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Travel warning Thailand: Bangkok police accelerate random visitor urine tests, searches, interrogations on western tourists and expats

WRITTEN BY: HERBRUNBRIDGE - NOV • 28 • 14

In what appears to be a rapidly increasing policy of harassing western visitors and residents in Bangkok, such individuals are now regularly being stopped by Bangkok police, where they are interrogated, searched, and made to contribute urine samples. This policy has become infamous in the tourist areas controlled by the Thong Lor and Lumpini district police. Westerners are routinely stopped at random on the street,



in taxicabs, and when traveling on motorcycle taxis. The stops are held day and night. When stopped, the individual is asked for identification, to empty the contents of pockets and purses for inspection, and a urine sample may be demanded as well, to be given and analyzed on the spot. Those not having proper identification or papers may be taken to a nearby police station, where they are held temporarily until the issue is either resolved or remanded to the Thai court system.

How common is this situation? Over the past few months, it has happened to numerous westerners living in Thailand, and has become a popular, if unwelcome topic of conversation. At least one individual with whom we here at [WoWasis](#) spoke shared the experience of being shaken down for a 20,000 baht "fine" to avoid arrest. In the [November 29, 2014 issue of the Bangkok Post](#), visitor Reese Walker described how she and her fiancé were stopped twice by police in two days, interrogated, searched, and urine-sampled. Their crime? Being in a taxi cab in the first case, and walking at the popular Asok intersection in the second. "This is our first and last visit to Thailand," she says in her letter to the editor. "The harassment of tourists is unacceptable... [we] won't be recommending other people to visit Thailand based on two frightening incidents of what we believe to be racial profiling."

Recommendations if you are arrested:

As a westerner, whether a tourist or an individual living in Bangkok, you may very well be stopped at random and subject to immediate arrest by Bangkok police. If you are stopped and harassed by Bangkok Police, especially common in the Thong Lor and Lumpini police district areas popular with tourists, here are some recommendations:

- 1) If you are taken to a police facility, do not sign anything. You will be verbally insulted and browbeaten (there is no anecdotal data that suggests you will be physically harmed). But refuse to sign. If you do sign, even an acknowledgement that you have been detained can be interpreted by Thai courts as an admission that you resisted arrest.
- 2) Demand that the police contact your embassy on your behalf. Again, sign nothing.
- 3) At least one person was able to get the police to release him by saying he needed to go to the hospital "to get my medicine." Your dying while in police custody is a public relations snafu that the police would prefer to avoid.
- 4) Particularly on a weekend, you may be forced to spend a night in a Bangkok jail. Hang in there, sign nothing, and sit tight until your embassy representative can assist you.

Tourism in Thailand is estimated to be down in 2014 by a factor of 20% from the year before. Harassment of western visitors is apparently a pastime determined to increase the number of international visitors that see Thailand, once considered a country friendly to visitors, as a country pushed further and further down the destination bucket list.

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18 Comments



swilbur says:
December 1, 2014 at 12:50 am

I always LOVE the foreigner who feels it is his job to defend the good name of Thailand. I know about the Asoke intersection. The BTS and MRT exits are regularly patrolled by what appear to be a couple of motorcycle police who think it is their job to harass Westerners. Where is your ID? is the first part and then attempting to physically search you is next. This is completely an utterly an unofficial money grubbing scam. The two areas mentioned are high traffic areas where many foreigners are likely to be and the scare tactics usually result

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in compliance. I do not use/buy/sell drugs. I have a business and a work permit and am married to a Thai. I DO NOT carry my actual passport with me but keep a copy on my phone. There are so many pickpockets and scammers that a valuable document like my passport is kept safely at home. If need be it can be produced with 24 hours – which any legitimate authority is bound to give you. secondly, allowing a policeman to put his hands in your pocket? And then he ‘finds’ something there? Planted no doubt. I will if necessary empty my own pockets but never will I allow anyone access to my pockets. And Sean Enright – I fully agree that not only are Westerners targeted by the police but the local citizenry are too. However, it IS their country and their responsibility to stand up en masse and demand change. (They rarely do and the situation goes on unabated). But as a Westerner, I cannot make the necessary social changes nor can I agitate for it. What I can do is still point out injustices and in this case the police ARE targeting Westerners. The threats are there to glean money from people. And most people are too scared and just pay to make the problem go away.

