

# From river to riches

Grass-roots culture is all the more enjoyable when there's a five-star hotel to retire to, writes **Ewen Bell**

**Y**OU don't have to be the King of Thailand to enjoy the Bangkok lifestyle. Food-filled streets, chaotic canals and ancient temples are waiting to be enjoyed, preferably with a touch of luxury befitting of royalty.

The trick is getting help from the locals who know how to find the local treasures and a good bottle of champagne.

Being pampered on a Bangkok stopover is the best thing about the long-haul flights to Europe. An interlude with Asia to restore your holiday spirit.

Bangkok's tallest five-star hotel is lebua at State Tower. An elegant building within walking distance of the Chao Phraya River, lebua has all the hallmarks of a great hotel — stunning views of the city, exceptional standards of service and room packages that include a personal tour guide to help you explore the city.

A day of cultural immersion begins with breakfast on the water, speeding along the rivers and klongs in a longtail boat.

The river provides easy access to Wat Arun, a temple so ancient it was built before Bangkok existed.

Monks come and go from the Wat aboard cross-river ferries, adding a splash of saffron to the river traffic.

Every aspect of life in Bangkok is visible from the water, including golden palaces, rowdy produce markets and wonky teak houses that slowly slump into the klongs.

Balconies of homes sit a few feet above the water mark, crammed with potted gardens and domestic necessities.

Orchids, herbs and fruit trees spill out from landings with a week's worth of laundry dangling on the branches.

There's not much room for a clothes line when you live on a river.

Until recent times the poorest homes in Bangkok were the ones built on stilts across the tidal shallows.

Many have been standing for more than 100 years, but may not last much longer.

Some of these have been restored to their former glory or converted to a traditional style worthy of the king himself.

Aboard the longtail we have a little luxury too.

Freshly squeezed fruit juice, smoked salmon with cheese and a glass of champagne are considered essential for a lebua-style picnic breakfast.

The informative musings of our local guide, Pat, are equally enriching and his earnest pride in the city is very touching.

Even the abundance of mud-dwelling fish are cause for his excitement.

"Life is very good in Thailand and the monks always have too much food. They throw it into the river and make the catfish very happy," Pat says.

This works out for the klong residents too, who can fish for a meal without leaving their landing.

Man cannot live on catfish alone, so locals rely on a steady stream of sellers drifting past in their boats.

Women paddle from landing to landing with supplies and treats for sale. Fresh basil and greens go past one minute, and the next it's durian-flavoured ice cream.

Thai people have done well to embrace global influences yet still retain their identity.

Seeing all this delicious produce floating down the river helps build an appetite for some local cuisine.

At the hotel we say goodbye to Pat and join our private cooking class in the hotel kitchen.

The concept is nothing more than local dishes presented by a local chef.

Orawan is our cook. She speaks English with a strong Thai accent, and cooks with an even stronger one.

Classic Thai dishes are explained and prepared before our eyes, with the bustle and mayhem of a busy kitchen clanging away on the other side of the glass doors.



**Water world:** (left) Klong tours are a chance to see how the locals live.

**Sight seeing:** (above right) Bangkok's Wat Arun temple, which was built before the city.

**Ancient:** (above right) Bangkok's Wat Arun temple, which was built before the city.



## »THE DEAL

**Getting there:** Thai Airways International flies direct to Bangkok twice a day. Return fares from \$1350 including taxes. Ph: 1300 651 960 or visit [www.thaiairways.com.au](http://www.thaiairways.com.au)

**Staying:** lebua at State Tower offers a complete three-night package of champagne-laced luxury with a klong tour, cooking class, fine dining at Sirocco and a few other delights for \$2400 per couple.

Per night room rates start at \$187.

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Orawan has been sharing her skills with patrons for more than three years, and knows that small secrets in the kitchen make a big difference to the cuisine.

Once the class is over we sit down in the restaurant and eat what we have learned.

**P**OMELO salad, tom yum soup, lamb with green curry and some clever ways to make fish taste fantastic.

The whole day has been spent eating and drinking, which is exactly how the locals live. Even the narrow back lanes surrounding the hotel are filled with food carts and the regulars who frequent them.

No stall is empty. There is always a customer waiting for a freshly grilled, fried or steamed meal. Nothing says Bangkok like dining out or dining outside.

Families along the klong have their meals on the landing and let the cool air off the water lap away the heat, crowded night markets send plumes of conversation floating into the sky and boutique guesthouses deliver simple rooftop menus.

lebua at State Tower adds its own twist to dining under the stars.

On the 64th floor the elevator ends and the Sirocco restaurant begins, offering the best views of Bangkok. The river, downtown and beyond fill out the vista in every direction with splashes of colour.

Somewhere in the night a few boats are motoring on the water, people are dining on the street and talented chefs are cooking up an explosion of flavour.

But the dining experience at lebua is something unique, a taste of the good life in Bangkok and a view that's fit for a king.