

Motorcycles in Surat

The How and Why's of buying, owning and riding a motorcycle in the City of Good People

Finding a Motorcycle

There are many ways to find a motorcycle in Surat. Here are the usual routes:

1. Contact a departing teacher and negotiate a price for their bike. You will need to transfer money to them, most likely via Western Union. They can store in the bike in SE housing and give the key to Wen or another teacher who will be staying.
2. Look on the Surat Facebook page. Many departing teachers sell their bikes there.
3. Ask Wen to help you once you arrive. She'll spend a few days looking for a bike at a good price and then take you to the shops.

Buying a Motorcycle

The price for a bike can range from 9000 baht to over 50000 baht, depending on the age and quality of the bike. The usual range for used bikes is between 10000-20000 baht. If you want a newer, better bike, expect to pay between 25000-30000 baht. A brand new bike can be anywhere between 30000-50000 baht.

When you buy a bike there are several things you want to look at:

1. The condition of the bike. If it looks like it will fall apart, it will probably fall apart quite often.
2. Start up the bike. Or try to start it up. If you have trouble even starting the bike then you may want to reconsider.
3. Does the bike come with registration papers? This is a crucial question. More on that in a moment.
4. Would you be able to sell it back to the shop upon your departure? If you pay more to buy a bike from a shop, you can ask them how much they would be willing to pay for it after one year. They will not want to give you a clear answer, of course. Just smile and agree with them and keep asking. Eventually they'll give you a price which will obviously be lower than what you paid but you'll have a fallback should you not be able to sell it to an incoming teacher.

The Need for Registration Papers

Upon purchasing a bike, the registration papers will either be filled out for you or simply handed to you. They will be in a Thai person's name, most likely Wen's. This is fine. The only thing that matters is that the bike is legally registered and you have a registration document which you can produce.

If you do not have a registration document, the police will assume that the bike is stolen. They will not assume that you actually stole it, but rather that you bought it from the notorious motorcycle bandit who steals bikes from good Thai people and then sells them to unsuspecting white visitors.

Road stops for motorbikes are quite common in Thailand. Especially towards the end of every month, the cops will be out and pulling over every motorcyclist to check their license and registration papers.

You do not need an international license. Well, legally you probably do but I've always shown them my Virginia license. They look at it and say "USA?". I say, "Yes, USA." Then they smile and go "USA!" and then I drive on my merry way. So the international license doesn't seem to matter much. The Surat police wouldn't know what one looked like anyway, nor would they be able to read it.

You **do** need registration papers. If you do not have registration papers there is a very good chance the police will take your bike. You will panic, you will cry, you will ask questions in English which they can't answer, and you will call Wen, who will be powerless to help you. *If you do not have registration papers, there is nothing Wen can do to help you.* She could come and talk with the police but it won't do any good, and it would just be a waste of time.

If you don't have papers, the best you can hope for is a large fine which you have to pay in cash right there. End of the month, get it? But even getting to that point will take hours of trying to convince the cops to not take the bike.

The other aspect to not having registration papers is that if you are in an accident, your financial responsibility could be considerably larger, probably because you're riding around on an illegal bike.

No, you cannot buy an unregistered bike and then register it. To do so means leaving it with the police while they check every record of every missing/stolen motorcycle in Thailand to see if the one you left with them pops up. You'd probably get it back a year after you arrived. The registration of a bike either comes with it from the previous owner or gets done at the bike shop.

In summation, **do not buy a bike without registration papers.** If you decide to do so anyway because of price or convenience, understand now that we cannot help you if something happens. There is nothing we can do. If you have registration papers then, yes, we can and will help you.

Riding a Motorcycle

1. **Always wear a helmet.** I have known Thai people who died from small hits to their heads when falling off a motorcycle. They got right up after falling, had a headache later, took some medicine, went to bed, died in their sleep and started swelling up like huge balloons. Seriously, always wear a helmet.
2. **Start in the fourth gear.** This seems counter-intuitive but motorcycles aren't the same as cars. They're much lighter. If you start in the first gear on a bike it will be nearly impossible to control. It will be so sensitive that even the slightest bit of gas will make the bike shoot forward like you're riding a bull at a rodeo. Unless you're a very experienced driver and familiar with your bike, starting in (or even using) the first or second gear will almost guarantee you have an accident. For new drivers I always recommend starting in the fourth gear. So after you put on your helmet and start your bike, click the gear four times. This will give you a nice easy, smooth ride. Most likely you'll forget this important piece of advice the first time you ride a bike, but you'll remember as soon as you give the bike some gas and it shoots out from

under you. Then you'll think, "Oh yeah, Peter said to start in the fourth gear. I better shift up to the fourth gear. Hey, that's much better! The bike is so much easier to manage now."

