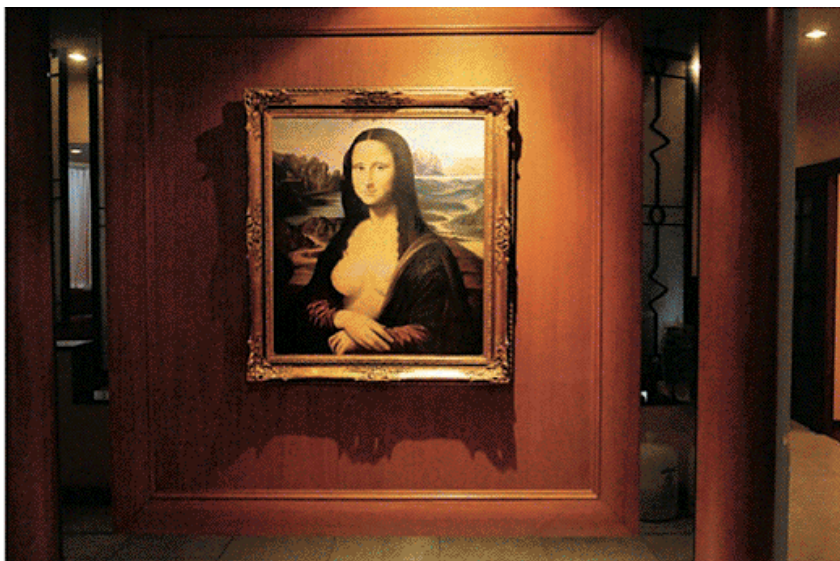




A Pilgrimage of Sin: Booze, Bombs, and Hookers in Islamic Thailand

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The group of Malaysian men I met on my first night at the Pink Lady had driven up to Hat Yai for the weekend in a rented minivan. They were barely thirty, clean-cut, and kitted out in knockoff Hugo Boss, although they had no plans to leave the hotel. Each one expected to get laid at least five times and to drink at least a whole bottle of Scotch, as well as gin fizzes, Royal Stag Indian whiskey, rum and Cokes, sex on the beaches, and Grey Goose shots en masse. “Then what?” I asked.

“Go home to Malaysia and sleep it off, la.”

White-collar Muslims from the border town of Kota Bharu, they blink-ed nervously, looking down at their over-polished shoes and touching the corners of their mouths as they considered their options. There were girls everywhere. Pinned to the walls of the establishment were pictures of available “Super Top Models” from whom they could choose by dialing room service.

The Pink Lady, marked PINK on the tourist maps, is Hat Yai’s most famous institution. It stands at the end of a covered shopping arcade off Sanehanusorn Road, near a thing called Hollywood Rockworld and a cluster of life-size plastic cacti that light up at night. The lobby’s decor is pure Thai bad taste—grandfather clocks, paintings of mystical shrines on lakes, haloed Buddhas, and photomurals of custard-skinned saints. A talisman shop sits next to karaoke lounges. Girls in white float past with ice buckets and trays of tequila, a wink at the

ready, murmuring “sawadee ka.” Upstairs, the hotel offers spartan beds with flowers laid on the pillows.

My new friends seemed to find the mixture of religious kitsch and merry whoredom as irresistibly seductive as it was incongruous. In the suffocating cocktail lounge, we compared out phallus-shaped plastic room keys decorated with the words HOT PINK, and I was taught a few useful words of Malay: “Cock” is burung. “Pussy” is nonok. Copping a feel, a grope in the bars, is known as rabaraba. The noble act itself is merodok. As they began to sink into their fruity gin and tonics, their tongues loosened. What did I think about the “Islamic war”? Had I heard about the two Thai soldiers killed the week before in Rusok? They had been escorting schoolteachers. Did I think the Muslim insurgents were bastards for bombing bars, decapitating Buddhists on rubber plantations, strafing roadside stalls? Ah, but I didn’t understand their grievances. The Thais were hard on the Muslims and Malay separatists. One rather mighty-looking travel agent by the name of Ahmad drew himself up a little and tried to distance some part of himself from the part that was obviously soused.* “The Thais are bastards,” he began. “But we love the Pink.”

