

TRAVEL & ADVENTURE



MALTA



SYMBOLIC: The Maltese flag.

Full local name: Repubblika ta' Malta
Location: islands in the Mediterranean Sea, south of Sicily
Area: 316sq km
Population: 400,000
Capital: Valletta
Form of government: republic
Independence: 1964, from Britain
GDP/capita: \$28,000 (NZ's GDP/capita: \$33,000)
Life expectancy: 79 years (for NZers: 79 years)
Religion: Roman Catholic (98 per cent)
Official Languages: Maltese and English
National food: timpana (macaroni baked with egg, meat and tomatoes), and mqaret (deep-fried pastries stuffed with dates)
Greeting: bongu ('hello' in Maltese)



BIG SMOKE: Malta's capital, Valletta.

SURPRISING FACTS:

- Malta is home to one of the oldest civilisations in Europe, and has the oldest freestanding structure in the world — a megalithic temple called il-Ggantija, dating back to before 3500BC.
- The ancient Phoenicians colonised the islands around 700BC. Since then the islands have changed hands between Carthage, Rome, Sicily, Spain, the Knights of St John, Byzantium, the Arabs, France and Britain — to mention a few.
- In AD60 St Paul was shipwrecked on Malta.
- Malta staunchly supported the UK in World War II and played a crucial role thanks to its proximity to Axis shipping lanes; it was bombed nonstop for 154 days and nights in 1942.
- The bravery of the Maltese people moved King George VI to award the George Cross to the entire population in 1942 — hence the George Cross on the nation's flag.

Haruru Falls photographer **Willy Pearce** — fearing for his life in a speeding taxi en route to Bangkok airport — casts his mind back over the serenity and madness, sweltering streets and shady temples of three weeks in Thailand.



Golden Buddhas in the Tiger Cave Temple at Ao Nang.

PICTURE: WILLY PEARCE



BELOW: Headless Buddha at the ruins of Thailand's old capital at Ayuthaya.



The devout offer donations at the Temple of the Reclining Buddha, Wat Pho, Bangkok.

PICTURE: WILLY PEARCE

Explore a land of extremes

THE taxi driver smiles into the rear view mirror, shakes his head and tuts "busy, busy" — seemingly more interested in maintaining his commentary than in self-preservation. I, on the other hand, value my time here on Earth, so admit to being slightly concerned as we fly along the motorway at 170kmh. The air conditioning stopped working long ago, back in those carefree days when we were only doing 120kmh. Now all that seems to be coming through the vents is the hot smell of burning engine and impending doom.

I turn to my girlfriend, both of us thinking the driver is hell bent on finishing our holiday with a bang. Worrying seems useless, as does having a quiet word with our chauffeur. Three cars have just rocketed past us — this seems to be the norm.

I was sure the sign that just passed in a blur said 70 and isn't that a sea of red lights ahead? Oh I see, in Thailand you accelerate towards the braking cars

in front. Of course, it all makes sense now.

When I was in India, I developed an attitude of not worrying unless the driver looked worried. That worked and I made it out alive, but over here the population is mainly Buddhist — they've always got another life coming up if this one were to end. And they always smile. But I have just one life and, to be honest, I'm enjoying it. If it were to end at the end of a three-week holiday, on the way to the airport, I would not be happy.

Rather than braking our driver swerves to the left, then to the right and somehow manages to weave his way through the slowing traffic at around 140 kmh, still tutting, "busy, busy". I should shout, "Yes I know it's f***ng busy mate, we've still got half an hour until we need to check in. Slow the f*** down!"

Instead we both close our eyes, letting the past three weeks flash before us, replaying the events as if they were to be our last . . .

In Bangkok we'd wandered, sweating and burning through the tumble drier that is summer. Taking in the sights, the markets and the food we wondered at the devoutness of the people. Active shrines in every shop and place of work, all offering some sticky rice and a bottle of Fanta to the Lord Buddha. Strange diet for a deity, I thought.

We were amazed at the co-existence of this most ancient of religions and our own most modern of worlds. Bangkok somehow manages to balance the two, laying on equal amounts of tom kha ghai and McDonalds, of Singha beer and Starbucks. It has the perfect Western Ying for the Thai Yang, or maybe that should be vice versa. Whichever, it acts as a great buffer zone and it could be argued is in fact the real Thailand.

I had my first Thai massage in Bangkok, a unique experience. I felt like Inspector Clouseau, waiting in fearful anticipation for his Asian manservant Cato to pounce. Never quite sure which part of my anatomy was going to be



A tuk-tuk — a cross between a motor scooter and a taxi — speeds through the night-time streets of Bangkok.

