



BIG BASA CATFISH IN BANGKOK.
THAT THE AUTHOR FAILED TO LAND.

Bangkok Dawn

Chasing mystery fish on the Chao Phraya. BY JUSTIN WITT

I SAW THEM the first morning as I stood choking down shitty hotel coffee and staring out our window from the 24th floor. Fish. Rising and rolling. Right below me in the canals. Holy shit. Dawn was breaking and the Adhan pouring out of the mosque seven blocks away seemed loud enough to wake the whole city.

I could see at least three miles of river spread across a grid of right angles to the east. The whole stretch of water looked like Islamorada under the Keys bridges during mid-migration of tarpon season, only without the battling toad-slingers and yelling skiff captains.

We certainly weren't in Bangkok looking for fish, that's for sure. Ostensibly, this was just a three-day layover on the way to some city in the North where my wife had signed up for a massage course. Regardless, what the hell were these fish? I had no clue, but they had to be big if I was seeing them from all the way up here. I've learned to always carry a bit of fly gear on these outings, even if it rarely gets unpacked.

By the time we got back from breakfast the canals—called khlongs—looked like turnpikes, full of people ripping them to shreds with their longtail outboards as they narrowly missed each other on the turns. All day, I Googled and asked around about the fish. The Internet made vague references to several carp-like species, some big bluegill-looking things, a species of native catfish called basa, and arapaima having been stocked from the Amazon. Seriously?

Out in the city seeing the sights, I took every opportunity to pause by the canals. The water looked like green ink, pock-marked with a diversity of plastic flotsam. No sign of the fish, though. I didn't tell my wife what I was looking for in the water,

but later that night she caught me sorting some gear and stringing my ten-weight before bed.

Sleep came only intermittently, a pre-fishing condition I've had since I was five and headed to the bream pond in the morning. An hour before dawn I was in the elevator, looking more than a little out of place. As I charged through the lobby, the concierge looked up at me, startled, then grinned. "Feesheeeeng?" I just nodded and ducked out the door. The city

was already alive as I threaded my way through blocks of motorcycles and rickshaws. Each canal had a narrow sidewalk on both sides. I'd picked one out from the balcony, but when I got to it, a battle of yowling street cats blocked my path.

The water was already alive, boiling with what had to be heavy bodies that remained just out of sight beneath the surface. The fish were everywhere just like the morning before, but even at close range I couldn't identify them. I made it to my chosen platform—three square meters of cement that must have been some sort of sewer drain protruding a few feet out into the canal.

Floating line on the eight-weight went first, with a medium streamer—the best bet I could make. Cast. Cast. Swirl. Splash. Gulp. Nothing. Some of the fish were so close I could have hit them with the rod, but I got only occasional glimpses of flesh. They weren't dinks, that's for sure. Change flies. Cast. Change again. Roll-casting to avoid hooking the locals standing behind me, staring. I tried everything I could think of, slowly working my way down in size like I always do, like I know I shouldn't, until finally I was throwing scuds. What the hell are these fish?? And what the hell are they eating??

Then it was time. Now or never. Out came the ten weight, connected to the big ancient Tibor with the drag cranked down as far as it would go, and the 450-grain sinker. Out came four feet of 80-pound Maxima. And out came eighteen inches of the biggest, baddest, most beautiful fly I'd ever tied—*God's Phallus*. (GP for short, especially if I'm showing him to someone else.) It takes balls just to tie the thing on. It's truly a preposterous fly, but damn does that thing swim.

There is no happy ending here. When I finally hooked a fish, the rod bucked like it was caught on a runaway longtail, throbbing twice so hard I could barely hold on. Then he was gone. The fish and my beloved GP—my buddy, my last hope. I will never know what happened. Bangkok's got him now.