

BANGKOK'S GREAT green lung

Bangkok's Bang Kra Jao is a rare urban oasis amid the chaos and bustle of one of Asia's most congested cities. Appearing as a mysterious black patch from local skyscrapers, this extensive jungle remnant, somehow overlooked by developers, is now being rediscovered by Bangkok's residents and is fast becoming a popular tourist attraction. **Ron Gluckman** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS by LUKE DUGGLEBY

Just a few kilometres from the congested downtown of a city whose choking traffic fumes have seen it dubbed the Big Smoke sits a strange anomaly, a dark, placid, fecund place existing in a world of noise, light and chaos. An oasis of peace in Bangkok's 24-hour bustle, Bang Kra Jao resides like a treasured island in the waters of the Chao Phraya (River of Kings). Unique not only to Bangkok, this great 'green lung' is an urban oasis unmatched in Asia, or almost anywhere else. Western capitals nurture vast central parks, but no major metropolis claims so much open space – almost 2,000 hectares of it – nor so accessible.

'It's amazing to find this wetland environment right on Bangkok's doorstep,' says Don MacIntosh, head of Mangroves for the Future, a Bangkok-based NGO. 'It's a rare, wonderful thing.'

OFF THE MAP

Bang Kra Jao (also called Bang Krachao or Kachao) boasts dozens of bird species, giant monitor lizards, thick jungle, fragrant tropical foliage and

charming canals that nourish bananas, coconuts and mangoes – as well as two things even rarer to Bangkok: open space and quiet.

This eerily evocative escape beguiles Bangkok's visitors from first landing. Largely off the radar to all but outdoors enthusiasts, this huge stretch of greenery has only a small scattering of wooden houses among mostly lush farmland. A few roads cross what many describe as an island. Actually, it's a peninsula connected to Bangkok at one point, but otherwise traffic moves on elevated concrete and wooden paths, adding to the laid-back illusion of being in upcountry Thailand, but perhaps half a century ago.

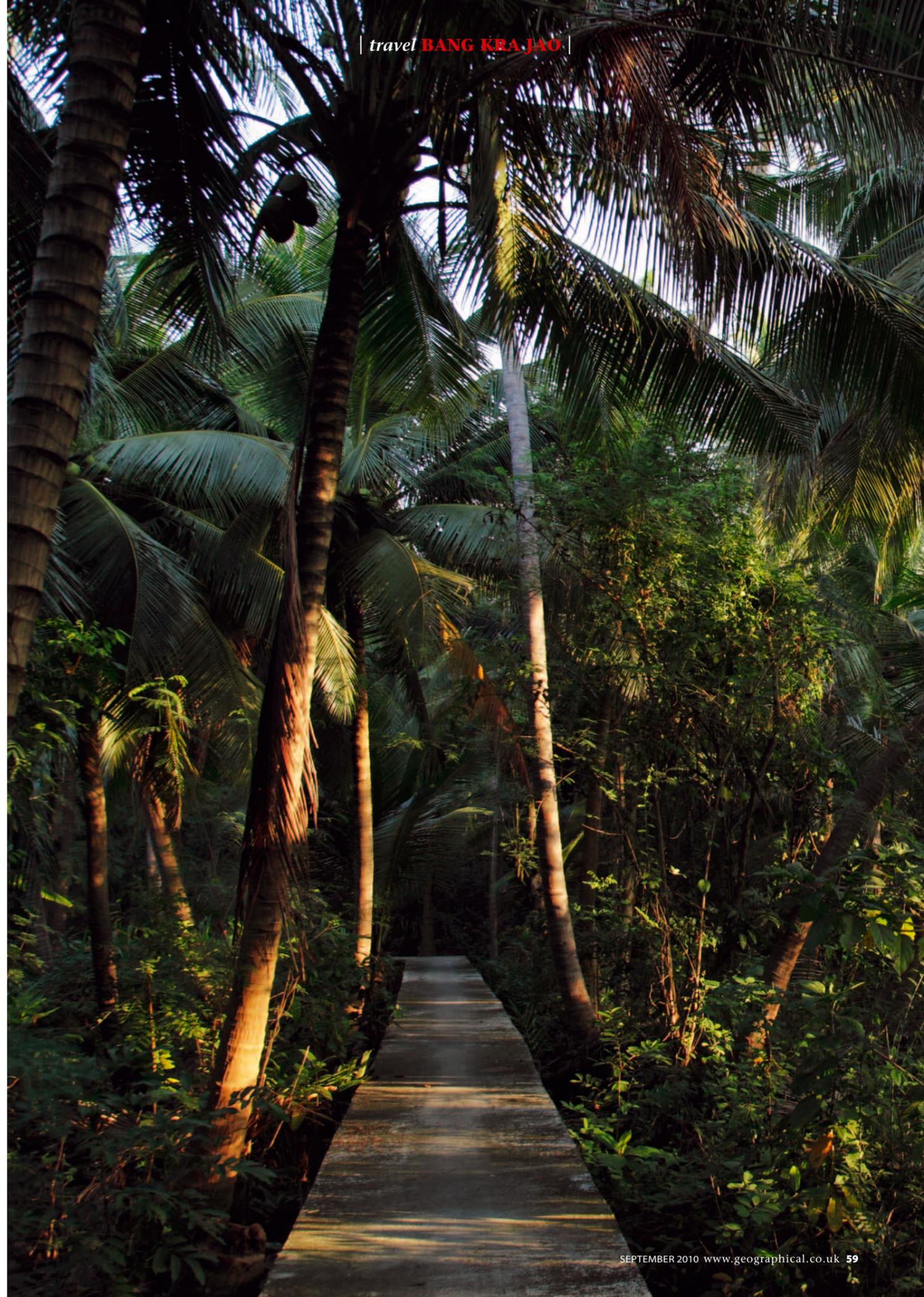
Steve Van Beek, a Thailand-based adventurer and author of numerous books about Asia's great rivers, recalls visiting the area during the 1970s, when Bang Kra Jao wasn't even marked on maps of Bangkok. 'At the time, it was truly a bucolic green lung,' he recalls fondly.

