

[attach photos of fried lizards on a skewer, cow's rear along road, Lek at the Mekong River,

During my time in Thailand, in these reports from the field I have made very controversial statements about sex, religion, politics, and the insanity of our species, and no one blinks an eye. But by far the most controversial thing I have written, judging from the number of people who reacted negatively, is when I reported killing the mouse that had invaded my kitchen. Several people informed me of mousetraps that do not kill the mouse. I know, I know, believe me I have tried to find such a contraption in Thailand. But everyone I asked about such a humane trap either laughed, or looked at me strangely like I was insane. In a subsistence economy like this village, where people eat rats, mice, lizards, frogs, insects, landcrabs, snails, and any other moving thing that has an ounce of protein on its bones, the idea of letting a mouse go free is sort of ludicrous. Overfed Americans may snicker, but it is amazing how quickly a person will change their opinion when they are hungry and have no money to buy food.

The elderly woman who lives across the street just came by, holding a large live wiggling lizard in her fingers, ready to prepare the evening meal for her family. I actually find fried lizards on a skewer [SEE PHOTO] to be quite delicious. I asked her if people also eat geckos, which are everywhere. She said no, which surprised me. That is fine with me, because I like them when they are small. They eat insects and are cute as they run all over the walls. But when they get big, the size of a large rat, they can be rather intimidating as they glare at me from above. Yesterday I came home to find two large geckos in a bloody battle. One had the other firmly in the grip of its teeth, and there was a lot of blood dripping down to the floor. Maybe they get territorial when they get big, and that is why there are so few big ones around.

These complaints about the mousetrap remind me of how much Americans love to complain. So, having been put into the mood I will do a bit of complaining myself. Those of you who have been following my reports from Thailand have heard me wax poetic about how wonderful Thailand is. Well, now it is time to tell some of the negatives. So this email is my complaint page.

While in general I like the food here, there are a few American foods that I really miss. A search in Maha Sarakham revealed that only one grocery store in the city carries cereal, but it is solely the kids' junkfood stuff that is packed with sugar. I brought enough Grape-Nuts cereal with me from America to last three months, but now I am running out. The largest grocery store in Bangkok carries Muesli from Germany, which is a non-sugar cereal, but I do not want to make the 8 hour journey there just to get cereal.

Nobody here in this province has even heard of mayonnaise or peanut butter. When I went to a grocery store in another city about two hours from here, I was surprised to find

both. I have never seen such a small jar of mayonnaise, or such a tiny bit of peanut butter, but they were very expensive since imported from America. Nevertheless I bought several jars of each, and have savored a homemade tunafish sandwich followed by a peanut butter sandwich (no jelly available) that I never thought of as more than a quick fix at home. After my previous meal of fried frogs (each frog eaten whole, in one gulp, bones and all), this was a real treat!

I will not complain about things that I no longer notice, such as the buffalo dung that is everywhere on the streets. Please don't tell me to use the sidewalks, because there are none. Every evening before dusk, as the cows and buffalos are being herded home from their grazing pastures, they pack the roads. A car, motorcycle or bus has to wait patiently for the bovines to mozie on over to the side of the road, on their own sweet time. Must be the cows' revenge, for humans eating them! Patience is definitely a virtue here.

I will complain only briefly about some of the obvious things. Most frustrating for me is the way technological things do not work as well. Tools are made so shoddily that they break after a few weeks of use. I made the mistake of installing a western-style toilet in the bathroom, and it flushes properly about one in three times. I may have to put in a Thai squat toilet, which at least does not have moving parts that could break. Above all other technological problems, however, for me the worse is the inability to get an internet connection that works from my house, or from anywhere in this village. My mother emails me that I should just hook up to a phone line. But there are no phone lines in the rural areas. People use only mobile cell phones here.