Last year, Western observers of Thailand were focused on the color-coded political conflict in Bangkok, which pitted the Reds, the working classes of the rural north, against the Yellows, whose ranks include elite supporters of the monarchy. But a longer and arguably more fundamental culture war has continued in Thailand’s three southernmost provinces, Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. Predominantly Malay and Muslim, the south has never been entirely at home in Buddhist Thailand, and since 2004 it has been roiled by an Islamic insurgency in which more than four thousand people have died. Hat Yai, the south’s only large city, is in the adjoining mixed Thai-Malay province of Songkhla, which has also seen its share of unrest. My brothel punters, who had come across the border to get away from shari’ah laws, nonetheless supported the militant Muslims in Thailand. “Irony” is perhaps not quite the right word: they were a little ashamed of the way they were caught at the Pink Lady with, as it were, their pants down. Although they sympathized with the insurgents, they were also potential targets. As they were not slow to point out, even Hat Yai has had its share of malignant detonations. Bombs went off at the Odean department store and at the Brown Sugar pub in 2006; three Thais and one Canadian tourist were killed, and six of the injured were Malaysian. The scrofulous old *farangs* who used to come here for the girls got the message, but the Malaysians keep coming because they have nowhere better to go for sex and Johnnie Walker. Kota Bharu, where they were from, is in Kelantan, the stronghold of one of Malaysia’s most radical Islamic parties, the Parti Islam se-Malaysia, or PAS. The party’s spiritual leader, and the chief minister of the state, is one Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who has pushed for the implementation of full shari’ah law, including amputation for theft and stoning for adultery. The federal government has obstructed the national imposition of shari’ah, but an Islamic coalition has won control of five of Malaysia’s thirteen states. In 2009, a shari’ah court in the Islamist-controlled state of Pahang sentenced Malaysian model Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno to six lashes of a

cane for drinking a beer in a hotel bar. It would have been the first judicial caning of a woman in modern Malaysian history. The Sultan of Pahang commuted the sentence to community service, but in February 2010, three women actually were caned for having sex outside of marriage, and many people think—my bar companions did—that canings for drinking alcohol will now begin to rise. Drinking in Malaysia will become increasingly dangerous, its allure will soar, and the border will boom. For Thailand, it's both a curse and a grotesque business opportunity.

The Pink Lady is not the Arabian Nights cabaret at the infamous Grace Hotel on Soi 3 in Bangkok, close to where I used to live, where Gulf Arabs swill their Black Label at the price of Bollinger to the cacophony of an oud orchestra from Cairo. We drank our own Black Label at the Pink with piles of off-tasting ice. But the men seemed to go into a state of catatonic contentment that derived as much from the brand name as from the alcohol itself. It was the quiet cocking of a snoot at a taboo, a group transgression as well as a mind alteration. There is something undeniably fraternal about getting drunk in a group, particularly when the disciplines of family life and religious custom are absent.

The cabaret started and a few girls came prancing onto the stage in top hats and Moulin Rouge feathers. They held up gold amphorae to no particular purpose. The effect was quite mysterious, and the Malaysians turned back to me. What, they wanted to know, was a farang like me doing in Hat Yai? I explained that I was traveling through the deep south of Thailand in order to sample "its pleasures." In fact, my itinerary was the reverse of theirs. From the Pink Lady, I would be traveling to their own hometown of Kota Bharu, an image of what the Thai insurgents were fighting for: an Islamic city entirely free of girlie bars, or bars of any sort. Curious to see how a Buddhist state mixed with Islamist politics along this border saturated with violence and booze, I intended to get a drink at each stop along the way. This made my friends uneasy.

Then it made them rock with laughter.

No one really knows who the insurgents are. The first separatist guerrilla organizations formed in the 1960s, after the Thai government imposed a compulsory national education system on the region. For the most part, they followed a familiar course from anticolonialism and "Islamic socialism," in the manner of many movements at that time, to the ethnic nationalism and conservative Islamism of today. By 1998 the insurgency had been suppressed by the Thai government, through a combination of diplomacy and force, but separatists emerged once more in 2001 when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the eminence grise behind today's Reds, took power. The latest round of violence erupted in January 2004, when insurgents raided an army weapons depot in Narathiwat. In April, insurgents launched eleven simultaneous attacks on police outposts in the south. A group of guerrillas in Pattani attacked a Thai security station, killing three officers, then retreated to a sixteenth-century mosque called Krue Se. After a seven-hour standoff, the army raided the mosque and killed all thirty-two people inside.

