

This article takes a light-hearted look at the potential perils of independent travel in Thailand. It follows one intrepid traveler's hair raising journey from gridlocked Bangkok to the southern 'sex resort' of Pattaya. Runs to 1415 words.

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Due South

Nothing really prepares you for the reality of Bangkok's infamous and ubiquitous traffic congestion. After the relative manicured tranquility of Singapore's thoroughfares, the chaos and cacophony of the Thai capital envelopes you in its muggy monoxide embrace as soon as you exit the terminal at Don Muang airport. The adjacent road throbs and throngs with jostling taxis and buses. Like metal sheep they swerve and surge as a besieged traffic policeman seeks to shepherd the relentless tide of disgorging vehicles with authoritative gestures and sharp shrieks of his whistle.

In this sultry 'City of Angels', nestled at the top of the vaguely triangular topography that forms the Gulf of Thailand, these choking roads have become an inadvertent tourist attraction – an experience one must enjoy or endure if one is to truly say one has 'done' Bangkok.

Even an expectantly brief trip to the local Seven Eleven store, mere yards from my downtown hotel, could become an unexpectedly lengthy excursion if you foolishly believe the traffic to stop to let you to cross – it won't. Down these torrid, narrow side streets, the gap between each pitiless vehicle is not much wider than a heartbeat and I soon learn it's wise to just say a little prayer on the curb and then run like the wind.

But it was not always thus. Once Bangkok was more canals than car parks. In 1782 King Rama the First proclaimed the establishment of a new capital along the Chao Phraya River and there arose from this previously quiet backwater a city whose commercial and defensive waterways so enchanted early intrepid travelers that they named this 'floating' conurbation the 'Venice of the East'. But by the middle of the 20th century most of the canal network had been filled in to make way for the internal combustion engine. Now the car is king.

But the car's conquest is not quite complete and some of these watery arteries still survive and serve as alternative highways. It was on one of these last remnants of a bygone age that I and my friend Thanachai choose to traverse the metropolis.

Be warned, as when crossing the road, if you board one of the river taxis, it doesn't pay to be either slow or hesitant. Once the driver has thrown the long, thin, wooden vessel up against the jetty, time is short. Like a floodgate, the protective plastic sheeting that runs along each side of the boat is dropped and out pour, hop, slip and lurch myriad commuters. As they hurriedly disembark, one must gain purchase on the lurching running board, duck down under the low roof and insert oneself nimbly onto the simple wooden benches in a matter of seconds. In this frenetic city, time and tide wait for no man or hapless tourist. Once we surge away from the bank the sheets snap up again and, as Thanachai recounts, we should be grateful for this protection. Once a woman got splashed in the face by the murky, polluted water, inadvertently ingested the toxic soup and ended up in intensive care. As we yaw and weave at breakneck speed down the narrow channels, two tenacious conductors shuffle precariously up and down either side collecting fares, thrusting their hands through the narrow gap between the plastic and collapsible roof. Just why a) they wear crash helmets and b) the roof supports are hinged soon becomes apparent as the first low, dank bridge sweeps close overhead and these sure footed folk crouch at the last minute and drop the canopy just enough to scrape underneath. Both actions are performed with a smooth, casual unconcern born of long experience.

Transport on more solid ground is by bus. As with all other modes of motion, there's no time to admire the view. Catching the bus takes on a whole, new literal meaning as you leap for the moving door. The hard seats, gnarled floorboards, guttural engine and open windows make it more akin to a mobile blast furnace than a mode of transport. But when one's ticket costs mere pence it would be churlish to complain and I am happy to hand over the meager fare to the swaying conductor whose only utterance is the 'clap, clap, clap' of his finger-trapping money tin.

My journey from Bangkok to the southern tourist resort of Pattaya was in a cramped and overloaded mini bus whose metallurgic groans indicated it was not at its peak. Once out of the teeming city our young driver took on the ambitions of a formula one wannabe and put pedal to the metal. For the next two hours we bounced and lurched along the undulating motorway that connects the two cities. This would not have been so bad had not my occasional fold-down seat been a mere nod in the direction of comfort. With each upward lurch of the bus, it renewed its determination to revert to a flattened state and would send me pitching toward the groin of my fellow traveler.

After what seemed an eternity trying to avoid getting to know the gentleman attached to aforesaid groin in a way neither of us desired or expected whilst our friend up front dodged, swerved and tailgated at warp speed, we arrived intact but frazzled at our destination. I was relieved to still be intact.

Once a tranquil fishing village whose graceful, 4km long crescent of golden sand is caressed by the gentle surges of the Gulf, Pattaya has become a bustling pleasure dome of hotels, thumping neon go-go bars, net cafes and souvenir emporiums. Stroll down the breezy, palm fringed promenade and one soon discovers that this is the place where East meets West in the most intimate of ways. Here couples of all shapes, sizes, ages and sexuality's, stroll hand in hand beside the well-tended flowerbeds. Whether these relationships are the result of true affection or something more capitalistic is debatable, although with such a prevalence of establishments where not only the food but those who serve it is on the menu, one cannot help but be somewhat dubious of the intentions of either amorous party.

The Thai ambivalence to and acceptance of differing lifestyle choices is nowhere better illustrated than at a more family orientated tourist attraction just outside the city limits. In a sprawling garden park amongst the neat lawns and clipped hedges are scattered detailed miniature replicas of the world's most famous man-made landmarks from Big Ben to the Sydney Opera House. Here you can see the sum of human civilisation in an hour and all without the risk of deep vein thrombosis.

Many examples of Thailand's own exquisite architecture and landmarks are also recreated and for that special photo opportunity you can pose in front of, for example, the world-famous Grand Palace in Bangkok with a couple of beautiful Thai girls in stunning traditional costume on each arm. In fact, on closer inspection these visions of loveliness are just as likely to be Ga' tuhy – transsexuals or transvestites to you and me. With their delicate Thai features and expertly applied makeup, these boys can appear more stunning than their female co-workers. Accepted as just another and equally valid expression of the human condition, Ga'tuhy are not shunned by kith, kin or society as a whole because they are, nevertheless, part of the clan, the family, the village and the greater Thai nation – an ancient collective mindset important to every citizen.

Waiting for my departure back at the terminal and in reflective mood, it is this 'live and let live' attitude that impresses me most about these beautiful, gentle, friendly and welcoming people, rather than their dubious driving skills. If you share their values of restraint, courtesy, calm and open-mindedness you are welcome - warts and all. This, plus the stunning scenery, ancient and deep-rooted Buddhist culture, delicious cuisine and some of the most ornate and beautiful palaces & temples in the world make Thailand truly a 'land of smiles', not just theirs but also your own, except of course on the roads, where it may be through gritted teeth!

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