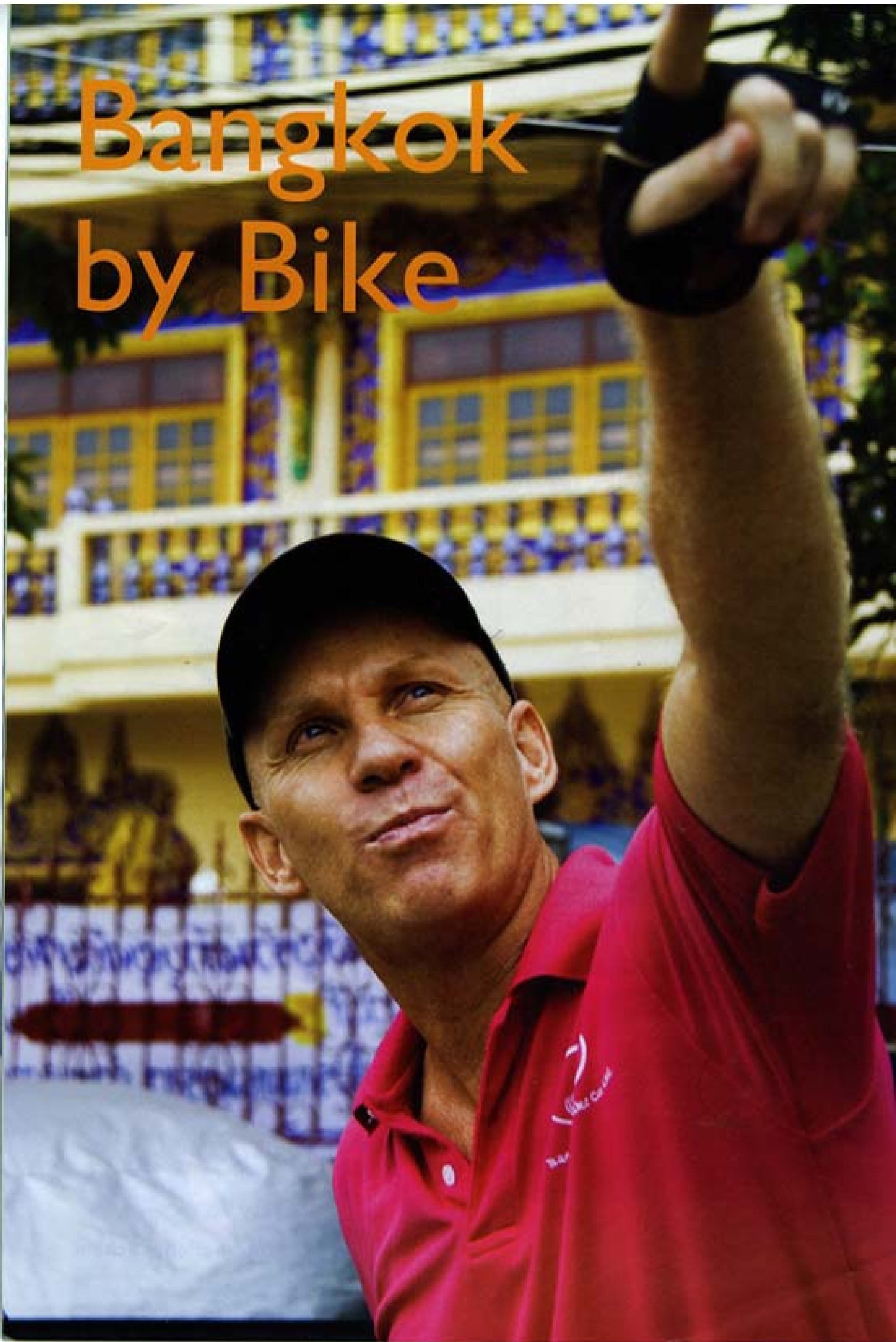


Bangkok by Bike



Who would have thought that Bangkok was so peaceful and green? On Arne Wilhelmson's bicycle trips tourists have the rare chance of seeing what is hidden behind the busy streets of Bangkok. ScandAsia jumped on a bicycle and drove through the back streets of Bangkok with Arne leading the way. A trip highly recommended.

By Sarah Mia Hoogenup
Photos by Ditaporn Yotprom

Bangkok by Bike, that sounds a bit risky. This is how most people react when they hear about Arne Wilhelmson's bicycle trips in the city notorious for its frequent traffic chaos. But Bangkok is more than crowded six lane roads, huge business towers, and busy streets crammed with food stalls and shops. If you take a bicycle trip through the city's small winding roads you will see a part of the city unknown to most tourists.