3. **Always keep your eyes forward.** Thai drivers are crazy. More than crazy. Unpredictably crazy. Like suddenly pulling a u-turn on a one way bridge crazy. Or deciding to pull directly out into traffic at a snail's pace crazy. Or cutting right in front of you and hit the brakes while they are driving and carrying their newborn baby at the same time. Crazy. If you take your eyes off what is immediately in front of you for split second you could suddenly discover that a large truck with no working tail lights has suddenly decided to come to a complete stop in the middle of the road for no apparent reason whatsoever and there is no way you can avoid hitting it. Yes, that happened to me. Which brings me to my next tip:
4. **(Try to) Drive slow.** This is very difficult on bikes. They are fast little things and once you are comfortable driving them it is very easy to speed. They are very good at driving fast. They are terrible at stopping. The brakes are crap. Most likely because if you came to a complete, abrupt stop you would flip off the bike head first. But as it is now, if you're going anywhere over 30 kmph you won't stop when you slam on the brakes. You'll continue to skid or slide for quite a ways. I was going 45 kmph, which isn't that fast, when I had my accident and I slid at least 10 feet into the back of a moronic truck. Even at 45 kmph and brakes pressed down so hard I pulled something in my wrist, I hit the back of the truck so hard that I bounced off of it, directly into the traffic that was coming from the opposite direction. So drive slow. Or at least try to.
5. **Watch out for the exhaust pipe.** Many people have been scarred getting off their bike and accidentally pressing their leg against the exhaust pipe. Watch out. It's hot.

Additional Comments and Stories from SE motorcycle riders:

Joe Rengstorf:

Laura and I had good luck buying a bike from an outgoing teacher sight unseen. It was a very fair price which we found out after hearing what the market is like here. We weren't too picky so that helped. We sent a money order to an address in the States but there are easier ways to pay the person. The logistics is entirely up to the people involved and your co-workers will be happy to store the bike somewhere safe.

As far as riding the bike, it took me a few days to feel comfortable and a few weeks to feel somewhat confident. On my second day riding, I learned the hard way that making sure your kickstand is up is important and that 1st gear is rarely needed. Peter gave me great advice in that you don't need to start the bike in first. First gear can be trouble on scooters, too much torque and jerkiness. Laura and I were much happier when we spent most our time in 3rd and 4th gear.

Biking in Surat can be intense, but study the flow, expect people to always want to pass, and don't take it personally when people pass you 3 abreast or come into your lane. They aren't out to get you. They just love passing everyone.

Laura Rengstorf:

I would say that to transfer money between teachers is best done through Paypal or send a money order to an address in the states. Paypal can be done online and there is no worry of

anything getting lost in the mail, this is great for transferring money to and from American bank accounts.

Daniel Trevor

I drive the all too common automatic Honda Click. 115 cc of raw convenience. I stick my key in the ignition, press a button, and with a flip of the wrist I'm on my way. Cruising like a champion through the mean streets of SuratThani. I've never driven a Segway scooter before, but I often liken the automatic bikes to one of those; mainly because I enjoy groundless assumptions, but also because of their effortless nature. My girl costs me about 150 baht a week in gas and the only upkeep she's needed over the last 10 months has been oil changes and flat tire replacements.

The roads here will certainly take some getting used to at first, but it shouldn't take more than a few weeks before you understand the pace and style of driving. And after driving in areas like Phuket and Bangkok the streets here will seem much less daunting. Thai people don't follow the standard grid format that we're so used to in the western world. Stopping at stop signs or checking your mirrors before merging/turning is admitting defeat to the Thai driver. Awareness is key, as is the understanding that standard rules of the road don't always apply here.

I have been involved in two accidents since arriving here 14 months ago. In neither case was I driving, so I can only assume that I'm a terrible passenger. Luckily neither crash was very serious, but they were certainly scary. I was particularly afraid of the hospital bills they would produce, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that my SCB insurance covered all the costs. SCB is the Thai Bank that you will open an account with upon arriving here. If they offer you the DEBIT PLUS card, accept. It's a one-time cost of (about) 500 baht, which insures you coverage of up to 5,000 baht for each accident you have for as long as you hold the card.

My final words of wisdom: always wear a helmet and never forget... it's all in the hips.