

The Fast Boats of Bangkok

Life's most precious memories are archived in my mind, indexed as mental pictures, surrounding my field of view in full color, soundless yet complete. These images are the truest and best record of my travel and my life – far surpassing in quality the actual photographs packed away in cardboard boxes or stored on my overburdened hard disk. One such image is from the *Klongs* of Bangkok. *Klongs* are the local name for an interurban canal system where *Fast Boats* carry half-drenched commuters at warp speed through muddy waters on their way to and from the city center.



In the old days, I imagine these boats were something like the Gondolas of Venice, propelled by a muscular boatman with a single, oscillating oar. Today, they are forty feet in length and are powered by an incredible contraption: a V-8 engine directly driving a high-speed propeller. As the boatman dips the business end of his pivoting drive shaft into the water, the V-8 engine balanced precariously between the drive shaft and his hand revs to a deafening roar, the bow of the boat rises up like a goose trying to get airborne, and the boat flies forward leaving a “rooster tail” of water in the air behind. Some of the twenty-odd passengers in the boat unfurl umbrellas before them, seeking protection from the spray. Away goes the *Fast Boat*, off to the suburbs, a field of pylon-supported wooden buildings and houseboats stretching out as far as can be seen.

¹ Photo credit: Jim Steinhart. Copyright 2006

Here, I thought, was one ride I didn't want to miss. Whatever was out there was bound to be of interest. So I decided to head out to the neighborhoods on one of these *Fast Boat* water taxis. Little did I imagine what lay in store for me in Bangkok's watery suburbs on the banks of the *Klong*.

I stepped into the long, narrow confines of the *Fast Boat*, seated myself hard against the gunwale on a wooden bench - protected from the blazing sun by an overhead awning - and prepared for launch. Once loaded, the boat pushed away from the dock, the V-8 fired up, and the drive shaft - resembling a giant milkshake mixer - dipped into the water. We accelerated slowly at first, picking up speed as we entered the broad expanse of the river. Once clear of the shore, the driver revved the engine, the bow rose, and a wall of water - a giant wake - appeared beside me, just outside the boat. Of course some of the traveling wave splattered aboard, and passengers not seated two abreast moved to the center to minimize the soaking. Other passengers opened umbrellas before them and cowered behind, as if in a horizontal rainstorm.

As adventurous as this *Fast Boat* seemed to me, it was first and foremost a water taxi for the local residents, a sort of waterborne commuter bus with frequent stops. As we headed out of the river and into the *Klong* itself, the *Fast Boat* slowed a bit to quench the wake, then drove purposefully onward to the fast-approaching stop. The *Fast Boats* had no posted route or schedule that I could discern - and even if they had, the elegantly-lettered Thai alphabet was a mystery to me. So away I went with my fellow commuters, no destination in mind, the wind and the spray in my face.

We were headed "upriver," but unlike Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness* my boat trip was filled with sights of healthy, normal - even cheerful - life. People washing clothes in the *Klong* or hanging them to dry outside the windows of their wooden tenements; kids jumping in the milk-chocolate water for a cooling swim - the signs of ordinary life were everywhere.

This, I felt, was leading someplace. The further upstream we went, the sparser the buildings became, and dry land actually appeared here and there. It seemed that we had now entered the suburbs. The boat stopped at little docks fairly frequently. The thought occurred to me: why not hop out and see what there is to see?

We stopped at a dock where a path leading landward was clearly evident. It was a straight walkway, leading to a plain-looking building that was apparently some sort of temple. It was a nondescript edifice, except for its height: taller than a house, shorter than a barn, but sporting a temple-type roof and a few decorations that set it apart from the surrounding houses. Its front door stood open – which I took as an invitation to enter. I had adopted the habit of visiting churches, synagogues and temples whenever possible, wherever I was in the world. And I'd been rewarded handsomely: Evensong in York Minster; the Dome of the Rock mosque with its elegant tile and mystical provenance; the Western Wall with its ululating women and praying men; and the tiny Greek Church on the Island of Thera, where three singing priests paraded their icons for hours among the segregated worshipers – men on the left, women on the right. But more often than not, a house of worship had been empty when I happened to enter, and I had to content myself with just the building and its ornamentation. This is what I expected here, on the banks of the *Klong* in suburban Bangkok.