Since 2006, the Thai government has been less aggressive, apologizing for incidents like Krue Se and promising to look into local grievances, but this tone of contrition has not been backed by action and has been met by insurgents with a rise in violence. Many insurgents still invoke the Sultanate of Patani, a small Islamic state erased from the map when the three southern provinces were annexed by the Kingdom of Siam in 1902. Its passing has not been forgotten by those who live within its former borders.

From Hat Yai, Pattani is a two-hour drive to the coast. The road passes estuaries clogged with spike rushes, rice paddies and orchards, flimsy houses ringed with bamboo birdcages hung on strings: the ubiquitous, sad songbirds of the south. A hot, flat land with an exhausted lushness, a feeling of ebb and no flow. Halfway there, the signs start changing to Arabic script and the first roadblocks appear. Thai Army units in their jungle-camouflage helmets vegetate under cafe parasols, armed with M-16s, or sit with expressions of exasperation behind walls of sandbags. By five o'clock, the roads are empty. Even at three in the afternoon my driver was anxious to be off the highway. The minivans that are the usual transport between towns in the south have been stopped by insurgent gangs, the travelers ordered out and shot on the spot. Few people come to Pattani now, though there's a sizable university, and its riverine neighborhoods of delicately carved Chinese shop houses used to draw Thai artists and bohemians. It feels like a city under curfew, and the only decent lodging is the C.S. Pattani, a luxury hotel a mile outside of town. It, too, was car-bombed (2008; two hotel employees killed) but has since been restored with Malay decor and Malay piped music, and it sits ghostly at the end of a cul-de-sac behind armed guards, sandbags, and tired security cameras. It looks a little like a Stasi compound with international flags.

When I arrived, a few Muslim businessmen were on the outdoor terrace drinking tea with condensed milk. Although my Thai is unreliable, I was able to persuade one of the hotel clerks to rent me his motorbike. Taxis in Pattani are rare. The clerk protested that it was unwise for a farang to ride around on a bike, but it seemed a reasonable risk for a cold beer. Why would anyone shoot me anyway? It was Buddhists, schoolteachers, and less radical Muslims they hated. I soon got lost. Around Pattani stretch long canals, acres of warehouses, and rice paddies fermenting. I was stopped by heavily armed Thai soldiers at a roadblock. They came out with their cameras to snap shots of me astride the dirt bike. Here were the recruits, with their Buddhist talismans and tattoos, sent to quell a Muslim rebellion. I asked them in Thai where the bars were, and how they felt about being posted here to Pattani. They were lackadaisical. The southerners were backward bastards, that was all. They were dying to get back to Bangkok for a weekend. We chatted about our favorite watering holes in Bangkok, exchanging cigarettes, and I realized how much our political complicity was centered on one thing the insurgents loathed: drink.

That night there was a festival in Pattani's old town. I rode there on the bike, through alleys where the street lamps had been cut off and that were lit instead by strings of red Chinese lanterns: an entire small city without neons, submerged in paranoia. Pattani has taken a step

back from the decadence of modern Thailand, and only the roadblocks of Thai soldiers remind you when and where you are. The festival had a rock concert and a dragon dance, and there was nothing Islamic about either, but nowhere was to be found a splash of humble beer. Back at the hotel, the lobby was a morgue and on the terrace they weren't even serving tea, but I wandered out to the grubby plaza beyond the security barriers and noticed a rose-lit establishment where the familiar Thai waitresses in slit dresses were lounging about at sticky tables—an astonishing sight. It was a modest one-room karaoke lounge, and I was able to order a Singha. It was clearly set up for Chinese businessmen staying at the hotel, or for the occasional Muslim willing to risk being seen, but there was no one there. I asked the girls where they were from. Some were Buddhists from the north, and they were uneasy working so close to a hotel that had already been bombed.

