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October 2018

# (S)Expectations Abroad: Male Traveler Interactions with Southeast Asian Economies


Elliot J. Glotfelty

*Urban Light*, [ejglotfelty@gmail.com](mailto:ejglotfelty@gmail.com)

Glenn M. Miles

*Swansea University*, [drglennmiles@gmail.com](mailto:drglennmiles@gmail.com)

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# (S)Expectations Abroad: Male Traveler Interactions with Southeast Asian Economies

## Abstract

Interacting with locals is a highlight of the tourism experience; however, these interactions may be accompanied by unsolicited propositions for the traveler to participate in the sex industry. Through the lens of Thailand's largely visible sex industry, this work addresses issues of tourism and travel intertwined with the sex industry in greater Southeast Asia. Governments, a variety of businesses and individuals benefiting financially from a burgeoning sex tourism industry encourage persistence of a viable local sex trade. Although subtleties exist between human trafficking, the sex industry, and sex tourism, each can be intertwined. This article provides an overview of the Southeast Asian sex industry followed by my (Elliot Glotfelty) personal experience witnessing child sex trafficking during an otherwise normal tourist excursion in Vientiane, Laos. During the drive back from the early evening trip, my driver offered to join me for a beer and made stops at a karaoke bar and beer shop, which turned out to be thinly veiled brothels. Having worked on human trafficking research in Thailand during the prior months, I recognized the situation into which I had stumbled. I was soon encouraged to purchase sex from multiple women and girls and therefore given an unexpected insight into local interaction with sex establishments. I was clear that I did not want to partake/buy anyone and extracted myself as soon as possible to get back to my guesthouse. My driver entered these spaces and seemed to know some of the girls inside and treated the situation with casualness. Local buyers of sex, such as my driver, are largely responsible for perpetuation of sex economies, though tourists have historically driven and remain important sources of income for many individuals, including businesses not directly associated with the sex industry. The goal of this article is to bring more awareness to child/human sexual exploitation and how tourists, specifically men, interact with the economies where it is prevalent. Focus on male buyers of sex throughout this piece is not intended to imply that women do not buy sex or engage in sex tourism. Recommendations for ethical tourism practices and possible policy interventions are provided at the end of the article.

## Keywords

Thailand, Laos, Southeast Asia, sex tourism, commercial sexual exploitation, male, men, travel

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## (S)EXPECTATIONS ABROAD: MALE TRAVELER INTERACTIONS WITH SOUTHEAST ASIAN ECONOMIES

Elliot Glotfelty

*Urban Light*

Glenn Miles<sup>1</sup>

*Swansea University, UK*

### ABSTRACT

Interacting with locals is a highlight of the tourism experience; however, these interactions may be accompanied by unsolicited propositions for the traveler to participate in the sex industry. Through the lens of Thailand's largely visible sex industry, this work addresses issues of tourism and travel intertwined with the sex industry in greater Southeast Asia. Governments, a variety of businesses and individuals benefiting financially from a burgeoning sex tourism industry encourage persistence of a viable local sex trade. Although subtleties exist between human trafficking, the sex industry, and sex tourism, each can be intertwined. This article provides an overview of the Southeast Asian sex industry followed by my (Elliot Glotfelty) personal experience witnessing child sex trafficking during an otherwise normal tourist excursion in Vientiane, Laos. During the drive back from the early evening trip, my driver offered to join me for a beer and made stops at a karaoke bar and beer shop, which turned out to be thinly veiled brothels. Having worked on human trafficking research in Thailand during the prior months, I recognized the situation into which I had stumbled. I was soon encouraged to purchase sex from multiple women and girls and therefore given an unexpected insight into local interaction with sex establishments. I was clear that I did not want to partake/buy anyone and extracted myself as soon as possible to get back to my guesthouse. My driver entered these spaces and seemed to know some of the girls inside and treated the situation with casualness. Local buyers of sex, such as my driver, are largely responsible for perpetuation of sex economies, though tourists have historically driven and remain important sources of income for many individuals, including businesses not directly associated with the sex industry. The goal of this article is to bring more awareness to child/human sexual exploitation and how tourists, specifically men, interact with the economies where it is prevalent. Focus on male buyers of sex throughout this piece is not intended to imply that women do not buy sex or engage in sex tourism. Recommendations for ethical tourism practices and possible policy interventions are provided at the end of the article.

