

IT'S A THAI SCORE

Part I

Hijacked by a *Tuk-Tuk* Driver

It's amazing how much difference 696 km (426 miles) can make. It's the difference between Boston and Washington, DC; Sydney and Melbourne; and in Thailand, heaven and hell. Or as they call them, Chiang Mai and Bangkok. There's a third part to Thailand, the southern beaches, but I didn't see them. I figure I can always rent "The Beach" if I want to check them out. Besides, if I do that Leonardo DiCaprio might write me a personal letter thanking me for being the 124th person to see the movie and then I can sell it for big bucks on eBay.

Bangkok's not an easy city. It's as crowded as a Japanese subway during rush hour, as noisy as your head after a night of drinking Mekong whiskey, as spread out as Los Angeles only without the sewage-fouled beaches (or any beaches for that matter), and it has the air quality of a tire dump on fire. It's the capital and the country's largest city, existing primarily as the center of government, finance, and sex. And also to make sure you appreciate the rest of the country because, thank god, it isn't Bangkok.

Oh yeah. It's hot. Very hot.

It's a city where on my first morning's stroll I came across a sign directing me to a club called Crackhouse a Go-Go. A few steps away was a sign hanging over the sidewalk which read: "Not a real nun. Do not pay." I looked down and there was the pseudo Buddhist nun standing beneath it, taking in donations left and right, which proves that either she can't read English, the Westerners giving her money can't read English, or it's the best sales gimmick since Ron Popeil said, "But wait! There's more!"

Bangkok is a city with a restaurant called Cabbages and Condoms which is decorated with condoms from around the world and even has a Vasectomy Room you can dine in. And not a cabbage to be found. It's a city where you can't buy a newspaper in the departure terminal at the airport—not a Thai or a foreign one. Sure the *Bangkok Post* I picked up (not at the airport, of course) had a column on page five with quotes from men who wrote in debating whether prostitutes fake orgasms or have real ones—and of course they were all delusionally macho enough to be convinced they brought these women to a climax—but is that any reason not to let you read it on the plane back home?

It's a city which is lively, vibrant, and has streets lined with vendors selling most anything you could want, at any hour of the day. A lot of it's food, but you can also buy clothing, household goods, books, magazines, your fortune, sex, or a *tuk-tuk* ride to see Thai exports whether you want to or not.

A *tuk-tuk* is a great form of transportation in spite of being a three-wheeled riding lawn mower with the blades removed and a passenger seat mounted on the back. At least I think they removed the blades. Since it's open on the sides, a short ride makes you much more empathetic towards the plight of coal miners with black lung disease. This is partly the driver's fault, since if they don't stall out at every traffic light they shut off the engine, then start it up when the light changes, revving it until it takes off with a lurch, filling the air with delightful black smoke.

They're actually very fun to ride in, except that the canvas awning comes down the sides just enough so that anyone over 5'2", meaning Westerners, have to slouch way down in the seat to see the sights of the city as they fly by. No wonder when the *tuk-tuk* driver recommends a good Thai massage parlor most people jump at it.

A *tuk-tuk* driver's primary job isn't to take you where you want to go, but rather to tell you where you should go. Then again, that seems to be the job of everyone in Bangkok. The first *tuk-tuk* driver I came across seemed like a fun guy. I wanted to go to the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaeo (a *wat* is a temple) but he said it was closed until 1 p.m. because it was "Buddha Day." Apparently on certain

auspicious days all monks have to go to their *wat* and pray en masse, then head to the Hallmark store to pick up their last minute “Happy Buddha Day” cards.

He tells me he knows a couple of good *wats* which are off the beaten path and open, offering to take me to them. We negotiate a price for an hour-long tour, which isn’t easy since my brain is still stuck in the Indonesian exchange rate, but as far as I can tell I wasn’t being gouged too badly so I climb in.

“Where you from?” he asks.

“America,” I reply.

“Okay! *Rock and roll!!!!*”

The sound system comes to life. The air pressure from the pumping speakers distorts my face like a 3 G Space Shuttle lift-off. I sit back and relax as we dart into traffic, reminding myself that one of the glories of traveling is to experience new things, like listening to “Hotel California” at a volume that would make Metallica proud while blood pours out of my ears, leaving a trail behind us on the steaming Bangkok pavement.

Captain Tuk-Tuk drove me to a couple of beautiful Buddhist temples. The Thai people sure know how to build them. They’re incredibly ornate and covered in more gold than an ex-New Yorker in West Palm Beach. He was particularly excited about taking me to see the Lucky Buddha.

“Not for tourist. This special. You pray, Lucky Buddha make happen. After that you see Thai Expo,” he tells me.

“I don’t want to buy anything, I’m here to see things.”

“Today last day of Thai Expo. Only one week every year to buy cheap. You see Lucky Buddha. Then we talk.”

Like most every *wat* I saw in Thailand, the Lucky Buddha temple was being renovated. Either that or the flying buttresses they use on Thai temples look a lot like our scaffolding.