“The Chinese guys will come down bored out of their minds and order ten rounds of beer,” a waitress told me. “The Muslim guys are like alcoholics. Drink, drink, drink. It's not our fault. We just hope they don't do a drive-by shooting on us.”

We swapped Bangkok gossip about the funding for the insurgents. Both local police and insurgents are suspected of being deeply involved in the drug trade, and, as in Pakistan, a country with 5 million drug addicts, narcotics are better tolerated by Muslims here than beer. Many Thais are convinced that the money comes from torn yam kung soup restaurants on the Malaysian side of the border, that insidious soup dealers were fuelling the massacre of innocents. It seemed so unfair, they said. *Tom yam kung*, a hot-and-sour soup with lemongrass, Kaffir lime leaves, and shrimp, is a lovely soup, beloved of all patriotic Thais. It was delicious and healthy, especially when you had a cold. How could it be put to such evil ends?

Narathiwat is another two hours down the coast in the province of the same name. It sits by a wide river and is known for its mosques: the province's name is Sanskrit for “the dwelling of wise men.” Eighteen percent of its population are Buddhists.

On my way there, I fell in with one of the theology students who always seem to throng the intercity minivans. Hakim was studying in Yala and wanted to know whether I could speak Arabic as well as Thai. No? He seemed mystified. He wanted to go study in Pakistan and, even more ambitiously, Saudi Arabia. We had a conversation during the ride about Islam's distaste for alcohol, and he made the delicate and sensible point that alcohol was forbidden by Islam because under its influence we are not “true to ourselves or our relationships.” Drink, in other words, distorts the individual's relationship to himself or herself, and therefore to everything else. He was studiously compassionate and calm on this point.

“Have you ever drunk a drop?” I asked.

“Never.”

“Then how do you know how bad it is?”

“The Koran has described it.”

Alcohol is mentioned only four times in the Koran, and its use, while frowned upon, is not expressly forbidden. It is drunkenness, not alcohol itself, that seems to provoke the Prophet's disapproval. The second *surah*, known as "The Cow," warns against drinking and gambling: "There is great harm in both, although they have some benefits for the people; but their harm is far greater than their benefit." In "Women," believers are told not to pray while drunk; "Wait until you can grasp the meaning of your words." In "The Bee," God is praised for sending water and milk; then, we are told, there are "the fruits of the palm and the vine, from which derive intoxicants and wholesome food. Surely in this there is a sign for men of understanding." In this passage, wine, like dates and milk and rain, might seem to be part of God's bounty, not necessarily evil.

Hakim did not see it so ambiguously.

"People who drink," he said, "should be flogged in public. Why not?" Then, realizing that I might be some kind of Christian lush, he toned it down. "Of course, I mean the Muslims who drink ..."

I asked him whether he thought Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno should have been caned for a sip of beer.

"Absolutely. It's symbolic."

"Symbolic of what?"

"Of letting Satan into the picture!"

Granted, the fourth passage on alcohol in the Koran does call wine an "abomination devised by Satan." But even here, the faithful are merely asked to abstain.

Our driver let Hakim off in front of a well-tended suburban house. He wished me luck in his "beautiful town" and gave me a friendly, masculine handshake that was intended to reassure me that nothing he had said was to be taken personally. He seemed to convey a dreadful innocence combined with a half-conscious sarcasm.

I was staying at the empty Imperial hotel. My room was gloomy and bare, with a black arrow stuck to the ceiling indicating the direction of Mecca. Non-alcoholic beverages filled the mini-bar, as accusatory as they always are, and the curtains smelled of thirty-year-old cigar smoke. I didn't mind, but in hotels like this, one is always forced out onto the street sooner or later. I went out for a walk after dark, as the loudspeakers from the mosques began to bray.

