



**Frontispiece:** Cultural Tourism Route of Thai Way of Life along Bangkok Canal.

# Cultural Tourism Route of Thai Way of Life along Bangkok Canal

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## Abstract

The term Bangkok Canal is used to refer to three adjoining canals which have been central to the lifestyles of Thai people associated with the river for hundreds of years. To understand something of the way of life of Thai people, tourists can experience these canals via a cultural tourism route. This research thus focused on developing an in-depth understanding of places related to Bangkok Canal, their significant values and how these should be interpreted for tourists. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to collect data from the area. In-depth data of historical, physical, economic and socio-cultural aspects were collected from secondary research and by direct observation.

The study confirms that the Bangkok Canal has the potential to be an important cultural tourism route because it comprises high value cultural attributes such as temples, communities, houses and floating markets. These key elements represent the way of life of people from the past to the present. In order to develop the Bangkok Canal into a cultural tourism route, all of these key characteristics must be preserved.

The author recommends several tourism routes and activities including proposals for a boat tour, walking tour, bicycle tour and a combined tour, designed according to interpretation principles, to enable visitors to experience the attractions of the Bangkok Canal waterfront area and to enjoy their visit.

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**Key words:** *cultural tourism, cultural tourism route, Bangkok Canal*

## Introduction

Rivers, canals and waterways have an important place in traditional Thai culture. Inland waterways have played many roles in Thai life, from domestic consumption to agriculture, transportation for commuters and trades, and as strategic defence systems. Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, was established in 1782 on the banks of the Chao Phraya River for strategic reasons and Bangkokians have had a close association with the river ever since. After more than 200 years, the river is still part of the people's daily life. It is like the heart and soul of the Thai people of Bangkok. From a small river settlement to a capital city of the country, Bangkok was gradually shaped through a unique culture of river and canal settlement, which has been passed on from generation to generation. The people of Bangkok express their culture both directly and indirectly through everyday living along the Chao Phraya River and the web of many natural and man-made canals of Bangkok, with the city once earning itself the name of 'the Venice of the East' (Fine Arts Department, 1991). Sections of the Chao Phraya have undergone many modifications through man-made canals from the Ayutthaya period created to bypass meanders or to shorten travelling time.

The present research focuses on the life along three canals:

- a. Bangkok Noi canal located in Bangkok Noi district, Bangkok
- b. Chak Phra canal located in Taling Chan district, Bangkok
- c. Bangkok Yai canal located in Bangkok Yai district, Bangkok

Bangkok Noi, Chak Phra and Bangkok Yai canals all have cultural significance particularly in terms of historical value, as they were the focus of some of the early settlements in Bangkok and have long been associated in local ways of life. Bangkok Canal refers here to a study area which covers Bangkok Noi, Chak Phra and Bangkok Yai canals. The area starts at the mouth of Bangkok Noi canal and finishes at the end of Bangkok Yai canal, with total length of 14.8 kilometres in three different administration districts, as noted above.

The author conducted a study of the waterfront areas along both banks of the canal including an inland area of 23 square kilometres surrounded by the Bangkok Canal.

## Study Objectives

The study focussed on four objectives:

1. To research key cultural values, features or characteristics and traditions of Thai people living on the banks of Bangkok Canal.
2. To identify the value of ancient architecture on the canal bank needing to be retained and interpreted.
3. To develop a model for cultural tourism routes to explain the way of life of times past that is bound with rivers and canals, with the aim of providing a tourism program based on a cultural tourism route.
4. To recommend a cultural tourism route in balance with the community and their continuing cultural values.

## The significance of the Bangkok Canal

### *Values deriving from the history*

The area was examined according to guidelines provided in the Burra Charter, which describes the meaning of historical value of a place has influenced, or has been influenced by, an historic figure, event, phase or activity. It may, for example, have historical value as the site of an important event (The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance 1999, p.12). Bangkok Canal plays an important part in Thai history, with evidence that can be traced back to the reign of King Chaiyarakajadhiraj of Ayutthaya. The king ordered a new canal to be cut and changed the course of the Chao Phraya River, when the former parts of the river became a canal and the new short-cut canal (Klong Lat) was widened to become the new reach of the Chao Phraya River (Baker and Pasuk, 2005; King, 2011: 2-4).