If you are going to justify that kind of mindless idiocy then ask yourself why the police are not harassing the unlicensed street hawkers in front of them – or the illegally parked taxis blocking traffic at the intersection. The reason – easy to scare the foreigner and get some money out of him.

I love Thailand and most Thai people are pretty great. BUT corruption is HUGE. Disgraceful behaviour towards the poor, disenfranchised and indeed foreigners is RAMPANT.

Good article and people should be aware of can happen to them. Because nobody will warn them nor help them when they are bailed up by the police at Asoke or Thong Lo where their only visible crime is being a tourist who may be a source of money.



A says:
[November 30, 2014 at 11:16 pm](#)

say for arguments sake you come from a country where smoking weed is legal and of course whilst in Thailand you stay away from drugs but then fail a urine test upon shakedown.... what happens to you then?



Brian Caine says:
[November 30, 2014 at 10:56 pm](#)

I've been living in Thailand for over 15 years and the only time I experienced this sort of issue was back in around 2001 when the government started cracking down on nightlife and piss-testing everyone, both Thais and foreigners.

Maybe I've just been lucky but this article is very misleading, insinuating that this is a new thing and if you come to Thailand it'll happen to you for sure.

Don't take drugs, carry a copy of your passport (as required by law) and everything will be fine.



Tommy says:
[November 30, 2014 at 10:11 pm](#)

Sean I get where your coming from, I have been here for years as well. You are not talking about the same thing the article is though. They don't stop Thai people on the street at all times of the day and night and search them, they certainly don't demand a urine test; loss of face would be great! They do shut down clubs and test though, but its not just Thai's I have been in Narz and they shut it down and tested all of us. However that was a planned and authorised operation. The harassment of (in general) white farang is racial profiling or grabbing an easy target who has access to cash might be more correct. It is happening with increasing frequency and anyone who plays along has to risk the fact that they may lie about your test in order to get cash. This is not simple law enforcement it is corruption at its worst. I have had it done to me and despite speaking Tai and knowing my rights I was forced to unlock my phone whilst they went through my messages. Having spoken to a judge, this is illegal! I was sober, on my way home and doing nothing illegal. Why was I targeted, my skin colour, and the fact i have a bank account are the only two reasons I can think of!



asokmanwalking says:
[November 30, 2014 at 9:05 pm](#)

True, you need to at least carry a copy of your passport with you. But under no circumstance are you required to hand over your actual passport to a Police Officer. Only to an Immigration Official. I was told this by an Immigration Official.

Near Asok junction, I've been stopped a few times. But my most recently experience In October was by far the worse and most intrusive.

The 2 police officers stopped me as I was simply walking along the sidewalk having just come down from the BTS. This was 5pm. This is what proceeded to happen:

a) asked to see my passport. i handed them a copy of my passport top page. admittedly, i didn't have a current copy of my stamped page, since I had just returned days prior from the States. i did inform them that i would be happy to come by the police station the next day with a copy of my stamped page. they were obviously unhappy with that idea.

b) the older officer repeatedly asked to see my actual passport. i explained to him that a copy is all that i have right now, and all that is required. it was a bit tattered since its been in my wallet for quite some time. he kept remarking on that as if this copy wouldn't do.

c) the younger officer, at the same time, went through my pockets himself, pulling out my wallet, phone, and a packet of cigarettes with only a few left inside.

d) he took my wallet and pulled out every card from every sheath, checked it, and handed them back to me all at once with everything out of place.

e) people walking along the street are now rubbernecking. bc at this point, both officers had their hands on me in someway, frisking some part of my torso. it was embarrassing.

f) as i then tried to put everything back into my wallet, he asked me if the cigarettes i had was actually marijuana. i said, no, they are simply cigarettes. and he asked, if i smoke marijuana. i told him no of course not.

