

Of Simple Pleasures in Life

by Punam Mohandas

Lot Mayom is a floating market frequented primarily by the Thais and thus, it's off the usual beaten tourist track. In spite of having lived in Bangkok for so long, I'd never even heard of it, until recently when a Thai lady happened to comment disdainfully that Chatuchak was nothing compared to Taling Chan or Lot Mayom. Lot, who? I wondered briefly, and put it on the back burner of my already cluttered mind.

This weekend, a Dutch friend, Etje, and I decided to go to the Taling Chan market. Unfortunately (or rather, fortunately as it turned out) our cabbie was a wily one who, having nodded his head sagely several times in response to 'Taling Chan' then proceeded to dump us seemingly at the edge of nowhere. "Market two side," he said, pointing to either side of the road before roaming off.

Etje and I look at each other in dismay for about three seconds; however, we are determined to make the most of the day so we set off exploring and - that's how we found ourselves at Lot Mayom. This is purely a weekend market too although, to be accurate, it's more of a food orgy than a floating market! We walk into a large enclosed space that looks cramped simply because of the many tiny 'shops,' most of them set up on nothing more than a table! The stuff on display is mainly clothes, with some odds and ends like fridge

magnets, cooking utensils, fancy erasers and yes – reading glasses! At 69 baht a pair, they're a steal and I grab a couple of nifty ones while Etje grumbles and groans her way through choosing a pair as this is the first time she's bowing before vanity and acknowledging the need.

Outside and to the side of this, under make-shift shelters, is the fruit market. The prices are really low when you compare them to Bangkok; for instance, a kilo of guavas is at 20 baht, and I make a note-to-self to pick some before we head on back home. Judging from the jostling crowd, there's a lady here doing some brisk business selling cold coffee in a paper bag!

We walk on ahead and inside again. Gadzillions of little stalls – there's everything you can think of, from curries and satays to somtam, sticky toffee, jumbo shrimps, mussel omelette, even, a whole roasting pig. And it's only 10am! No matter, this is Thailand, where eating is a way of life. All this looking and salivating is hungry work so we pick up some lurid orange noodles, topped with bean sprouts, raw mango and prawn, for 40 baht. Seeing me struggle with the chopsticks, a neighbouring stall person selling juices and drinks very kindly comes to our table and offers me a clean fork and spoon. It must be what he uses for his own lunch and the simple kindness of the act overwhelms me.

Walking on, I see a Thai guy seated before a table for six on which rests a humungous feast of prawns, crab, lobster and fish. Eyes

popping, I ask him – “Are you gonna eat all of that?” “I’m supposed to!” he smilingly replies. Meet Life, from Channel Five, and thus it comes about that we get our nano-second spot of starry fame on Thai television, as he invites us to smile prettily into the camera and go “Bangkok chuaarn chhim” in unison with a thumbs-up signal. Sadly, his crew needs to click that spread with him alone, so we’re not invited to tuck in.

All that seafood has brought an unholy gleam into my eye. I stop to look at an array of slowly grilling fish stuffed with Thai herbs. “I don’t think we should eat river fish,” says Etje nervously. “What fish is it?” she asks the seller, who smilingly replies, “snake fish.” Eeeeps!! There’s no way I’m gonna eat that now even if it fell from the skies! We walk to another stall that has some plump fish which the woman assures us is from the sea. Now Etje worries about the oil spill on Samet. At this rate, we’ll never get to EAT! Fortunately, I manage to overcome her and we settle down to our own mini repast of freshly grilled fish with cucumber, lettuce and a spicy, green chilli chutney, all for 200 baht; “plate flee” (free) says the seller, like that makes a huge difference to our buying the fish. It’s like a picnic – can you imagine us seated out in the sun on wooden benches, with a floor fan blowing some warm air on us languidly.

It’s about 11.30am now and there is no end in sight to all the eating. I must have seen only about a dozen shoppers at the little stalls outside whilst here in the food area, people are packed in like

sardines in a can! The “pathways” are perilous little tracks where you either bump your shin on a protruding wooden stall or have your elbow in someone’s face as they’re eating, or, even worse, risk getting singed by the portable barbeques that have hundreds of fish, chicken and duck being slowly roasted on them! It’s also possible to buy food that’s prepared on the longtail boats by riverside vendors.