PICTURE: WILLY PEARCE

● CONTINUED PAGE 12

Eat and drink safely to stay healthy

Melanie Schonewille, pictured, from Stephen Gillingham House of Travel gives a few medical tips and some hints on photography when travelling.



Medical travel tips

In the case of illness while travelling overseas you may need to go to a local hospital. Medical insurance will cover most emergencies, and some countries, such as the UK, provide free health care to New Zealanders. Be aware if you choose not to take medical insurance that the country you are travelling to may

not have government subsidies for health so may be very pricey if you need help. When travelling to less economically developed countries, don't drink the water if you want to avoid the risk of diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases. Remember the ice may also be contaminated. Bottled water may be safe, as long as it is factory bottled. Bottled

carbonated sodas, beer and wine (without ice) are safe. Cooked foods are usually safe, but raw foods and salads (lettuce, raw vegetables, fruit without peel, unpasteurised milk, milk products, undercooked seafood or meat) can lead to gastrointestinal problems. Eat in restaurants that have a reputation for safe cooking.

Tips for great travel photography

Take your time — you'll compose your photos better.

- On a very sunny day, use the flash to make sure faces aren't shadowed.
- Don't be afraid to ask people for their photo.
- Have fun, get creative. Try different angles and subjects.
- Kids make great subjects as they're often not as shy as adults.
- When the light is low use your flash, but remember the main subject needs to be close to the camera for it to be properly exposed.
- Don't forget to get photos of yourself and your travelling companions.

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TRAVEL & ADVENTURE

● FROM PAGE 11

wrenched from my body, tied into an impossible knot then somehow slotted back into roughly the correct spot. I say it was my first and it was also my last. I needed a massage afterwards more than I had when I went in.

Bangkok was hot, so we left. We joined the hordes who had all signed over the next 14 hours of their lives to a strange gang of drivers and guides who somehow manage to get large amounts of people from A to B. The process never goes quite how it has been described to you: "One bus to the boat then you get boat and arrive at 8am, no problem".

Sounds good, however what she actually meant to say was: "One bus, s*** seats. You arrive middle of nowhere at 2am, in the dark. You will be left with no explanation on a bench by the road with a crazy man wandering around shouting at you. Another bus will arrive, with a drunken driver. You will get on that and then wait for another two hours, slowly more people will arrive then you will drive 15 minutes to the ferry office, where you will wait until 10am or until the driver has sobered up. Then and only then will we take you to the ferry wharf where you will wait until noon to get on an old fishing boat that will take you to your destination, arriving around 4pm. OK?"

The most amazing thing is that it's done with the bare minimum of communication to us, the passengers. We just follow when told and wait when told. It's strange but it works and it's all done with a smile.

Our trip took us to Kho Tao, where the German bakeries and dive shops have proliferated among the palms, and where we swam among the electric neon throughout the coral reefs, finally cooling off and getting a shower in a tropical downpour.

Via the safe hands and smiling faces of the people movers we made it down to Kho Phi Phi, made famous by the movies and infamous by a tsunami, where the hordes of tourists fuel the juggernaut of development as it chews up this once beautiful island and spits out an ever-expanding tourist ghetto. The beaches are strewn with debris and detritus, making going for dip more like a game of dodge the whisky bottle and the streets are full of masseuses who's chant of, "Thai massage, OK?" reminds me of a certain Asian lady in the film *Full Metal Jacket*, and the foreigners are all surgically attached to their mobiles.

