

# HOW DID IT START?

A new book seeks out the origins of tourism in Thailand

STORY: SHON HO



It's hard to say who was the first tourist in Siam, because tourism as we know it didn't exist until a few centuries ago. Indian merchants sailed here in the 5th century, the Chinese came to trade and later to settle, and one of the earliest European travellers were the Portuguese, arriving in Ayutthaya in 1511. In 1680, Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim, a Persian, visited the land and recorded his impressions — "All around us were trees that never feel the withering touch of autumn" — while the first guidebook to the Kingdom was written by local resident J. Antonio in 1904. (Its most highly recommended activity is the shooting of birds and mammals.)

In the new book *Thailand Tourism: The Early Days*, history, nostalgia and the evolution of inbound travelling come together. The book tracks the development of Thai tourism through anecdotes, profiles and interviews, from its humble start to an industry that makes up 16% of the GDP and employs more than 6 million people.

The book was edited by Roy Howard, the original advertising manager of Thai Airways International. The writer is Steve Van Beek — lecturer, writer and journalist — who was based in Thailand for nearly 40 years. The book is published by Dusit Thani PLC.

"The book proposed to honour the early pioneers of tourism-development, before they and their memories are gone," said Van Beek.

A sturdy hardcover with glossy pages and plenty of images, *Thailand Tourism: The Early Days* documents the impact of some of Thailand's earliest visitors — a lasting influence of the Portuguese being the introduction of egg yolk *thong yod* dessert, for instance — and records the contributions of some of the industry's individual pioneers.

Among the figures who paved the way — or more aptly, in this case, capitalised on the waterways — was Khunying Supatra Singholaga, who, born in a floating house on the Chao Phya River, revolutionised ferry transport through express-boat services.

Thanpuying Chanut Piyaoui, the founder of Dusit Thani International, was one of the very few business women in Thailand in the 1950s, and built The Princess, one of the first luxury hotels in Bangkok. She later built the Dusit Thani hotel on Silom.

The book gives perspective to local history, and fills the holes in our understanding of several images we associate with Thailand today.

In prehistoric times, rhinoceroses wandering Phuket were said to have migrated over a land bridge from the mainland. Before the island developed into a tourist hot spot, it was only really known for being a tin-rich enclave, the centre of a burgeoning rubber industry and a prosperous site for pearls. In the 50s and 60s, it was hardly a desirable place to visit, despite its picturesque shores, because it was so inaccessible.

Phuket's isolation was eventually remedied by the construction of the Sarasin Bridge, connecting it to the mainland. From addressing the creation of infrastructure, the introduction of air travel, the promotion of Thailand to the outside



world and the state of the market today, the book explains the remarkable development of tourism in the country over the last half-century.

One effect of the book, inadvertent or not, is the contrast between the idyllic early days of travelling and the advent of the mass tourism industry, which nearly turned everything upside down.

Sometimes inviting others to appreciate culture goes hand in hand with inviting them to exploit it. The commercialisation of a culture may sit at odds with preserving its heritage, respecting it and refraining from manipulating it for the sake of profit.

"The challenge is to create a sustainable balance," Van Beek said. "The commodification of culture has been beneficial in preserving areas which might have otherwise have disappeared. The emphasis on sheer headcounts, however, has had a deleterious effect that shows no signs of abating and which threatens the future viability of tourism."

In saying this, the book is ultimately a celebration of the rise of Thailand as a destination of choice that reaches beyond the superficiality of beaches, parties and eternally sunny weather.

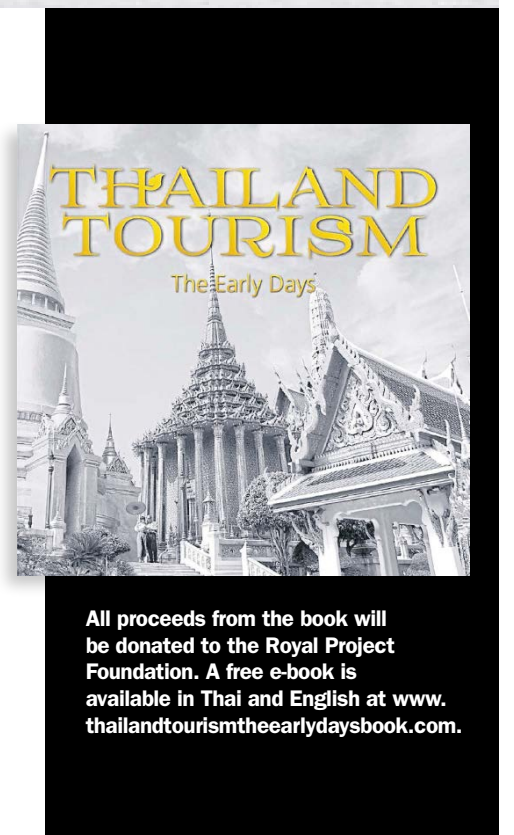
"Stereotypes linger, and there are operators who are only in it for the money and therefore feed tourist expectations unrealistically, or in ways that are contrary to Thai culture," he said.

