

Title:

Arriving at an Airport You Can't Even Pronounce

Word Count:

665

Summary:

If you have recently traveled to Thailand you arrived at the newest Southeast Asian airport. Bangkok's new airport replaces an old friend of mine.

Keywords:

airport, bangkok, international airport, don muang, international, taxi, taxis, thailand, suvarnabhumi

Article Body:

I have been traveling to Thailand off and on for the past 35 years. I was stationed in Bangkok in the early 70's and I still go on vacation there 2 or 3 times every year. With all of those trips, I knew the Bangkok International Airport like the back of my hand.

In September 2006, the new airport, Suvarnabhumi (su-war-na-poom) opened and the end of the Don Muang era came to a bittersweet close. Suvarnabhumi is now the official International Airport for Bangkok and Don Muang has been relegated to domestic flights. I now had to learn to navigate this new metal monster.

Suvarnabhumi, meaning "Golden Land" is about 30 km east of Bangkok in an area known as Nong Ngu Hao, or "Cobra Swamp". The complex covers 32 square kilometers, and has the world's tallest control tower (132 meters). The passenger terminal has 360 check-in desks, 120 gates, and accommodations for handling 45 million passengers a year. Surrounding the airport are flooded rice paddies.

The new airport is an architectural masterpiece of metal and glass and is aesthetically beautiful. My only complaint is that it is a long hike from the arrival gate until you actually reach the Immigration lines. It seems like miles.

On the plus side, as soon as you clear Immigration, there is giant electronic display board which tells you where your luggage is. There are many luggage carousels and knowing exactly which one is yours makes life a little easier.

Once you get your bags, clearing customs is a snap. I have never been checked

once in over 35 years of flying in to Bangkok. The next thing you will face is the taxi mafia gauntlet.

Bags in hand, you will walk into a mass of humanity - some waiting for loved ones - most waiting to harass you. They are the infamous clipboard toting taxi mafia. They will pester you, block your way, ask where you go, and never give up no matter how many times you refuse and no matter how many languages you swear at them in.

Having used all of your best football moves, you work your way past the clipboard thugs and head for the down escalator. This will take you to legal and much more reasonable taxis. You will have to pay a small fee - but you will get some piece of mind in return. The taxis are registered, the girls in the booth speak English, and you won't have to do any bargaining as these taxis use their meters.

If your cabbie offers to take you and not use the meter, agree upon a price and who will be paying for the tolls. This will be your first opportunity to experience haggling in Asia. Have fun.

I can't vouch for all the taxi drivers but I did find one very honest one using this service last year. I left my credit card wallet in the cab and the driver contacted my hotel and arranged to return my plastic intact. He was rewarded handsomely and saved me a lot of hassle and possibly a lot of money.

Now you will experience the controlled chaos of driving in Bangkok. It is indescribable and has to be experienced. Say a prayer and hope for the best.

If you plan to go anywhere in Thailand, you might be lucky enough to fly out of the old International Airport - Don Muang. It resembles more of a ghost town than an airport but still brings back to me memories of hundreds of trips to Thailand. Being the first thing you see in a foreign country, you develop a fondness for airports.

I guess I will get over it and learn to accept Suvarnabhumi and treat this new International Airport as a new friend. I have been there twice and will return in March, 2008 for another holiday. And, luckily, I will get to visit my old friend, Don Muang, the next day as I head up to Khon Kaen. It will be good to see old and new friends.