

A letter from North Thailand

LIGHT AIRS

AUSTRALIAN TRAVELLERS to Asia often get a surprise at the rules - for example on the road there is a seeming lack of any enforcement.

A motorbike carrying a family of five is not uncommon. Adolescent children zoom around the streets on their own without restriction.

In Thailand one common form of taxi is no more than a covered ute with thin bench seats along the sides which squash in as many passengers as possible.

In cars and taxis seat belts are mostly ignored. There is no RBT or speed camera anywhere to be seen.

It all seems very risky and probably is when something goes wrong without the usual safeguards we are so used to. Pedestrian crossings are semi-respected at best and the onus seems to be on everybody to keep a lookout for what is in front and the devil take the hindmost.

But there appears to be a different attitude to road travel. People seem to drive more slowly and patiently. Road rage is not a feature. Can it be that Buddhists are less aggressive? Or is it something to do with saving face? Crossing the road is like crossing a river. The cars and bikes don't exactly stop but weave around the ever moving pedestrians.

In the small town of Pai in Northern Thailand, I hired a moped. As an emergency doctor I am fully aware of the dangers of sustaining a compound fracture in a remote area of the third world. Yet I felt confident in the environment which had no fast moving traffic and neat little roads leading to temples and waterfalls.

At the hire place, a woman tourist was trying to hire one of these and the Thai manager was reluctant, not because of no licence but he was assessing that she had never ridden such a



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machine.

In first world countries there are lots of regulations which we take for granted and expect that the tourist will be protected in the same way over there. When I asked about insurance, he seemed bewildered. When I explained, he smiled and said, 'Don't damage the motorbike and there is no problem'. That's insurance?

A friend was almost shaken off the back of an elephant, because the animal got furious when the mahout would not allow her to stray into a farmer's cornfield.

People trustingly take rides through rapids on bamboo rafts with no helmet. Looking for life jackets and safety equipment on the small inter-island boats is not always rewarded. The onus of responsibility is shifted from the state to the individual.

Speaking of animals, there are some very curious things. For example, a visitor to 'Tiger Kingdom' is invited to cuddle the tigers. They deny the use of drugs in these wild animals so tourists can be photographed in this bizarre act.



David Miller

On the same tour, at an elephant show, the animal actually painted this portrait, the mahout handing her the different colours. If I had not witnessed it personally, I would not believe such a thing possible.

Do these activities represent animal exploitation? Some think so and in other parts of Thailand, there exist rehab parks which aim to return the beasts to the wild.

In Thailand, taxis are cheap, a good meal for two is \$5-10, a great room at the Pai River corner resort is \$30 with breakfast included.

The Thai people have an immense respect and love for their King. His portrait is everywhere and criticism is unheard. Even when the generals tried to take power, they were summoned and had to approach the Royal presence on their knees.

A friend told me he gets dental work at a fraction of the Australian price. There are many vexed questions around the subject of dental tourism, now a thriving industry in Asian destinations.

Strangely, after getting used to this way of doing things, a culture shock on the return home awaits those who have relaxed long enough to forget the omniscient hand of bureaucratic authority regulating every little thing.

The cost of the first taxi ride home in this land of ours can also come as a rude reminder.

