

Joe Bucket from Pattaya
ia and on his adventures among
the streets, bars, brothels
and beaches of
Sihanoukville
and let
him introduce
ou to
the gangsters,



Visa Run

Pattaya to Sihanoukville



Peter Jaggs

VISA RUN

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Text by

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VISA RUN

A novel by

Peter Jaggs

This one is for my old Dad

INTRODUCTION

If, like myself, you are not a great lover of fiction and prefer the books you read to be factual, you might be interested to know that every single tale and anecdote in this novel is based on a real event.

Essentially, Joe Bucket's story is a factual account of a visa run from Pattaya to Sihanoukville which actually happened.

Although at times I found it prudent to change the identities of some of the people and places mentioned in the narrative for obvious reasons, many of them still retain their real names and can be recognized by any visitor to Pattaya or Sihanoukville.

All the conversations that appear in this story are also based on dialogues that really took place, apart from that of Louis the French gangster whose name, bar and appearance I was obliged to fabricate completely to avoid being murdered.

So, although I present this book as a work of fiction, in reality it is closer to being a true story.

Peter Jaggs, Pattaya

GLOSSARY

- Bawbaw* (Cambodian): A type of soup
- Chai dee mak* (Thai): Very good heart
- Farang* (Thai): Westerner (used throughout the book for both Thai and Cambodian speakers to avoid any confusion)
- Flics* (French underworld slang): Police
- Fort-a-bras* (French underworld slang): Strong arm man
- Isaan* (Thai): An area of Northeast Thailand
- Katoey* (Thai): Lady-boy, transvestite
- Keeniaw* (Thai): Miserly, tight-fisted
- Khao pad khai* (Thai): Fried Rice with chicken
- Khor thot, mai roochak* (Thai): Sorry, I don't know (him/her/ the answer)
- Krama* (Cambodian): Cambodian garment usually worn around the waist
- Lambaak mak* (Thai): (Many/great) difficulties
- Motodop* (Cambodian): Motorcycle, usually a motorcycle taxi
- Soi* (Thai): Street or road
- Songthaew* (Thai): Pick-up truck used as a taxi (lit. two rows)
- Tambon* (Thai): Merit making
- Teelac* (Thai): Darling, my love

PREFACE

My name is Bucket. Joe Bucket. I've lived in Thailand for a long time now. I suppose there are plenty of self-righteous people out there who would label me as a sex-pat, but I reckon I'm just a regular guy enjoying early retirement in a country I've loved for years. If you have spent any time at all in Pattaya the chances are you will probably know me already, and if it's your first time here, you are certainly going to see me around. Either way, I'm sure there is a very good chance you will recognize me before the end of my story.

You can call me a sex-pat if you want to; I don't mind. After all, I guess I'm exactly the sort of bloke some Bright Bollocks had in mind when he coined the ignominious phrase. I would be a liar if I said I didn't love Thai women, and I happily admit I am not averse to shagging them either. I am also lucky enough to live in Pattaya, since a profitable but painful altercation with a rogue drill-pipe tong on a North Sea oil rig ended my working life. When I came out of the resulting coma in Aberdeen Hospital three weeks later I had a blinding headache, a left arm that would never really work properly again and an ambulance-chasing solicitor sitting beside my bed who told me he could fix things for me so I would never have to work again. He wasn't bullshitting, and the resulting compensation he blagged for me enabled me to pack in all the rubbish jobs I was wasting time on for half the year in order to finance the remaining six months in Thailand. So here I am, and if that makes me a sex-pat, so be it. I'm happy and proud to be one.

I made my first trip to Thailand over twenty-five years ago. There were three of us, a trio of Essex boys from a grotty little factory in Billericay that made those awful shopping trolleys old ladies pull around. Incredibly, we knew nothing of the racy reputation of the country and had come to take a look at the ancient temples of

Ayuttaya and Sukhothai. Felix the punch operator was the instigator and arranged it all; he was a university drop-out and very interested in all that cultural stuff. Wayne the welder and I just wanted an exotic holiday in the sun to boast about down the pub—and we simply went along for the ride.

