

GILDED RIVER

Sailing Thailand's Chao Phraya may be the closest you'll get to traveling back in time, as **LAWRENCE OSBORNE** discovers on a trip that transports him from the buzz of Bangkok to the wonders of ancient Siam.

Photographs by **CHRISTOPHER WISE**



The 19th-century Aisawan Thipaya-Asana pavilion, on the grounds of Bang Pa-In, a palace in Ayutthaya province. Opposite: Loy River Song crew members wear traditional silk brocade jackets.



EVEN AFTER LIVING in Bangkok for nine years, I rarely, if ever, leave the city by river. I am an anomaly, historically speaking, since the Thai capital was built around a network of canals fanning out from the Chao Phraya—the sacred waterway that flows from the city of Nakhon Sawan, in the country’s center, through Bangkok and out into the Gulf of Thailand. The Thai word for “river,” *maenam*, literally translates as “mother water,” and reveals the culture’s reverence for waterways as the centerpiece of life. For centuries, civilization has evolved around the majestic Chao Phraya.

So on a cruise run by Loy Pela Voyages last November, I felt a palpable sense of history as the boat plowed through sheets of hyacinths on the water’s surface and passed the low-slung rice barges that still constantly ply the route. To leave Bangkok this way is to realize how ephemeral much of the city is today. When you leave by a taxi to the airport you never escape the urban claustrophobia. By water, however, you are taken away from the cement and the suburbs and into a seemingly different country, all in the span of two hours.

Our destination was the UNESCO World Heritage site of Ayutthaya, founded in 1350 and mostly destroyed in 1767 during the 11th Burmese-Siamese War. It’s only about 65 miles upriver from Bangkok, yet our itinerary was to last two nights and three days. The cruise would be a journey into Thailand’s past—and would prove surprising in its haunting beauty.

Most modern visitors to Ayutthaya travel by car or bus, but ambassadors and other dignitaries of the 14th to 18th centuries would have arrived by boat, as the city’s planners intended. Our vessel, the *Loy River Song*, was certainly fit for a stately tour. The boat’s interior resembles that of a luxury yacht—intimate and largely open to the elements. Four cabins, appointed with dark teak floors, hand-painted walls, and antique ceramics, sit

below the main deck, and the effect is cocoon-like. I glimpsed the reflection of the water through the window above my bed—an aquatic green that tinted the ceiling. At night, the gentle rush of the river propelled me to sleep.

THE BANKS OF CANALS and rivers are always where Thailand seems most alive. These places are not practical for real estate development and so they remain lush, a landscape where monitor lizards sunbathe on stones and children fish with ease. The residents, among the country’s poorest, live in makeshift wooden homes on stilts. The contrast on the *Loy River Song* sometimes felt jarring, especially during lunches, which were meals of smoked-eggplant caviar with yellowfin tartare and baked barramundi with foie gras and apple purée. Afterward, I’d sit on the deck as we glided through the stillness of the forest.

The first evening, we moored beside an old royal temple called Wat Niwet Thammaprawat, which was built in a disorienting European style—King Chulalongkorn commissioned Italian



architect Gioachino Grossi to design it in 1876. The chapel is dominated by a Gothic altarpiece that holds a polished-gold statue of the Buddha.

Since it was not yet dark, we ventured farther to Bang Pa-In, a summer palace built in the 1880s on top of an older palace that had fallen into disuse. It is a curious, eclectic fantasia of wedding-cake-white structures, opulent bridges flanked by stone statues of Greek deities, and artificial ponds. There's also a massive royal residence that's reminiscent of Beijing's Forbidden City. Successive Thai royals added to the compound over the years, but most of it was conceived by King Chulalongkorn between 1872 and 1889.

As closing hour approached in a hot and still dusk, squads of young soldiers appeared around the palace complex as if ready to eject any stragglers. It was a reminder that tensions in the kingdom were high—back on the boat we heard reports that street protests against the monarchy had rocked the capital.

DURING THAT EVENING'S dinner, something that looked like a comet flashed across the sky. It consisted of three orbs in shades of yellow, blue, and red. "A satellite disintegrating," one of my fellow passengers suggested uneasily, without knowing one way or the other. As the orbs plunged through



◀ From far left:
The Loy River
Song docked in
Ayutthaya; modern
and traditional
architecture sit
side-by-side along
the Chao Phraya
River in Bangkok.

▶ From top: River
prawn and pomelo
salad aboard the
Loy River Song;
the 63-foot-tall
Buddha inside
Ayutthaya's Wat
Phanan Choeng;
children greet
passengers of
the boat.





◀ Garlands of flowers, leaves, and cloth adorn a tree in Ayutthaya.



▼ A Buddhist monk waits for a ferry on the Chao Phraya in Bangkok.



Earth's atmosphere, they lit up the entire horizon in a burst of pale-green lightning. A few on board let out a low moan of wonderment, and we recalled that in former centuries such a sight would have been interpreted as a sign of approaching turmoil.

It seemed, in retrospect, a fitting omen for a visit to Ayutthaya the next morning, a site steeped in violence. In the 1700s, amid a centuries-long conflict, belligerent Burmese king Hsinbyushin took thousands of Ayutthaya's inhabitants prisoner and massacred the rest, leaving a ruined ghost city behind. The capital moved to Bangkok as a result, and the Thai-Burmese relationship remains tense.

Ayutthaya today is a paradox. The modern town is awash in commercial billboards and ramshackle malls. But the UNESCO-protected historical core is remarkably coherent. Pandemic

restrictions kept the usual throng of international visitors away, and the ruins of the Buddhist temples had an air of melancholy. The most magnificent ruin is that of Wat Chaiwatthanaram, with its eight towering spires, built just across the river.

Throughout the site are spread overgrown canals that were once the city's arteries. Loy Pela Voyages organizes longtail-boat tours to navigate these smaller lanes, which let you burrow into the core of the city's identity as a hub of culture and commerce during the Ayutthaya Kingdom's glory days. We disembarked at one point to walk around the Khmer-style Wat Ratchaburana, constructed in 1424. It has somber stupas and long red-brick walls, which I fancifully imagined to be undulating from the effects of those battles almost five centuries ago. It's perhaps the most chilling and beautiful site in Thailand.

There was something surreal about returning to the water's edge and simply re-embarking—to be greeted on board by the warm and friendly crew with an afternoon tea of strawberry pavlovas and Thai-style coconut pudding. Such are the luxuries of the Age of Tourism.

A heavy rainstorm fell the next day during our return to Bangkok, which dramatically raised the water level. Sitting on the deck as lightning flashed over the distant skyline, I realized that this—much like the frenetic, bewitching capital city we were approaching—made the river seem even more mysterious, and even more powerful. 🌐

loypelavoyages.com; one-to-three-night sailings on the Loy River Song from \$1,650, all-inclusive.



*Wat Chaiwatthanaram,
a 17th-century Buddhist
temple in Ayutthaya.*