g) i was wearing two shirts, a button up over a t-shirt, and i had my sleeves rolled up. the younger officer began rolling my sleeves down himself because he felt the snap button underneath the roll and wanted to inspect. found nothing of course. another embarrassing sight.

h) at the same time as this was happening, the older officer took my cell phone and tried to unlock it, but i had a passcode on it. if i hadn't he would've started going through my phone most surely.

i) at this point, i was visibly shaking. bc i was growing upset by how intrusive they were being, and so they asked me why am i nervous? i said i am not nervous, i am upset because you're touching me, rolling down my sleeves, trying to check my cell phone. it's too much. and the younger officer then said something to the effect of, we are police, you have to do what we say.

j) this all only ended bc the older officer got a phone call, just as i believe he was going to ask me to unlock my phone for inspection. but this didn't happen. if it had, i'm sure i would have refused, and perhaps the situation would have escalated even more.

i have heard stories that sometimes when this happens, it is actually off-duty cops, or fake cops even, who will prowl the area for looking mostly for men who are walking on their own. trying to shake down a few thousand the for some manufactured grievance, in order to supplement their admittedly meager wages.

what i've heard is that cops are ridiculously under paid by salary, and that's the main motivation to rely on graft and bribes for supplementary income. that's the sad part, if only they were paid a decent living wage for being police officers, perhaps none of this would be happening.



John says:
[November 30, 2014 at 6:58 pm](#)

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I've had 2 resident friends who were stopped in separate incidents. Both were coerced by 2 Police officers off the main road into a small Soi before being vigorously searched then asked for a 2,000 Baht fine for no reason.

What not to do when tourism is hurting, says:
[November 30, 2014 at 5:09 pm](#)

[...] the rounds on social media.. Travel warning Thailand: Bangkok police accelerate random visitor urine tests, searches, interrogati... This would appear to be based off this BKK post information. IMO, taking one report and making [...]



Steve says:
[November 30, 2014 at 4:00 pm](#)

Thankfully the Rule of Law still applies everywhere else.

You have lost my millions, Thailand.

Sincerely,

Quality Tourist With Respect for Due Process.



BB says:
[November 30, 2014 at 1:55 pm](#)

This article needs a little clarification. First of all, THAIS have always been subject to the exact same treatment. I can't count the number of clubs that have been raided over the years where every single Thai patron was drug tested, and if failed, charged under Thai law and dragged off to jail while the foreigners were sent on their way unimpeded/untested. So this is not profiling of any kind. You are, in fact, now being treated just like everybody else – well within Thai law. Secondly, embassies will not intervene in matters of local law enforcement – check any consular website and it will clearly tell you you are on your own if you break local laws. Third; having a “smart ass” attitude like “I know my rights!” or “I’m an American Citizen!” will absolutely NOT help. If your urine is clean, be patient, be polite, stick it out. If they have nothing on you, and you give them no reason, you’ll walk. If you’re urine is NOT CLEAN – be grateful you’re getting away with a fine – especially these days.



Dave says:
[November 30, 2014 at 8:22 am](#)

By the way.... I got this from the lawyers today regarding when you must agree to a search and when you don't need to.

Sunbelt Asia Legal Advisers responds: If the police have set up correctly labeled gates and barriers with clear signs stating Seize / Stops and there are high ranking enough officers then the police have the right to conduct searches and tests on anyone, including Thai nationals. If you refuse a search or test at such a legal barrier then you run the risk of being charged with obstruction.

However, if the barrier is unofficial, i.e. not clearly signed or lacking in the correct ranking officer, then you can refuse to be searched or tested. In either case, it is in your best interest to contact friends or family to witness the situation before anything proceeds. The sign will be in Thai language and will state that you must stop, usually it is a large lighted sign. The lowest ranking officer that must be at the stop is Police Sub-Lieutenant.



Andrew says:
[November 30, 2014 at 4:22 am](#)

Its true that they stop Thais too. I was once pulled over in the morning on my motorcycle, along with a line of Thais, and when they got to me they were surprised to see I was a foreigner. They just asked to look in my bag, didn't even ask for ID! They just let me go.



