

BANGKOK

Kiss



by David Thompson

BANGKOK KISS

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Newbie From The Motherland

As my plane approached Bangkok international airport, I looked out of the window and was amazed to see a golf course situated between the two main runways. The fairways and greens were in pristine condition and the white sand of the bunkers reflected the bright sunlight as if they had their own source of illumination. When the plane landed and taxied to the end of the runway, I could make out golfers waiting until we had passed in order to resume their game. I tried to imagine their frustration at having play held up because a Jumbo Jet was crossing the fairway, but couldn't quite get my mind around the whole idea. On the other side of the course, another Jumbo was taking off and I could not believe that a shout of "Fore!" was going to offer any warning to the pilot should a player slice his shot. I wondered what damage a golf ball would do to a jet engine. Back home in England, the authorities would never have allowed anything like it! Just imagine Heathrow or any of the major airports with an eighteen-hole golf course set right in the middle of the runways!

This was to prove to be typical of Thailand: a country of contradiction and contrast where what is not spoken is far more important than that which is. A country where the rules are not just bent or even broken, but positively shattered into tiny pieces until even the rule makers themselves forget which ones apply.

Here, I was a stranger in a strange land, a fish out of water,

too old to learn new tricks but too young not to try. I couldn't wait to set foot on Thai soil and begin my adventure packed holiday!

My break from monotony included a full itinerary with visits to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya and Phuket and incorporated an elephant safari, scuba diving, visits to temples and just about everything else I could wish for, even a Thai cooking course!

This would be my first holiday travelling alone and I had ensured that I would have no time for loneliness, no time to become morose over the ending of my marriage, no time to think or deliberate, just get out there and have some fun. Something I hadn't done for many years.

Eventually, the plane stopped and over four hundred weary travelers, including myself, who had spent the last twelve hours cramped together in an aluminium tube, could not wait to get out. The doors opened and we filed out into the air-conditioned terminal building to be greeted by welcoming airport staff who all seemed to be young women with incredible smiles.

"Sawadi Kaa," they said, and put their hands together as if in prayer as is the manner of the formal wai greeting. This was the first time I had heard the famous Thai welcome, but it would not be too long before I would be using it myself, except that I would replace the female "Kaa" with the male form of "Khrap". I was immediately curious as to why all the staff seemed to be women. Don't get me wrong, I was certainly not complaining, but I was curious all the same.

I had not known what to expect of Thailand, but was surprised, as we walked through the long corridors, to see advertisements for all the brand names we either love or hate back in the western world. The life styles of beautiful people, who eat reclaimed meat in a bread roll or drink sugar enriched

flavoured water straight from the bottle, jumped out at me from the billboards and posters. I find it incredibly difficult to believe that the young, beautiful, fresh faced youngsters who smiled down at me had ever maintained a diet of such poor quality as the ones they urged me to consume.

Once my fellow passengers and I had walked the long walkways of the terminal, we found ourselves at the back of an inordinately long queue of people waiting, some patiently, others not so, to show their passports. I noted that the officials were all male and this was the first insight I would have into Thai culture. It seemed to me that the smiling ever-attentive women were the sweetener for the bored looking non-speaking male officials. It would not be too long before I learned that virtually the whole of the Thai tourist industry was dependant upon the smiles of their young women.

Eventually, after two and half hours spent queuing, and about three minutes actually getting my passport stamped with a thirty-day tourist visa, I collected my luggage and walked through to the exit area of Bangkok airport.

To say that I was relieved to be leaving the hustle and bustle of the busy airport would be an understatement and I looked forward to getting out and into the quieter surroundings of the city itself.

What hit me as I walked into the arrivals hall was unbelievable; an explosion of noise and confusion, a cacophony of sound that battered at me in such a way that I could not distinguish one sound from another. Loudspeakers blaring out a language I couldn't understand, the sound of the traffic just outside the huge open doorways, whistles blown at a decibel level that would rival most commercial jets, hawkers calling out to me that their taxi, hotel or excursion was the best, the cheapest, the newest. A wall of sound that almost pushed

me back through the door I had just entered!

I managed to gather my senses enough to push through the crowds and escape to the outside world, only to be blasted by a searing heat that tried to suck the very breath out of me and, at the same time, drench me in perspiration. It was like walking into the steam room I used at my local gym back home, except this time I was fully clothed and carting around a full seventy-five kilo rucksack!

Taxis, buses and cars all vied for space as they pulled in to collect weary travellers and then roar away in a mad hurry to get back for more fares. Thai men in uniforms I took to be police blew whistles and waved their arms in an effort to bring some sort of order to the seemingly chaotic behaviour of the traffic. The air was heavy with pollution from the many diesel and petrol engines, and the stench of exhaust fumes assailed my nostrils until I could taste the gritty particles of soot in my mouth and throat.

“You want taxi?” said a man with a knowing look on his face.