As I took off my shoes and entered the temple, a Thai man joined me. We knelt on the floor and had a nice chat. I learned that he sold cars and came every

day to pray to Lucky Buddha for business to be good. He instructed me in how to pray. After we finished we sat for a quiet, meditative moment.

“Where you go now?” he asked.

“Golden Mount, the Giant Swing, and the Grand Palace,” I said.

“All good. But first go Thai Expo.”

He told me that even he had gone. He bought a ring that he’ll take to Singapore and resell for a tidy profit. He pulled a receipt from his wallet to show me. Then he wrote down the name of the jeweler I should see.

“But I don’t want to buy anything, I want to see things.”

“You go Thai Expo, see good investment, pay for trip.”

After admiring the shrine outside the temple with the almost full soda bottles as part of the offering—though it’s possible the construction workers deposited them there knowing no one would steal them—I climbed in the *tuk-tuk*, ready to be firm.

“Now go to Thai Expo,” the *tuk-tuk* nazi said.

“No,” I told him. “I want to go to Golden Mount.”

“Not open now. Today Buddha Day, remember? We go Thai Expo, then other temple, then Golden Mount.”

I could tell it was either go along with him or walk, and I had no earthly idea where we were so I gave in. He took me to an expensive jewelry store. It turns out Thai Expo wasn’t the big Thai trade exposition I thought it was, what they were saying was Thai *export*. I walked in the store, looked around for two minutes, thanked the sales people, then left. Now my driver had another brainstorm: it was time to check out some custom-made clothing.

“No,” I said, emphatic this time. “Take me to Golden Mount.”

“Too early. We go to temple near Golden Mount, walk from there.”

He screeched to a halt at Wat Benchamabophit, the Marble Temple, where he unceremoniously dumps me, quickly reminding me that it’s time to pay. Then he zooms off in a huff because I’m not half the mark he wanted me to be. You’d think he’d be happy with a quarter mark, this being Buddha Day and all.

After looking at the gorgeous temple and its courtyard filled with 52 bronze Buddhas in styles from different regions and periods, I stand out front examining my map trying to get my bearings. I have a very good sense of direction—I can find my way around most places after just a little while—but for some reason Bangkok leaves me totally turned around.

I ask a taxi driver who was waiting for his passengers to return where we were. He points to a spot on the map—we were miles from Golden Mount. Then he told me that’s not where I really want to go.

“You go see Thai export.”

All day long, every *tuk-tuk* driver, taxi driver, even people I stopped on the street informed me that where I wanted to go wasn’t really where I wanted to go. After all, I’m a *farang*, how could I know? Each one knew best, and each one knew I needed to see Thai export.

“I’ve seen Thai export,” I told each of them.

“You have?” they’d say incredulously. Then they’d tell me to see more.

There was even a friendly and helpful guy on the street who, when I asked for directions to—yes—Golden Mount, wrote out a list of temples I should see because they were on the way. He hailed a *tuk-tuk* driver, arranged a dirt cheap price, and instructed me not to pay more than 10 baht because “that’s what he agreed to.” Then he handed me the list. Smack in the middle of it was “Thai Export”.

It turned out this was the last day of a promotion in which *tuk-tuk* drivers got a coupon for free gas every time they brought someone to a shop that sold Thai-made merchandise. Why the rest of the populace was so into it I’m not sure, but later in the day I got into the swing of it too. I made one really nice *tuk-tuk* driver’s week by volunteering to go to two (count ‘em, 2!) Thai export shops in return for his driving me around for a while for free. I got pretty good at walking in a store, cruising through it in record time, pretending I fooled them into thinking I was remotely interested, then thanking them nicely for showing me a wonderful time.

Actually, I got to see a lot in between Thai export stops. I saw the Big Buddha, the Reclining Buddha, the Emerald Buddha, and the Lucky Buddha. I saw beautiful temples, ornate palaces, and a McDonald's that sells Samurai Pork Burgers for 45 baht (about \$1). I saw produce markets, flower markets, and meat markets, most notably Nana Plaza, a two-story mall where they sell one thing: sex. And I saw an incredible number of Western men walking down the street hand in hand with Thai women, finally realizing after the 1,234th couple that those weren't girlfriends, but rather that's how the Bangkok Escort Charm School and Sate House instructs them to act when they go out on the first paid date.

I ate great food from street vendors. I regretted not having time to get to the Siriraj Hospital Forensics Museum to see the embalmed body of Si Oui, Thailand's notorious child serial killer. I saw mailboxes that had slots for "Bangkok" and "Other Places", making me wonder if the mail has to stop at Thai export on the way to the other places. And yes, I bought a bus ticket out of there to Chiang Mai.

Best of all, I did it without once hearing that lame-ass semi-ABBA song from the musical Chess, "One Night in Bangkok", which proves one thing: if you pray properly to Lucky Buddha your wish really can come true.

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