

Cheap Thrills in Bangkok

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SUNDAY HERALD-SUN ESCAPE

When I first heard about bicycle tours in Bangkok I figured you'd have to be missing a few cogs to be mad enough to try one. I've seen the way tuk-tuk drivers swerve and dodge on the streets and I'd rather be sitting in a seat behind one of those guys than riding a bike in front of him.

Two-wheeled transportation requires very little space, and very little space is what Bangkok has plenty of.

Risking life and lungs to cycle around this town is definitely and adventure, but it turns out the half-day bike rides designed by Grasshopper Adventures take the path less travelled.

Instead of roads you follow lanes and instead highways you follow water-ways. Backstreets and bridges are the key to staying well away from Bangkok's bustle. Secret temples, local markets and a few undiscovered neighbourhoods are all on the itinerary. This adventure is more for seekers of culture than seekers of adrenalin.

Anyone who can ride a bike can join a Grasshopper day tour, but for those who want a little more challenge there is also a Bangkok-by-night tour.

The same narrow paths and sleepy urban-villages take on a new twist when explored after dark. You are immersed in the everyday rhythms of city life, with nothing more than your guide and flashing bike-lights to illuminate the way. Behind each corner are families hanging laundry, grandparents having a chat and children waving from every direction.

Bangkok's network of rivers and klongs provide fascinating views of waterfront life, usually enjoyed from the paths that follow one side of the river-bank. Somewhere in deepest darkest Thonburi the river path leaves the bank and heads out across the water. With no rails or street lights the riders have to keep themselves on the path and out of the river.

A few hundred meters later the paths returns to solid ground, and heart-rates return to normal.

Wheels and pedals are given a rest when the ride reaches Wat Po and again at Wat Arun, the most popular of Bangkok's Buddhist temples. The golden colours of the stupas and statues

are enjoyed by very few visitors at night, and the absence of crowds makes these spiritual places all the more peaceful.

Inevitably all riders must head back to the starting point to hand back their wheels, helmets and flash-lights before returning to life as regular human beings. They leave Bangkok not merely having visited it, but having experienced it.

(photos for this article supplied by Jason Williams)