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<sup>1</sup> Glotfelty and Miles have worked together on human trafficking research projects for five years. In this report, Glotfelty describes his personal experience in Thailand and Laos; and Miles contributes his expertise to the literature review and policy recommendations.

## KEYWORDS

Thailand, Laos, Southeast Asia, sex tourism, commercial sexual exploitation, male, men, travel

[W]e (Thailand) have a need for money. Therefore, I ask all governors to consider the natural scenery in your provinces, together with some forms of entertainment that some of you might consider disgusting and shameful because they are forms of sexual entertainment that attract tourists. Such forms of entertainment should not be prohibited if only because you are morally fastidious. . . . We must do this because we have to consider the jobs that will be created for the people. -Boonchu Rojanasathien, Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, 1980 address to the national meeting of governors (qtd. in Satha-Anand, 1999, p. 196)

Money exchanged or income generated from the sale of sex is often not limited to the two active participants (Lim, 1998; Shared Hope International, 2007; Singh & Hart, 2007). Lisa L. Thompson (2017) describes this “global supply chain” involving not only brothel owners—often offering sex services in massage parlors, karaoke bars, or saunas as fronts—pimps, and strip club owners, but also considers those indirectly involved, namely in the tourism industry. Thompson (2017) further explains that the commercial sex trade’s positive economic impact on countries’ gross domestic products (GDPs), 10-12% in Thailand (Singh & Hart, 2007) for example, adds to the difficulty of regulating the sex trade and eradicating commercial sexual exploitation. This is especially true where “cultures of tolerance” exist, that is “. . . societal acceptance backed by political tolerance,” such as in Thailand and other communities in Southeast Asia and throughout the world where commercial sexual exploitation is widespread (Smith & Healy Vardaman, 2010). Brents and Sanders (2010) describe “social ambivalence” and neoliberal government policies in depth in their analysis of the causes associated with the growth of sex economies worldwide.

More troubling than the blatant acceptance of the necessity of the sex industry for a thriving tourism economy is the façade of government officials’ support for other forms of tourism while actively participating in the trafficking of persons. In 2000, Cambodia’s current Secretary of State for the Ministry of Tourism, So Mara, praised a report by World Vision encouraging cultural tourism over sex tourism but was shortly after implicated in a trafficking ring involving eastern European women. Despite the fact that much evidence supports the accusation, he remains an important government official (Marcher & Saroeun, 2000).

The ancillary beneficiaries of a burgeoning sex trade contribute to the common experience of male travelers in Southeast Asia receiving unsolicited encouragement to participate in the sex industry. Some businesses offering indirect sexual services (karaoke bars, massage parlors, etc.) “. . . explicitly target white foreign, or *farang*,<sup>2</sup> men as well as men from Japan, Malaysia, India, China, and other parts of the world,” making these businesses the most visible aspects of a much larger local sex industry catering to the resident population (Singh & Hart, 2007, p. 160; Montgomery, 2008). Sex tourism locales in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries often rely on racial differences between the buyer and seller of sex, capitalizing on “men’s fantasies about the local women, rooted in colonial racist

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<sup>2</sup> Thai translation commonly used by expatriates.

discourses and, more recently, influence by media depictions and internet discussions and photos” (Brennan, 2010, p. 317). These thinly veiled businesses and tour networks are catalysts for the sex industry’s growth in many developing countries (Hawke & Raphael, 2016; Nuttavuthisit, 2007). Traveler awareness of opportunities to buy sex, whether sought after or not, come from calls of bargirls or masseurs lining the streets, offers from *tuk-tuk* or taxi operators to drive to destinations where sex is for sale, and media or advertisements presenting images of sexualized individuals in erotic/exotic destinations, with the implication that “easy sex” is available. Unsolicited offers of sexual services are particularly common among *tuk-tuk* drivers or street side massage establishments in Thailand (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2017). Unpublished research by Miles, Taylor, & Ainsworth (2013) found short to long-term expatriate workers were vulnerable to erotic massage and prostitution due to their accessibility both financially and geographically. Personal experiences mark the evenings as a common time for *tuk-tuk* drivers to solicit passengers to purchase sex at local venues. This typically entails showing pamphlets of the sex venues as potential destinations, while other advertisements for similar establishments are plastered in clear view in the passenger area. These drivers often receive commission or “kickbacks” from venues for bringing potential customers (Steinfatt, 2015).

