

Thai-ed Up Traffic

By Jack Goldfarb

In a few years an adventurous motorist will be able to roll eastward out of Teheran onto the start of the Asian Highway, an 8,000-mile stretch of internationally linked roads, leading him overland to the two farthest corners of mainland Southeast Asia.

On the way he may see some of the more spectacular sights of South Asia—the shadowy Khyber Pass, the sacred Ganges, the mighty Himalayas, the pagodas of Rangoon.

When he reaches Bangkok, however, he is probably less likely to be immediately impressed by the magnificent skyline of gold and green temples and sleek-futuristic office buildings, than to be terrified by the tumult of the traffic. In the streets of Bangkok, he will probably see more cars than he encountered all along the seven-nation route from Teheran. And in winding his way through the maze of unmarked streets, across webs of *klong*, and around gigantic traffic circles, he may very well equal his trans-Asian mileage before he reaches his hotel.

What is bad now threatens to become even worse later. Unless drastic steps are taken soon, visitors approaching Bangkok by air will see swarms of vehicles trapped in doomed orbit, hopelessly circling the city, while hordes of pedestrians, aging rapidly on the curbstones, wait in vain for rescue modules.

Traffic in and around Thai capitals was already in bad shape 300 years ago. When the seventeenth-century Portuguese explorer Pinto visited Ayutthaya, he was moved to write not only of its glorious monuments but also of monumental traffic jams caused by 200,000 boats moving through the *klongs* of a city with already more than a million citizens.

Pinto's description of the seventeenth-century Siamese capital bears a strong resemblance to the premier city of modern Thailand. Substitute "vehicles" for "boats" and quadruple the population and you have modern Bangkok, a sprawling metropolis.

In any other city the situation might

lead to fratricidal conflict. But by nature the Thais are a gentle, easy-going people. In the Thai social code, to lose your temper or raise your voice is the most boorish kind of behavior. Taught from early childhood that violent displays of emotion are taboo, the Thais generally keep their cool even in the nerve-bending traffic that affords rich opportunities for angry outbursts and uncomplimentary exchanges as to ancestry, sensory faculties, and motoring talent. Heated words are rarely spoken. Even horn-blowing is muted.

Surprisingly Bangkok's accident rate is not as bad as one might expect. Some people give the Thais' calm temperament and disciplined restraint the credit. Another theory says the Thais' aversion to being touched or nudged carries over to their driving habits. Perhaps. But a routine ride across town will convince you how adept Bangkok drivers are at near-misses. One Thai wag has remarked that the general state of beardlessness in Bangkok comes from the close shaves one gets in traffic all day long.

Among Bangkok's vehicles, the ten-wheeled trucks—*kodangs*—have a special place in the city's transport network. These five-ton workhorses, with their highly polished teak bodies and Japanese motors, haul the bulk of the upcountry farm produce and other heavy goods into Bangkok. Recently banned from the city during daytime hours, the flamboyantly decorated lorries are now a familiar sight racing through the streets in noisy caravans the moment their curfew is lifted at 9 p.m.

The buses of Bangkok, brightly hued people-eaters, prowl their routes with never-satiated appetites. These voracious charabancs swallow unlimited numbers of passengers, while the undigested overflow hangs precariously out of the doorways mumbling prayers. Through this press of humanity squeeze the energetic little conductors, youngsters about 12 years old, rattling coin boxes, whistling signals to the bus drivers, and advising helpless foreigners, carrying addresses written in Thai, where to disembark. Cheapest bargain in town, a bus ride across the length of the vast metropolis, costs only half a baht (2-1/2¢ US).

More expensive, though not necessarily more reliable, are Thai taxis. Bangkok cabs are required by

law to have meters, but no one worries whether they work or not. The meters are used mostly as hat racks, the drivers nonchalantly apologizing for their being out of order. Consequently, driver and passenger must reach a "negotiated settlement" before the journey begins. This bargaining can be time-consuming, but at least there is no meter running while the haggling goes on.

The most original conveyance in Bangkok is the *samlor*, the tricycle doorless taxi that charges less and bounces more. These tiny *tuk-tuks*, built close to the ground, can navigate the narrowest of the city's byways, and give you a memorably accurate count of the number of potholes along any specific route.

In the go-go traffic of tropical Bangkok, traffic lights and traffic police are about as rare a sight as White Christmases. A handful of traffic policemen (there were some women too, but they all quit) try to bring order at principal intersections. But the odds against them are heavy. The helmeted and booted officers, sweltering long hours in the blazing sun, engulfed in a mist of monoxide, and dealing with drivers, 90 percent of whom are supposedly unversed in the rules of the road, cannot be blamed for directing traffic without the gracefulness and élan of Thailand's renowned classic dancers.

There has been no shortage of advice to Bangkok on what to do about its traffic problem. Organizations and individuals, including United Nations agencies, the US Secretary of Transportation, European government experts, the Royal Thai Automobile Association, and hundreds of Letters-to-the-Editor writers, have made their studies and come up with suggestions.

Thailand's trafficologists generally agree that to clear the clogged streets of Bangkok three important innovations are necessary—a modernized mass-transit system, an up-to-date traffic control center, and improved streets.

Thailand (*Tai* means free) is the only nation in Southeast Asia that has remained independent throughout its history. Well-informed Thais assure you that there is no real threat to the country's continued independence. After all, they say, if a foreign invader ever came to Bangkok, how would he get across the street? 