Klong Lat still plays an important role in the local community: where natural canals failed to respond to the needs of commerce and trade because their naturally meandering nature caused delays to boat trips, man-made canals were built to solve such problems. After completion, Klong Lat played an important role in Bangkok in terms of transportation, economy and society.

### *Evidence of community evolution*

The Klong Lat construction led to the expansion of the local community. The area near Wat Arun was then surrounded by river and canals and became an island. Settlement along the riverbanks and canal sides expanded and people adapted to live with water. People of the Bangkok Canal developed their own version of waterfront community culture, society and way of life, which were passed down to the present generation. Unique identities found along Bangkok Canal include housing along Bangkok Canal, the Royal Barges museum, local wisdom, the stone-polished bowl culture of Ban Bu community, traditional mattresses of Bangkok Noi Muslim community, fine craft of Ban Chang Lor community, bael fruit in syrup of Trok Matoom community and shredded rice grain of Trok Kao Mao community. These cultures and wisdoms are worth preserving.

### *Aesthetic values of the Bangkok Canal environment*

Water is associated with Thai people's lives. Villages were usually established along banks of canals and often named with the word 'bang' which means village or house built along the waterway, for example 'Bangkok Noi', 'Bangkok Yai'. As the people of Bangkok Canal have lived in harmony with water from the past to the present, water has blended into their everyday life. Therefore they are sometimes referred to as 'people of water' (Jeerapong et al., 2009: 6; also see Terdsak, 1998; 2003). Along both banks of the Bangkok Canal, the distinctive scenery of Thai houses and the Thai way of living reflect its aesthetic value to the eyes of visitors. The people of Bangkok Canal rely on the water for transportation and commerce, and also appreciate its aesthetic qualities.

At present, the Bangkok Canal not only serves locals as a transport route and drainage system but it is also becoming an increasingly important tourist attraction (Dovey and King, 2012). Many temples, mosques and houses built on the banks of the canal, together with everyday activities of the people, reflect Thai ways of living. Visitors can see children playing in canal water at dusk, locals sitting at the house terraces enjoying evening breezes, and farmers paddling their wooden boats loaded with agricultural produce for sale. Many traditional Thai houses have been built along the canals and can be seen today. Art lovers can enjoy the beauty of mural painting and the architecture at ancient temples dating back to the Ayutthaya period. Museums, ancient communities and the floating market, as well as local festivals, are all at Bangkok Canal, attracting both Thai and foreign visitors to appreciate the atmosphere and waterfront culture.

Bangkok Canal still maintains its aesthetic value, which can be found in different types of Thai house along the canal. Materials used for house building vary from wood, pinewood to concrete; the architecture and design of houses maintain usability with facility to respond to the people's waterfront lifestyle.

### *Social values in the community*

The people of Bangkok Canal evolved a water-related culture with the temple as a centre of the community and playing an important role in education, religion and the survival of traditions. Water was used not only for domestic consumption but also for transportation, communication and religious ceremonies. One important ceremony is the Chak Phra ceremony held annually in Bangkok Noi canal on the 2<sup>nd</sup> waning moon day in the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month. Chak Phra means towing a Buddha image. Apart from Buddha images, sometimes Buddha relics were enshrined in a throne and hauled along the canals. The Chak Phra ceremony is a temple fair and other activities such as boat racing and flower boat parades are also held in the same period. It is clear that the temple is a centre of the community in every Buddhist settlement in Thailand.

In recent times communities along the Bangkok Canal have changed. Agricultural areas have become residential and commercial. Roads have been built to provide access to the area and better transportation is provided. However, the old style of living never dies, and the atmosphere of the past can still be traced in some areas such as in the small lanes behind major roads (Cuttaleeya, 2005; Cuttaleeya and King, 2007). New road systems have boosted land prices; agricultural land has been sold and converted to residential housing, commercial buildings, hotels and accommodation. The change of economy and society has affected the occupations of the locals. From farmers, many people have turned themselves to traders, office employees or public servants.