I entered the building and found myself in an antechamber; obviously the place to remove one's shoes. Before I could bend down, a woman came rushing forth, in a state of agitation, pointing nervously at my boots. I tried to speak to her but she was gone in an instant, but was immediately replaced by a sedate and friendly middle-aged man. I could not tell how old he was for sure – many Thais look younger to me than they really are. He had smooth, rosewood-colored skin, roundish eyes, and an open, forthright countenance. He was of medium height, perhaps 5' 8", wearing a long-sleeved white shirt, dark trousers and leather shoes. His English was nearly perfect, with little hint of an accent to my American ear. "May I enter?" I said. "Please do come in," he replied in a somewhat formal, slightly apprehensive tone. "We are having a special event. Go ahead, bring your camera." In this last phrase I detected a note of forced graciousness, so I replied that no, I

would leave my camera behind, not wishing to show any disrespect (or, in truth, to be thought an Ugly American). His head nodded ever so slightly, his expression relaxed as if grateful for my response, and he touched me gently on the elbow as he said, with complete sincerity, "Please, come in."

Right decision, I thought.

As I entered the main room of the temple, I was astonished by the scene. I found myself surrounded by people sitting or reclining any place they could, on the benches around the perimeter or on the concrete floor, or wandering about in some sort of stupor. The room was semi-dark and the air was filled with the smoke of incense and the smells of the Orient. "What is this event?" I enquired. "This is the funeral of my father," he replied. Oh! "I am truly sorry for your loss," I replied, while my rational self lamented the absence of a camera. "No need to be sorry," he said. "My father was ninety years old. He had eleven children and many, many grandchildren. Here he is."

My God! Here he was indeed, surrounded by diaphanous curtains, stretched out on a stone slab, clothed in a simple gown, his flesh as white as if he were a marble statue. My host pulled back the curtains, and I could see the arm of the deceased, stretched out at right angles to his body, hanging down, its wrist positioned above a bowl on the floor. "We have bled him," my host explained, making clear the reason for this statue-like appearance of his late father.

Perhaps it's best I didn't have my camera after all. As it was, the image of this scene found its way into that corner of my brain where all the full-color images reside; permanently enduring, ever available for replay.

"How long have you been here," I asked, as I noticed various plates of fruit scattered about in unclear states of decay. "Eight days," replied my host, "we have a few more days to go." Eight days! No wonder these people looked stoned. Had they eaten? Were they smoking something? Were they just tired? These are questions that went unasked

and unanswered. I can't recall how long I lingered – it could have been a minute, it could have been an hour. I had been transported to a dreamlike state not unlike that of the mourners. I was in their world, where time did not matter, where there was no more reason to speak.

My host and I finally exited the chamber, silently, reverentially, both knowing that the visit had come to an end. In the anteroom I bowed slightly, thanked him for his hospitality, and departed the way I had come, down the path to the *Fast Boat* dock. But I was still in a state of semi-shock over the experience of this encounter. The body I had just observed, stretched out so ceremoniously, had been a real man, a man born in the days of Imperial Siam, a man who had borne witness to the twentieth century's transformation of this isolated nation into a tourist destination wide-open to the world. And his son – my host – had chosen to welcome me, a foreigner and a stranger, into his world, which I had chosen to enter with only my eyes for a camera. Why had he done this? Was he just hospitable? Was he bored after eight days of mourning? Was he curious? Or did custom obligate him to welcome strangers, perhaps assigning some mystical significance to the mysterious interloper? These are questions that went unasked and unanswered.

To this very day, many years after the event, a full-color image of this encounter inhabits my mind, surrounding my field of view, forever haunting my memory. And I wonder about my host. Does he live? Does he prosper? Does he recall the interloper at his father's funeral? Does he have questions that went unasked and thus unanswered?