It all started because Arne had a Danish friend who was very fond of cycling. Every year they both spent about 3-4 months in Bangkok and one day his friend bought a bike, urging Arne to get one too.

"At first I was hesitating a bit. Like every one else I thought it wasn't possible in Bangkok," Arne recalls. Even so Arne bought a bike and went biking with his friend. On their bicycle trips through the back streets of Bangkok they met another side of Bangkok and came to the conclusion that other people might enjoy it as much as them, so they bought 10 bikes and went to Khaosan Road to attract the tourists. The bicycling trips appeared to be a great success and in 2006 Arne decided to start the company Bangkok By Bike. Today Arne lives in Thailand with his Thai-wife - quite different from when he worked for the Swedish post office.

No money for advertisement

Arne has never had a great deal of money to do marketing, as having your own biking company isn't the most lucrative business especially because of the low season and the competition from other similar companies. Advertisement has mainly been through Scandinavian newspapers, his web page and travel organizers as Vingresor.

But even without big advertisement campaigns it seems like Arne has succeeded in getting the word out, also to tourists outside of Scandinavia. As soon as tomorrow, two Spanish tourists are joining him on one of his trips. Something he is much excited about as he doesn't get a lot of tourists from this part of the world. Usually he arranges trips for Swedish and Danish tourists. 99 percent of the time tourists are very satisfied with the trips while a small percent is a bit "iffy" about the whole idea. Biking isn't for everyone, as Arne says.

"It's a very nice job where I meet a lot of people and almost everyone is happy and friendly but it happens when somebody is in a bad mood. I specifically remember this woman, who was very unhappy when she discovered there was no foot break on the bike but only hand breaks. It destroyed her mood so she wasn't that excited about cycling", Arne says.

Since people typically have fun on the trips it often happens that Arne gets contacted by tourists who have heard about Bangkok by Bike through friends. The tourist group today also consists of people who have heard about Arne through friends. Besides me and my photographer, the group is made up of four people from the Danish island Bornholm: 21 year old Phuket-guide Julie Carlson, her mother Hanne Carlsen and their friends, husband and wife Nils Kofoed and Hjørdis Nielsen. Like me they are all anxious to see a



different side of Bangkok.

Our 8 bikes are waiting for us outside Arne's small office near Phra Pin Klao west of the river and we get ready to leave, fully equipped with water and cameras.

Getting a glimpse of daily life

Not long after take-off we enter a small local community and a large shining temple is made visible behind the grey roof tops. We make the first stop. The temple Wat Bangveekhan, which is located in between small houses, is just one of nearly 30,000 temples in Thailand and one of the bigger ones in Bangkok. Fifteen monks live inside the temple, which is used for social activities. The stop is short and we continue on our bikes.

Next stop is the 7 year old

Rama VIII Park by the Rama VIII Bridge which stretches across the Chao Phraya River. The park was built in honour of the former King Rama VIII, who was brother to the existing King IX. A statue of the king has been put up in the middle of the garden beautifully surrounded by trees blooming with white Hawaii flowers. Since it is still early in the day hardly anybody is in the park except for us, a few gardeners and a Thai man out for a morning jog looking very amused by our presence. He probably noticed us when we parked our bikes by the garden wall. The sight of six white foreigners paddling away on bicycles is an interesting and odd sight for the locals seeing that tourists in Bangkok usually travel by taxi, tuk tuk, or bus.

We leave the park and continue on our bikes and drive past two Thais sleeping under the bridge. One of them wakes up, yawns and smiles when he sees us. The town is still waking up and people are on their way to work and school.

The sinking temple

We follow the road away from the traffic noise into an area with narrow alleys and plain little houses with sheet metal roofs. After a little while we make our third stop by a small river. Arne brings fried bananas for us to try while his guide Palida Diwell or Tammy, as she is also called, tells a story about the community we just drove through. She



knows a lot about Bangkok's small communities and you can tell that she is very interested in introducing us to the city's rich history.

We continue along the river on a pathway full of holes through a small middleclass community. After a while we make another stop this time at a coconut stand by the side of a small gravel road.

