



Leaving on a jet plane

... don't know when I'll be back again!



General

There comes a stage in most young people's lives when they need to break free of parental control and show that they are capable of independent living! Nowadays this often comes about as the almost compulsory overseas trip where they circumnavigate the world with their one year travel pass. The day finally arrives when their plans come to fruition and they are off at last - disappearing to some far flung destination - promising their parents to stay in contact and not to do anything silly!

Destinations

Some head east. Some head west. However Thailand remains the number one choice for many international travellers. It is the most common stop-off point for those heading to Australia and, for a significant number of travellers, this may be their first exposure to independent (non-parental controlled!) travel. The culture shock for western Europeans arriving in Bangkok International Airport on their first solo overseas trip is akin to landing on a different planet. People everywhere rushing about, a colossal amount of noise, what appears to be disorganised chaos (though others seem to know what to do!) and general invasion of personal space all leads to serious doubt as to whether or not this stop-off was really such a good idea! Once this initial shock has subsided and some degree of normality and control has been regained, there is then the question of where to collect the bags and how to get to the first hotel or backpackers' lodge where they can recoup their energy and take stock of their situation!

Settling in

Accommodation in Thailand is cheap. Many budget travellers will aim for the backpackers' hostels and so get the chance to meet up with others doing something similar. This gives the opportunity to compare notes and gain valuable insight into what options are available. This initial period is important as the inexperienced traveller can so easily fall into what parents will call 'the wrong company' with devastating consequences. The basic rule of not 'over-trusting' anyone is easy to explain to people but really difficult to follow. The other travellers seem so very experienced and such 'nice people' and, of course, in most cases this is absolutely true. However, there are many exceptions to the rule and it is all too easy for the unwary traveller to fall victim to the unscrupulous cad.

Getting over jet lag

The first few days are often spent getting the body clock sorted. Days and nights merge together and it is essential to put some normality back into the circadian rhythm. This

takes time and there is little that can be done to speed up the process. However, spending extended hours in pubs and nightclubs will do little to help! The combination of alcohol, a smoky atmosphere and jet lag are significant features in many stories where the traveller runs into difficulties. Probably the best way to overcome jet lag is to allow the natural sunlight to stimulate the normal internal processes which control awakening and sleeping cycles. This natural manipulation of melatonin levels (exposure to sunlight drops the levels circulating in the blood) will get the pattern regulated within a few days in most cases. During this time, the traveller should plan a more relaxed exploration of Bangkok, perhaps visiting some of the temples, the floating market and generally savouring the atmosphere without pushing the boat out too far and trying to experience everything on offer all at once!

Bangkok - the city

Opinions of Bangkok vary greatly. Some feel the city is dirty, polluted, over-crowded and generally disgusting! For many others it is a hive of activity and one of the most exciting cities on earth! Why the variation? Perhaps it is due to the widely differing expectations of many travellers. Some want to experience the culture and see the people in their own environment. Others want the excitement of cheap, international shopping, more nightlife than one individual could possibly experience in a lifetime and the option to put western Europe behind them as they aim for this new independent life! Bangkok offers both ends of the spectrum and has something for every traveller. However, for the unwary, the lure of the night-life is a powerful force and one which needs to be clearly understood.

Night-life in Bangkok

The night in Bangkok starts early - in fact it usually can be experienced throughout the entire 24 hour period! Alcohol and cigarettes are cheap and, as the Irish would say, the craic is powerful! Travelling alone is always a risky venture but even in company there can be problems. For the younger female and male traveller there are different issues which should be considered and avoided if at all possible.

Males and Females

Females attract males! This is true in Europe and everywhere throughout the world. Unfortunately, after some alcohol consumption (linked with a degree of jet-lag and the general excitement of being overseas), the ability to clearly identify a potential problem and to take the necessary evasive action may become somewhat blunted. The wrong signals may be transmitted and, what would easily be dealt with in normal circumstances, can suddenly

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Web Address: www.tmb.ie

This leaflet has been prepared using information supplied from W.H.O. Center for Disease Control (US) and other International sources.