So, if I want to do emails I have to drive an hour over bumpy dirt roads to get to the city to an internet shop (where the internet may be working well or it may be incredibly slow). The officials at the district government office, which is in a town only a half hour away, have been incredibly kind in letting me use their internet connection, but sometimes they are busy using it, and sometimes it is not working at all. Plus, government offices are only open Monday to Friday from 9am to 4pm, except for holidays (of which there are many). Sometimes I will drive the half hour to the office, only to find that it is closed so that the staff can attend one of the national government's many meetings and training sessions.

So, I complain only briefly about the limitations of technology or food in these parts, and the bountifulness of cow dung. What brings my ire up to the level of a virtuous American complainer, that part of my personality that is like the Puritan preacher who has just discovered original sin, is the Thai Immigration Department.

First, in setting the situation, my Thai drivers' license that I got a year ago has expired. In Thailand, though, one cannot go to the Department of Motor Vehicles and renew one's license until AFTER it has expired. That is, officials will not let one renew until at least one day after the expiration date shown on the license. Therefore, one has to get someone else to drive to get the renewal, unless you want to take the chance of driving with an expired license. So, Lek dutifully drove me to the proper office. The official took a look at my passport and said that I need to get a letter from the Thai Immigration

Office, saying that I am legally in Thailand, before they can issue me a renewal. I showed them the stamp in my passport that clearly shows I am in Thailand legally, and offered to make a photocopy. That is not enough. They need an official letter.

The requirement was a pain, but at least the timing was good.

VISA EXTENSION

I entered Thailand on December 26, on a three month tourist visa that costs \$30. Since I am staying in Thailand for six months this time, I paid \$60 for two three-month visas. I will have to leave Thailand after three months, but then I can enter again on the next day. Foreigners who spend a lot of time in Thailand call these trips “Visa Runs,” and they dutifully travel to cross the border into Laos on the north and northeast, Cambodia on the southeast, Myanmar on the west, or Malaysia on the south. After paying a fee to enter and exit that country, even if only briefly, the foreigner can come back into Thailand for another three month visa. This whole system is nuts, but the three month visa is the standard length of time offered by many countries.

However, in addition to this exit after three months, the Thai government has an additional requirement. After being in the country for two months, the Thai government requires every alien on a tourist visa to get an “extension of stay” stamp at a Thai government immigration office. Why this particular stipulation is required for the last 30 days of the 90 day tourist visa has never been adequately explained to me, and when I ask no official seems to know the reason. “That is just what the law requires” is invariably the reply, the last refuge of bureaucrats throughout the planet.

What makes this requirement so onerous is that the main Immigration Offices in Bangkok and Chiang Mai are eight and twelve hour bus rides from here. And in northeast Thailand where I am living, which is way off the tourist paths, there are no Immigration Offices except at border crossings. Maha Sarakham province where I live is nowhere near a border. By looking on the map, though, I found the three closest border crossings. One of them is in the south on a road that goes to Cambodia, one is in the north next to Laos, and one is to the east also bordering Laos at the city of Mukdahan

I tried phoning that office, but the immigration official did not speak much English, so she did not understand my question. All I could get from her was “you must come here!” Next I telephoned the Immigration Office near Cambodia, and the officer told me that if I came within one week after the date stamped on my visa that I would not be charged a late fee. To make sure about this, I phoned the Immigration Office to the north, and was told the same thing. I spoke very simply, saying “I came into Thailand on December 26. I need to get an extension of stay after two months. How many days do I have after the date stamped on my visa, before I am charged a late fee?” Once again, the officer said that I have seven days after the date, to come in to be stamped for the extension of stay.

Just to be sure, I still wanted to go on February 26. But we discovered the car was leaking gas, and the back tire tread was dangerously worn, so Lek had to take it in to the city for repair and to buy a new tire. I figured that one day late would not be a problem.

So, on the morning of February 27 we left for Mukdahan. I chose to travel to this office because it was a bit closer than the other border crossings. I have never been to this area of eastern Thailand, so I chose that site hoping to see some things of interest along the way.