Andrew says:
[November 30, 2014 at 4:12 am](#)

Its true that they stop Thais too. I was once pulled over on my motorcycle, along with a line of Thais, and when they got to me they were surprised to see I was a foreigner. They just asked to look in my bag, didn't even ask for ID!



Jack says:
[November 29, 2014 at 11:02 pm](#)

Sean, do you live in the Thonglor area? These shakedown only happen to you if you are not with a Thai and happen at all times of the day to pretty much everyone I know who lives there since about 4-5 months. Happened to me twice already now, once with drug testing. My friends in the area and me live in Bangkok over 10 years and this never happened before and did not happen to any of us outside this area yet. This is targeted at foreigners so dont talk about things you have no first hand knowledge about.



Dave says:
[November 29, 2014 at 10:56 pm](#)

Doh!
Please edit for me.

'rules are rules'

Auto correct strikes again!



Dave says:
[November 29, 2014 at 10:54 pm](#)

Firstly, it IS targeted at westerners, since Thais aren't subject to random stops in the street.

Secondly, there are rules regarding searches to ensure people aren't searched illegally. Chief amongst these rules are police need 'reasonable reason' to search someone. 'Being white and walking down the street' is simply racial profiling – something most of us have come to abhor.

And the need to carry an original passport at all times is out-dated, unrealistic and xenophobic.

And please don't say 'rules are Tyler's' or I'll assume you think marijuana smokers deserve imprisonment and gay people shouldn't be allowed to marry – those are rules too.



Donald Johnson says:
[November 29, 2014 at 10:36 pm](#)

Sean Enright: Getting stopped twice by the Royal Thai Police in Bangkok over one weekend is abnormal; either they were extremely unlucky or some kind of shakedown on Westerners is currently going on. Thonglor and Asoke are upscale neighborhoods, they were not in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Things have definitely gotten worse under the current coup (I have lived here for 12 years too, so I am in a position to judge). Do you think it is reasonable that visitors/foreigners must now carry their passports with them at all times? What about at the beach?

I don't buy your argument that essentially if you have done nothing wrong, you have got nothing to worry about. There are lots of scams, especially at the airport where departing tourists sometimes get accused of shoplifting and are encouraged to pay stiff fines in order not to be detained and miss their flights home.

In Thailand, it's "who you know" that keeps you protected, because the justice system doesn't work and you need to know important people (or be in an important job, like a company manager or a university lecturer). I once got stopped for a traffic violation that I didn't commit; the cops let me go immediately when I told my wife, "call the "nai amphur" [local mayor] for help). I realize now that was an overreaction, but it is an example of how you need to be prepared to call on your personal resources, because you will always be an outsider.



herbrunbridge says:
November 29, 2014 at 8:08 pm

You've made some good points, Sean. We, too, think it's a mistake to engage in illegal drugs while in Thailand. And ID should be carried wherever one goes.

The larger issue is how Thailand wishes to treat visitors. In today's Bangkok Post, there was yet another letter describing a poor way to treat visitors: "Feeding on foreigners": <http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/446227/crooked-police-undeterrred> Among other things, the author made reference to payouts to police made by those who were searched.

Tourism is down 20% this year in Thailand. Potential visitors are voting with their feet in electing to go elsewhere, where they won't be randomly shaken down for urine tests and searches. That's most of the civilized world. This isn't about the law. It's about how a country grows — or destroys — a tourism industry.



Sean Enright says:
November 29, 2014 at 6:46 pm

im an expat that's been living in Thailand 12+ years and there is decidedly something wrong with your article that should be corrected. First, they don't only do this to westerners. They do it to locals as well. Sometimes they will shutdown a whole venue and test everyone inside. Drugs are illegal here and the police have the right to do this. So best policy is don't so drugs.

Second, by law, visitors/foreigners must carry their passports/copy of passport with them at all times. Maybe you would be better off informing people of the laws rather than ignoring those important bits and suggesting only foreigners are targeted. It's simply a local law enforcement practice.

Now, are there shakedown? Sure, but if you've not done anything illegal, it's a lot harder to get shaken down!

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