"The trick is to keep it authentic. Programmes like homestays, hostels and courses in Thai arts (massage, Muay Thai, etc) are beneficial in creating connections between tourists and Thais. The challenge is to keep it authentic and ancillary so it doesn't disrupt the daily lives of most Thais."

As some of the full-sized pictures in the book remind us, the grand stories of the country's past are very much alive in the present, and Thailand's natural landscapes have always been a draw. Tropical white beaches are immortalised on postcards, deep green hills are ideal for hikes and 37.1% of the country is still covered in trees.

As for what is most striking about living and travelling in Thailand: "The short answer is: the immense diversity of scenery, cultures, and experiences," Van Beek said.

"For the traveller, [it is] the range of facilities and amenities, the sensory impressions and the people."



## Violence on the water

It's 8pm and the buildings along the banks of the Chao Phraya are brightly lit. The engine grumbles, the smell of petrol coats the air and The Ferry Gallery departs from Jam Factory Pier.

A woman is sitting in front of us wearing a white dress. She is holding a large block of ice. She stares into the distance, cradles the block closely against her body and runs her fingers along the edges. As she performs, there are videos playing on opposite screens of the boat.

Launched in 2014, The Ferry Gallery kills two birds with one stone. Based at Tha Tien, it operates as a public ferry and a gallery space, housing video art on the go. Its new show, "The Act Of Violence", initially curated for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women last November, presents three diverging

visual experiences.

One of the screens shows Tania Smith's *Domestic Gestures*. A woman walks up a dirt road in front of a wide green paddock, casually sweeping the dust with a broom. In another sequence, she sits thoughtfully on a hill, looks around quickly — although no one is watching — and throws her arms up, rolling down the slope on her side out of shot.

At the other end of the boat, Adel Abidin's *Ping Pong* is playing. Hollow taps echo through a dark concrete room as two men strike a ball. They are oblivious to the woman who is lying naked in the middle of the ping pong table under harsh white light. The woman inhales sharply as the ball slaps her flesh; her body is mottled with red marks.

Behind that screen is a video featuring

the same woman holding the ice on the boat — in this video, *Heart Melted*, we see Alisa Chunchue's half-turn towards us holding a block of ice in the middle of the ocean. Her live performance, a derivative of her video project, was exclusive to Galleries' Night last Friday.

The videos play on loop, and water drips down Alisa Chunchue's knees — the ice is melting onto the deck, becoming slightly translucent.

"I wanted to provide different perspectives to promote the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women," says Kawita Vatanajyankur, The Ferry Gallery's director.

"The artists are from different cultures, Tania is from Australia, Adel is from Iraq and Alisa is from Asia."

Although each piece is different in terms of mood — Smith's work is colourful and whimsical; Abidin's piece is jarring and impassive; Alisa Chunchue's performance and video is almost hypnotic and calming — there is something that unifies them.

"The pieces are about strength and about endurance," Kawita says. "I want women to understand that they can become stronger and that strength comes from within."

An installation artist and sculptor, Alisa has been fascinated with capturing the intangibility of water in art.

"I play with water because I feel like it is a part of me. Our bodies are 80% made up of water. Ice feels like part of my body — my organs. I just want to hold [the ice] until it melts, until it disappears," she says.

Pushing physical and mental limits for an hour during the performance, it seems incomprehensible how she was able to tolerate such raw coldness. For the artist,



Adel Abidin's *Ping Pong*.

her concept stemmed from a question she encountered after her grandmother's passing when she visited the morgue of a hospital.

"When I saw her body, her dead body, everything looked the same, but when I touched her, I was shocked, you cannot imagine how [it felt], like pork — hard. That moment questioned me. I wanted to know what happens in my mind if my body freezes like that. Today I saw nothing, I heard nothing. My mind was separate from my body. It was like meditation."

"I think performing on the ferry was easier than performing in the middle of the sea. [For the video project] when I began, the water was around my legs, and when I finished, it was up to my neck. It

made me so nervous!" she says.

When ice reverts into water on the ferry, there is symmetry in the thought of it slipping into the river. It is precisely the context of where the videos and performance coexist that makes the experience intriguing.

"[The ferry] is public transportation so we have a lot of passengers who do not expect to see art," Kawita says.

"We have monks, we have students, we have market sellers, we have kids who are not going to school. I think it's meaningful for people in the community to have a space for discussion. You don't get to go to museums everyday, but this is one way of incorporating art into daily life."

As we travel down the river, the staccato

clacks of the ping pong ball can be heard in the background. An obnoxious karaoke cover of Frank Sinatra's *Sway* blasts from the speakers of a passing cruise ship lined with flashing fairy lights.

A breeze can be felt, but the evening is hot and sticky.

Such is the experience of sitting on a boat in motion. The sights, the sounds and the movement of the river invade the insularity of a gallery space as you travel from point A to point B.

***Domestic Gestures* is on until March at The Ferry Gallery. *Ping Pong* and Alisa's work were curated only for the Galleries Night. The Ferry Gallery is boarding at Tha Tien.**



Alisa Chunchue performed live on the boat last Friday.

STORY AND PHOTOS: SHON HO