Back then, it was populated mainly by a scattering of Mon, one of

Thailand's many ethnic tribes. Most had journeyed to Bangkok generations previously in search of work. Speaking their own language, rather than Thai, and ill equipped for city life, they retreated to this peculiar backwater, which had been forsaken by Bangkok's other residents and was thus free of land claims.

Ironically, these would-be urban migrants returned to the only work they knew – farming. Soon Bang Kra Jao was a matrix of vegetable patches and small fruit plantations, nurtured by canals that funnelled water to terraces piled with rich river soil.

Those original farms largely survive, along with the Mon language, its distinctive curly script appearing on signs outside temples and on food stalls at the charming market that now serves the increasing number of day tourists. Otherwise, there are few concessions to the modern world. Step off a boat, and the contrast to Bangkok is complete. Gone are nearly all reminders of the big city so close by. You no longer see, hear or smell it.



SIMPLE LIFE

The transition is astonishing, cleansing. From the push and shove of Bangkok, one instantly slows to a blissful Bang Kra Jao crawl. The old wooden paths – which carried residents on bikes and supplies on push carts over the spongy terrain of the peninsula – have mostly given way to rain-resistant cement, and are now slightly wider to accommodate motorbikes. But you can still count the buildings with more than two storeys on one hand.

‘This is a green place, and we want it to stay green,’ says Phayal Noocknaka, 62, a retired local schoolmaster. Phayal describes how his family came here searching for land 200 years ago, settling on this stretch of mud in the river that nobody else wanted. Now the population has swelled into the tens of thousands, but he likens Bang Kra Jao to a big village, where everyone knows

riverbank that faces his waterfront terrace. There, the shore is lined with hotels and sky-high condominiums that boast million-dollar river views.

STRICT PROTECTION

Recently, the first small guesthouses have been allowed on Bang Kra Jao. Phayal himself plans to open two bungalows in a homestay he will call, most aptly, Next to Water. ‘But otherwise, the island is strictly protected,’ he says.

I hear the same story from residents and local guides. Thai environmentalists proudly boast about the stringent protections in place on Bang Kra Jao. Yet checks of public records reveal that barely ten per cent of Bang Kra Jao is actually Royal Forest Department parkland.

How this prime piece of land remained beyond the grasp of developers in one of Asia’s busiest and most booming cities is just another marvel of Bang Kra

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everyone else. ‘There are no police, no need,’ he says. ‘There’s hardly any crime. Everything here is simple.’

The area’s placenames, too, seem to have been culled from a fairytale. Phayal explains that the six *tambon* (districts) have names such as Water Lily, Fish Cage and Honey, but he’s less clear on the meaning of Bang Kra Jao. ‘It’s similar to a name for a bird that used to live here,’ he says, quickly adding that the name may also stem from a hairstyle women once wore. ‘During times of war, they would shelter here, and put up their hair like a man, in disguise. So that’s another possible meaning.’