## **Research Methodology**

Data on history, physical setting, economy and socio-culture of the waterfront area were collected from both primary and secondary sources, as well as from direct observations. Data collected were compared with the principles of cultural tourism routes to test the potential of promoting the Bangkok Canal as a sustainable cultural tourism route. Government agencies and local people in waterfront communities were interviewed to find out their views.

In order to obtain opinions from both Thai and foreign tourists, questionnaires were used as a data-collecting tool. Three hundred tourists who visited the Bangkok Canal area by land and by boat during October until December 2012 were asked to complete questionnaires. The questionnaire format was devised to explore expectations as well as the types of activities tourists wish to see on a culture tourism route. At the end of the analysis, the results and information collected from research were used to address the study's objectives.

## **Recommendation of a Cultural Tourism Route for the Bangkok Canal**

After data were collected from primary and secondary research, and site visits and direct observations were analysed and studied, key characteristics or key values of Bangkok Canal were identified. The values are reflected through the local peoples' simple water-based way of life, the use of the waterway for transportation,

boats for travelling and commerce, water for daily domestic consumption, also the attractive ancient houses and buildings and the beautiful ancient temples.

The five reasons that tourists reported for visiting Bangkok Canal were (1) to see the ‘Venice of the East’, (2) to profit from easy access from nearby attractions such as the Grand Palace, (3) to learn about and study historical canals, (4) to enjoy the charms of the water way of life along the canal, and (5) to experience a unique water way of life that cannot be seen anywhere else.

The findings from the research were then used in the design of cultural tourism routes in the Bangkok Canal area in order to respond to the needs of potential tourists and, at the same time, to contribute back to local communities.

The results of these studies indicate trends in tourist attractions that can be linked to develop tourism routes with the key characteristics of the Bangkok Canal. The author has designed a range of different tour routes that offer different activities and different attractions and that involve travelling by different means, as follows.

## 1. Boat Tour

**Route 1: Cruise Bangkok Canal – The way of life that never sleeps. Major attractions include Ta Chang pier – museum of Royal Barges – waterfront houses – Suwannaram temple – Taling Chan floating market – the Artist’s house.**

The boat will travel one way but the start and stop location is at Ta Chang pier. Ta Chang was selected as a start/stop location because it is just next to the Grand Palace, a main attraction that almost all tourists visit and it is easy for tourists to extend their tour to the Bangkok Canal. The boat would be used for slow travel to allow tourists to absorb the charm and beauty of Bangkok Canal.

The key characteristics, or key values, of the Bangkok Canal that tourists can see along this route are the attractive scenery, the bond between locals and the water showing why the area was once called ‘Venice of the East’, and the beauty of ancient temples with their mural paintings reflecting everyday life of people in the period when the temples were built. Tourists will also visit a popular museum and important markets. Different styles of house can also be viewed from the boat. This route combines many important landmarks and highlights the distinctive way of life of the Bangkok Canal.

