



The Royal Treatment

Monks, myths and martinis along Thailand's River of Kings | Rowena Carr-Allinson

A VOYAGE UP THE CHAO Phraya provides a rare and exceptional insight into life in Thailand. So cruising Bangkok's lifeline in a luxuriously converted rice barge isn't just the best way to see The River of Kings — it's the right way.

The lavishly refurbished Manohra Song is a floating hotel made of 100-year-old teak. This four-cabin classic is all about elegance. On deck, the racing green seat covers with gold trim complement the warm woods perfectly.

It's already humid as we prepare to cast off. At barely 9:45 in the morning, it feels like mid afternoon.

As we head out from the pier, we go under a freeway bridge. It's hardly the most scenic start, but that's the beauty of Bangkok. It's a chaotic city that blends the ancient with the modern; a place

where Chinese temples battle for space with modest homes and sleek condos.

As we settle in to enjoy the views, a glass of cool coconut juice arrives and the chief steward offers me the first of many souvenirs. Will it be sweet-smelling lemongrass soap or a "calming" bar? Both sound relaxing, and just what I need.

The crew introduce themselves: Bovy, Lekky, Franky and Ky will spend the next two days pampering us.

As we cruise the river, life on shore unfolds.

Industrial buildings stand shoulder-to-shoulder with glittering temples, rickety wooden shacks and sleek two-story homes. Children run and jump into the murky brown water for some wet relief, as enormous barges towed by minuscule boats heave by. Bright long-tail boats carrying grinning tourists speed

past like something out of a James Bond movie. Just like in the city, there's plenty of traffic on the Chao Phraya.

Our first stop is at Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn. It's buzzing with tourists. The central Khmer-style tower soars over four others, which represent the 33 heavens. With a heavy Cambodian influence, the towers are covered with

fragments of Chinese porcelain and intricate sculpture. Sunny, our guide, reveals the principles of Buddhism and leads us up steep steps,

A SONG FOR THE AGES: The Manohra Song, a century-old teak treasure, floats past Wat Arun temple, above. At the end of its slow, rhythmic journey through rural Thailand, the Chao Phraya bisects Bangkok, right.

across the grounds and into the heart of the temple.

We watch in awe as monks in saffron robes sit and chant. It's quite a spectacle. And I'm reminded that nothing ever truly remains unchanged as electric fans whirr a breeze over their shaved heads.

Back on board, lunch is an assortment of traditional Thai dishes. Appetizers are served with a lesson, as we learn to fold leaves to load them with lime, dried shrimp, peanuts, fish sauce and spices.

I sample the delicious king prawns with asparagus while others opt for fragrant green curry. My partner wolfs it down and turns a little pink. A fellow Thai voyager, unimpressed, adds a heap of dried chillies to his.

After coffee, we retire to our air-conditioned staterooms for a snooze. All this sightseeing, not to mention the midday heat, takes it out of you.

Below deck it's a vision of teak and Thai silks. The cabins are plush and romantic, with a raised queen-sized bed, a heart-shaped mirror, crisp, white linens and white hanging drapes. A few steps below sits the spacious bathroom with its black marble sink and shower.

The attention to detail is amazing. A fragrant jasmine and orchid necklace lies on the bed, "romantic" Asian art adorns the walls, and even the soap is wrapped in silk paper.

At 4 p.m., English afternoon tea is served. Sipping Earl Grey, nibbling delicate smoked salmon sandwiches and enjoying scones with cream in these exotic surroundings is ridiculously civilized.

The monk is smiling, whispering. What's that? He's talking on a cell phone? That's the end of the myth.

The banks of the Chao Phraya are still teeming with activity, even though high-rise buildings have given way to brightly painted homes on stilts.

Cheerful fishermen zip past and wave as they glide on the chocolate-milk river. As dusk settles in, the city feels far behind as we proceed into the dense palms and lilies that cover the water.

We'll spend the night moored on an island that is home to Wat Nivat. The heat has lifted but the mellow warmth lingers. I strain my eyes to see the young saffron-robed monks on the shore. They gaze back, impassive. Linked to the mainland by a makeshift cable car, they whiz across, sometimes with stray dogs, alone or in groups. Pointing the camera in their direction triggers delighted giggles. It's a real privilege to watch this slice of life, and although I feel like an intruder, I don't feel unwelcome.