The Friday-night sermon in the mosque across from the hotel was in Yawi, the variant of Malay spoken in Thailand's south, and after every furious phrase the imam paused and sighed a long, exasperated aaah. Men watching Manchester United games in the cafes, stripped to the waist and holding plastic mugs of lychee juice mixed with green gelatin, paused between goal kicks to lend an ear, and the boys lounging on their motorbikes by the river glanced up as the aaah echoed across the night. I failed to find a single outlet for alcoholic pleasures and, defeated, slogged back to the Imperial. As I was going through armed security, however, I saw a tall kathoey, or "ladyboy," clattering across the plaza. When in Narathiwat, I thought to myself, always follow a lady-boy. She went to a "saloon" that I had not noticed earlier.

The saloon, however, contained only the ladyboy, and she looked at me shyly before asking what I wanted. It was a good question. I had the feeling that asking for sex with a transsexual hooker might be less dangerous than asking for an imported Kingfisher, and the transsexual hooker knew it. She confronted me playfully along these lines, and I stuck my neck out and ventured for the beer. She went into a back room and came back with a Chang, a Thai brew, and then turned on the karaoke screens. I had to be entertained.

“Me and you?” she finally said in English, turning a long painted finger-nail upon herself, and then upon me.

Refusing gallantly, I asked her if drinking a Chang was safe. Those aaah sounds coming from the mosque did not sound exuberantly friendly.

“No,” she said in Thai. “He is talking about the importance of washing. Washing your feet.”

“Nothing about drinking?”

“That was last week.”

It’s a sad fact that life by and large would be endurable, as Sir George Cornwall Lewis once said, were it not for all the pleasure we have to endure. That night I had a nightmare and woke up convinced that a giant beetle was walking across the ceiling. It was the prayer arrow. A single beer had made me delirious.

The raffish and unstable town of Sungai Golok sits insalubriously along a narrow river {sungai is Malay for “river”) that is, in effect, the border. It is here that most Malaysians in Kelantan furtively come when they need a break from the shari’ah regime, and as in Hat Yai there are special all-in-one hotel brothels that cater to their urgent and time-constrained needs. Chief among these is the Chinese-style Genting Hotel, named for the region of Malaysia where the British once had their charming hill stations. The Genting is less than a mile from the border, and you can walk if you don’t mind the heat. You can pay here in Malaysian ringgit, and the second-floor cabaret and lounge is a source of local girls. Frequent bombings and shootings in Golok have moderated the flow of Muslim men, but it is remarkable what some men will brave to get laid and to sip a tumbler of Sang Thip whiskey, preferably at the same time.

The Genting specializes in Malaysian dances, and on the night I arrived one of them was in full swing. Unlike the Pink Lady, the Genting is also a cheerful family hotel, and its restaurant doubles as a nightclub where six-year-old children dance between the tables to wildly off-key middle-aged Thai crooners singing luuk thung country-music ballads. The girls from upstairs sit around in their fringed white go-go boots holding teddy bears and halved pineapples, eating dishes of kaeng som, and among them move the slightly uncertain, slightly tense Malaysian visitors who seem never to smile and whose eyes look subtly haunted by their own persistent desires. It’s a ragtag crowd and there is nothing very louche about it. Even the massage parlor upstairs seems laid-back and wonderfully unrepentant. At the bar next to it I sat talking to a sixty-year-old engineer from Kota Bharu who said he had just scored a cut-price haul of Kamagra, the version of Viagra that retails in Thailand for about \$5 for a blister pack of four. He had a glass of Mekhong whiskey on the bar, and the girls were telling him not to drink the

fearsome Mekhong and take Kamagra at the same time. He was tiny, bald, and slipping off his stool. His name was Yussef. He maintained that the symbiosis of Kamagra and Mekhong was perfect bliss.

"You bad man," they said in English. "You come here boum boum lady. You die heart attack."

"Wonderful ladies, la," he said turning to me. "So graceful."

"I'll buy you a drink," I said. "Mekhong again?"

We talked about Golok. It was a fine enough hellhole, he said in English, thinking the girls wouldn't understand, but the insurgents liked bombing it. Again, I was struck by the irony that the town was filled with Muslim tourists, and I said as much.

"Yes, but we are sinners to be here in their eyes. We deserve to be killed with shrapnel. I am not sure they are trying to kill Malaysians. They are trying to intimidate the Thais. But it's a tiny town." He smiled. "They can't miss us."