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- ✓ Tropical Diagnostic Laboratory
- ✓ Tropical Disease Screening Centre
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escalate into a serious situation. Having at least one non-drinker within the group is a useful safety measure but, even so, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks can be easily spiked, leading to a rapid alteration in one's awareness and protective reflexes. Having a rule whereby one member of the party (a sensible one!) stays at the table while the others go off dancing will help to lessen this risk. Like many other animals, the herd of 'night-life revellers' in Bangkok need to stick together and provide protection for each other. Once the evening entertainment is over the party should stay as a group as they make their way back to their accommodation. If one of the party wants to disappear off with a newly-found acquaintance the others should apply the dog-lead and drag them back into their protective fold. Tomorrow, during the warm light of day, perhaps that acquaintance can be cultivated further - but not tonight!

Men are just plain dumb! Put them in a situation where they have had a few drinks and they will do just about anything! Okay, so not quite always true but in many cases that is all it takes! Probably the biggest danger for the young male traveller in Bangkok is getting involved in either a bar room brawl as they protect their newly-found manhood (!) or going for the ubiquitous Thai massage! The Thai massage is an art in itself and certainly should be classified among the wonders of the modern world! However in many of the parlours (and not just the seedy ones) the individual client may be offered more than they expected. Bangkok is often referred to as the number one sex capital of the world. Thai efforts to combat the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in the mid to late 90's is to be commended. However, recent evidence would suggest that this has not been maintained. Judging by the huge increase in sexually contracted diseases among travellers, many tourists find out to their cost just what a 'minute on the hips' may actually lead to. When discussing this topic, many will consider only the danger of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS forgetting that very serious diseases such as chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhoea, syphilis etc are all very common within this region.

Just testing

Addictive drugs are easily available in Bangkok. Almost every night in the bars and clubs, party-going revellers will find that it is easy to obtain supplies. For some this may start as just a simple experiment - a bit like trying the local foods! However, to their cost, they can easily find that such dabbling has far-reaching consequences which can last a life time. The laws in Thailand against drug trading and being in possession of even a minimal quantity of controlled substances are among the harshest in the world.

Pre-departure training

If the traveller is unsure of this, perhaps it would be a good idea to watch Nicole Kidman's portrayal of an innocent traveller getting caught up in the horrific world of drug trading in the film "Bangkok Hilton" (1989). It would certainly act as a worthwhile training video before they leave home. Parental advice not to do anything silly seems so far removed from their situation and, of course, peer

pressure can be a powerful force. The thought that 'I'll just try it once' and 'I'll never become addicted' is true for any age group and not just the young backpacker.

Choose to Travel in Health

Despite all the gloomy information above, Bangkok and the trip through Thailand is a phenomenal experience and one which should be encouraged. It is a beautiful country, with a truly lovely people, and has an immense amount to offer both the backpacker and the typical tourist. However it is always essential that as travellers pack for their trip they include a bountiful supply of commonsense and dispense it regularly during their time abroad. Vaccines and care with food and water are important additions to the armoury required to staying healthy while abroad but nothing can replace pure unadulterated commonsense.

TMB Web pages

The Tropical Medical Bureau web pages provide a significant amount of information for the international traveller. www.tmb.ie The news reports are regularly updated and contain information relevant to all aspects of travel. Keeping an eye on the specific country information will help ensure the traveller is more prepared. The site also gives TMB patients the ability to easily make contact with our dedicated staff in case any health-related difficulty should arise while travelling. Generally these queries are answered within hours of their receipt.

Summary

For many young 21st century international travellers the lure of hot tropical climates, reduced parental oversight and the excitement of becoming truly independent for the first time may lead to risky behaviour which can have devastating long term consequences. The international traveller needs to plan their trip in detail and also remember to pack loads of 'common-sense' and use it regularly while travelling!

Drugs and Drink

*Drugs and Drink, they'll cause us sink
into the morass of despair
so 'tis our fault if we don't halt the progress of this pair.
Hand in hand they'll engulf the land
and we will live to rue and regret the day
we stood aloof to wait for proof
while they trod upon their evil way.*

(Evening Papers, Dublin 1971. Author unknown)

Back in the early 1970's this poem appeared in the letters column of one of Dublin's evening papers. The truth contained in its lines 35 years ago is just as important today as it was back then.