And for three horny, sex-starved lads barely out of their teens out on the prowl in a country that was home to some of the most seductive and available women in the world, what a ride it turned out to be. I remember we went down Soi Cowboy that first night. We were lucky enough to meet a bunch of hard-bitten Aussie miners on vacation in the first gogo bar we went into who took pity on us and showed us the very beginnings of the ropes. They quickly became our heroes and the very next morning we got on the bus to Pattaya with them at Ekamai and travelled down to have a couple of days at the beach resort of Pattaya before we left for the ancient cities. We had come to Thailand for the factory's two-week summer break, and I went home six months later when my bank account ran dry. We never made it to the historic temples and Felix and Wayne the welder were never seen again.

After that first trip, my previously aimless life in England became much simpler. Suddenly, all I was interested in doing was accumulating enough money to spend as much time as possible in Thailand. The work I did was dirty, dangerous, distasteful or merely boring, but if the weekly wage slip meant I could accumulate the Thailand tokens required for another six months of sun and sex, I did any type of work happily. I would work at any shit job going for as long as I could stand being away from the country and the women that had woven such a spell over me, and as I was fit and strong and worked hard and would perform even the most unpleasant task with a grin, I never wanted for employment when I needed it. I was so cheerful doing these dead-end jobs sometimes people thought I was bit barmy, but why wouldn't I have been smiling? I was off to Thailand for six months again soon, whilst all my unfortunate workmates were going to suffer another bitter winter in England. Postman, milkman, hod-carrier, petrol pump attendant, warehouseman, bakery delivery driver, fish smoker, jelly maker, spot-welder, farm labourer, computer technology proof-reader in Taiwan and barman and bog cleaner at the Baker's Arms at Stock in Essex were just some of the jobs I did over the years to finance

a craving for Thailand that was as strong as any narcotic could induce. Finally, a Pattaya drinking buddy known as Short-Time Sam fixed me up with a job as a roustabout on an oil rig where he was the toolpusher and I had a lucrative four years in the North Sea and made it up to derrickman before I ended up wearing that pipe tong as a hard hat.

In the good old days before everyone started coming over here and jumping on the bandwagon I also made a good bit of extra money selling fake watches and Levi's jeans that I bought in Thailand. The copy game was still fairly new back then, and there were loads of blokes back on the building sites and in the factories of England who would pay well for a glittering gold Rolex or pair of 501's that looked exactly like the real thing. So what if they usually fell to bits within a month or two? After that it was football shirts. There was a lot of dosh to be made on the knock-off soccer kits for a while but you had to remember to take a good look at the merchandise before you bought it. Some guys didn't, and I still remember the day Dozy Dave returned from a trip to a backstreet tailor and opened up his latest shipment of three hundred England football shirts that were bound for somewhere in Leeds during a long ago World Cup competition. Stitched proudly under the famous three lions emblem on every shirt was the prophetic word, 'Endland'. Did Dozy Dave get his money back? Of course not.

I had a great result the year Vietnam started welcoming tourists again and I went over there on a visa run and invested in two hundred old US Army Zippo cigarette lighters. They were all engraved with the coats of arms of different regiments and quirky slogans from the Vietnam war. The first lot I bought were genuine and everyone wanted one and I sold out within a month and made a small fortune. Then the copy boys in 'Nam realized they were onto a good thing and started reproducing them and the bottom fell out of the market. I couldn't give away the next two hundred fake lighters I bought the following year. Another time I took home five hundred of those crazy foam rats on yo-yo strings; the Thai guys sell them along the Beach Road outside the Royal Garden Plaza. I put on a silly hat with a rat stuck on top of it and wore a shiny jacket and stood in the middle of Basildon Town centre near that horrible fountain, pulling on a string all day to make the rats scurry around the pavement by my feet. In fact, to my surprise, the magic rats sold like hot cakes

but I had to pack it in when a gang of irate mothers from a nearby council estate tracked me down and demanded their money back under threat of violence because the damn things kept tangling up and all the kids were crying their eyes out.

When things got really tight I even had a go at smuggling those ridiculously cheap cigarettes they sell at the Cambodian border markets for a while, until Jim the Perv told me how he had been caught with a rucksack full of the dodgy gaspers. The immigration police banged Jim up in a filthy cell for an extremely worrying couple of hours until, unfathomably, they gave him back his bag of contraband cancer sticks and let him go. Despite the Perv's escape, after that I didn't much fancy the fag game any more.

Throughout the last quarter of a century all the different jobs I did and all the crap I sold meant I never had too much trouble getting back to Thailand every year for a good lengthy trip. Over the years, my visits to Pattaya became longer and longer. By the time I received my compensation money Pattaya had completely undergone her metamorphosis from fishing village to major tourist destination and I found I was spending nearly all my time in the city.