At night, though, most of Golok is quiet, and the trees in February swarmed with thousands of chattering birds that supplied its only nocturnal sound. The streets are deserted after the food stalls close down, and it is only the hotels and their surrounding dives that remain alive. The Marina, the Sumtime Bar, the Tara, which houses a massage parlor, and the Mona Lisa Massage at the Marina, which sports a large image of Leonardo's dame with bared breasts. Downstairs at the same hotel Malaysian men crowd around the plasma TV to watch English Premier League games. "Liverpool!" they cry, as if in anguish, raising their fists. On the other hand, the Chinese temples, the lanes of red lanterns and metal shutters, remain darkened. The pendant birdcages have had their birds removed. There is a strange charm to the place, and to the lively mix of Chinese, Thai Buddhists, and Malay Muslims. It's the public space of the hotel, however, that keeps it humming after-hours, when none of the bars appeared to be open.

I got up early and had breakfast at the Genting: Nescafe, oranges, and congee. I was joined by some Kota Bharu sex tourists who insisted on recounting their conquests of the prior night. They seemed immensely pleased with themselves and were going back to Kota Bharu with a measure of decent, glowing satisfaction that needed an audience. Super Premium model good, la?

I listened to them dutifully and then left to get some cash from a nearby ATM. When I got there, the street seemed uncommonly empty. Some cops standing around told me that a bomb had been found in the ATM that morning. The culprits were identified as a group of insurgents led by the splendidly named Wae-ali Copter.

I crossed the border to Kota Bharu after lunch. I wanted to see the city at long last, an Islamic city at least partially under shari'ah, entirely free of the scourges that insurgents associated with Thailand. I wanted to see where Malaysian sex tourists came from.

Nik Aziz's capital, as it turned out, was a pleasant city. It was calm, orderly, and mild, with air-conditioned malls like the KB Trade Center, little red phone boxes with the word HELO written on them, branches of Eoncap Islamic Bank, and neoclassical cream-white emporiums dating

from the colonial era. It was a much nicer city than Sungai Golok or Hat Yai. It was cleaner and more familial. I saw signs for Frost Rut Bir, but, as anticipated, nothing to suggest nocturnal social life. I had expected a dark and dingy pile terrorized by loudspeakers, but lo, it was a slice of imitation America, influenced perhaps by aspirations toward Singapore. As the sun fell and dusk came on, the mosques sprang to crackling life but the streets began to die. Between the mosque and the mall, I saw nothing but domesticity, a guarded privacy.

Roger Scruton, in his book *The West and the Rest*, has described this bipolar-ity in the traditional Islamic city:

The mosque and its school, or madrasah, together with the souq or bazaar, are the only genuine public spaces in traditional Muslim towns. The street is a lane among private houses, which lie along it and across it in a disorderly jumble of inward-turning courtyards. The Muslim city is a creation of the shari'a—a hive of private spaces, built cell on cell.

Kota Bharu may aspire to be such a traditional city, but it is also a place where the malls are chilled and the infidel brands proliferate readily enough. One misses only the garish, insolent public space that is the bar. As I walked through the delicate quiet, under trees heavy with birds, I grew nostalgic for the scores of mobile bars that line Sukhumvit Road in Bangkok every night, little more than motorized wheelbarrows that appear after-hours and are mysteriously driven away at dawn. It's a brilliant concept: a temporary occupation of a piece of sidewalk, a row of vodka and scotch bottles, a line of chairs open to any stranger. These bars are part of what makes Bangkok feel so free in its earthy, immediate way, and I've noticed that they are much loved by visiting Malaysians, Arabs, and Iranians. But they are not here and never will be.

Kota Bharu was the first place in the region I visited that did not live in daily fear of assassinations and bombings, and perhaps the relative absence of contemporary urban life was the reason. There was just the mall itself, where I sat down at last to eat an enormous ice cream under the smiles of the head-scarved girls who served them. Isn't ice cream always the substitute for a nice beer, from "dry" Islamabad to "dry" Ocean City, New Jersey? A good ice cream lulls the mind in the same way, almost, and there is about it the sweet intoxication of virtue.