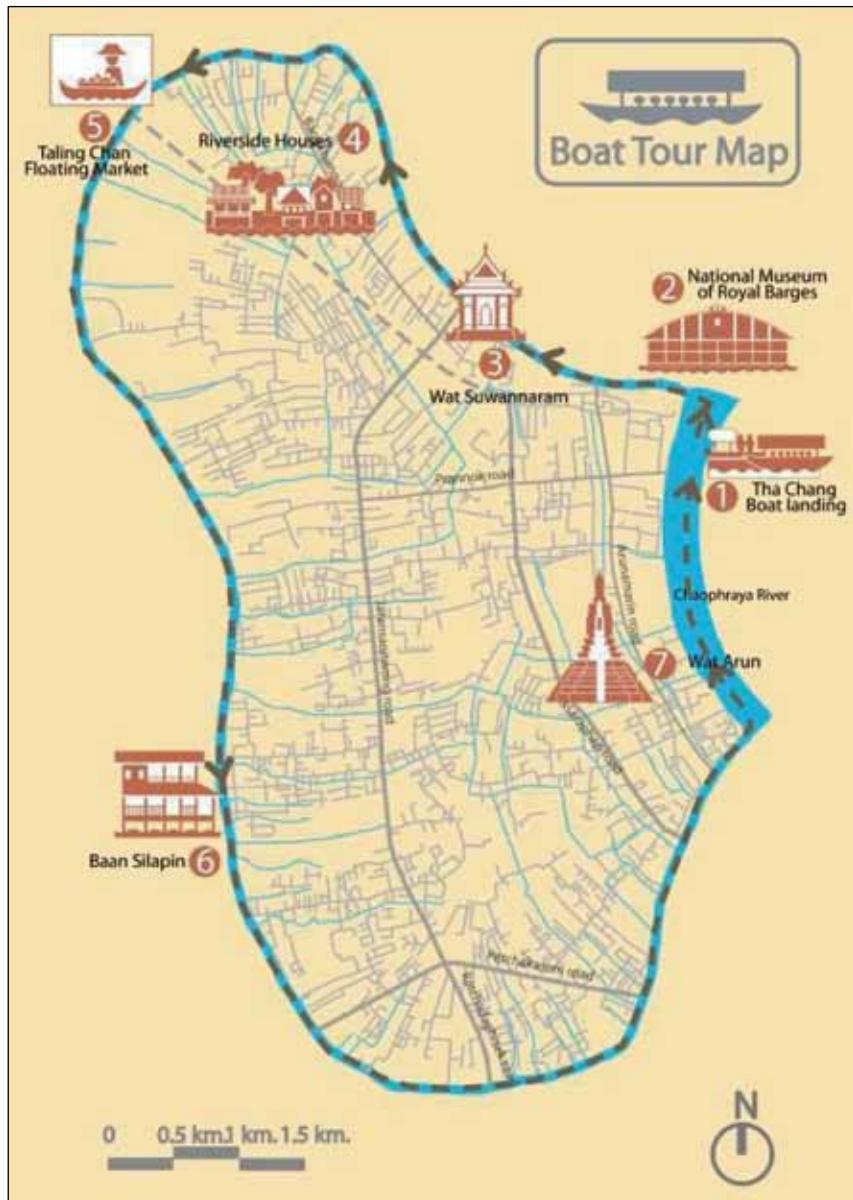


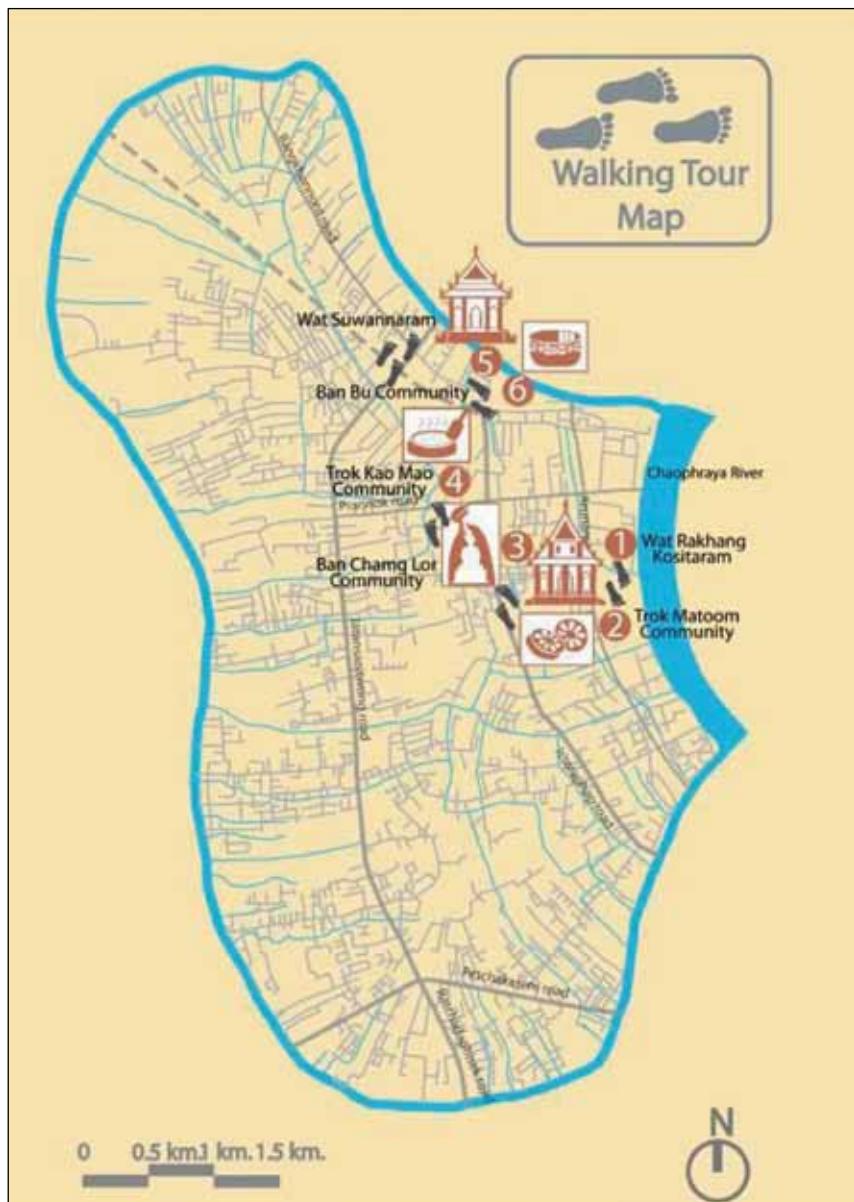
Figure 1: Map of Boat Tour Route

## 2. Walking Tour

**Route 1:** The real Bangkok Canal way of life as seen by foot. Major attractions on this route include Rakang temple – Ma Toom lane – Kao Mao lane – Chang Lor community – Suwannaram temple – Ban Bu community.

This program is designed as a one-way route with stop and start points at different locations. The route passes many attractions scattered throughout the Bangkok Canal area.

Key characteristics or key values of Bangkok Canal which tourists can see and experience along this route are the way of life of people living on the canal banks. They will also learn about local crafts, the history of temples and the characteristics of the ancient community.