He had obviously seen many independent, worldly-wise travellers wilt under the intensity of noise, heat and sweat.

“Yes please,” I managed to croak, and within seconds I was hustled into a yellow and green taxi that thankfully was equipped with air conditioning.

This would be a good time to explain that virtually all first time visitors to Thailand suffer the same experience. The long wait for the officials, the heat, the noise and the stench of exhaust fumes beat at the senses until the traveller is thankful for any respite and accepts virtually any offer of help. The taxi I had been ushered hastily into was not a meter cab and the cost to transport me away from the oppressiveness of the airport would surely be high. Experienced travellers to

Thailand do not walk out into the arrivals hall, but instead walk through to the domestic departure terminal and, on the way, stop off and refresh themselves in the staff restaurant. In the domestic departure area, there is very little traffic and the taxis that drop off the local travellers are almost all meter cabs that have air conditioning and will drive to Bangkok for a fraction of the cost of the non-meter cabs. However, as this was my first visit, I did not know any of the tricks and I was forced to accept my initiation in the same way as thousands of other first-time visitors to Thailand.

In the relative cool of the taxi, I was able to collect my thoughts, but unfortunately not for long. When we reached a toll road, the driver turned and told me, “Forty Baht.”

There was no explanation, just a demand for the money that I duly handed over. Then the fun began. I had heard a little about the traffic and the method of driving in Thailand, but I was not prepared for the leap into hyperspace that we proceeded to undertake.

Within seconds we were hurtling along at a breakneck speed and it was all I could do not to scream out as we overtook, undertook and seemingly went straight through the other traffic!

The only saving grace, as far as I was concerned, was to discover that the Thais drive on the same side of the road as the English; namely the right side of the road, which is quite clearly the left hand side and not the right, which is most obviously the wrong side of the road!

Amazingly, there were other vehicles overtaking and undertaking even my taxi as we careered along the three-lane highway at speeds approaching that of light. Perhaps Einstein had visited this place and had developed one or two theories whilst sat in this very same cab! It was certainly old enough!

There seemed to be no logic or rules governing the speed or direction or flow of the traffic. Motorbikes were driving along on the same side of the road as we were, but in completely the opposite direction!

“Where you go?” my driver asked quite calmly, as though nothing was awry.

Fumbling in my pocket and shaking with nerves, I found the paper on which I had written all my much-needed information. No sooner had I taken breath and looked to my driver to speak than I had cause to stop abruptly. He was looking right at me and I was in the back seat!

At that moment I knew I was going to die. We would crash and burn in this green and yellow coffin on wheels and drive straight to hell at breakneck speed overtaking or undertaking the ferryman and his cohorts on the way!

“Watch the road!” I blurted out, pointing at the same time at the back of the overloaded truck trundling along in the outside lane.

With a smoothness that would have impressed most formula one drivers, my chauffeur calmly steered us around our impending doom and looked back to me with a smile.

“Okay. No problem. Where you go?”

To be honest, I couldn’t help but be impressed with his driving skills and laid back attitude, so with a shake of my head and a smile of my own, I tried to pronounce my destination.

“Sukhumvit Road. Soi Five. Nana,” I told him, in the perfect accent we English use for foreigners.

“Sukhumwit, Soi Ha, Naa Naa,” he replied with a smile. I was becoming used to the smiles, and I have to say that they are quite infectious.

“Yes, please,” I said, and relaxed back in my seat to watch the horror movie speeding by in a more comfortable

position.

This was far better than being petrified, sitting on the edge of the seat, whilst clenching my fists until the knuckles turned white. Much nicer to sit back and at least try to enjoy the last moments of my life. I was tempted to take a photograph of the teeth marks on the back of the headrest in front of me, but I was worried that my driver might turn around and pose for the shot.

Once we left the toll road, we descended into the heavy traffic of Bangkok city. Although our speed had been reduced to that of a commuting cyclist, it was no less scary. Motorbikes approached from every direction and spilled out of side roads in front of the oncoming traffic with careless abandon. Everyone sounded horns as the traffic squeezed itself through the narrow streets between shops, hotels, restaurants and street traders. Small three wheeled chariots called 'tuk-tuks' weaved in and out of the cars, trucks and buses like kamikaze mosquitoes, their passengers grimly gripping the steel bars of the passenger cage that afforded them their only protection.

Once again, the air was filled with the stench of exhaust fumes and a haze of pollution hung above the crowded streets. I was so thankful for the air conditioning, but even that was not enough to prevent all the pollution from entering the taxi.

As I looked out of the window, I was entranced by the sights we passed. A family living in what appeared to be a cardboard shack beneath one of the many road overpasses watched as I passed. People cooked all manner of food on small barbeque trays attached to motorbikes or even bicycles by the side of the road. Street traders selling everything from tee shirts to ball gowns used every inch of the crowded sidewalk. The sights and sounds of Bangkok were already beginning to fascinate me.