

# Bangkok Post

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THAILAND & BEYOND by boat

## River of Kings

*The Chao Phraya plays an important role in the life of an American writer*

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*The Sri Suphannahong royal barge.*

Wooden houses on stilts still line both sides of the river just as they did a century ago. Rising among these houses are golden temples with pointed, sloping roofs and carved nagas. Every few hundred metres, small, narrow khlongs (canals) empty into the river. The Chao Phraya throbs with river traffic, with everything from slender express boats to ferries carrying school children and workers, to hotel launches carrying guests. The Chao Phraya is one of Asia's great rivers.

Now, I am aboard a rice barge that has been converted into a luxury tour boat. For this trip I decided to read up more about the river and its history. There are plenty of good books available. Harold Stephens, who outfitted his schooner, *The Third Sea*, along the banks of the Chao Phraya wrote a very good book, *Chao Phraya: River of Kings*. It gives a lively description of the history and modern day life along the river.



*Monks arrive for morning alms by boat.*

There is another book, *Slithering South*, by Bangkok based writer Steve Van Beek, that many consider a Thailand travel classic. It is a narrative about his quest to paddle down the headwaters of the Chao Phraya River. He begins his journey in a teakwood boat on the Ping River.

There is one thing that strikes me as odd, and that is that Steve had already lived in Thailand for nearly 20 years before he made the journey. So, why did he do it?

I found the answer to my question in the introduction of *Slithering South*:

"In recent years, my writing and my life had become routine, bland. I had become jaded. Asia had become so familiar that I no longer appreciated the miracles unfolding around me. It was at this point that my yearning for new experiences and my curiosity about the river collided. I resolved to travel the entire length of the river that flowed past my door."

Reading his book you quickly get the idea that his journey was much more than just an A to B voyage. It became a personal quest to blend in with the Thai society and the environment. With the help of

journalist, Mick Elmore, I met Steve Van Beek at his home/office in Bangkok near Phaya Thai and Phetchaburi roads.

His home was cluttered with stacks of 35mm slides, maps, and of course wall to wall with books. Steve sits crosslegged in a chair that is half broken and wearing a rumpled T-shirt. It does not take long to get him talking about one of his greatest passions - rivers, and the Chao Phraya specifically.



*The Chao Phraya River is a facilitator of trade and commerce...*



*The river and its slippery banks are happy playground for children.*



*and the chief source of water to irrigate farms lining its banks.*

An afternoon with Steve is like being with an absent minded professor. One minute you are floating down the Mekong River where trees have been bent over from the rivers current, and the next you are swimming with Irrawaddy dolphins. And before you know it you are trekking in Nepal or Death Valley or looking at photographs of this or that river.

This month, marks the 20th anniversary of his trip down the river and I asked him how things have changed.

"Roads now parallel the riverbanks and that dispels the tranquility I found 20 years ago. The headwaters areas of most rivers are perhaps the least touched."

How have you changed since your trip down the Ping/Chao Phraya?

"I have a better understanding of how rivers think. I have a greater understanding of the role of the river in nearly everything Thai. I understand the Thai relationship with the river. I have nothing but admiration for appropriate technology and villager genius in adapting their surroundings to their needs.

"I say that with two caveats: one, modern materials (PVC pipes), and technology (water pumps) threaten to upset the natural balance, and two, the sheer numbers of people plus the prevalence of large farming conglomerates threaten the watersheds and riverbanks, and add to the river's pollution."

"You are planning another trip down to see how the river has changed in the last 20 years. And what do you hope to find? I asked.

"Since this new trip relates to the 20th anniversary of the Slithering South trip, it will likely be along the roads that now rim much of the river.

"Because from what I have seen on brief trips since then is that so many dams have been built and so much water has been sucked out of it for irrigation purposes that the journey would take me at least half again the the time it took in 1988. There is a tendency to view natural resources as raw grist for industry, regardless of how it alters the environment."

"When you want to show a visitor or friend a part of the Chao Phraya, where do you take them? I ventured.

"I generally take them into the canals that branch off from the main river on the Thon Buri side. Nothing enhances intimacy with one's surroundings like a narrow waterway; broad rivers - where most of the tour boats operate - are like wide boulevards, seemingly endless and generally boring."

Back on the rice barge, the sun is beginning to set over the Chao Phraya. We continue to glide slowly onwards, soon coming to a halt, mooring at a quay in front of a temple.

Monks clad in saffron robes line the railing along the sea wall. Here we will spend the night. Lights from lamps along the banks cast their reflection upon the still water, and, and from a temple in the distance, I can hear monks chanting.

For more on Steve Van Beek and the Chao Phraya River, visit <http://www.stevevanbeek.com>.

#### **MoreINFO**

Why not try a custom tour of the Chao Phya? Contact Chao Phraya Express and ask them what they have to offer.

- Chao Phraya Express  
78/24 Maharaj Road, Phranakorn, Bangkok. Tel: 02-222-5330
  
- Mekhala Luxury Rice Barge  
Asian Oasis Tours, [www.asian-oasis.com](http://www.asian-oasis.com).

#### **RECOMMENDED READING:**

- 'Slithering South', Steve Van Beek.
- 'Thailand: Reflected In A River', Steve Van Beek.
- 'Chao Phraya \_ The River Of Angels', Harold Stephens.

[http://www.bangkokpost.com/170108\\_Horizons/17Jan2008\\_hori007.php](http://www.bangkokpost.com/170108_Horizons/17Jan2008_hori007.php)

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