There's something slightly surreal in the air; all is still and as the sun sets, it's time for a martini.

Dinner for six is beautifully laid out on deck. The atmosphere is romantic and theatrical.

Thailand Do's and Don'ts

Thais are a tolerant and laid-back people who treat visitors with warmth and friendliness. If you're a guest in their country, it's good to know a few ground rules rather than risking offending them.

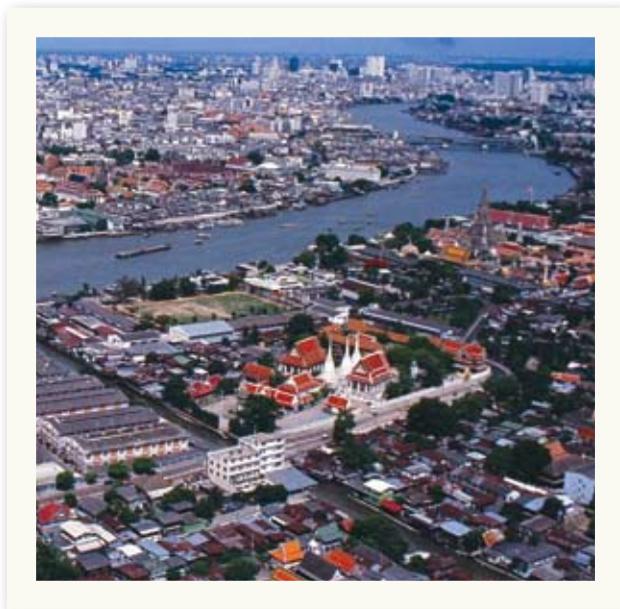
With so many revered customs it's easy to accidentally do the wrong thing. But don't worry too much; Thais almost never lose their tempers.



