't possible to do much outdoor work, so Thai people started to use the time to experiment with food. Secondly, during the rainy season many men get bored, so their wives cook them lots of tasty dishes to keep them at home, and not away misbehaving. And during the rainy season, the tradition is that monks can't

leave the temples, so we go to the temples to get merit by feeding them. Last century, people started to get very innovative with their food offerings to the temples, and many new dishes were invented. Also, in the last century the royal chefs spent ages experimenting with different recipes and ingredients, in order to come up with new delicacies to tempt the royal taste buds.

Can you give an example of a dish invented in the royal kitchens?

Gerng pet pet – spicy duck curry.

How do you make it?

We gently roast the duck for four hours. The base ingredients for most Thai dishes are galangal, lemongrass and kaffir lime. We take these ingredients, together with the finest fruit from all over Thailand, and reduce them for four hours, to form the curry sauce.

Do you have any food advice for Western visitors?

Yes, go to a local market and buy a kilo each of a few different curry pastes, then take them home with you. They cost about a twentieth of what you would pay in the West, and are usually better quality.

Koh Lanta is in southern Thailand. What are the characteristics of southern Thai food?

The signature technique of the local cuisine is the liberal use of

turmeric, which creates curries that are not too spicy in the mouth, but warm the stomach in a pleasing way. Turmeric is fortifying for the body, and is eaten by manual labourers in the rainy season, in order to stop them getting cold when working outside in the rain.

Is Thai food healthy?

Yes, it is, very much so. Most of the ingredients we use are also medicines. Garlic and galangal will ease a headache, basil soothes the stomach, and ginger tea alleviates a hangover, by forcing the body to sweat out the toxins.

What is your favourite Thai dish?

Mo pat gra pow – crispy pork with basil and garlic. It is difficult to get the skin crispy, not chewy, but it is worth the effort. First I gently steam the meat for four hours, then I gently deep-fry it for three hours. I reserve the oil used in the deep-frying and use it later to cook Thai-style omelettes, which taste much better when fried in that oil.

European hotel kitchens have a reputation for being hot-tempered places. What is it like at Pimalai?

We almost always stay calm, even when we are working very hard. In Thai culture it is completely unacceptable to start shouting and swearing like the chefs do in European kitchens. If I behaved like that, all of my staff would resign.

Mahouts and massages



After being whisked between luxury resorts in a speedboat and a 1960s Mercedes once owned by the

Cambodian king, **WEXAS** travel consultant **Julie Mathews** spoke to **Jason Thomson** about her trip to Thailand and Cambodia.

Elephants. Holding paintbrushes in their trunks and painting exquisite pictures of flowers and leaves. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," Julie Mathews had heard about it before, but until she joined a training

course for *mahouts*, she had been sceptical.

They began by meeting their own elephants, and Julie was partnered with Nel, a five-year-old female. "She was beautiful," said Julie.

They rode them bareback in the jungle and took them down to the river where they had their bath. There they learned various methods of mounting the animals, but Julie chose to avoid climbing up the trunk and over the head. Instead, Nel lifted her leg to make a little staircase.

Even though Julie was aware of how dangerous elephants can be, she felt calm and completely trusted her mount. "I know it sounds silly, but you do build a kind of rapport with them, and apparently if you go back the next day to continue



the course, they remember you," she explained. "They can smell you. They trust you."

Julie visited the elephant camp when she was staying in Chiang Mai, Thailand's second city, in the

northern reaches of the country, near the border with Burma.

Later the same day, she found herself drifting down a river on a bamboo raft, her Thai guide gently poling them along. Jungle and paddy fields slid past, elephants and birds slipped into view and fishermen's huts gave an occasional sense of habitation.

Less relaxing were the traditional Thai massages that seemed to lie in wait for Julie at every new hotel. "It hurt. It was quite brutal," she said. "But you feel good afterwards. You feel the benefit."

Then she dashed into Cambodia to visit Angkor Wat. The temple impressed – as it can hardly fail to do – and even now, excavators are still reclaiming areas of this World Heritage Site. "It was amazing," said Julie. "They're trying to put pieces together like a jigsaw."

Travel there

HOW TO GET THERE

Etihad Airways flies from London Heathrow to Bangkok via Abu Dhabi (7 hours to Abu Dhabi, 8 hours to Bangkok), with Bangkok Airways providing connections to Siem Reap in Cambodia (1.5 hours).

A non-stop alternate is Eva Air, who have great value premium economy and business class cabins and convenient onward connections to Siem Reap.

WHERE TO STAY

THE PIMALAI RESORT on Koh Lanta has excellent dive facilities and 121 rooms of five-star quality.

YAIYA RESORT AND SPA in Hua Hin comprises 23 deluxe rooms, 6 suites and 11 pool villas and is located on the beachfront of Thailand's oldest coastal resort.

RACHAMANKHA is a quiet haven of 25 well-appointed rooms, a restaurant and a swimming pool, in the centre of Chiang Mai.

RASANANDA RESORT on Koh Phangan has 44 villas and suites, each with their own pool. There's also a spa offering a wide range of treatments and yoga classes.

THE SCENT HOTEL on Koh Samui is a member of the Relais & Châteaux group with 15 rooms, three of which are beachfront suites with private terraces. Its Le Jaroen Restaurant specialises in French and Siamese cuisine.

THE DEWA RESORT on Nai Yang beach on the north-west coast of Phuket sits adjacent to the Sirinath National Park. It has 34 pool villas, plus 62 Junior and Family suites.

THE RACHA on Racha Lai island off Phuket is a quality hotel with numerous activities available for guests, from yoga to tennis, mountain biking to canoeing.

THE HERITAGE SUITES in the Cambodian town of Siem Reap is a boutique hotel with 26 guest rooms, close to the centre of town. It's a good base from which to visit Angkor Wat, 8 kilometres away.

To discuss your Thailand travel plans with Julie or another Far East specialist please call **020 7838 5967**. For more Thailand holiday ideas visit www.wexas.com/Thailand/holidays.