



The Floating Markets of Bangkok’s Canals

Bangkok was known as the Venice of the East in the 19th century. JG Photo/Wahyuni Kamah

Wahyuni Kamah

Bangkok. Dubbed as Venice of the East in the 19th century, Bangkok’s rivers and canals have been the way of transportation for the city. Boats have been used not only to transport people but also farming products from one place to another. As such, floating market has been part of community’s life for people living on the river banks.

While in Bangkok, I really like to see the floating market. However, its location is far away from the capital and forced me to wake up at 5 a.m. to go there. After doing a bit of research, I found floating markets in Thonburi, only 12 kilometers west of the city center.

From my homestay in Old Bangkok, I took the air conditioned bus no 79 to Taling Chan Floating market. It is about 30-minute drive on weekends. For those who just want to have a short day trip, Taling Chan is also an option.

The market opens on weekends only from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Taling Chan (High Bank) is located on Khlong Chak Phra; “khlong” is Thai for “canal.” However, do not expect to see a market that is occupied by boats.

I arrived at about 9 a.m. when the market was not yet crowded. By the entrance there is a long line of plant and flower vendors with a lovely variety of Thai orchids that I was tempted to buy.

I continued to enter the sheltered corridor where many traditional Thai snacks are offered in addition to tropical fruits and souvenirs. The market is neatly arranged and clean.

It’s good to go there with an empty stomach since there are different foods to taste. Indeed, it is the right place to find home-made, traditional, Thai snacks. Some of them are similar to Indonesian snacks and they are mouthwatering.

I tried a taro ball in coconut cream that reminded me of Indonesian kolak. I also found traditional fresh pancakes, salad with peanut sauce, different types of sweets, and luuk chut, miniature fruits made of beans. The prices are relatively cheap and tagged clearly on each product.

The “floating market” tag is not exactly true as I did not find many floating boats. I crossed a small bridge over the canal and landed on a sheltered wooden platform by the bank, lined with tables and platforms.

A number of wooden boats are moored on the canal. The boats are floating kitchens run by both men and women who barbecue prawns, fish and crab, while preparing soup like tom yum or som tum (papaya salad).

Since the market was not yet crowded I could take a look at how vendors prepare the food. The standard of cleanliness at this floating kitchen is not different from sidewalk restaurants, but prices are slightly higher.

When I reached the pier I saw a longtail boat that offers a canal tour to other floating markets. I couldn’t miss that opportunity. The nearly three-hour canal tour costs 99 baht (\$2.76).

Though the guide spoke only Thai and I couldn’t understand his explanations, the experience turned out to be fun.

As the boat floated on the canals, I was mesmerized by the view of villagers’ houses on the bank. The houses are mainly stilt houses made of wood, but they are well maintained.

The villagers have integrated with the waterfront lifestyle as each house had a small boat to use for roaming the canal.

I was surprised to see such branching canals in this part of Bangkok. Like the streets on the ground, the canals are named. Despite its turbidity, the water is free of trash.

The semi-rural atmosphere of Bangkok’s canal life is totally different from the life in the city center. As we went farther I could sense the tranquility and simplicity.

Our first stop is Khlong Lat Mayom Floating market. A main pier leads to an open sheltered market that is full of vendors selling different kinds of fresh food, traditional home made Thai snacks and desserts, fresh fruits and some knick-knacks. There are also some kiosks selling t-shirts and dresses. All kiosks are managed by the local people.

The market that was established in 2004 is a gateway for Bangkok residents to spend their weekends away from the hustle and bustle of the city. There are tables and chairs for those who want to enjoy the food on site. I was amazed by the neat arrangement and cleanliness of this market. I felt a more local taste here than in any market in Bangkok.

We then headed to Wat Sapan Floating Market, which is located on the bank of Khlong Sanam Chai. Of the other markets I visited, I must say Wat Sapan Floating Market is the most interesting because it is ordinarily local for its authentic atmosphere and arrangement.

I didn’t see any foreign tourists here; only local residents and everything is written in Thai. There are also some food vendors and boats that function as kitchens. The fresh vegetables and fruits sold in the market are fresh products of local farmers and I am familiar with all of them. Prices here are also cheaper than in the two other markets.

On our way back to Taling Chan Pier, we had the chance to feed some fish. Several passengers were prepared and had bought bread to throw into the river. It was entertaining to see the fish scrambling to the surface for their meal.

The tour gave me a genuine picture of canal life in Bangkok and the charm of local markets.....<http://jglo.be/i00T>

