

ancient, weathered structure, the Kuan An Keng Chinese temple which, like the Catholic church, also dates to the 1767-1782 reign of Siam's warrior king, Taksin. The air is dense with incense but there's not a tourist, other than us, to be seen. Nothing glittery or gilded here, no badgered groups or selfie-stick zealots. Beside the altar are traditional fortune-telling yarrow sticks. You ask a question and then shake out a numbered stick that coincides with a printed "answer". Amy seems pleased with her reading while my oracular call is a definitive "up-to-you, sport", either way OK, line ball.

Taksin the Great (as opposed to a similarly named, more recent supremo, Thaksin the Deposed) remains honoured in Thailand for having resisted conquest by the neighbouring Burmese. He established the new capital of Siam at Thonburi and so naturally there is a shrine to him here, a handsome bronze equestrian statue, and his ashes reside nearby at Wat Intharam Worawihan. However, my daily quota of temple-church-shrine attendances is

already filled and, plus, the canals are calling.

ALONG THE KHLONGS

"The Venice of the East" was an early European tag for Bangkok, referring to the khlongs that were earlier dug to link the settlement's communities. With 20th-century modernisation, many canals on the eastern side of the river were filled-in but in Thonburi they remained intact and are still in daily use.

Khun Amy has arranged for a rua hang yao — a classic long-tail boat — to collect us for a canal trip. As the boatman guns the skinny, six-metre vessel along the river we pass the curiously named Windsor House, a beautiful, two-storey teak building that has long intrigued me. Nicknamed "the gingerbread house" because of its elaborate fretwork and eaves, there's little known about this now broke-down palace other than it was built around a century ago by a wealthy British merchant named Windsor. Sadly, each year it slides further into decay.

A short distance along the river we turn west, inland, on the Khlong Mon canal that will bring us to the heart of old Thonburi. "Traditionally, the Thais are an aquatic people — or perhaps that should be amphibious," wrote Sir John Bowring, Queen Victoria's

ambassador to Siam in the 1850s. He was speaking of this network of canal-side communities, canoe vendors and floating markets.

WEST SIDE STORIES

With old temples and new townhouses to the left and mangroves to our right, plus giant monitor lizards the size of small crocodiles on the bank, these amphibian villages seem a parallel universe to the speed-dialled vortex of the Big Mango, aka Bangkok, just two kilometres east.

Turning into Khlong Bang Luang (the canals are sign-posted like the "streets" they are) we dock at a long, traditional teak building known as Baan Silapan, or the Artist's House. After a good Thai lunch, we catch a performance in its theatre of classic Thai puppetry where the masked, standing puppeteers operate large marionettes depicting episodes from the Ramayana epic. A quick coffee, a look around the museum of puppets, paintings and masks and it's time to re-board our long-tail and head back.

There's no time left today to visit the extraordinary Royal Barges Museum just upriver that houses the king's magnificent longboats ("barges" simply isn't adequate for these exquisite vessels). Rarely, on auspicious royal occasions, a parade of these slender, stately craft progresses up the river, rowed by chanting sailors in traditional finery. It's one of the world's truly great processions. Meantime, catch the fleet of intricate "barges" at rest or being restored in the Royal Barges Museum, which is open to the public.

THE OVERVIEW

The tuk-tuk driver deftly outwits the peak-hour traffic jam (yes, even Thonburi has them) and



drops me at the Hilton hotel. I make my way to the 32nd floor where the aptly named Three Sixty Bar gives you a traffic controller's view halfway to China.

With a gin and tonic at hand and a smoky jazz singer in the background, I watch the great looping river below, where darkened cargo barges creep north past cruise boats ablaze with neons. On the opposite shore, the wondrous melee of going and getting, having and flashing that is Bangkok proper seems a world away. Here's to Thonburi.

Classic Thai puppetry at Baan Silapan, or the Artist's House.

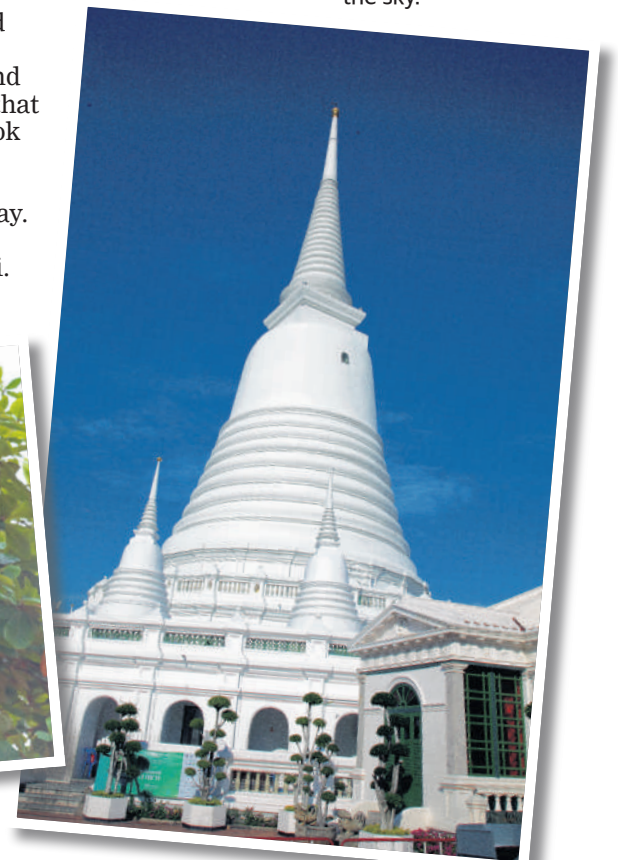
The white stupa of Wat Prayurawongsawat needles 60m into the sky.



Windsor House was built around a century ago by a wealthy British merchant.



Siam warrior king Taksin reigned from 1767-82.



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