The reputation of Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular, as a sex destination for western male travelers was solidified during the Vietnam War of the 1960s. Before this conflict, approximately 80% of economically active Thais were involved in the agricultural sector (Hindley, 1968). This demographic shifted with growing urbanization throughout the decade as a response to the large influx of military personnel and money flooding the country (Ouyyanont, 2001). United States servicemen seeking relaxation during leave would flock to areas surrounding bases in Thailand, which fueled organization of entertainment sectors and the profitable sale of sex to the soldiers (Brodeur, Lekfuangfu, & Zylberberg, 2017). This phenomenon is not limited to Thailand, with similar patterns arising around military bases in the Philippines and more broadly throughout the world (Nagel, 2000; Rho-Ngt, 2000). Through extensive analysis, Brodeur et al. (2017) assert that regions reachable within one hour of former United States’ military bases currently contain five times the concentration of commercial sex workers as other regions in Thailand. Infrastructure in place following the Vietnam War sustained a sex industry now catering to tourists, although servicemen from the United States continue to engage in high rates of purchasing sex within their life (23%) compared to national averages of approximately 14% (Monto & Milrod, 2014).

With the passage of the *Entertainment Places Act*, B.E. 2509<sup>3</sup> (1966), the Royal Thai Government facilitated the legitimization of the sex trade, affirming legal business status to karaoke bars, massage establishments, bath houses, tea houses and other venues where sex may be available for purchase, despite a law

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<sup>3</sup> Unofficial translation commissioned by Office of the Council of State of Thailand's Law for ASEAN project: [http://web.krisdika.go.th/data/outsidedata/outside21/file/Entertainment\\_Place\\_Act.pdf](http://web.krisdika.go.th/data/outsidedata/outside21/file/Entertainment_Place_Act.pdf)

prohibiting prostitution.<sup>4</sup> Vague language in the law does not explicitly allow for the sale of sex but permits these venues to provide “services,” commonly interpreted as a euphemism for sex services (Singh & Hart, 2007; Steinfatt, 2002). Sex was and continues to be sold under the auspices of licit storefronts or entertainment venues and thrives under ambiguities in current laws and complicity in law enforcement. Those individuals running operations in illicit markets such as human trafficking, prostitution, or smuggling are known to bribe police to continue business and circumvent current laws (Robinson, Thame, & Branchini, 2016).

An estimated 85% of Thailand’s sex worker population earns income in “entertainment venues” (Empower Foundation, 2017), although these physical spaces are becoming increasingly replaced by digital market/meeting spaces, including commonly used location-based dating or “hook-up” cell phone applications such as *Tinder* and *Grindr*<sup>5</sup> (Dewey, 2014), among others. *Gfendr*, developed in 2018, is the latest iteration of these applications developed specifically for transactional sex, branding itself as “The App for Sex Workers.” Additionally, male and female escort services and webcam sex chats are readily found online, opening access to the sex industry to virtually anyone (Hakim, 2015; A. Jones, 2016). Digital spaces offer a nearly universal accessible “culture of acceptance” and facilitates profiteering by individuals not directly involved in the sale of sex, such as website designers, programmers, internet service providers, and advertisers. The sex industry drove much of the growth and jobs related to the Internet, even in the technology’s infancy (Hughes, 2004). Hughes (2000) explains how trafficking and exploitation of women and children in the Mekong Sub-Region<sup>6</sup> was facilitated by this internet technology growth, including a description of one of the first sex webcam shows called “The Rape Camp.” From January 2016 to January 2017, Internet use throughout Southeast Asia grew 31%, with 53% of the population regularly using the web. Cell phone use is also ubiquitous in the region; 70% of those using these devices have regular access to broadband services (Kemp, 2017). Worldwide use of the Darknet, an area of the Internet typically used for illicit means, continues to grow, from an initial user base of just under one million directly connecting users in 2013 to over four million users by the start of 2018 (WePROTECT Global Alliance, 2018). Internet access is important for the growth of any economy, though it has also made access and advertising to digital sex markets that much more available.