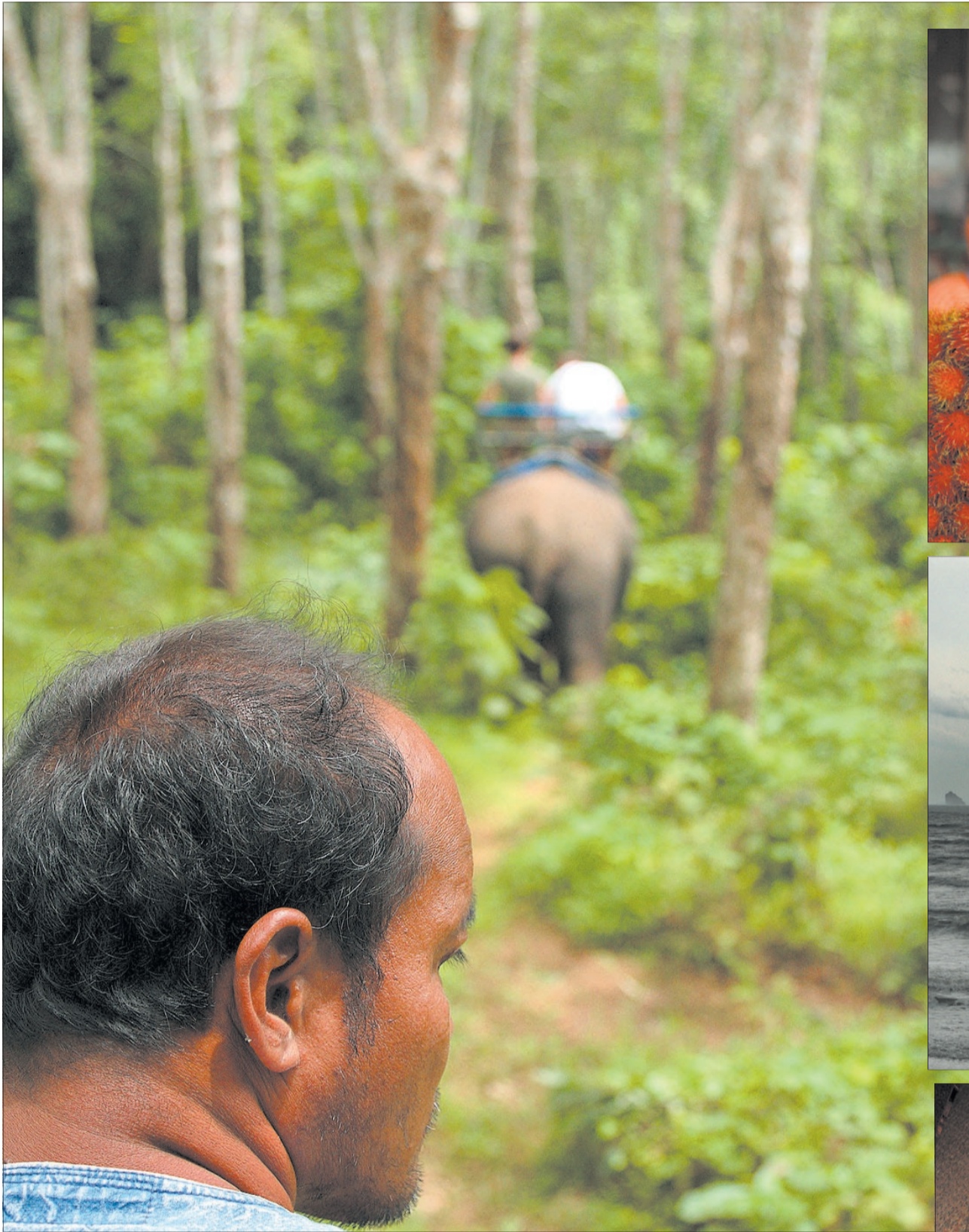
When I was travelling around Asia in 1992, I used to set aside one day every month or two to write postcards or letters. Occasionally I would try to call my parents via an almost wind-up operation down a back street and would hear the faint voice of my mother wishing me well. I had to plan ahead and tell people to send mail to Poste Restante a couple of months in advance. Upon arrival to the town, I would eagerly make my way to the GPO, clutching my passport, nervous with anticipation — would anyone have written or have they all forsaken me? I would wait patiently while the clerk went to check for my mail, then try to not look too disappointed when they returned empty handed, or too delighted when they handed me a letter from my mum (I was trying to be a free, independent spirit, you see).

Nowadays, however, the kids are all texting their mates back in London, emailing and Skyping from the beach with wireless broadband. If their parents don't hear from them instantly then they worry. Where is the danger? Where is the "Oh we haven't heard from Johnny for three months now, I hope he's still alive"? Where are the free, independent spirits? This web of communication is a good thing and it does make life easier, but I can't help feeling that kids nowadays are missing out on something liberating, something character-building and soul-defining. It's a shame.

Once more we were on the road, back to the mainland. We checked out the beaches at Railay, where the weather stopped us going further afield, but the beaches on the peninsula are spectacular. We spent a happy morning waddling around a rubber plantation on the back of a pregnant elephant, looking for snakes and monkeys.

