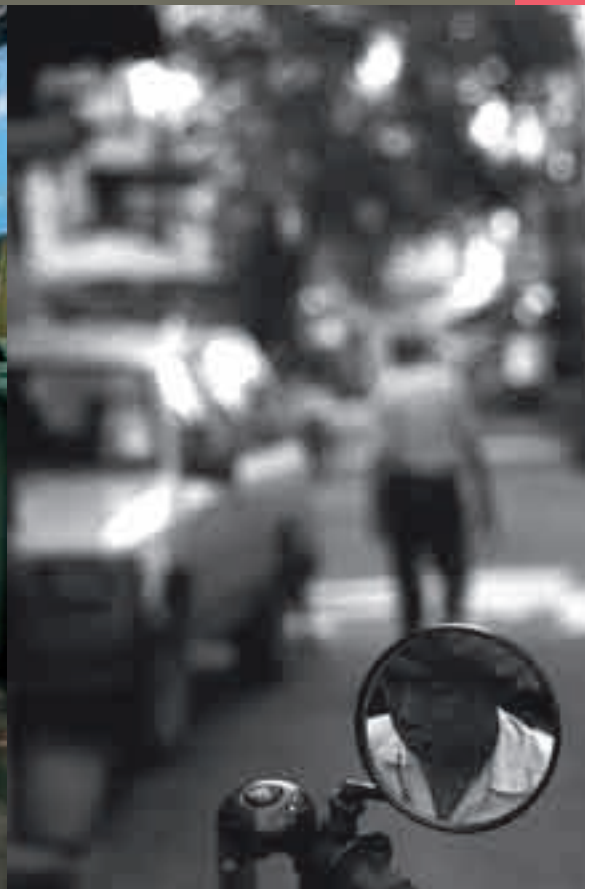




Big City, Little China

Story by Ben Gillingham
Pictures by Justin Eeles



Outdoor Bangkok can be best appreciated from the river. Basing ourselves at the family-friendly Royal Orchid Sheraton, *lifestyle + travel* discovers the atmospheric alleyways of adjacent China Town.

Although the best-known method of getting to China Town is via the only Bangkok thoroughfare that flows no matter what the time of day; the Chao Phraya river, for those staying at the Royal Orchid Sheraton it is a simply matter of walking five minutes from the lobby - positioned as it is beside the sign-posted China Town Walking Street tour. The tour begins amidst the colonial architecture of the 'Old farang quarter,' slowly transforming to reveal ever more oriental influences as one approaches China Town's hub and its maze of alleys and small streets that lend the area its charm.

As the city's most frenetic commercial trade centre, it's only natural that China Town should be located on the river that defined the city's growth and success. Ever since 1782, when King Rama I moved the resident Chinese community from the planned site of his new palace, Bangkok's Chinese population has been centred here.

The Chinese were in Bangkok long before it became Thailand's major city - the earliest records go back to the 14th Century

- and have been intrinsic to the capital's economic and commercial success. By the mid 1900s, it was estimated over half the city's population was either 100% Chinese or of mixed parentage.

China Town today is a mesh of busy streets night or day, offering the adventurous pedestrian a multi-flavoured assault on the senses. For pure concentration of odours, from delightful to despicable, it has no equal.

Leaving Sheraton behind and heading towards Soi Wanit 2, the pace of life changes almost immediately. The narrow alleyway is alive with motion and activity. We set off in what must have been afternoon school break, as the many hawkers that line the street were besieged by hordes of thirsty children, most with their eyes on the ice man. The school is located next to the stunning Holy Rosary Church.

Continuing on past the Marine Department, an elderly man preparing brightly coloured paper lanterns caught our eye, so we strayed from the path. Past him and through some narrow passageways, we stumbled into the small Talaat Noi covered market, a perfect one-stop for greens, fresh fish, fruit and all things coconut. Emerging, we headed west along Songwat, parallel to the river, past Wat Pratum Khongkha before aiming for the commercial bustle of historical Soi Wanit 1.

Above, left: School girls search for refreshments along China Town's narrow alleyways.



This street, known commonly as Sampeng, is the heart of what was old China Town. At its start, there's barely enough room to squeeze a car, but as you progress, it gets narrower and narrower, prohibiting all traffic except the odd motorbike or fruit vendor. Those looking for imitation gems or uncut ruby sapphires might pop into Dhanish Gem shop at the start of Sampeng, run by the helpful Mr Asik.

As the road continues west, the number of pedestrians rapidly increases, which with the narrowing of the street, can lead to quite slow progress (one way of avoiding this is to visit on a Sunday, when most of the route is blissfully deserted). The shops are equally jammed full of cheap shoes, bags and clothes, which in turn become fabric traders and purveyors of fine plastic junk. Attracted by the obvious age of one shop, we went inside and met the smiling proprietor. Khun Suebpong runs the teashop his grandfather opened after coming over from Shanghai at the turn of the 20th century. Specialising in Oolong and Jasmine, he has brews for every budget and is happy to introduce the uninitiated into the many wonders of green tea.