In 2001, the Royal Thai government initiated the “Branding Thailand” project, aimed at gauging tourists’ opinions of Thai products, services, and tourism. During this project, a major theme that arose from a diverse range of international participants was that prostitution and the sex industry were linked to Thailand’s image: “. . . respondents, especially those who have never been to Thailand, claimed that they have heard and seen many television programmes or magazine articles about Thailand’s sex industry, which resulted in bad impressions of Thailand for them”

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<sup>4</sup> Prostitution was illegal under the Suppression of Prostitution Act of 1960. In 1996, this law was repealed and replaced with the Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act: <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/46403/65063/E96THA01.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Both free cell phone applications, Grindr caters to men preferring to have sex with men, while Tinder is typically used by those seeking partners of the opposite sex.

<sup>6</sup> The Mekong Sub-Region refers to the Mekong River basin containing southern China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, home to 326 million people.

(Nuttavuthisit, 2007). Nuttavuthisit (2007) goes on to give examples of how Thailand is depicted in the media as a place for “sexual adventures.” With much of the tourism experience based around “fantasy,” a disinhibition of male tourists’ normal behaviors may occur and encourages participation in the local sex industry and fulfillment of internalized desires (Brennan, 2010; Carr, 2016). Those intending to receive a massage from a common street front massage parlors may be offered sex or other sexual services unsolicited (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2017), and a “why not?” attitude characteristic of tourism mindset may lead to the unplanned participation in the sex industry (Brennan, 2010). Some expensive spas and resorts may also offer sexual services. However, these are usually not provided unsolicited and are more expensive (Monk-Turner & Turner, 2017). Despite efforts by the Thai government to rebrand the country over the past few decades, much remains unchanged and the sexualized tourism industry persists.

Popular media, movies, and television programs in the United States such as *The Hangover: Part II* (2011) and *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* maintain images of Thailand as a sex destination. *The Hangover: Part II* film has inspired tours aimed specifically for bachelor/stag parties that feature stops at red-light districts highlighted throughout the movie. Advertisements and promotions for these tours are easily searchable on *YouTube*, are sexually charged, and feature images of sex workers.<sup>7</sup> In Season 38 of *Saturday Night Live* (2013),<sup>8</sup> a parody commercial for Rosetta Stone<sup>9</sup> features several stereotypical white, western men preparing for trips to Thailand to participate in the sex industry. In the skit, the men discuss learning phrases such as “How much?”, “Is that for the whole night?” and “ping-pong ball,” a reference to sex shows common in Thailand. Typical depictions of “preferential” sex tourists,<sup>10</sup> or those actively seeking specific experiences/people and travel with purpose to purchase sex (Shared Hope International, 2007), as shown in the *SNL* skit, and are less nuanced than the reality of actual populations engaging in sex economies (Monto & Milrod, 2014), especially those traveling in countries who are offered and accepting of unsolicited sexual services. Hawke and Raphael (2016) confirm in a global study on the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (SECTT) that “. . . offenders can come from any background and that they do not all fit the stereotypical profile: a white, Western, wealthy, middle-aged male paedophile . . . [A] majority are ‘situational’ offenders—who may have never dreamed of sexually exploiting a child until given the opportunity to do so. . .” (p. 15). Definitions of “situational” buyers extend to the sex industry in general, not just SECTT (Shared Hope International, 2007).