After having a cool and refreshing drink we drive to a temple by the name of Wat Chalong - slow down temple. The huge temple is, however, under construction so apart from its impressive and beautifully conusating and multi coloured facade there isn't that much to see behind the huge temple walls. Right next to it however is a very small and ram shackled temple, which almost looks like it is sinking into the ground. Tammy tells us it's from the Ayutthaya period (1677 - 1767). We move closer to the temple and inside an orange-robed monk is blessing a Thai woman, who is sitting on the stone floor in front of the monk, surrounded by smoking sticks and candles. It's a very peaceful ceremony and it doesn't seem like anybody is disturbed by our presence.

Not far from the temple we stop at a little local outdoor restaurant right next to the river. Arne orders phat siyu gap gai, a traditional Thai dish with fried noodles and chicken. With renewed energy we continue on our bikes through a peaceful and green area called the Bangkruay district. It's almost like we've left the pulsating city entirely and entered a small vilage. There are no cars or motorbikes here only us and a few locals.



Fortune telling

We drive through narrow tortuous paths covered with palm leaves and stop at another old temple.

The temple, which looks like it belongs in a fairytale, has aged in a very captivating way. It's totally covered in leaves and tree roots have twisted their way up the temple walls hiding it from plain sight. Traditional Thai music is playing from somewhere in the temple very suitable since the temple is called the music temple or Wat Phlaeng in Thai. Again we are the only ones there. We enter the small temple and gather in front of the altar.

Tammy tells us a little about Buddhism and Arne hands us a jar with some Chinese wood sticks carved with numbers. The wood sticks are part of a very old fortune telling tradition passed down from China, where the idea is to shake the jar and let one of the sticks fall to the ground. The stick's number will then reveal the future if you dare to read the text that goes with the number. All of us get a number with a fortune detached to it but we are apparently an unlucky bunch since almost all of the fortunes are riddled with ill-luck. We are told to

leave the text in the temple as it will bring us luck, and we do.

We step up on our bikes again and enter an area with narrow winding paths on the canal. We all make an extra effort to watch our step as none of us have any desire to end up in the shallow waters. At the end of the path a long-tail-boat is waiting for us, ready to take us down Bangkok Noi Canal to Arne's office as we have almost reached the end of our trip.

Arne hands out bread so we can feed the fish as we get near a big temple area leading out into the



river. If it wasn't for the law which makes it illegal to fish in front of temples this little spot would by far be every fisherman's dream. The amount of fish here is overwhelming and it almost looks like they don't have enough water to swim in.

Back at the office

Everybody are in good spirits when we arrive at Arne's office at about half past 12, four hours after leaving his office. It doesn't seem like the twelve kilometres was too much for anyone, on the contrary, Julie Carlson, her mother Hanne Carlsen and their friends, Nils Kofoed and Hjørdis Nielsen are all very pleased with the trip.

"It was really exciting seeing so many different neighbourhoods and so many social layers of the society here in Bangkok," Nils Kofoed says.

They are all surprised by the green scenery and especially enjoyed getting close to the locals in the small communities. A perfect way to get to know Bangkok and experience other sights than the ones you can find in the guide books.

Besides morning trips Arne also offers trips in the afternoons and weekends. The afternoon route is completely different from the morning trip and is more concentrated around the typical tourist areas.

On weekends Arne takes the tourists to the floating market in Talung Chan, the Royal Barges Museum and to the old Thonburi railway.

The trips cost from 1250 - 1800 Baht per person. And as the icing on the cake you can after completing the trip buy a t-shirt with the words I Did Bangkok by Bike, as proof that you actually did drive through Bangkok on bike, crazy as it may sound.

Bicycles...for rural students



The Imperial Queen's Park Hotel in conjunction with "Foundation for Rehabilitation and Development of Children & Family" (FORDEC) invite during the month of December interested donors to contribute a cash donation for "Bicycles ...for rural students". Donations will be used to buy a bicycle to be shared by children to transport them from a distant home to school.

More than 15 provinces in rural areas across the country are active

in selecting the students most in need for a donated bicycles. Initially, 1,219 schools have been identified where students have to walk a long distance for about 3 kilometers to school everyday. They are located in provinces all over the country, but obviously most are in remote provinces like Chaiyapoom, Surin, Buriram, Srisaket, Srakaew, Nongkai, Nakorn Rajchasma, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Nan and Mae Hong Son.

Not only those children can have a better mental health, but

also they would be able to save lots of expenses of children's family, learn to share with friends, arrive school on time so they can concentrate more on lessons and most of all, it is a good daily exercise.

To make a cash donation, please stop by at the Lobby area, Imperial Club Tower from December 1-31, 2009.

For more information, please contact Public Relations Department at T.02-261-9300 ext. 5938, 5945