Heading north along Soi Mangkon, over the busy Yaowarat and Charoen Krung, takes you to the gates of Leng Noi Yee temple, the most impressive Chinese temple in China Town. Past the huge imposing statues that stand guard at the entrance, the main pagoda is a magnificent structure of dark woods, gilded Buddhas and towering red candles. Worshippers clutching incense sticks pay their respects at a series of shrines devoted to separate deities - the temple combines elements of Taoism and Confucianism, guaranteeing a steady stream of devotees.



Nearby, Nakhon Kasem, or 'thieves market' provides the more selective shopper the opportunity to buy a hunting knife, a cement mixer or an imitation handgun. We stopped for a streetside shot of Bua-Bok, some sort of leaf juice, which tasted vaguely likely Pimms. It's reportedly very good for the heart. The vendor certainly looked extremely healthy with a beaming, if slightly green, smile.

Leaving Nakhon Kasem, we headed due south towards the Pak Klong Talaat flower and vegetable market, the last stop before getting back on the river and returning to base (public ferries run frequently, and with the Tha Memorial Bridge river boat stop minutes away, there's an easy exit strategy to head back downtown). This 24-hour market, a few strides from the river, is Bangkok's largest flower market and the place to go for blooms of any description at lower prices than you'll find elsewhere in the city.

Back at the Sheraton, there are a variety of ways in which to cool down. There are two pools (one garden-style, surrounded by lush verdancy, jogging track and tennis courts), one terrace-style, adjacent to the well-stocked and staffed gym; a Mandara Spa, where each suite incorporates oversized aromatherapy floral baths, and the whole spectrum of treatments are on offer - plus some of Bangkok's best views to enjoy mid-massage - a feature also shared with the 26th floor, panoramic window-flanked Club Lounge. An enticing array of wining and dining options should also be attempted by those not staying at the hotel - most notably Thara Thong; set in a Thai teak pavilion, where guests sit at low tables and feast on scrumptious authentic cuisine - and Giorgio's, a romantic, riverside option serving innovative Italian eats.

There is also an added incentive for one to stuff themselves here - a rather long and intriguing walk begins only minutes away... 

lifestyle + travel was hosted by the Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel & Towers Bangkok.

Left: A young lady prepares a Lei of flowers in the Pak Klong Talaat flower and vegetable market.

Right: An older lady prepares soy milk-based confectionary items in China Town.

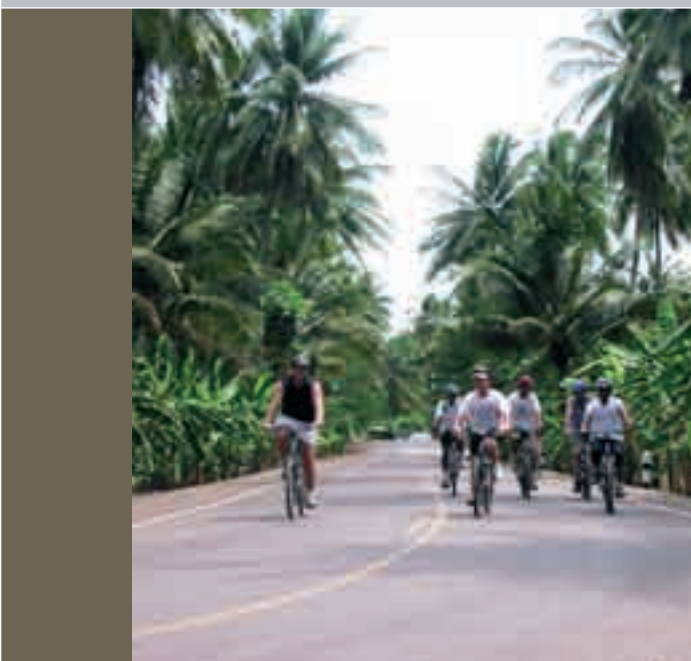


Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel & Towers Bangkok
2 Captain Bush Lane, New Road, Bangkok
Tel: + 66 (0) 2266 0123
00172.info@sheraton.com, www.royalorchidsheraton.com

*Published rates from USD 170. Contact **Sheraton** to find out about their special 'Romance on the River' package, which starts from Baht 7,000/night, and includes a deluxe room, bottle of wine/cheese platter on arrival, and buffet breakfast.*

*Also, **Pattaya's** first **Sheraton** is opening in July 05. The country club-like resort is located on a cliff headland overlooking the Gulf of Siam, with 156 rooms, 40 pavilions and two villas. Visit www.sheraton.com/pattaya for more information.*

*Above: A bird's eye view of Royal Orchid Sheraton's riverside garden pool.
Right: The Sheraton's jogging track, which circles the garden pool area.*



Biking the Bangkok Outdoors

A different kind of market experience can be had around the Damnoen Nam Saduak Floating Market, an hour south of Bangkok. The regional cycling tour operator **SpiceRoads** (www.spiceroads.com) has introduced a new one-day trip to the Mae Klong Delta area. The tour starts with a thankfully swift exploration of the inauthentic and touristy floating market, before a longtail boat ride to nearby historic temple Wat Amphawan Chetiyaram, the starting point of the ride.

Cycling through quiet back roads and jeep trails, passing fruit orchards and coconut/aloe vera plantations; the tour pauses occasionally for a quick look-see at other points of interest, but there is enough time to truly appreciate the countryside en route.

SpiceRoads fully supports the trip with a high quality of service, high-spec mountain bikes, food and drinks. - PM