

Weird Stuff That's Normal in Surat

Most days, Surat Thani feels like a typical place. You've got restaurants, traffic, coffeehouses, and shopping centers, and once you're accustomed to the aesthetic differences between Thailand and the west, it's easy to feel at home here. But every once in a while, I witness something so completely bizarre that it hits me with all its weight: I'm in freaking Thailand. The best part is that in these head-scratching moments, while you're trying to wrap your brain around what just happened, you'll be the only person who has even blinked.

Driving on the wrong side of the road

Coming from the US, it's rough enough having to override your instinct and stay on the left side of the road. But you get used to it, and eventually right turns cease to be terrifying. But your problems are far from over because yeah, in Thailand people drive on the left side, unless they're in a hurry, or traffic is bad, or they just have to go a couple blocks and can't be bothered to get to the proper side only to have to cut across again. The shoulder is a rule-free zone, where directions mean nothing. If you're going a little slower than traffic that qualifies as a safety precaution, entitling you to do exactly what you want. Thai drivers go where there is unoccupied pavement; road signs and yellow lines are mere suggestions. The plus side of this is that, because they'd die if they weren't, Thai drivers are incredibly aware of everything going on around them, and everyone uses their turn signal so others can be aware of them. Once you get used to it, it's actually a pretty efficient (if nerve-wracking) way to travel.

Bottomless beer on ice



Thai beer isn't great. It all tastes like the scary-cheap swill you chugged in college and leaves you with a comparable hangover. But you're going to drink so, so much of it. Why? Because here's what happens: you and your friend grab dinner at a nice restaurant and agree to split a big beer. It's a weeknight, no reason to get crazy. The waitress bring you two glasses of ice and pours the beer over it. It's freezing cold and watery, so you suck it down like H₂O. It doesn't even taste like beer, and it's so refreshing in this heat! Suddenly, it's two hours later, you're both hammered and the bill is hundreds more than you counted on. That sly waitress has been opening beers for you all night because you weren't paying close enough attention to stop her. Now's a good time to remember how awesome it is that you just got accidentally drunk on less than ten bucks.

Pellet Guns

My neighbors are a family of friendly, welcoming firefighters and cops, all upstanding citizens who drop by every now and again to have a beer and a chat. Great neighbors and ostensibly normal people. But every now and again, they stroll past the house, dressed in full fatigues and packing heat. One flicks aside a cigarette, nods at me, and says simply, "gun game." He's headed to the paintball-like setup he's built in the backyard, where he and his friends and family will unload pellets on each other for the next hour or so. They love it. And they're not alone. The pudgy five-year-old son of the owner of a farang-frequented restaurant once came barreling around a corner and showered my boyfriend with these pretend bullets. No you'll-shoot-your-eye-out concerns here. Luckily, they're gentle enough that it's mostly funny rather than painful.

Elephants



So you're sitting at an outdoor restaurant, enjoying some chashew chicken and a beer on ice. Or maybe you're cruising down Amphur, dodging street dogs and weaving through traffic whilst unconcernedly driving on the wrong side of the road. Suddenly, there's an elephant. Despite his size, he's initially tough to spot on the poorly-lit road, and at first you only see the sparkly pom-pom tied to his tail. But sure enough, that's an elephant. Perched on a sort of saddle on his back is the driver, steering the creature by its ears. Within a few seconds, the guy walking next to the pair has noticed you're white and is trying to sell you some elephant treats.

This may not seem strange in principle, considering that elephants are native to Thailand and white people think they're pretty cool. It logically follows that some entrepreneurial Thai person would, through God knows what channels, obtain an elephant and train it to amuse tourists. It's natural and actually pretty depressing. But even with all that in mind, I challenge you to keep your cool the first time time one strolls up to your dinner table. It's an extraordinary experience.

Open shock upon seeing non-Thai people

I'd already lived in two foreign countries before moving to Thailand, so I'm no stranger to sideways looks of curiosity. I was, however, completely unprepared for the intensity of the spotlight in Surat. I don't think it's xenophobia so much as awe and curiosity, but whatever it is, it can get sometimes feel a bit uncomfortable. Because Surat isn't a tourist destination, white faces aren't something locals are used to seeing. They make no bones about it: you are a strange and hilarious sight. They point, laugh, drop their jaws and say "farang," with no attempt at a whisper. Vendors and tuk-tuk drivers unabashedly charge you more than Thai people, even when you clearly just watched them pay less, and your co-teachers, while explaining your instructions to your baffled kids, won't refer to you by name, but as Teacher Farang. There are days when this

can feel less than great, and coming from a heterogeneous society where this sort of behavior is unacceptable, it can feel like alienation or even racism. But I really think it's honest curiosity and surprise. And the good side of it is that everyone calls you beautiful all the time, which never hurts.

Surat is real Thailand, for better and for worse. The best thing you can do is accept all this glorious weirdness and play along. Once you embrace the oddities, it's a great experience.