Purchasing sex is common among males. A 2015 study of United Kingdom men shows 11% purchased sex at some point in their lives (Jones et al., 2015). Rates among Thai, Cambodian, and Japanese men are highest at around 70%, while Spanish men top European rates at 39% (Malarek, 2009). Males who purchase sex from other males or transwomen<sup>11</sup> while traveling may do so because of stigmas

<sup>7</sup> Example of Hangover II inspired tour: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pm17NQ\\_8pxE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pm17NQ_8pxE)

<sup>8</sup> Video Link: <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/rosetta-stone/n32023?snl=1>

<sup>9</sup> Computer assisted language learning software.

<sup>10</sup> “Preferential” buyers of sex defined by Shared Hope International (2007) as buyers that “. . . have a sexual preference and shop specifically in the markets providing the preferred victim or service.”

<sup>11</sup> Male to female transgender population.



associated with homosexuality in their home countries (Mao, Tang, Liu, Wong, Tang, Wei, & Tucker, 2018; Winter & King, 2011). Despite prevalence throughout Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines, the locations where these preferential buyers (*i.e.*, men seeking sex with men) purchase sex are largely not noticed by tourists, existing outside well-known red-light districts as shown in one research report (Chiang Mai, Thailand, in Davis, Glotfelty, & Miles, 2017). Men often engage in the sex industry out of loneliness, or a quest for companionship, or they may see themselves as a “white knight” provider for an individual selling sex; purchasing sex is seen as providing valuable income to an otherwise helpless person (Garrick, 2005; Sommer Miller, Miles, & Havey, 2016). Reasons or justifications for buying sex cannot be reduced to these assessments. Indeed, the populations engaging in the sex industry are diverse, especially when also considering participation in digital sex economies.

### **Personal Experience: Introduction**

Before landing in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where I (Elliot Glotfelty) would begin my volunteer work with an anti-human trafficking non-profit called Urban Light,<sup>12</sup> I felt uncomfortable with the depictions of individuals wanting to learn Thai and travel there. Sexualized perceptions of Thailand and travelers to Thailand are pervasive, and while in the United States, mention of my planned eight-month stay in the country would often be met with conversations about Thailand’s beautiful women, happy endings, “ladyboys”<sup>13</sup> and other jokes or asides about the sex industry in the country. Thailand’s erotic reputation depicted in the media (Carr, 2016) undoubtedly contributed to many of the conversations I had with acquaintances before my stay in Chiang Mai. I was indeed cognizant of the pervasiveness of the sex industry in Southeast Asia before my arrival, but despite awareness of issues surrounding trafficking and exploitation, I unexpectedly encountered child sex trafficking following a tour on a short visit to Vientiane, Laos. Traveling privately with a local driver, I was asked if I wanted to join him for a beer. I agreed and was taken into two brothels and encouraged to buy sex from girls as young as 15. The following narrative was written one day after this excursion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [www.urban-light.org](http://www.urban-light.org)

<sup>13</sup> “Ladyboys” is widely a used term in Thailand to describe the male to female transgender population. It is viewed as derogatory to much of the transgender community. In Thai, *kathoei*, is the more appropriate and sensitive term.

<sup>14</sup> Minor edits were made for this publication. The original version can be viewed at <https://worldelixir.com/2013/09/12/down-the-dirt-road-an-unexpected-glimpse-of-human-trafficking-in-laos/>

## An Unexpected Glimpse of Human Trafficking



Picture 1. Downtown in Vientiane, Laos. This is a popular destination for those traveling in the city or doing visa runs from Thailand.

It was around 3 PM while sitting in my hotel room that I decided fatigue's lure to the bed needed to end—how often would I be in Laos after all? With only two nights and three days in the country's capital, my time was limited, and of course, I had to see some of the sites while in town. On this day, I drank a delicious bottle of dark BeerLao that was left over in

my fridge from the previous night and looked through the ripped *Lonely Planet*<sup>15</sup> pages I managed to scrounge about everything Vientiane (although the information was dated by five years, it was still useful). The only thing that really piqued my interest in the “attractions” section was Buddha Park, a site containing over 200 Hindu and Buddhist inspired statues. It was recommended that traveling on an empty stomach would be best, as the road to ahead was said to be quite bumpy. I had a sizable breakfast and I thought I wouldn't have a problem making the 45-minute journey without lunch or another large meal.