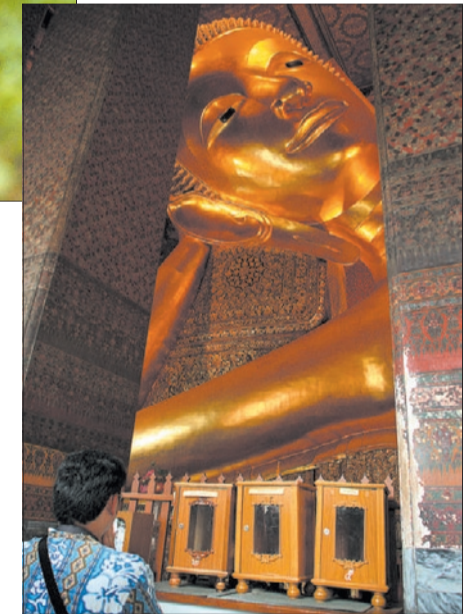
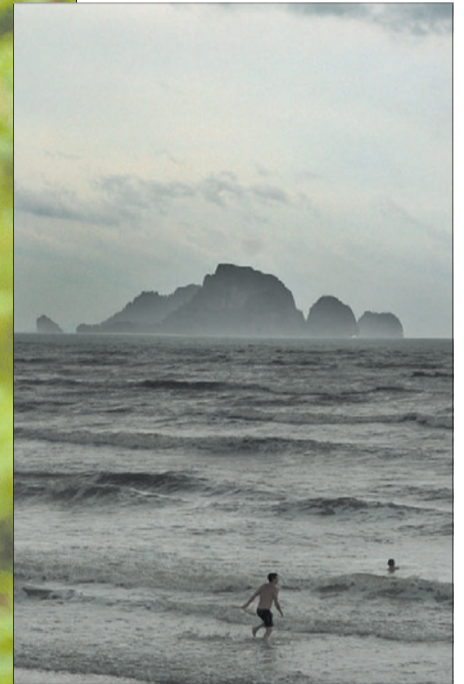
From here we braved the Thai roads and headed off on a scooter to the Tiger Cave temple, where the lack of tigers is more than compensated for by the sheer number of monkeys.

It seemed like a good idea to



Elephant trekking in the jungles of Ao Nang, Krabi Province.

PICTURE WILLY PEARCE



FROM THE TOP: Exotic fruit at a Bangkok market; A storm brews over Ao Nang, in Krabi Province; The giant Reclining Buddha, Wat Pho, Bangkok.

PICTURES: WILLY PEARCE

Explore a land of extremes

climb to the top of the hill and 1297 steps later when we couldn't possibly have sweated any more. We were glad we had. The views go on forever and the huge golden Buddha sits there, smiling, enjoying them all day long. The climb down was slightly easier as by now the sun had moved from its zenith to afford us a little shadow, if only we had waited an hour or so...

Finally we signed our lives over one last time and joined the hordes heading back to Bangkok. At any one time throughout Thailand, in fact throughout Southeast Asia, there must be thousands of westerners all placing their safety and wellbeing in the hands of these smiling strangers.

We managed to escape Bangkok for one final time and, this time under our own steam, using the public bus service, made a trip to Ayuthaya. We wandered among the ruins in the unbearable heat and I couldn't help thinking that perhaps the ancient Siamese had been secretly pleased to have their wonderful capital city sacked by the Burmese and moved to its cooler, current locale. One day of baking was enough for us and we headed back to the steamy

megalopolis and our roof-top pool.

Thailand is an amazing country, the only Southeast Asian land never colonised by the West, retaining a vast amount of its original, native charm. The devoutness and serenity of its people, even in the most modern, lurid, capitalistic of settings is remarkable and is no doubt one of the reasons it has become so popular as a destination.

It's easy to travel around, as long as you leave your Western preconceptions of time behind and seems completely geared to getting its little smiling hands on the tourist dollar.

The communication network of our modern world makes life so much easier, even if it does take away some of that danger, and Thailand is no slouch when it comes to providing internet and mobile services. And even if the days of the 25 baht (\$1) beach shacks have long gone, a trip to Thailand still won't make too big a dent in your wallet.

And then there's the food. Who doesn't like Thai cuisine? All those flavours swirling about together as if in a delirious waltz, an unimaginable maelstrom of vibrancy, all underpinned with the

ever-present sting of Thai chilli washed down with a cooling, refreshing Singha beer.

It could be argued that Thai cooking is a perfect metaphor for the country and culture itself. The vibrancy of the flavours matches the life and colour of the people, the variety mirroring the contrast between different areas of the country, and the spiciness hammering home the otherworldliness of a Thai experience.

Suddenly we are stirred by a blast of cool air. It seems the air conditioning has come back on and that can only mean one thing. We've slowed to within the parameters of normal travel and seem to be approaching the airport.

"Busy, busy" our driver tuts again. "We here, airport, which flight?" Anywhere will do, I tell him, anxious to get out of this bullet as soon as we can.

He drops us at the terminal and after an exchange of money and a smile he is off, screeching away with the other taxi drivers, off to find more Westerners to scare for money.

We're sorry to be leaving, but relieved to be going home alive.



Taxi boat sign at Kho Tao, Gulf Of Thailand.

PICTURE: WILLY PEARCE