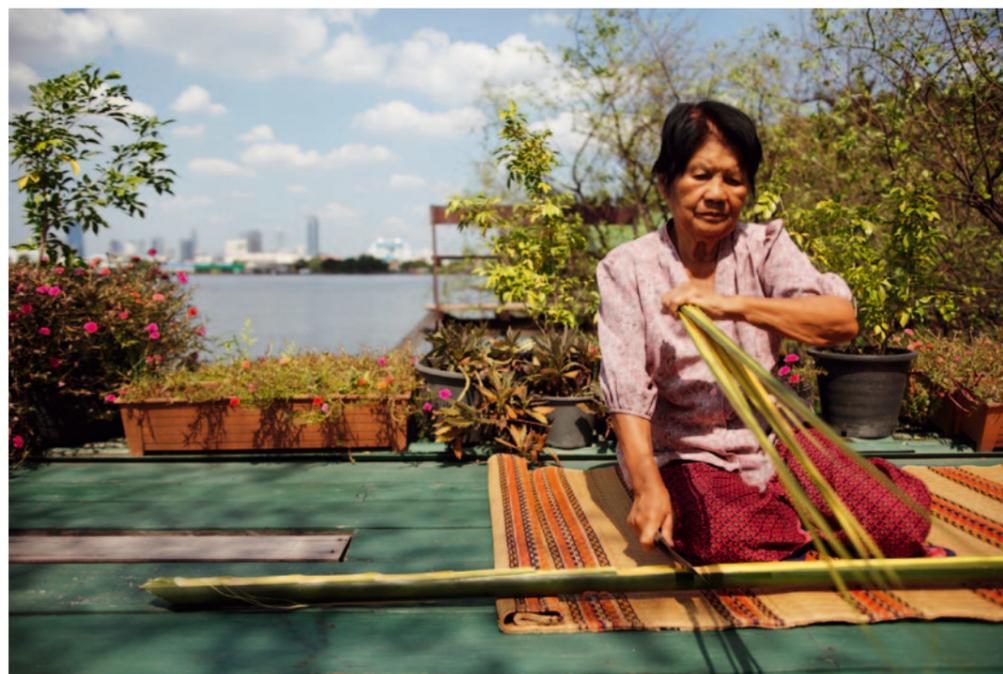
Such confusion is common to rural Thailand, but folk myths permeate practically every aspect of life on this enchanting wonderland, right down to its very existence. Phayal says regulations ban resorts and apartment buildings, in striking contrast to the

Jao. Such puzzles are quickly forgotten, however, along with city musings, when I join a bike tour to the Bangkok Jungle, as it’s billed by SpiceRoads, one of half a dozen outfits that regularly run bike trips to Bang Kra Jao.

Like many Thais, my guide goes by a quixotic nickname: Beer (I meet another guide called Apple). Odd choice, too, as he’s a clean-cut 26-year-old who works for the Thai Chamber of Commerce. But on weekends, he unloosens his tie and puts Bangkok behind him by cycling to Bang Kra Jao. ‘I just love to get away, into nature,’ he says, beaming.

He’s part of a rare group of Thais who have actually visited a retreat that *Time* magazine rated Asia’s best urban oasis. ‘Tourism really started about five years ago,’ says Struan Robertson, general manager of SpiceRoads, which has been running bike trips to Bang Kra Jao

PREVIOUS SPREAD: one of the raised concrete walkways that criss-cross Bang Kra Jao; **OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT:** the only motorised transport small enough to travel around Bang Kra Jao; **OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT:** Nakhorn Khawblum, 62, a telephone engineer, waters his vegetables; **OPPOSITE, CENTRE:** a local woman shaves a tree branch to make traditional cigarette papers; **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT:** Mana Phuatphong, 45, tends his small plot in Bang Kra Jao. He works in the Marriott Hotel in Bangkok but returns to Bang Kra Jao every weekend; **OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT:** a local plant-grower pushes his daughter in a trolley



since 2006. Tours now average about 150 cyclists a month. 'People love stepping instantly into the countryside.'

My fellow cyclists and I feel the same way, and biking from Bangkok to the ferry provides a powerful reminder of what makes Bang Kra Jao so special. Meeting at a Bangkok restaurant, our group pedals 20 minutes through bus fumes and blaring horns before arriving, with great relief, at a river dock. Along the river, several wooden docks offer ferry rides for the equivalent of 20 pence or less to Bang Kra Jao. Within minutes, Bangkok is behind us.

