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The author travels to Thailand and experiences something very different from Kashmir.

It was a little past 3 in the evening when my plane landed at the Suvarnabumi International Airport in Bangkok. I had left my room roughly around 8.30 in the morning, and here I was now, nearing the end of my journey. Airports are always a nice sight for me, reflecting a unique blend of westernisation, modern architecture, culture and a great centre for tax-free shopping. I would really love the day, when I could step inside a shop or two, with the weight of my wallet promising me great stuff and experiences. However, I still have a lot of years to go till then. I breezed past the high-end shops while staring inside to get a glimpse of all the colours of creation. Finally, after immigration, and shiny Visa-On-Arrival, I walked my way to the arrival section of the airport, until I finally saw my cousin. "Welcome to Thailand!", said my lean cousin, ushering me into a big bus.

A guy handed me a ticket with a smile, and joined his hands in the form of a much familiar 'namaste'. This traditional greeting is known as the wai, where you press your hands together as is in prayer and bow slightly. Among Thais, there are strict rules of hierarchy that dictate how and when the wai should be given. Inferiors salute superiors first and people do not wai service people or street vendors. The higher your hands go, the more respectful you are. I nodded back in respect and went to my seat.

I read the ticket, that he gave, with concentration, and noticed a peculiar thing. The date had a 2553 instead of the usual 2010. A mistake, I thought. I later came to know that the Thai Calendar is 543 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar. This date didnt see m that strange to me because of my familiarity with our own Islamic calendar dates. Thai calendar is solar as compared to the Islamic calendar which is lunar. I also learnt that Thai dates in English are often written as **B.E.**, short for "Buddhist Era".

Speaking of Buddhism, Thai culture is heavily influenced by Buddhism. Thai temples known as wats, with plenty of gold and easily identifiable with their style of multicolored, pointy roofs . The Buddhist monks are meant to avoid the temptation of women, and they do not touch women or take things from women's hands. The monks are not allowed to accept money. Amazing. Good for them,

There was this particular guy sitting with me in a bus today, from Poland. He was bald, well-built and particularly reddish for my taste. After striking up a conversation, I received all sorts of crazy information, that I think made me more wiser than I was this morning, running after a taxi.

This guy works in Petronas, in an offshore plant near Myanmar. We talked about a lot of issues, ranging from weather to highly sensitive issues like religion. Mysteriously, he seemed well informed about quite a lot of things, particularly the history of India, Pakistan and the stuff going on in Kashmir. He even poked me when he saw a rare occurrence of a magnificent mosque on the way, and then smiled.. I smiled back.

I keep my distance, being careful enough not to extend the conversation upto the point where volcanoes usually line up to burst the heat out, the point of no return in religious talk. I had to try and talk to him, but within the comfort zones. It ended with a polite goodbye from my side and cheek-wide smile from him. Hoping to see him around (Not that I would recognise him but I just hope).

Coming back, Thai people are majority Buddhists, with a few Muslim minorities here and there. Buddhism is thus everywhere, part of the culture, cuisine and crowd. The rest of the troops comprise of red-skinned people, from countries such as Russia, Germany and even Israel. (Unlike Malaysians, Thai people dont have any trouble with the Israeli people). Thus, as on 22nd November 2010, I hereby recorded my first sight of an Israeli couple, scribbling away their immigration related papers.

People in Thailand look astonishingly different from the familiar Chinese, Indians, and the Malay faces that I have grown accustomed to. The second surprise was their language, which an untrained ear may take for a song played on some kind of ghostly instrument. The language isn't exactly Chinese, is no where near to it actually. It reminds me of the similarity between our own mother-tongue(s) Kashmiri and Urdu; they are just not the same my Kashmiri brothren.

Unlike here in Kashmir, horns are used judiciously. I was quite amazed that everyone seemed to follow the traffic rules. Here, back in the valley of the saints, the chaos looks more or less organised, as men, chicken and vehicles wiggle pass on the roads without care.

After travelling for around 2 more hours in the bus, we finally arrived in Pattaya. Pattaya is a beach resort city, filled with Russians and outsiders who have come to holiday. The first thing I did there was climb a Tuk-Tuk, the famous transport of Thailand, which bears quite a striking resemblance to our "Khataare-Auto". Only that its as big as a Tata-Sumo, and can seat around 10 people and many more standing.

Early the following morning, we took a taxi to "The Million Years Stone Park and Pattaya Crocodile Farm". Its like a living museum of natural beauty and exotic animals. I had a chance to watch a live Crocodile show, and click some pictures with really big tigers. The tigers were chained ofcourse, but not behind any barriers. Scary.

Later that day, we went to the "Elephant Sanctuary". This was my first time when I felt and smelt an elephant's trunk. They also had a cool show there, with local dance, historical play, local martial arts demonstration, and a cool elephant show as well. I managed to get a picture clicked as two elephants lift me up high in the sky.

Thailand is the most popular tourist destination in Southeast Asia, and for a reason. You can find almost anything here: thick jungle as green as can be, crystal blue beaches and food that can curl your nose hairs while tap dancing across your taste buds. Well, correction about the food part. Thai food is popular, and good to have if you are in Malaysia. Primarily because Thailand meat is not Halal, and where-ever it is, there is pork served side by side or alcoholic drinks. Even the so called fast-food chains that we believe serve Halal food dont. Well, I would like to point out to our Kashmiri Muslim community that the chicken isnt Halal at the KFC outlets in Delhi, or in any other part of India; atleast not in Select CityWalk mall. If you think it is, check with manager of the outlet, he would be moving inside the outlet in a bossy manner.

As a frequent traveller, I would suggest to eat as little, and as nutritious as possible. Meats are a strict no, which includes chicken from McDonalds, KFC or any other chain which your friends have told you about. My trip to

Thailand followed a similar rule. I did go to KFC for my lunch and dinner, but I wasn't particularly going to relish the birds in two flavours of original and spicy. For the first couple of days, I was seen eating a cupful of rice and a large mashed potato. Later, I had my flesh cravings on a significant increase, and I changed my potatoes to a small helping of fried fish. Fish is thus the new life saver.

After getting my caloric supply right, I went into an internet parlour, which promised of reasonable speed. I found a nice PC and opened the web-browser. As a tech-aware person (something I am always involved in, unlike my occasional hobby of writing), I felt a need to spy around. I followed the wire from the keyboard and saw a small device attached to it before it went inside the PC cabinet. A keylogger, yes. Many of you might not know what a keylogger is. A popular online resource Wikipedia defines Key Logging as *“the action of tracking (or logging) the keys struck on a keyboard, typically in a covert manner so that the person using the keyboard is unaware that their actions are being recorded.”* Typically, it is used to copy passwords and do all sort of follow-up stuff. I promptly stood back up, and left. After this, my internet ventures were managed by buying a prepaid wireless connection. Scary Thailand.

You know what's more scarier? Robbery. My cousin told me about people getting drugged and robbed while travelling on overnight buses. I remember my evenings in Kashmir, around 7 pm, very clearly. It was the moment when time stopped in my house, the clocks bore an ugly sight. 7 pm, the time for the local news in Kashmir, full of boring, uninteresting stories. Everyday half an hour of my life, went into the pathetic blabbering of boring incidents around the valley. I don't blame them, children always have much more interesting stuff to do.

Evening news in Thailand is interesting, in the fact that it's spicy. Who stole what, who killed what, news about Russian tourists, girlfriends, scandals, drugs, and drunken old men. Interesting.

As I read on this T-Shirt somewhere:

"Good men go to Heaven, bad men come to Pattaya"