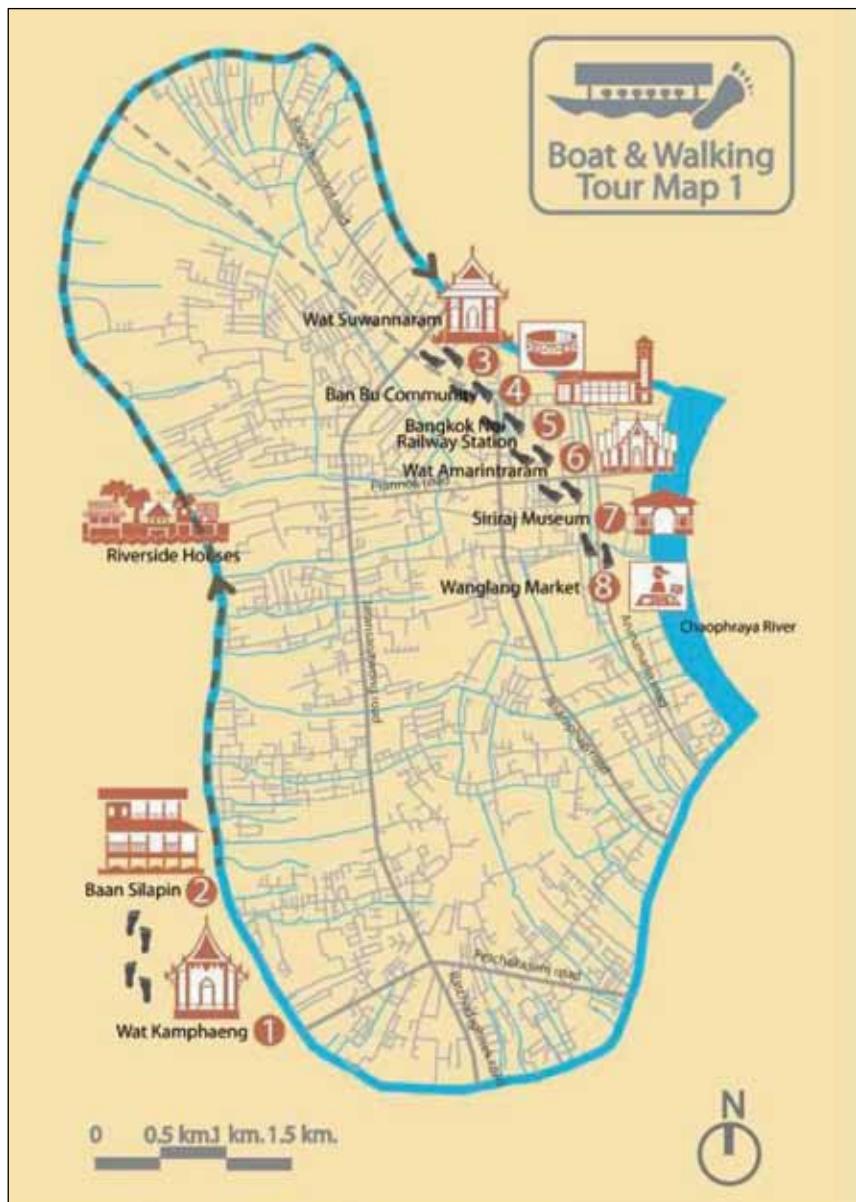
**Figure 2: Map of Walking Tour**

### 3. Combined boat and walking tour

**Route 1:** Experience authentic life of Bangkok Canal's people and their daily activities. Major attractions on this route include Kampaeng temple – the Artist's house – waterfront houses – Suwannaram temple – Ban Bu community – Bangkok Noi train station – Sirirat museum – Wang Lang market.

This program is designed as a one-way route with stop and start points at different locations. The route passes many attractions throughout the Bangkok Canal area and is undertaken by boat and on foot.

On this tour, tourists can experience the local scenery, the bond between locals and water in the area, and the ancient temples with beautiful mural paintings reflecting everyday life of the period when the temples were built. In addition, they will observe the local community to closely experience the way of life of people living on the canal banks. Tourists will also visit a popular museum and important markets. Different styles of house can be viewed from the boat. This route combines many important landmarks and the way of life of Bangkok Canal.



**Figure 3:** Experiencing authentic lives of Bangkok Canal's people and their daily activities.

**Route 2:** *Experience authentic life of Bangkok Canal's people and their daily activities. Major attractions on this route include Wat Arun – Wichaiprasit fort – Moli temple – Hongse temple – the Artist's house – Kampaeng temple – Suwannaram temple – Ban Bu community – Ta Chang pier.*

This program is again designed as a one-way route with different stop and start points. The route covers a diversity of attractions and, like Route 1 above, is undertaken by boat and on foot.

The key characteristics of the Bangkok Canal that tourists can see along this route are the scenery, the bond between locals and water, and the ancient temples with their mural paintings reflecting everyday life of the period when the temples were built. Tourists will also visit a museum and important markets. Different styles of house can be viewed from the boat. In addition, they will observe the local community more closely by walking. They will also learn about local crafts, the history of the temples and the ancient community.



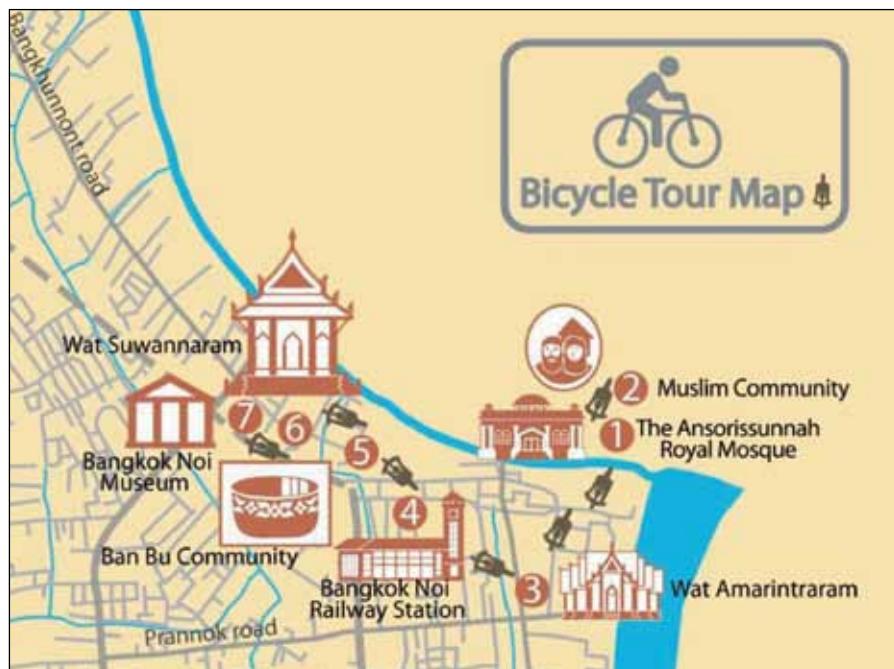
Figure 4: An alternative boat and walking tour.