I hopped on a local bus bound for the Friendship Bridge<sup>16</sup> after getting a bit of guidance from my *tuk-tuk* driver, and after many local stops, we finally made it to the Thai/Laos border crossing. I asked around about ways to get to the park, and eventually made my way onto a rickety bus, its scheduled departure unknown. I began reading a book and after waiting for about 20 minutes with no signs of leaving, I asked another local sitting in a truck about ways to get to the park. I was the only one sitting in the bus, and I assumed the driver was waiting for more passengers before heading out. It was about 4:45PM and the sun would be going down in just a few hours. Not wanting to miss my chance to see the park, I took up the offer of the other man in the truck for the higher price of 8,000 Kip (\$1 US). His vehicle was much nicer than the one I was in minutes ago, and the



Picture 2. Giant leaning Buddha of Buddha Park.

<sup>15</sup> Lonely Planet is a popular travel guide.

<sup>16</sup> This is a famous bridge that marks the Thailand/Laos border.

price was fine by me! I knew more Thai than he did English,<sup>17</sup> which made for a great opportunity for me to practice my Thai skills.

The road was indeed bumpy, and I cannot begin to imagine what the ride would have been like in the bus. It took nearly 40 minutes to drive seven kilometers— it's a wonder this place is a top attraction, as I would have expected better infrastructure or at least an attempt to fill in the giant holes in the road. When we arrived at Buddha Park, I was relieved and pulled out my camera to take some shots of the impressive and beautiful sculptures, most



Picture 3. Me with Buddha Park in the background. My driver is behind the camera. We left the park about twenty minutes after this photo was taken.

of which were cast by amateur artists. My driver entered the park and offered to take some pictures of me (I didn't have any pictures of myself in Laos, so I was happy to show him how to use my camera.).

After sufficiently exploring and taking several photos, we were back on the road. The sun began to set, and my driver agreed to take me back to my guesthouse



Picture 4. BeerLao, locally produced in Vientiane.

near the Thai consulate. I had built some rapport with him and he seemed happy to take me along the way. I attempted to explain that I was hungry and I thought he would know of a quality local spot to stop at on the drive back. He instead asked if I wanted to grab a BeerLao. I was a fan of these local beers and had expressed such earlier in the trip. It was a kind gesture for him to offer, so I agreed. Unsure of where we were along the route back to my guesthouse and with the sun almost set, the truck stopped in front of an unlabeled and poorly fashioned shed-like structure. We were still on the bumpy road and I estimated Vientiane was still at least a half hour away. After a brief moment looking inside as we walked closer, I saw some young ladies approaching us and had some suspicion as to what I was

about to step into. I continued walking into the establishment, and when we sat down in the plastic chairs surrounding a wobbly plastic table, the two young women joined us as three adults (two women and one man) behind me sat and

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<sup>17</sup> Many Laotian people are fluent in Thai, a language very similar to Lao. This is especially so near the borders of the two countries.

watched various karaoke DVDs. I quickly and nervously drank my beer, not knowing what else to do in the situation.

During my travels, I have always expressed my interest in “going local”—seeing how locals lived, ate, and worked. This is not the local experience I was searching for. I uncomfortably watched my “friend” grope the girl next to him and peck her on the cheeks. She giggled as she brushed his hands away. I was encouraged by the



Pictures 5 and 6. The dirt road between Vientiane and Buddha Park.

driver to get close to the girl sitting next to me. He demonstrated his “smoothness” as he rubbed the leg of the girl sitting next to him. The driver made several gestures to me in an attempt to convey what I already knew—these girls were for sale, and sex was available just a walk upstairs. I repeatedly insisted “*Mai aw*” (I don’t want) and stumbled through some broken Thai sentences: “*Phom mi fane thii mueangphom Phom rak khaw*” (I have a girlfriend in my home city. I love her.). The girls smiled sweetly at me and didn’t make advances. The driver continued egging on the girl next to him, getting her phone number and even calling one of his friends to join. To say I was uncomfortable is an understatement.

