



A Bangkok canal vendor sells her wares. Pictures: John Borthwick

Thai 'left bank' is just right

JOHN BORTHWICK escapes the modern bustle of Bangkok for a glimpse into old-world culture across the river

The hi-so half of the city churns with sky-trains, bling malls, traffic mauls, temples and tour coaches. Yes — we're talking Bangkok. Meanwhile, the other side of town, Thonburi (pronounced "Tonbury"), sitting just across the Chao Phraya River, goes almost unnoticed by many visitors. Which makes Thonburi, Bangkok's "left bank", exactly the place to explore next time you're in the Thai capital. In fact, Thonburi was the Siam capital between 1767 and 1782, before it was moved across the river.

SETTING OUT

Where to start in this realm of "khlong" canals, hidden villages and surprising Eurasian history? Firstly, book a stay here; your options run from several luxury hotels to budget boltholes like the stylish, enigmatically named J No.14 Hostel. Then find a map that actually covers Thonburi (many don't even bother), hail a tuk-tuk and be off.

"Even the tuk-tuk fares here are reasonable," says my Thai guide, Amy, acknowledging the gouging that happens on the other side of town whenever a hapless "farang" tourist boards a tuk-tuk.

"The people here in Thonburi are more courteous, too," she adds, meaning less commercially

hard-nosed. In short, more traditionally Thai.

TARTED-UP

We rattle and rev the short distance to a curious little Thai-Portuguese enclave known as Baan Kudichin (or Kudjeejeen). It means "Chinese shrine village", but we're here not to pray but eat cake. In the early 16th century, Portuguese traders, missionaries and mercenaries were the first Europeans to settle in Siam (as Thailand was known) and while those bloodlines have now thinned, their favourite pastry lives on.

Amy navigates narrow "soi" laneways past century-old teak houses to the Thanusingha Bakery

House, the first bakery established in Siam, where the specialty is "kanom farang" — foreigner sweet. For over 200 years, this family bakery has made a traditional snack whose simple ingredients are duck eggs, sugar and wheat flour — no yeast or butter — baked in cupcake moulds. We sample the delicious tarts and then, moving down the lane to the next family-run shop, a few more along with coffee.

Now well tarted-up we check out the private Baan Kudichin Museum, an elegant two-storey, colonial-style home where Mrs Navinee Pongthai shows me

Fact File

Millennium Hilton Hotel: hilton.com
J No.14 on Facebook: [jno14.lodgment](https://www.facebook.com/jno14.lodgment)



Three Sixty Bar at the Millennium Hilton offers a stunning view of the Bangkok skyline.

Catch intricate 'barges' at the Royal Barges Museum.



The museum houses the king's longboats.

around the collection of historic memorabilia from the old Kudichin community and her own Portuguese-Thai heritage.

A CHOICE OF CHURCHES

A few sois further on, we come to a Bangkok riverfront landmark, the domed Santa Cruz Church, built by the Catholic community in 1770. There's probably time to slip in for a quick Hail Mary, or perhaps to confess that I've eaten too many khanom farang, but the doors don't open until afternoon, so we press on to meet other gods.

The brilliant white stupa of Wat Prayurawongsawat needles 60m into a cloudless blue sky. In 2005, the Buddhist abbot noticed that his temple's celebrated steeple was tilting. Not wanting the 165-year-old spire to become the leaning (or worse) tower of Bangkok, engineers were called in and were able to ingeniously brace the hollow spire from within rather than with external struts. The project won the UNESCO Award of Excellence in Cultural Heritage Conservation. We explore the conical, brick-lined inner void of the stupa, a wonderfully tranquil space that also has a fine little museum attached.

Reaching the Chao Phraya's riverfront walkway we find an



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