#### 4. Bicycle tour

**Route 1:** *The real Bangkok Canal way of life by bike. Attractions include the Ansolissunnah Royal Mosque – Bangkok Noi Administration Office – Amarintaram temple – Bangkok Noi train station – Ban Bu community – Suwannaram temple – Bangkok Noi museum.*

This program is designed as a one-way route, again with different stop and start points, covering a diversity of elements and undertaken by bike.

Tourists will enjoy aspects of the Bangkok Canal along this route including its scenery, the bond between locals, ancient temples with their mural paintings from the period. They will have a chance to closely experience the way of people living on the canal side by bike, to listen to the history of the community and also to learn about local crafts and buy local products. This route combines many important landmarks and the way of life of Bangkok Canal.



**Figure 5:** *The real Bangkok Canal way of life by bike*

## **Proposal for the development of sustainable cultural tourism routes**

The task, in the development of the tourism routes outlined above, is to achieve a program that is in balance with the community and their cultural values. Three aspects are key to this task, as follows.

### ***1. Area development to support tourism***

#### *a. Meaningful signs at attractions*

Meaningful signs should be put up at major locations, tourist attractions and along the walking path in the Bangkok Canal area. These should be positioned where tourists can see them clearly and easily. The design of the sign should be unique but blend in with local environment. The signs should provide accurate and clear information on the attractions, both in Thai and English. Such signs will help independent tourists to gain accurate information about the attractions.

#### *b. Information centre for tourists*

An information centre should be set up in a prime location with easy access. One good choice could be at the Ta Chang pier where many tourists visit every day. This information centre should be unique and of an eye catching design, but should not stand out too much in the overall environment. The author has found that currently there is no such information centre specially set up for promoting cultural tourism routes. Tourists arriving at the pier do not have enough information to help them make decisions to visit the Bangkok Canal area. Only a few private tour operators have brochures with information on the area.

Therefore the author proposes that related government agencies set up this information centre to provide appropriate, accurate and reliable information on the cultural tourism routes to tourists. English-speaking staff should be assigned to work at this centre, because survey results show that the majority of visitors to Bangkok Canal are foreigners and English is the main foreign language spoken.

*c. Guidebook for tourists*

After making many site visits to the Bangkok Canal, the author noticed that there is no guidebook on the Bangkok Canal available. A guidebook should be produced with information on routes, major attractions, shops, how to get there and other details. At present, only a few district administration offices produce a guidebook and each office produces its own version with linkages to the nearby area. These are not accessible for tourists.

In addition, the guidebook should provide information on what tourists should and should not do, how to conduct themselves appropriately when visiting local communities or temples, also other aspects of social conduct such as women not touching Buddhist monks and that shoes should be taken off before entering temples, ordination halls or houses. The guidebooks should also include easy-to-follow maps, especially where the route is self-guided such as the walking route.

*d. Piers / landing points*

Safety at the piers should be improved. The exact number of passengers allowed to stand on the piers should be clearly stated, and the pier must be strong enough to support the weight. Life vests must be available, and other life-saving equipment must be installed to prevent loss of life if an accident occurs. Entrance and exit signs should be put up clearly to prevent confusion. The pier area must be kept clean at all times. At present, more and more tourists take the public boat resulting in more garbage being brought to the pier area. Cleaning must receive more attention and enough trash bins should be available to prevent people from dropping garbage into the river or canal. This would help to maintain the beauty of both river and the Bangkok Canal and the quality of water for the sake of visitors and locals alike.

*e. Tourist boat*

While the long-tail boats may be an essential aspect of Bangkok Canal culture, tourist boats should meet safety standards for the safety of tourists and provide a better service. Engine and boat conditions should be checked before every schedule; the boat must be safe with life vests available for all passengers.

