

True Tales of a Traveller Series

Winter Break

Throughout this bus journey, I travelled with my luggage - a large sports holdall (with a number of hidden and unhidden pockets) - on my lap. While still in Taiwan, I had been unsure whether to take this bag or a backpack, but was later glad to have chosen the former. Although a backpack was more difficult to separate from the holder, it could be surreptitiously opened from behind in crowded, noisy places, without the carrier even knowing it. Before arriving in Manila, I thought that there was only a marginal possibility of such a thing happening, and even then, only 'crowded, noisy, places' would present thieves with suitable opportunities. But by the time I took the bus to Puerto Galera, I felt sure that no place in the Philippines was safe from thieves. Even on the bus, with my arms around my bag, I felt it would be very unwise to fall asleep. My intuition, on this occasion at least, was right on the mark.

I noticed un-uniformed armed men in the street at several locations only 10 or 20 minutes after leaving the bus station. Some were in groups, but others were simply individuals walking around with rifles slung on their shoulders. I was later told that the shantytowns on the city's outskirts were already under the control of the New Peoples' Army, which was consolidating its forces in preparation for a final assault on the capital. That year, the NPA's so-called 'sparrow' assassination units would murder dozens of police officers in Manila, not to mention American military personnel, foreign businessmen and other 'legitimate targets'. Those targets even included foreign nationals who had set up small businesses like shops and restaurants, just because they were citizens of non-communist countries, which made them 'the enemy'.

When the bus arrived at the Batangas bus terminus and ferry pier, I noticed that most of the locals, especially the younger ones, were quick to disembark, while the foreign backpacking crowd were last. At first, I thought this was simply because the foreigners were carrying heavy baggage and were also less sure about their next stops - like myself. But after a few moments it became apparent that something was wrong. Six or seven foreign travellers, which was all of us, except for myself and another young European man who was travelling with his local girlfriend, were in state of extreme confusion, as some of the content of their backpacks - which had been on the overhead racks - fell to the floor of the bus.

A young German woman, very upset, pointed to the rips in the bottom of her backpack, as her male travel companion looked on in astonishment. The bus driver had by now turned around to look at the commotion, and immediately broke into a wide smile. He seemed to be chuckling to himself, but after a few minutes he grew tired of observing this scene, and hurried the remaining passengers off the bus, telling them to report the thefts at the local police station. But the smile never left his face. What concerned me most about the whole incident was not so much the fact that all those travellers had lost their valuables, unfortunate as that was - I was already expecting something like this at any time, even if the scale and the skill of the thievery surprised me - but my inner conviction that the bus driver was happy to see all this. I wondered if he were in cahoots with the thieves, perhaps allowing them to ride back and forth between Manila and Batangas for free, or whether he was simply pleased to see the foreigner travellers lose their valuables.

I also realised that while the travellers' bags had been on the overhead racks and had been furtively slit open so that the thieves could rifle around inside and steal anything of value, the travellers themselves had probably been in happy conversation with the thieves, as a ploy on the thieves' part to distract attention. And all this had been carried out so stealthily, that even in my heightened state of alert, with a full view of the entire bus interior in front of me, I hadn't noticed anything.

Safety in Numbers

Standing in the sunshine, enjoying the sea breezes at the back of the deck on the ferry, with my bag by my side, all other passengers within my sight in front of me and nothing behind me but a handrail, I met Daniel, the young, bearded European man who had been travelling on the bus with his local girlfriend. A deeply-tanned, muscular Swiss national in his early twenties who had grown up in the UK and was consequently fluent in English, he and his girlfriend, Susan, introduced themselves from where they were sitting a few metres away, commenting that they had noticed me being harassed by a couple of local scam artists the previous evening (at the place I had eaten before returning to the hotel). He also commented that I had done the right thing by ignoring them, and then described the tactics of the two local scam artists, and their aim. I had thought almost nothing of the interaction at the time, and had completely forgotten about it until Daniel

mentioned it, but as soon as he did, I realised I had closely escaped yet another chance to lose my valuables.

Also on the deck, several off-duty American military men from Clarke Air Force Base flirted with their local girlfriends. I had mixed feelings about these women and their boyfriends. The girls were, I felt, only a step or two up from prostitutes, something like groupies, but for regular Americans serving in the Philippines rather than for rock stars. On the other hand, I could hardly blame them for seizing the chance to utilise what assets they had at their disposal to attempt an escape from this 'south-east Asian island paradise', particularly after all I had learnt about life in the country in less than two days.

But among some of the other, male, Philippine nationals on board the ferry, there was an unmistakable atmosphere of tension and resentment. Their hard, unsmiling stares said it all. The sunshine, wind and waves masked this underlying tension to the point that the Americans, preoccupied with their girlfriends as they were, were apparently unaware of it. But I noticed the look of disdain on the face of one man in his thirties, sitting at the other end of the deck; for me his hatred of the Americans was almost palpable, and I half expected it to explode into violence at any moment.