Since my driver license had expired, Lek drove the whole way. It was a harrowing journey along narrow two-lane roads. School kids were riding motorcycles two abreast, chatting with each other nonchalantly as big trucks and buses whizzed by a few inches away. As usual on Thai highways, cars and buses passed with absolutely no regard for the yellow line street markings in the middle of the road. At one point a car stopped, right in the middle of the lane on this busy highway, to talk to a pedestrian. Traffic came to a screeching halt behind. Not one person blew their horn or complained as the driver chatted away. At another spot, a cow that was standing next to the road suddenly bolted and ran across the road right in front of us. As Lek expertly stopped just a hair's breath from the cow, I was sure in both these incidents someone was going to rear-end us. At another turn in the road, a cow plodded slowly along, right in the middle of the road. Since the cow was bigger than the car, we had no choice but to watch the cow's rear as we inched along behind it [SEE PHOTO]. Despite all these multi-species hazards, no accident occurred. I was glad I was not driving.

After four hours of driving like this, we finally reached Mukdahan. Lek was very tired from the driving, and my nerves were a wreck. Yuck, I wish all this "extension of stay" idiocy could be done online, or at a police office or other local office that did not require such a long journey. But that is not the way things work, so I had to get that stamp in my passport. Mukdahan was the nearest possible locale, and driving four hours to get there was a lot more convenient than taking eight hours to drive to Bangkok,

Oh, I long for the day when people will be free to live where they want to live, and travel where they want to travel, without having to deal with passports and getting permission from national governments. In my view, the freedom to travel should be considered a basic human right. Just as people in the United States can move to whatever state they wish to visit or live in, without asking the permission of a government, I predict that one day (long after I am gone) this will be the reality for the world. I remember the first time I went to Europe on a Eurail Pass, having to have my passport inspected by various dour officials as the train raced across one border after another when going from one little country to another. Officials said that is just the way things are done in Europe, and it will never change. Now, though, I have lived to see all that passport nonsense become a thing of the past in Europe. People are now free to go throughout the European Union, just as Americans can go from state to state. When, oh when, will this simple principle be applied to the whole world?

My thoughts were so occupied as we parked in front of the Immigration Office. As soon as we entered the office, I knew I was in trouble. Unlike every other Immigration Office where I have gone, from the main office in Bangkok to the branch offices in Chiang Mai and Nong Kai, where officials speak good English and are consistently kind and helpful, at this office there was no greeting of "Sawadee Ka" or "May I help you?" Only a glare.

The officious looking stocky woman behind the counter gave me this look, letting me know that my presence was a rude interruption of her day (even though her job is to serve the tourists who need their passport stamped). When I said I was here to get an extension of stay, she only reached out wordlessly with her hand to grab my passport. Looking down her nose at my Thai passport, she snickered as she read the stamp and then looked up at me. Harshly she barked: “You overstay visa!” With a pen she stabbed at a sign on the wall like she was in a fencing contest. The sign stated that overstaying a visa requires a payment that has recently been increased to 500 baht per day. “You four day overstay. You owe 2,000 late fee.”

Seeing my look of surprise only goaded her to press onward. With special sensitivity training that she must have received in Paris during the Nazi occupation, she barked again: “Four day overstay.” To prove her point, she grabbed a calculator and punched 500 multiplied by four, equaling 2,000. As she thrust it in my face, she continued to repeat “Si wan, song pan” [4 days, two thousand baht]. I was sure I heard a German accent.

“I understand what you are saying. But,” I sputtered, “Today is February 27. I was admitted on December 26. So I have two months before I have to get the extension of stay. That was yesterday. I am only one day late.” At this point she thrust the page in my passport in my face, pointing at the stamp that was put in when I entered Thailand stamped 26 December 2007. The date of my entry showed clearly, but below that was another line labeled “Admitted until” The date that was stamped in that spot was so fuzzy that it was hard to read, but since it was for two months I assumed it said 26 FEB 2008. However, she pointed to the number and said “yi siep sam” [23]. I looked again, and on close inspection I could see that the numeral I thought was a 6 was actually a 3. But the stamp was so faint on the page, with the upper right part of the 3 so unclear that it could be read as either 3 or 6.