Pattaya. You will either love her or hate her. The polluted, traffic-choked, bar-lined streets soon have those tourists who value peace and order fleeing for the classier Thai resorts of Hua Hin, Phuket and Koh Samui. The real lovers of solitude will have already left for the relative tranquillity of Koh Chang, Koh Wai or Koh Phi Phi. Most of these people find it astonishing that there are so many of us who have fallen in love with the Eastern Seaboard and choose to stay here. They can't understand that for those who have really been hit with the Pattaya stick, the soul of the city seeps into their very being like a highly enjoyable form of cancer for which there is no cure. Nobody really seems to know exactly what it is that impels so many *farangs* (Western visitors to Thailand) to return to a grimy, crowded city with a crappy beach time and time again until they finally end up staying there, but it is undeniable that Pattaya does boast a very impressive seduction rate. Until I went on the visa run that prompted me to write this book, I hadn't been out of the city for half a decade.

I wouldn't want you to think Joe Bucket has always been such a Pattaya Potato, though. During my first ten years or so in Thailand I really used to get around. I've visited almost every province in the

country as well as making extended visa run trips to The Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos and Singapore and one time I even had a spell working in Taiwan. However, although I enjoyed every one of these excursions immensely I've never found anywhere that has managed to pull me away from Pattaya for any length of time, so I guess I have to admit to being one of the guys who have fallen for her hidden charms hook, line and sinker.

Throughout the years I've seen two generations of backpackers, travellers—and more recently, holidaymakers—sneer at guys like me and call us sex-tourists. For some reason many of them seem to think that just because Joe Bucket appreciates the beauty of Thai women and makes the most of what's going on, he knows nothing more of the country other than that which nestles between the open legs of her bar-girls. It is strange how many people I have met here do seem to have all the answers, though. The only thing I've really learnt since I came is that no *farang* can ever really understand Thailand or her people however long they stay. Although many of us so-called sex-pats have spent decades here and can speak the language fluently and have a more intimate knowledge of the country and her people than any couple on a package tour or smart-arse student enjoying a University gap year is ever going to acquire, most days the Thais confuse the hell out of us too. Come to that, plenty of *farangs* I've met over the years have been pretty unfathomable as well; perhaps this just goes to show you never really know what's going on in someone's brain wherever they come from.

When I made most of those trips up-country or down South I would be accompanied by my latest Thai bar-girlfriend, and visiting all their homes sure was a great way to see the country. In the early years, a never-ending, ever-changing parade of different Pattaya bar-girls very kindly took me all over Thailand. Some of you backpackers might be surprised to know Joe Bucket has stayed in a squatters shack in Samut Sakorn, nearly broken his back helping with the rice harvest in Roi-Et and hunted lizards and small birds with a catapult with the local kids in Buriram. He has had an evil ghost sucked out of his soul by a spirit doctor in Petchabun, lost money on cock and beetle fights in Surin and stood knee-deep in a muddy river looking for edible water beetles to jump on in Khampaeng Pet.

But as the years rolled into decades, I am sad and sorry to say

that I stopped making these jaunts out of Pattaya. Years of familiarity with Thailand inevitably turned my sense of adventure into lethargy and changed a reckless youngster into a middle-aged stick-in-the-bar. It wasn't that the opportunities for visiting new places were lacking, but somehow I just didn't seem to be able to get my act together enough to go any more.

One day I looked into the mirror in my apartment and noticed how flabby and tired-looking I was becoming. It was then I realized that, apart from the one day visa runs to Cambodia I had to make every three months, I hadn't left Pattaya for five years. I wondered sadly where my spirit of adventure had gone to. It seemed the unthinkable had happened. I had turned myself into a Pattaya Potato.

Then, by a strange twist of fate, I met a retired seaman called Ron who was stuck in a wheelchair. This salty old bloke managed to rekindle the spirit of adventure in me that I thought had gone forever. A dropped wallet, a bottle of rum, an evening of sailor's tales and a rash promise later and suddenly I was back on the road, enjoying the kind of episodes I hadn't experienced for fifteen years. I was alive again, and for this I'll always be grateful to the old man. The ancient mariner managed to get the Pattaya Potato off his arse again, and that re-awakening is really what this book is all about. Joe Bucket's visa run.