The dramatic contrast heightens the sense of escape, and our glee is repeated as we speed along elevated paths on the island, suddenly rounding a bend and seeing a crane or high-rise across the water through a gap in the canopy. No matter how often it happens, the process has the same feeling of serendipity. Submerged in greenery, we quickly forget that a city of ten million lies but a few kilometres away, until, bang – Bangkok re-emerges in all its chaotic bustle.

FLOATING MARKET

And it isn't just the scenery; the very pace of Bang Kra Jao is calming. Everything is peacefully slow, like in a provincial Thai town from long ago. Residents exude countryside friendliness. Waving from stools outside simple wooden homes, they often invite us to stop and share a snack of smoked squid, dried fruit or peanuts.

Why not? There really isn't much to do on Bang Kra Jao, although not doing much is a welcome treat on a break from one of the world's most congested cities. If you're desperate, you can explore the many temples located on the peninsula, or visit an incense factory that sells homemade soaps and rents a few rooms.

Visitors invariably wind up at the bustling floating market. The area's traditional market, where locals sold vegetables and household goods from a series of small boats, closed years ago, but it was replaced by a mass of stalls beside a canal, where tourists and Thais alike feast on a potpourri of local specialties, including dishes rarely seen these days in Bangkok; many are old Mon and other tribal treats. Next to a small picnic ground, children colour in sketches sold at an arts booth by Saraporn Methasatitsook. Four years ago, she



When to go

In Bangkok, the rainiest months are from May to October, when humidity is also high. During the rest of the year, temperatures hover around 32°C, but conditions are more comfortable and sunnier. Tourists tend to visit between November and March.

Getting there

Several airlines fly into Bangkok from the UK, with British Airways (www.ba.com), Thai Airways (www.thaiair.com) and Qantas (www.qantas.com.au) offering direct flights. Bang Kra Jao is a short boat journey across the Chao Phraya River from Bangkok.

Further information

Tourists from the UK don't require a visa to enter Thailand and can stay in the country for 30 days. For visits of up to 60 days, a tourist visa is required. For information on cycling through Bang Kra Jao, visit www.spiceroads.com.

migrated from Bangkok with her artist husband, who was born on Bang Kra Jao.

'The change has been so good for my spirits,' she says. 'It's so quiet and peaceful here. I only leave to visit my mother. In Bangkok, I just cannot take the traffic. Life here is so easy.'

She says that most tourists at the market are Thai, and their number is increasing. 'I'm afraid of prosperity. I worry that development will come to this place. Already we see the price of land going up.'

Such news usually cheers business-people, but not here in the green lung. 'We are already rich in peace and quiet.'

Bangkok's green lung keeps pumping

The survival of Bang Kra Jao is a quixotic tale with a decidedly Thai flavour. Bangkok decided to nurture its natural beauty with a plan modelled on Sentosa Island, which Singapore turned into a green getaway far removed from the congested city state.

The government budgeted about US\$80million in 1977, envisioning beach resorts and lucrative tourist facilities. Parks were mapped for protection, a flood wall was installed, and then the scheme stalled. Decades on, this largely forgotten oasis remains a treasured retreat for nature lovers and chilled-out locals.

'My first visit was on an organised cycling trip nearly ten years ago,' says Daniel Fraser, founder of Smiling Albino, a Bangkok company that specialises in adventure trips around Southeast Asia. He often guides guests such as TV stars and dignitaries to Bang Kra Jao. 'The reaction is always the same – amazement.' Foreign officials have enviously noted how lucky Bangkok is to have Bang Kra Jao.

The big question, however, is how much longer this 'green lung' can keep pumping. A new bridge connection to Bangkok foretells more traffic for what always felt like an island. 'I think, in part, it escaped development as much because of its isolation and the lack of interest in developing it as any governmental intervention,' says Steve Van Beek, Thailand-based author of several books about the region's rivers.

Only about a tenth of the nearly 2,000 hectares on Bang Kra Jao is protected, acquired in the 1990s for a park now run by the Royal Forest Department. The remainder is in private hands, but several visits by the princess pushed a campaign to keep the area green. Even without ruling power, the royals are revered in Thailand.

'We think the situation with Bang Kra Jao is safe,' says Chaiyod Bunyagidj, vice president of the Thailand Environment Institute, the country's largest environmental group. 'If you had talked to me ten years ago, I wouldn't have been so positive, but Thais these days are very interested in environmental protection.' The green lung, he insists, is in no danger of breathing its last. 