Ambling on, we come across some fresh peanut sticky toffee being made. It all looks frightfully tempting as we watch the gooey jaggery mix being stirred vigorously till it thickens; the seller holds out little nibbles for us to taste, it’s absolutely delicious and we both buy a packet each. Along the way, we pass some strange looking fruit which is shaped like large round spiky oranges on the outside, with deep blood-red segments inside. We are informed this is known as the “Dak” fruit, more colloquially called “fuk-kao” (rhymes with f***) I kinda like the sound of that! The taste is salty-sour and we end up buying some fuk-kao juice.

Before we settle down to another round of gluttony, we decide sternly that it’s time to do what we came here for and go about locating the “pier.” This being a rickety wooden ledge outside some more food shacks, we wait till a longtail boat pulls up. The price is 20baht each for the locals and 50 baht each for us farangs. The water is a murky, unhealthy green and we turn a bit green ourselves as we see hundreds of narrow long fishes thrashing about and

realise the implications of what we almost ate! Shuddering, we turn to our fuk-kao juice for solace.

Okay, the boat's full now and we're off. Wooden houses on stilts line one side of the klong and there are clearly some mini businesses that flourish here, for instance, one appears to be a laundry service. Further into the klong, all one can see are palm trees and lotus patches; it's all serene and serendipitous and we muse quietly that this is how river life must have been just about a hundred years ago.

Our boatman gives some rapid-fire commentary in Thai and pulls up outside another rickety wooden ledge. Everybody alights and we scramble out too; without benefit of translation, all we can do is keep someone from our group always in sight!

Turns out we're being encouraged to step out for a tour. Some of the local homes here have got together to welcome visitors to tour around their homes and see what old-style river living was like. There is no fee; mini stalls selling refreshments and kitsch souvenirs have been set up for those who want them. The houses have narrow winding paths leading from one to the other; it's utterly silent and we visitors speak in hushed voices too.

It's getting to be a bit touristy though, just wandering through strangers' houses; we've been at it for half an hour and, after about four of these, I'm getting noticeably cranky. An old Thai crone who

was on the boat with us and speaks a little pidgin English, starts fanning me with her hand fan and alternately offers me a bench to sit, cola to drink, or kitsch to buy. “I just wanna go back,” I moan to Etje. Fortunately, after another ten minutes of humid, sticky torture, our boatman decides it’s time to go. We jump into the longtail with alacrity and head on back.

We decide to do a last wander before we leave Lot Mayom. Etje gets one of those coffees in a paper bag that practically hurts her teeth; it’s so sweetened with condensed milk! There’s an “art zone” for restless kids to keep themselves occupied while the parents sigh in relief. We hang about a shack waiting for this woman whose sign outside proclaims she can get rid of our negative energy. Far as I can tell, this consists of telling me to sit quiet with my hands folded and look down till my neck aches, while she waves her arms around my head in sweeping gestures. A few minutes of this and she beams and asks – “how you feel?” Err, just the same as I did five minutes ago!

And with that, we decide to call it a day. We have been out since 8.30 this morning and never was a day better spent. The locals here are so friendly and welcoming; there is no pressure on you to buy anything, and they are happy to explain things to the ignorant farangs. It’s a way of life that’s so far removed now from the daily stress we all battle against and we decide to come back here soon

for a dose of healthy uncomplicated living where there's nothing more pressing on your mind than deciding what to eat next!

Lot Mayom can be partly accessed via the BTS; take the Silom line up till Pho Nimit. From here, if you're adventurous, hop into a songtaew or else get a taxi that will cost between 120-140 baht per trip. Make sure the taxi runs by the meter and that you mention Lot Mayom ahlaknaam (market.) It closes at about 5pm and is open Sat and Sun only.

A. Punam Mohandas is a widely-read journalist with 21-years of experience across India, Dubai and Bangkok and has been the Editor of several publications in these countries. Besides being an accredited travel writer, she writes professional film reviews for The Film Writers Association of India. She is the author of the book 'Fallen Angels' and is presently working on and researching material for her next books, both of which are centred around Thailand. She has been teaching English since 2012 and is presently a full-time lecturer at the Institute for English Language Education at Assumption University.
