

True Tales of a Traveller Series

10: One Day in Bangkok

"Scuse me, mate," he said, as I neared him. "Can you help me?" I could detect an Australian accent.

"Sure," I told him.

He drew a deep breath before offering me his map. "I can't make head or tail of this," he told me, handing me his map, shaking his head. "Got to admit it; I'm completely stumped. This city is hellishly confusing, and so is this bloody map."

"Well, let's have a look", I said in the manner of someone taking confident command of the situation as I took the map from him. "Where are you trying to get to?"

A street called Khao San Road, in a place called Banglamphu, he told me. I laughed. "Well, you're almost there; you didn't go far wrong. Hang a right at the next street," I gestured back in the direction I had just come, "and it's the second turn on your left. Can't miss it; you'll be there in five minutes."

An air of optimism seemed to wash over him and flush away the despondency of only a minute earlier. "Oh, right...great. Guess you've been here a while then, to know your way around so well?"

"Less than a week, actually. It is a bit confusing at first, I must admit, but it won't take long to find your way around once you've got the basic layout of the place. Piece of cake!"

The Aussie stood up, shook my hand and thanked me before going on his way. I went on mine with more confidence than ever before; I was beginning to feel like an old Bangkok hand. I had to chuckle as I reminded myself that I had actually been in the city for far less than I had just let on to the Australian; a little less than 24 hours in fact. Imagine how envious Sean and Tony would be, I said to myself, if they knew that I was not only well on my way to Australia, but had already got myself fixed up with a southeast Asian girlfriend, who may well eventually be going to join me Down Under!

However, my pride was a little premature.

I discovered the bank's foreign exchange facilities to be woefully inadequate. Following a sign to the first floor (or the second floor for Americans), I found that the bank had reserved just one desk for foreign exchange, before which stood a long line of foreign visitors waiting to change money. I joined the queue.

Finally, my time came, and I took a seat opposite the bank teller, a bespectacled young Thai of around my own age.

I pulled the booklet of American Express traveller's cheques from my money belt, and took the topmost 50 pound sterling cheque from it, which I then placed on the desk.

"Could you cash...?"

Something inexplicable had apparently happened to my booklet of traveller cheques and I was unable to finish my sentence on account of this.

Puzzlingly, the booklet of thirty 50 pound travellers' cheques seemed to have become mixed up with some kind of newspaper cuttings of the same size as the cheques, which were linked together origami style. I perused them, looking for a clue of some kind. The newspaper cuttings were all in Thai. I couldn't remember putting them there, and couldn't think of any reason why I would. And there was no sign of any of the other cheques in the booklet; only the one on top, which I had just placed on the teller's desk in front of me.

"Yes, sir?" I heard the teller say. "Do you want to cash this?"

Slowly, I pulled the long stream of newspaper cuttings from the booklet, stretching them nearly to their full length of about two metres, and hoping that my remaining cheques would fall out from somewhere within the cuttings, where they may have become trapped.

Then a realisation came to me, like a knockout punch delivered in slow motion. Somebody *had* entered Zara's hotel room the day before, found my money belt, removed all but the top cheque and replaced those cheques with newspaper cuttings purpose-cut to the same size. Incredible. And when I had put my head out of the bathroom, that person must have been hiding, lying behind the bed! It was the only explanation. All my energy seemed to drain from my body.

I barely heard the teller's voice put another couple of questions to me, but finally he became insistent

"Sir! Can I help you? Are you alright?"

I remembered then that there had been a long line of people waiting to change money; I wasn't the only one.

"Are you alright?" the teller asked again. I suppose the colour must have drained from my face.

"My travellers cheques have all been stolen." I sighed.