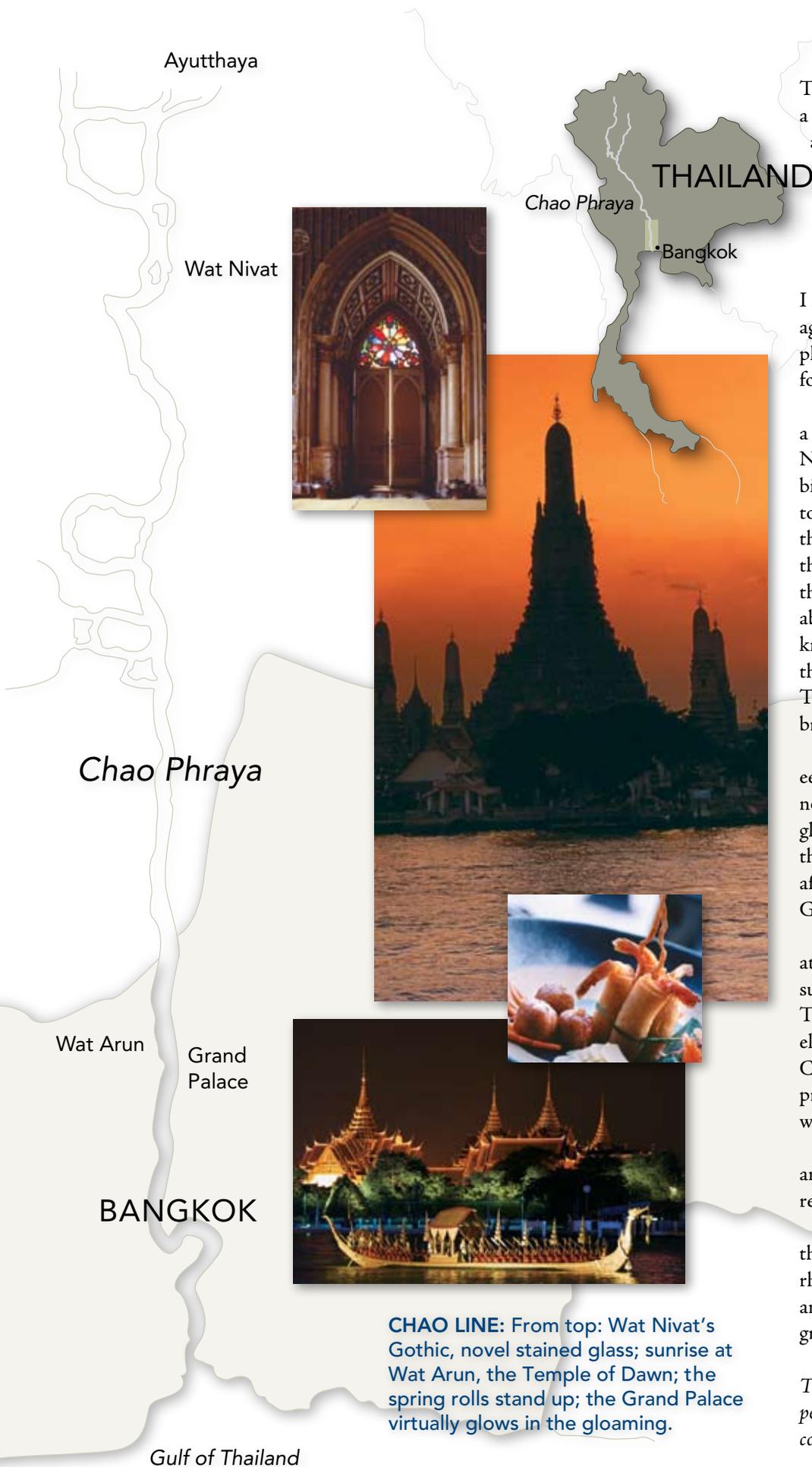
MANOHRA CRUISES

Rules to remember

- * Don't show physical affection toward a Thai. Hugs and kisses aren't appreciated. Even among visitors, holding hands is fine but anything more is frowned upon.
- * Don't joke about the Royal Family. Thais won't find it funny.
- * Don't touch a Thai person's head, it's considered sacred.
- * Don't step over a person, or into a monk's shadow.
- * Don't point your finger or show the soles of your feet, especially not to Buddha's image. It is considered very disrespectful.
- * Women must not touch monks, or talk to them if they're alone.
- * Don't wear your shoes into a person's home or a temple.
- * Don't go into a temple with your arms or legs showing.
- * Accept things, like business cards, with both hands.
- * Wai wisely. Thais don't shake hands, but give a greeting called a "wai." Place your palms together (fingers upwards), and bow your head slightly. It's not necessary to return the greeting every time, a smile and nod suffice. But do wai to the elderly to show respect.



CHAO PHRAYA IMAGE COURTESY THAILAND TOURISM



Traditional Thai soup, served in a coconut shell, is followed by a parade of dishes: everything from red curry to seafood. In true Thai custom, dessert is deliciously rich and sweet: bananas in warm coconut milk. The monks still roam the bank. I hear one whispering, his face aglow. What's that? He is on a cell phone. It's the end of the myth for me.

The following morning, after a hearty breakfast, we visit Wat Nivat. The island is alive with birds. A handful of Japanese tourists snap photographs. And the hum of prayers rings through the temple. Incense wafts through the air, and rows of shoes sit abandoned while their owners kneel indoors paying homage to the gold-leaf covered Buddha. Traditional flip-flops sit alongside bright green kitten heels.

The temple is unusual but eerily familiar. There's something not quite right about the stained glass windows. Sunny explains that King Rama V patterned them after windows in an English neo-Gothic cathedral.

There's more mixing of styles at Bang Pa Na, one of the King's summer palaces across the river. The heat is stifling, but the elaborate European, Thai and Chinese style royal residences and pristinely manicured gardens are well worth a visit.

Our cruise was only a sampler, and unfortunately we have to return to Bangkok too soon.

I'm totally enamoured with the Manohra Song. Its slow, rhythmic sway, the gentle breeze and its relaxing pace suit me to the ground. Or, rather, the water. 

Two night cruise rates from \$1,150 per couple. www.manohracruises.com. Tel 66-2477-0770

CHAO LINE: From top: Wat Nivat's Gothic, novel stained glass; sunrise at Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn; the spring rolls stand up; the Grand Palace virtually glows in the gloaming.