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James Dobyns/Photo Associates of Rochester



# THAILAND'S WATERY WORLD

by Jack Goldfarb



Between pagoda-towered banks the sampans, skiffs, and long-tailed taxi-boats traverse Thailand's waterways, as they have done for centuries, carrying people and goods. Thailand (once known as Siam) has been called "the Venice of the Orient" because her rivers and canals serve not only as places for the people to bathe and to wash their clothes and dishes but also as the main arteries of transportation.

A trip on one of the waterways is a sensual experience, especially for a "farang" (foreigner). You pass banks of fragrant blossoming lotus and water lilies. Rice fields flank several of the shores, and you can watch water buffaloes at work or at times see elephants dragging logs down to the water to be loaded onto barges.

Along the sides of the Chao Phraya River where it passes through Bangkok ("City of Angels") you glimpse people sitting at pavilion tables to sip and stare. And here and there you catch a glint of a gold-covered temple roof.

Once a year the King of Thailand journeys down this ancient river in his glittering royal barge en route to the Temple of Dawn to present new robes to the Buddhist monks. As His Majesty sails by, thousands of Thais along the river and adjoining canals bow and look reverently down.

Everyday of the year hosts of foreigners sail along the same murky waters and hardly anyone on the banks looks up. Not that the Thais are unfriendly. But the mass of sight-seeing traffic jamming the rivers and canals nowadays — hell-bent on getting to the Floating Market, Thailand's number one tourist attraction — is enough to make the normally amiable river dwellers indifferent at best and understandably irritable at times.

Yet, to the farmers, fishermen, and merchants who haul their wares in frail boats through the winding waterways, and to Bangkok's half a hundred travel agents who handle the ceaseless tide of sightseers, the Floating Markets (for there are now more than one) are a vital means of livelihood.

The original Floating Market was a motley collection of goods-laden rivercraft, mostly navigated by straw-hatted women using long poles to propel their craft through the narrow canal (or "klong") between Bangkok and Thomburi.



This scene was filled with a babble of hawkers' cries, also a melee of colors to bedazzle the sight: heaps of golden, crimson, and purple tropical fruits; boatloads of pink and silver speckled fish; basketfuls of green and umber vegetables; and a profusion of orchids, gardenias, and hibiscus that would brighten up a rainbow. The smells of flowers, spices, and incense mingled with the smells of fish and also those odors so peculiar to canals in inhabited areas. The growing hordes of visitors, intent on soaking up "native atmosphere" and capturing the bustling scene on film, finally forced the marketers to hoist anchor and withdraw to a quieter haven near the Temple of the Banyan Tree. The tourists now are taken to their own floating emporium set up on a canalside pier with room to park the sight-seeing launches. Here they browse in neatly-arranged, though 'touristy' and high-priced, stalls. Then the launches take them back through the snarled canal traffic, past lithe coconut palms, spindly bamboos, gaudy flame trees, and thatched dwellings on stilts rising out of the dense underbrush at the water's edge — all part of the ever-fascinating panorama of Thailand's river life.