*f. Public toilet*

There are not enough public toilets for the number of visitors. More public toilets should be built at the pier area and at tourist attractions. Public toilets should be designed to blend in with the surrounding sites and toilets must be kept clean. There should not be an unpleasant smell from toilets.

*g. Garbage collection*

Each district administration office has a good garbage collection system. Boats are used to collect garbage floating in the river and canals. What is lacking is a sufficient number of trash bins for households along the canal banks. Enough bins should be provided to prevent dropping of garbage into the water with resulting damage to the waterscape of the Bangkok Canal. Garbage management should be handled well, and trash bins can be designed with an attractive shape. More bins should be placed at the pier, at temples and throughout the community.

## ***2. Involvement of local communities***

### *a. Promote and encourage local communities to take part in all events*

Local people are the owners of the area and they will be directly affected if the area is promoted as a tourist attraction. Therefore, they must be involved in all activities from initial meeting, feasibility survey planning, to management of the tourist attractions. If they are brought in and understand the entire concept, it is easier to raise awareness and they will be the ones to protect the attractions and receive benefit.

### *b. Locals in sharing of information on ancient places and attractions*

Since local people live in the area, they are the ones who know a lot about their own places. Some history and knowledge may be written in books, but most is verbally passed on among locals. Local people should take part in the project as the gurus or information sources. Once information is gathered, it should be kept in written forms to prevent the loss of knowledge. This information will be of benefit to the development of the cultural tourism route.

### *c. Locals should be involved in maintaining the cleanliness of attractions*

Locals should be made aware of the importance of cleanliness and be encouraged to keep the area clean. Both community and canals must be kept clean; garbage and wastewater must not be released into the canal. Here the task is to be seen as one of changing community culture and behaviour.

## **2. Knowledge transfer to locals**

### *a. Training on tourist services*

Local people want to get training on how to provide services in order to be prepared if the Bangkok Canal is promoted as a cultural tourism route. Training on how to communicate with tourists, how to greet them and how to prevent accidents is requested.

### *b. Local guide training*

Survey results show that foreign tourists want local guides as their tour leaders and information providers. Therefore, training for local guides is necessary. In addition, local guides will develop awareness on how to protect the heritage of the community and so can be a good source of information in maintaining the cultural tourism route.

### *c. Raise the sense of a good host*

The appropriate government agency should organise training to raise awareness among locals in order to educate them about tourism and the related supply chain. Once understood, locals could be a source of information for tourists and exchange or share knowledge with them. This could help reduce complaints, especially regarding cheating. Friendly hosts will bring back visitors to their area and to Thailand as a whole.

### *d. Career training*

Local people want the government agency to give them training on how to improve their career prospects or to find a new career. If the Bangkok Canal is promoted, more tourists will arrive; then, if locals are equipped with knowledge, they will find opportunities to create additional jobs such as making traditional Thai sweets or souvenirs to sell to tourists. Local people can have additional income for a better life.

#### *e. Learning centre for the community*

Each community should have a learning centre to serve as a learning place for locals and as an archive of local knowledge. Local knowledge and wisdom can be shared and exchanged through such a place. New knowledge can be brought back for people to apply in their community. The government agency and local communities should work together to make such centres happen.

### **Conclusion**

The clear finding from the study of a potential cultural tourism route along the Bangkok Canal is that the Bangkok Canal area has the potential to be a cultural tourism route.

The area possesses important places and is valuable in terms of its cultural assets – for example temples, varied and ancient communities, attractive houses and floating markets. These line the Bangkok canal and present ways of life of people from the past to the present. The design of a cultural tourism route for the Bangkok Canal must respond to the needs of tourists and also meet the needs of local communities. The area must be ready to take tourists with high standards; local communities must be involved with all tourism activities; and stakeholders, including the government agencies and local people, must have involvement. Furthermore, the cultural tourism route must offer relevant activities and include attractions that reflect the way of life of the waterfront community people. The route must help to promote local knowledge and entertain visitors, and also must contribute benefits back to the local communities in order to boost the pride of local people, create a sense of a ‘good host’ and, eventually, the local people will protect their heritage and conserve their way of traditional living.

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