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A journey on the death highway

By Greg Hardwick

My knuckles turn white as I grip the bar on the roof and nod to the three men standing beside me. It's a cool January morning as we slowly drive past the Mae Sot Police Station. I look down at my feet to make sure I'm securely standing on the tailgate.

The *sawngthaew* (a covered pick-up truck with two lines of benches) slows and we turn south towards the village of Umphang. I bend down to stretch my back and see twenty-five woman, children and old men sitting or laying on two small bench seats.

An old Burmese man in his sarong-style *longyi* looks up and smiles. A woman breast-feeds her infant and a young girl with *tanaka* powder (a decorative powder made from crushed Tanaka root), painted in two large yellow circles on either cheek, stares with dark eyes towards my partner, Lyndal. My partner's blue eyes look out of place.

The truck regains speed as I lean left to see past the bags, wire and pipes, and the five dark haired young men sitting cross-legged on the roof. Mae Sot is rapidly disappearing behind us, and the road ahead looks flat and straight.

The village of Umphang is 165 kilometres away, at the end of the Route 1090, the “Death Highway”. The serpentine road acquired its dubious nickname because some 600 workers died during its construction. Some of them were ambushed by Thai communists, or insurgents from the Karen and Hmong hill-tribes living in the area, who saw the road as a threat to their seclusion. Fortunately the attacks stopped by the mid-Eighties when the Thai government offered amnesties to communist renegades.

Begun in 1968 and finished in 1987, the road, with its 1,219 bends and switchbacks still lives up to its name. And off to the west of the road, the Karen are still fighting the longest-running civil war in history against their Burmese oppressors.

As a testimony to this struggle, we pass a military checkpoint, before making a slow climb into the mountain. The air cools as we start to negotiate the first of the sharp bends.

Each twist provides a different perspective on a green theme of jungle with steep descents down to iridescent green rice paddies, banana groves and chilli plantations. The constant swaying makes my stomach flip-flop. Weaving across both sides of the two-lane road we pass trucks and on the hairpin turns I can look down past my feet to the valley floor below.

At the halfway point we stop. Two other *sawngthaews* on their way back to Mae Sot are also parked, as our driver motions us towards the nearby toilets. We're at Umpiem Mai - home to 19000, mainly Karen refugees from Burma.

Across the road the hills are bare except for tall grass. A large village, with cramped bamboo huts and a dirt soccer field, sits amongst the hills beside the road. Two men walk past with large body-length baskets on their backs and slowly disappear into the tall grass.

After our break we find most of our fellow passengers have already reached their destination. The driver smiles and points towards the roof – he wants me to sit on the roof?

I climb up and give Lyndal a hand and we're back on the road. After five minutes, we stop again. The driver appears and says in broken English that no girls are allowed on the roof.

"Local people don't like," he says.

Only three of us now ride on the roof amongst the luggage. The swaying continues so I grip both sides of the roof-rack. On the side of the road white concrete markers display the remaining distance.

"Only 80 kilometres to go," I almost say out loud as we sweep around yet another hairpin turn.

My eyes continue to water, my face is sore from the wind and my hair has been wind-gelled into an Elvis bust. The forest is thicker here and an overhanging branch of bamboo tries to scalp me.

Soon the road straightens, the air warms and we slowly descend into Umphang. Until the completion of the road, this journey, via a short cut through Burma, would take four days on foot or by elephant. We'd just done it in seven hours.

In this town of 3,000 people, the narrow concrete roads are lined with blue-tiled teak houses, and locals sauntering between food stalls and small shops. One woman carries her child in a sling across her chest as she purchases a bag of tamarinds.

A small grey monkey sitting with a chain around its neck on a timber window cries out, as we turn left up a steep drive. The truck finally stops.

Our guide approaches and with a big smile he introduces himself. A slightly built man, in his early twenties, with a small moustache and wearing a kind of slouch hat, stands with his hands on his hips.

“Hello, my name is Boo-Boo,” he says.

Grinning, I’m tempted to say, “Hi, I’m Yogi bear!” But I can’t, my stomach is still moving with the motion of the truck. I jump down off the roof, remove my sunglasses and shake his hand.

Lyndal and I are both lovers of independent travel, but on this occasion we decided to book a tour. No motorbike hire shops in Mae Sot allow their machines to be taken to Umphang – now I understand why.

We had come to get off the northern tourist route to Chang Mai and see this less-visited region of Thailand. The easiest option was to book a tour at our guesthouse in Mae Sot.

The next day, Boo-Boo guides us by raft for half a day down the Klong River. We set up camp at the headquarters of the Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, close to Thailand's largest waterfall – Nam Tok Thilawsu.

In 1999, the sanctuary was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site and forms one of the largest continuous forests of this type in Southeast Asia. It reminded me of sub-tropical Australia.

Most of the tours, lasting three days and two nights, include stopovers at the sanctuary and waterfall, along with elephant riding and off-the-beaten-track outings to rarely visited hill-tribe villages.

That night, by campfire light, we are serenaded by a collection of Thai tour guides. I fall asleep smiling as they laugh at their own attempts to sing in English.

We return to Umphang the next day and now face the return trip to Mae Sot.

However, this time, we ride alone with room to stretch out in the back of a new

truck. Absolute luxury! We're both tired and the return trip passes by like an old film in reverse.

Back in Mae Sot we walk past the local refugee detention centre back to the same guesthouse we stayed in before the road trip, and collapse on the soft bed. I can still feel the swaying of the moving truck.

When I look at Lyndal, she's already asleep. I think of our journey and can still picture those electric-blue *sawngthaews* swaying their human cargo along Route 1090. It's peculiar how it's not the waterfall or the rafting that remains in my mind – it's the journey down a road less travelled.

Other Information

Mae Sot

Mae Sot is described as a Burmese-Chinese-Karen-Thai trading outpost. Market places within the town sell all sorts of goods including caged birds, live fish and eels. Rebel soldiers, Burmese spies, mercenaries, UN staff and volunteers mix together in the streets. The town is three kilometres from the Burmese border.

Getting to Mae Sot

Train from Bangkok to Phitsanulok, then bus to Sukhothai. Regular mini-vans from Sukhothai run to Mae Sot via Tak. Another option is a direct bus from Bangkok to Mae Sot – about 9 hours.

Umphang

The name Umphang is derived from the Karen word for a small basket used to carry identity documents. Umphang is 670 kilometres northwest of Bangkok.

Route 1090

Almost 600 lives were lost during construction of the Death Highway. In 1972 a major attack killed three policemen and wounded twenty workers. An airstrip was built in Umphang to allow reinforcements to arrive.

Refugee Camps

Mae La camp, 66 kilometres north of Mae Sot, contains as many as 45,000 refugees. In total, more than 100, 000 refugees live in various camps both north and south of Mae Sot.

Nam Tok Thilawsu

Thailand's largest waterfall is 400m high and up to 500m wide. The falls are at their biggest after the wet session – November and December.

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