



A BIG MISTAKE

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Paint your wagons

From Chinese mythical scenes to anime and pop culture images, privately owned tour buses in Thailand are decorated to stand out from the crowd

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The charter coach owned by Prapas Wongchua, a bus driver in Thailand's central Nakhon Pathom province, is a hulking, old-fashioned vehicle that groups of holidaymakers can hire for excursions to places such as Buddhist temples, waterfalls or beaches.

It has 48 seats but offers few comforts and even lacks air conditioning, a conspicuous shortcoming in a tropical country. Small fans stir the muggy air in the passenger compartment and his clients try to stay cool by opening the windows.

Yet the vehicle makes up for a lack of luxury in other ways. Adorning its sides are oversized anime characters painted in bright lollipop colours. So people can hire his vehicle, which functions like a taxi, Prapas' name and phone number are emblazoned beside an image of a green-haired nymphet in a blue bikini. On the front door is a pink cartoon bear, beaming cheerfully and waving welcomingly.

The paint job, by a graffiti artist, set Prapas back 50,000 baht (HK\$12,800) but it's been well worth it, he says. "Many people like buses with nice paintwork," the 48-year-old says. "They enjoy going on trips in decorated buses."

Competition is fierce among the owners of private tour buses in Thailand, and one way of standing out from the crowd is to put on a show. "You need to be like a peacock to be noticed," Prapas says.

Other tour bus owners share his view. Thousands of private long-distance coaches with custom paintwork traverse the countryside, appearing like flamboyant mirages on wheels as they barrel down highways among passenger vehicles painted mostly white, grey and black.

"These buses are a distinguishing characteristic of Thai traffic," says Erik Cohen, 89, an Israeli social anthropologist who has studied the phenomenon of Thailand's painted charter buses. "The decorations serve to display [the owners'] individuality among the mass of unmarked vehicles on the road."

The trend got rolling two decades ago in small garages in parts of rural Thailand where older buses are revamped, retrofitted and redecorated. To jazz up some ageing vehicles, graffiti-style decorations were painted on them, perhaps in imitation of the brightly painted small buses in the Philippines called Jeepneys, which are fashioned from World War II-era US military jeeps.

The result has been an eclectic pastiche of eye candy inspired by street art on Thai roads. Some



Clockwise from above: a Thai tour bus painted with the images of slasher film villains including Chucky and Freddy Krueger; tour bus driver Prapas Wongchua stands next to his coach decorated with anime characters; Patthanai Chaiyaboot runs a garage in Nakhon Pathom province that decorates tour buses and other vehicles; a charter bus featuring the design of a Chicago Bulls basketball player. Photos: Tibor Krausz, courtesy of Sukij Klunsanoi



Some people think it looks scary, but I love it. Many of my passengers are students who love horror movies

SUKIJ KLUNSA NOI

Freelance painter Nipon Komnan works on a tour bus owned by a Thai arts college.



paintwork rivals the best graffiti murals decorating walls in Bangkok and elsewhere.

"It's a commercialised form of pop art," Cohen says. "Most designs are derivative, but they are more refined than they were even a few years ago."

The decorations emblazoned on private buses, and some trucks, come in a wide variety. Dominating designs are characters from Japanese manga comics, American superhero films and popular video games. Many designs are replicas of film posters, with the *Fast & Furious* series a particular favourite.

Occasionally, locals' love of horror films manifests itself. For his new bus, Sukij Klunsanoi, a 25-year-old driver, has selected a stylised, colourful tableau of

slasher film villains. The phantom killer Freddy Krueger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* with his leather glove of razor blades is flanked by the serial killer Jigsaw from *Saw* in his creepy kabuki mask, and Chucky, the evil doll from *Child's Play*, laughing maniacally with a kitchen knife in each hand. Near the back is another image of Chucky beside the hockey mask-wearing baddy of the *Friday the 13th* films.

"Some people think it looks scary, but I love it," Sukij says. "Many of my passengers are students who love horror movies."