“Why would the Thai government give me two months entry, and not give me exactly two months? December 26 to February 26.” I pleaded with increasing exasperation.

“Yi siep SAM” she repeated, pointing to the fuzzy stamp on the page, with stress on the SAM [three].

“OK” I replied, ready to begin my next line of argument: “Even if it is February 23, I still have seven days grace period before I have to pay a late fee.”

“NO” she barked again, “Si wan, song pan.”

I then explained that I had phoned not one but two Immigration Offices, and both of them had told me that I would not have to pay a late fee if I came for the extension of stay stamp within seven days of my “admitted until” date. “I am only four days late, so I should not be charged. Besides, February 23 and 24 were on Saturday and Sunday, when your office was closed. I could not have applied for the extension of stay during those two days, so even if you are correct I should only be charged two days late fee.”

By now her glare was so hostile and antagonistic that I looked at Lek, who took my cue and started talking to her in Thai. Lek talked for a long time, I assume explaining the two phone calls that we made, in which the officials at both offices explained to me in English and to Lek in Thai that there would be no late fee if we came within seven days after my “admitted until” date. Even though Lek did his best to be very diplomatic and polite, she did not budge.

I reminded Lek that we also needed to get the letter stating that I was a legal visitor to Thailand, so that I can renew my drivers license. Lek politely asked her to provide us with the form so I could renew my expired driver license. “NO” she barked again, “You are only going to be in Thailand for another thirty days, and that is too short a time.”

“But I paid for two entries into Thailand,” I pointed out, showing her the “2” stamp in my passport. “I will be coming back again for another three months. That is four months in total.”

“NO,” she repeated, “too short time.” End of discussion.

By this time, though inside I was feeling increasing anger, I retreated to a chair and did not look at her any more. I know that Thai people do not react well if a foreigner shows anger, so I was determined not to fulfill that stereotype of the ugly American. I sat in the chair stonefaced. When Lek came over to tell me quietly that there was no hope of getting her to change, I asked Lek to go over her head and appeal to her supervisor, who was sitting at a desk on the other side of the room. “No, no, no, you can’t do that!” Lek implored me, “That would cause her to lose face.”

So, I had no choice but to sit there expressionless as she handed me a form to fill out, specifying the charges. Four days at 500 baht per day, totaling 2,000 baht. Plus, the fee for her to place the “extension of stay” stamp is 1,900 baht. And, she announced with relish, I had to get a photograph at the photo shop down the street. I went sullenly to the photo shop, where the charge was an exorbitant 60 baht (I paid six baht per photo when I had some pictures printed a week ago at a regular photo shop). I was tempted to stick out my tongue in the photo, but resisted the urge and smiled. The photo came out amazingly good.

After bringing the photograph back to the Immigration Office, she glued the photo onto the form, and then told Lek that he must go to a photocopying shop a block away to make a photocopy. By this time I was seething inside, especially because there was a photocopy machine in the office right behind her and it would have been so simple for her to lift her substantial backside off the chair and make the copy herself. But by this time I was saying nothing, and Lek made the trip without objection. Lek wanted to get this whole thing over with as soon as possible.

When Lek came back with the copies, she dutifully wrote out a receipt in Thai, and handed it to Lek. She at last showed a bit of humanity by confiding to Lek that dealing

with foreigners who do not speak Thai gives her a headache. I do not think she realized I understood what she said. “Well, duh, if that is the case,” I wanted to respond, “then perhaps you should get a different job since this job is specifically for dealing with foreign tourists.” But, again, I said nothing. I was proud that I had kept my cool, but I did not smile or thank her as we exited the building.

