The four-cabin *Loy River Song* journeys from Bangkok to Ayutthaya on Thailand's Chao Phraya River.

Small Wonder

An intimate new river cruiser is an ode to Thailand's ancient treasures and natural beauty. *by Chris Schalkx*

THEY CAME LONG after sunset. I'd guess about fifty of them, in a snaking procession on the riverbank, their shaved heads mere silhouettes in the moonlight, their saffron robes illuminated as they passed by a glowing lantern. Seconds earlier, my fellow passengers and I had been chatting away, a little loudly perhaps, with cocktails in hand on the front deck of the ship. But as soon as we spotted the young monks, we all joined them in their silence until the last of them vanished into the darkness.

Their home was ours for the night. Well, sort of. We had moored in front of their college, a candy-colored village on a narrow peninsula on the Chao Phraya River. Two days earlier, we had left Bangkok on the *Loy River Song*, a new river cruiser by Loy Pela Voyages that sails between the Thai capital and the temple-strewn town of Ayutthaya.

With just four staterooms, the jewel box of a boat—a barge done up in teak, marble, and Thai silk in orange and royal purple—is ideal for intimate sailings and group buyouts. The outdoor deck is large enough for sunrise yoga sessions and traditional dance performances. In the airy salon, there's a dining table for eight and reading nooks for lazy afternoons. Below, the spacious cabins, each named after a

COURTESY LOY RIVER

Thai river, come with marble-clad bathrooms and butler call buttons.

The crew is just as elegant. Dressed in gold-silk jackets and traditional *sompot chong kben* trousers, they serve Thai tasting dinners (including one created by chef Thitid Tassanakajohn of Bangkok's Michelin-starred Le Du), as well as afternoon tea and sunset cocktails. Every day after breakfast, they'd hand us over to an expert guide, who'd whisk us by *tuk-tuk* or long-tail boat to little-visited temples and palaces. We explored Ayutthaya's canals, where we were the only visitors in the late afternoon. Other journeys included a visit to the ancient summer royal palace of Bang Pa-In and cycling excursions in "the green lung," a jungle-covered peninsula in Bangkok.

Even from the *Song*'s deck, the riverbank became a slideshow, and the late-night monk procession was just one of the many awe-inspiring scenes passing by. Over the course of three days, we saw the landscape change from clusters of gleaming skyscrapers to riverside shanties backed by golden temple spires. Bangkok's incessant buzz faded into a chorus of crickets and cicadas, its concrete sprawl into one of banyan trees and palms. At every bend—and there were many of them—we discovered a new vignette: fishermen casting their nets in the water, crocodile-sized monitor lizards lazing in the sun, wooden boats ferrying troops of schoolchildren. Life in front of us slowed down, lost its fuss. And with that (and a little help from the bottomless sparkling wine), so did we. *Two-night sailings from $6,870 per cabin; loypelavoyages.com.*

Take Me to the River

More ships sailing slow and steady, from the Amazon to the Nile.

A suite on Uniworld's SS *La Venezia*.

UNIWORLD
The cruise line known for its lavish Super Ships is heading into 2021 with a trio of new vessels that will be anything but cookie-cutter. First up will be the SS *Sphinx* on the Nile, followed by the SS *São Gabriel*, which will cruise Portugal's Douro River. Coming later this year, the 126-passenger SS *La Venezia* is sure to fit in with the palazzos and piazzas along the Venetian Lagoon and Po River, thanks to Fortuny fabrics, Murano glass, and hand-etched glass walls. *uniworld.com*

VIKING SAIGON
The mighty Mekong River will have a sleek new resident this summer when this 80-passenger vessel makes its debut with sailings between Kampong Cham, Cambodia, and Ho Chi Minh City. The *Saigon*'s all-white design sticks to Viking's signature Scandinavian aesthetic, but the itineraries—packed with ruins, temples, and traditional markets—offer an authentic immersion into Southeast Asian culture. *viking.com*

AMADAHLIA
AmaWaterways returns to the Nile in September after a ten-year hiatus with this 68-passenger ship with a sundeck bar, swimming pool, fitness room, spa, and two restaurants. Between trips to temples and pyramids, onboard entertainment includes *galabeya* (Egyptian gown) parties and dervish performances. *amawaterways.com*

AQUA NERA
Aqua Expeditions has redefined cruising on the Amazon with its stylish ships, world-class cuisine, and wildlife excursions—and now the company is improving its winning formula with this 20-suite vessel. In addition to a contemporary look by the Vietnamese studio Noor Design, the *Nera* offers visits to remote villages and markets and locally sourced cuisine from award-winning Peruvian chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino. *aquaexpeditions.com* — *Donna Heiderstadt*

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