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My secret shame: I go to Asia to be fawned over



by Nigel Bowen

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I like being treated like a king. There, I said it. And I suspect I'm not the only one.

It was 3am in Bangkok when I finally put my finger on why I enjoyed travelling in Asia so much. I wasn't, I hasten to add, in an establishment involving the unconventional propulsion of ping-pong balls. In fact, I was about to walk into a pleasant but by no means expensive hotel with my girlfriend following a long-delayed flight. In the hotel's driveway, a welcome party was waiting for our taxi to pull up. As soon as it did, five of the hotel's staff started frantically bowing, placing flower necklaces around our necks and apologising profusely for all the trouble caused by our delayed flight.

They were in no way responsible for our problem-plagued flight. In fact, if anyone was to be saying sorry it should have been us for turning up late. But, of course, that's not the way it works in Asia – you're treated like an honoured guest who can do no wrong. And not just by people whose livelihood in some way depends on it. Throughout our trip, if Thais saw us staring at maps they would stop and offer to assist, with no expectation of or request for reward.

This isn't to suggest Thailand or any other Asian country is Shangri-La – you will inevitably have unpleasant encounters with, say, a tour guide who gets shirty because you've failed to buy anything at the tourist-trap store he's insisted you visit. But, overall, spending time in Asia is like getting to experience for an all-too-short time what it must be like to be incredibly rich, powerful or good looking.

I'd like to think I don't abuse the privilege of being fawned over. That said, I'd be lying if I pretended I don't enjoy being treated like royalty. After all, as Mel Brooks once famously observed, "It's good to be the king!" And whether or not they're inclined to acknowledge it to themselves, I suspect many other Aussies love Asia not so much because it's relatively easy to get to or cheap, but because it's somewhere they are treated like a big deal.

Sadly – for Westerners at least – the party may be coming to an end. When I travelled to Shanghai recently, I found myself somewhat taken aback by the lack of deference extended to me, even by staff at the five-star hotel I was staying at. I guess when you're a citizen of the nation predicted to dominate the 21st century, you no longer feel the need to bow and scrape to visiting foreigners.

As Asia as a whole improves its economic position relative to the Western world, it will probably be the waiters, maids, taxi drivers, croupiers, tour guides and ordinary citizens of Australia who will be expected to show endlessly cheerful deference to Chinese, Indonesian, Malaysian, Singaporean, South Korean and Taiwanese tourists. I somehow doubt we'll prove as good at it as they have been.

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