Other popular themes include scenes from Chinese, Hindu and Thai mythology with religious undertones. Now and then, a Buddha image is painted overhead to provide positive karmic energy for a vehicle's occupants, complementing the driver's protective talismans affixed to the dashboard or hung from the interior rear-view mirror.

Decorations can also attest to the private lives of vehicle owners. "Some drivers want pictures of their cats or dogs painted on their buses," says Nipon Komnan, 43, a freelance painter who works in Ratchaburi province, west of Bangkok, and neighbouring Nakhon Pathom. "Or their kids like Doraemon so they ask me to paint that."

The semirural area where Nipon works is one of the country's two bus-painting hubs; the other is in Nakhon Ratchasima province.

Nipon says he has lost count of the vehicles he has painted since he started out 20 years ago. When he drives his car (which he has left modestly undecorated) he often sees his handiwork on the roads. "It's nice to know my paintings



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NIPON KOMNAN, FREELANCE PAINTER



The ceiling of the passenger compartment of a tour bus has been bedecked with illuminated decorations so that passengers can have a party on board during long rides.

20,000

More than this many Thais die in road accidents in the country every year

are still around years after I made them," he says.

Like most bus decorators, Nipon employs a combination of stencilling, airbrushing and free-hand painting. More elaborate designs can take him several days or even weeks to complete.

Even often-rendered images like superheroes can be taxing if a customer wants them with more lifelike features, including wrinkles and beads of sweat. "The more realistic paintings need to be, the harder it is to make them," says Patthanai Chaiyaboot, 35, who runs a business with her husband for decorating and outfitting buses and other vehicles.

If you do a nice new design, other people will copy it, so you have to keep innovating

SURIYA KLAEWATANONG, BUS DESIGNER AND DECORATOR

They are also more expensive. Yet a heftier price tag has not deterred Warot Promchawi from ordering a high-fidelity rendering of the Hulk for his concrete mixer truck, which he uses to earn a living as a freelance contractor. "If I had a normal-looking mixer, why would people want to hire mine and not someone else's?" he says. "Now my truck will stand out."

To be even more noticeable, many owners festoon their buses and trucks with chromium bling. Their vehicles resemble wacky anime versions of the road warrior conveyances in the *Mad Max* films. Dozens of mirrors, large and small, are mounted on both sides in protruding clusters, while covering the front are rows upon rows of headlights, spotlights and fog lamps. At the back, outsized mud flaps are printed with paintings of Mexican bandoleros or American actor Al Pacino from the 1973 drama *Serpico*.

Many buses get glammed up on the inside, too. Upholstered ceilings are inlaid with backlit acrylic plates laser-printed with flowery patterns and edged with vivid LED lights. Speakers and disco lights complete a discotheque-style feel in the passenger compartment.

"During long rides many passengers like singing, dancing and partying," Patthanai says.

Supab Saksawat can confirm that. A villager who lives in a southern province, Supab likes going on days-long trips around Thailand with friends and colleagues in rented tour buses.

"When the music starts and the twinkling disco lights are turned on, we all get up and dance," the middle-aged woman says. "It's so much fun. The bus begins to bounce as we dance."

Yet such revelry is not without risks in a country with one of the world's highest traffic fatality rates. Each year more than 20,000 Thais die in road accidents.

In October, a tour bus carrying holidaymakers collided with a train at a railway crossing near Bangkok, killing 20 passengers and injuring some 30 others. The bus' driver reportedly did not hear the train because of the blaring music of a spirited passenger party in his vehicle.

Superman, Spider-Man and Captain America may have superpowers in films, but painting them on buses will not help protect occupants, concedes Suriya Klaewatanong, 45, a petrochemical engineer who has found a new calling as a successful bus designer and decorator.

He pioneered American superhero designs in Thai bus paintings in 2008 when the first Iron Man film was released. "If you do a nice new design, other people will copy it, so you have to keep innovating," says Suriya, who employs 70 people, including freelance painters, at his hangar-like garage in a town in Ratchaburi.