



Produce: (right) a street hawker checks her goods. Another stall (inset) displays one-size-fits-all dentures.

Along for the ride: (below) negotiating the concrete paths through the "lungs of Bangkok".

A Thai HIGH

Rachael Oakes-Ash pedals off in search of authentic Bangkok

IT'S easy to get lost in the tourist traps of a big city. Bangkok is filled with temples, markets and other such places where you are guaranteed to meet other tourists but few locals. So it's refreshing to find a tour on which the only Westerners you meet are your fellow travellers.

I didn't think it was possible to find a part of Bangkok devoid of farangs (foreigners), but then I hadn't thought cycling and Bangkok went together either.

Michael Hoes is a Dutchman who, after his corporate contract in Thailand finished, had the choice of returning to the Netherlands or taking a different path.

He chose the latter and took over the running of Real Asia, a tour company dedicated to giving travellers an insight into the lives of locals in Bangkok. Of course, being Dutch, he wanted them to do it on bicycles.

It's Saturday — market day — but instead of going to the famous and overcrowded Chatuchak Markets, we head for the wet markets of Khlong Toey.

There are 15 of us, all on bikes, two local guides, and Michael.

We start in single file, negotiating the notoriously haphazard traffic of Sukhumvit Rd before entering the maze of back lanes.

The farther we go into these back lanes, the more a new Bangkok emerges, far removed from the world of guidebook tours.

Washing hangs from balconies, tarred surfaces give way to dust, money is bet on cockfights in makeshift rings, and an intricate community is revealed.

We've found the "real" Bangkok, where street hawkers sell their wares to locals. We're invited to try the grilled bananas, tapioca and sweet khamom treats on display.

Michael takes us to a back lot that looks like a dump. It's not — it's a communal area for the residents in a block of dilapidated apartments.

He says one of the residents owns a new Rolls Royce but chooses to continue living here.

Why? Because of the community spirit.

I can't help but wonder why he doesn't just sleep in his car.

The Thais have always been a loving, Buddhist people — open-hearted, wide-smiled and caring.

We enter the Khlong Toey, a bustling produce market selling fresh spices, herbs, fruit, seafood, meat and more.

We're the only foreigners. We push our bikes past flocks of live chickens on one side, roasted chick



Single file: in the back alleys.

ens on the other; fish still swimming in water, dried fish in baskets.

Nearby, a dentist works, moulding one-size-fits-all dentures.

It's exciting and authentic and we stop for a rest to eat the sweet-filled pancakes Michael has bought.

Then it's on to the Chao Phraya River, where we board a longboat for a 15-minute ride to Phra Pradaeng in Samut Prakan province.

This area of rich rainforest and townships untouched by development is known as the "lungs of Bangkok".

THE villages of Phra Pradaeng, Bang Nampheung and Bang Kra Jao are connected by raised concrete paths over open waters, swamps and forest.

Most of these paths lack handrails and, as we negotiate the turns on our bikes, we must ensure we keep cycling lest we topple into the water.

Inevitably, one of us does.

Soon we're at Bang Nampheung's floating market.

Thai families use the markets as a day out for the family on weekends.

It's a testimony to Thai flavours and cuisine, and we are offered samples of everything we see.

Michael demonstrates how to make miang kham, a blend of shrimp, coconut, ginger, chilli and spices wrapped in betel leaf.

Then it's on to lunch on the fringe of Bang Kra Jao Park, where we are served chilli rice with chicken and prawns in a restaurant set on stilts above the swampy water.

We finish the day back in the streets of central Bangkok — and back in the land of the tourist. Sigh.

Rachael Oakes-Ash travelled courtesy of Thai Airways and Real Asia

THE DEAL



➔ **Getting there:** Thai Airways International flies direct to Bangkok from Melbourne. Fares start from \$710 return plus taxes www.thaiairways.com.au or ph: 1300 651 960

➔ **Staying:** The Peninsula on the banks of the Chao Phraya River is an oasis of calm, the perfect break from the bustle of Bangkok. bangkok.peninsula.com

➔ **Cycling:** ABC Amazing Bangkok Cyclist Tour costs \$70 for a full-day tour on a weekend, \$55 on a weekday and \$35 for a half day. www.realasia.net