As I came out I was thinking to myself that I had just been charged 3,975 baht for staying a mere thirty more days in Thailand. Add the 1,000 baht that I paid for gas to make the journey to the Immigration Office, plus the 150 baht I had to pay a doctor to sign a medical form saying I am in good health, and that totals about 5,100 baht [\$150.00 USD]. If I had known that this whole extension of stay effort would be such a hassle for such a short time I would have simply packed my things and taken off for Cambodia a month early. That has been my intent to go to Cambodia all along, because before I left America I had decided at the end of my first three-month visa period to tour Cambodia’s famed Angkor Wat ancient ruins as soon as my first visa period in Thailand was finished.

Lek felt even worse than I did. He apologized profusely to me for not being able to persuade the officer to waive the late fee, and for not understanding that we had to get there at an earlier date. But I could not be mad at Lek, who had tried his best. What makes me upset is that one office told me one thing while another office says the opposite. Whichever officer was correct, shows the misinterpretation that this extension of stay policy engenders.

This incident of typical bureaucratic ineptitude makes me sad for Thailand. Given that so many people in the tourist industry are working so hard to attract tourists to come to Thailand, and given that Thailand desperately needs more tourist dollars, such policies do not make sense. What Thailand needs is for more tourists to visit many sites in the kingdom and to stay as long as possible, and then to come back again and to tell their friends what a wonderful time they had in Thailand. That is how Thailand can generate more foreign currency.

It seems to me that it is best to encourage tourists who come on a three-month visa to stay in Thailand for the full three months, without the added requirement that they make a long and inconvenient journey to an Immigration Office during the middle of their stay. Most other countries admit tourists on a tourist visa for three months, with no requirement for an extra extension of stay after two months. It would be much simpler for the Thai government, as well as for the tourist, to simply stamp the passport with a three-month date when the tourist initially enters the Kingdom. Then they would leave at the end of the three month visa. If they overstayed their final date after three months, then they could be charged the 500 baht per day fee.

After feeling frustrated by that experience, Lek and I walked over to see the Mekong River. I have seen some big rivers, but this river is huge! Truly impressive. As we stood there, a Thai person spoke to me in perfect English. I was surprised, until I found out that he is an American of Thai descent. Turns out he is also a professor (of English and

Communication) from Los Angeles. He volunteered to take Lek's and my picture, but the wind was blowing so hard we look really windblown.

[PIC OF MEKONG RIVER]

I told him about what had just happened at the Immigration Office, and he confirmed that stories like mine are common. He said that the reason for this hefty fee is to generate income for the Immigration Office. It would be better for the Thai government, as well as the tourists, he said, to simply increase the Visa application fee that the person pays before they arrive in the kingdom. He agreed with me that forcing tourists to interrupt the enjoyment of their time in Thailand by requiring them to make a journey to an Immigration Office in the middle of their time here gives a bad impression of Thailand, especially when the tourist is told one thing by one office and then the opposite by another office. This sort of thing, he said, happens all the time.

It did not make me feel any better to learn that my experience was not exceptional. I just kept thinking of that poor bureaucrat, most likely rushing to swallow a headache pill after we left. What a pity that she was so mismatched to the type of job she held, when there are many other gregarious Thai people who would love to have her job to gain all that daily experience in practicing their English. She probably is a really good person after she leaves work.

I want to reiterate that this has been the only single negative experience that I have ever had with the Thai Immigration Office. Every other officer I have dealt with, in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Nong Kai, has gone out of their way to be kind and helpful. But I wanted to relate this negative experience for those of you who think I only tell the good side of Thailand and am too Pollyanna-ish about this place. This experience makes me look forward to leaving Thailand for awhile, and going to Cambodia. Since I am busy writing some articles with publication deadlines, and since I am helping out at the Buddhist temple in the preparations for a big festival that is coming up next week, I might not have time to send more emails before I leave for Cambodia. So, I send all my best wishes.

Well, after all this venting and kavetching, I have to admit I feel much better. Not a very good Buddhist attitude to have, but what the heck. That's life.