The driver’s friend arrived, and he and I switched seats. I was now drinking my second beer, bringing surprise to the two men at how fast the light lager went down. Again, nerves were getting the best of me, and drinking the beer or smoking a cigarette they offered were my best choices to stay calm and not get upset with what I was watching unfold. Motioning with his hands, my driver repeated that there was a hotel upstairs where I could go to have sex, motioning with his hands. The sun was down by now and the string of lights sparkled in my periphery. My driver eventually got the point that I wasn’t interested, and after three beers split between us, we went back to the truck (I didn’t allow my driver to have more than one beer). As a gesture of goodwill, I paid the tab. Ultimately, I was in my driver’s hands in this small town along a dirt road, just over 30 minutes outside of Vientiane. With no working cell phone or other means to get home, I certainly didn’t want to upset him, so I did my best to remain calm. Paying was the *least* I could do to show my “appreciation” for the stop along the dirt road.

After leaving, relief swelled over me, but just five minutes after getting back into the truck, we pulled over again. I hoped that we were just making a stop for food. My driver’s friend pulled up next to our vehicle and joined us as we walked down a small hill in the general direction of a bar with a large group of girls sitting out front. I immediately stopped and stressed “*Mai aw*” but was pulled inside, as he insisted we would have just one beer. Three girls joined my two “friends” and me. My driver, obviously proud that he had brought a *farang* to the establishment, bragged that two of the girls sitting in front of me were 15 years old. He pointed to



the August calendar's 15<sup>th</sup> day to make sure I understood how young they were. "*Sip ha pi*" (15 years) he repeated several times. He went on to explain that the girl sitting next to him was from Japan, hence her different look. He groped her breasts hoping to excite me into making a move. The girl did not speak during our time there, and I question whether or not she even knew Lao or Thai. The room was dark and lit with a variety of stringed lights. There was obviously a lot more organization to this particular brothel than the prior, just from the sheer number of girls—probably around 15—and the drink service they provided, our glasses continually filled with ice and a beverage. I drank a glass of water as fast as the beers, and other alcohol flowed; after all, this would give me a good reason to go to the restroom and be alone for a moment, collect myself and sit back down.

Not only was this situation stressful, but I also felt my safety could be at risk and I was sure my driver was aware of my expensive camera equipment locked in the truck. I continued to downplay the two men's persistence to engage with the girls saying that I wasn't interested and had a girlfriend. The men insisted, "*Mai bpen rai*" (no worries). I was, after all in Laos and nowhere near the girl I spoke of. The driver forced a girl to grab my leg and forced my hand onto hers. In Thai, I whispered in the girl's ear that I didn't want anything and that I was sorry for my "friends." I told her she was beautiful several times—I didn't know what else to say. And the girls were beautiful. The caked on makeup created a façade of age and experience, but their innocence could shine through any veil. The driver let me know that for 50,000 Kip (\$6.50) I could have sex upstairs with the girl of my choosing. My stomach churned at the thought of these girls being bought for a night.

I sat there in disbelief at what I was seeing—two girls aged 15 and another from Japan. What were they doing in this brothel along a dirt road outside of the Laotian capital? I had read several books on human trafficking, but to see it firsthand like this pained me unlike anything coming out of the pages I devoured before my trip to Thailand. I wasn't prepared for this, although my plight was nowhere near theirs. This situation seemed stereotypical to stories I read. Were the girls sent away from their homes for whatever reason and forced into karaoke bars or brothels to pay off debts or support their family? No definite answer can be given, although from the looks on their faces, I could tell this job wasn't their idea. I can only imagine what the young Japanese girl's story was, but I know she didn't end up in the bar on her own accord. I stared each of them in the eye trying to convey some humanity and compassion. The two men laughed and carried on as they groped and poked the girls who were obviously not enjoying the attention. I got up several more times to use the restroom and at one point was in tears in the bathroom. After gathering myself, I remained calm and entered back into the bar. My glass was filled with beer and ice, and even Redbull was mixed in. Following a few beers split between the six of us, we got up and left the establishment. Relief flooded me, although any respite I felt paled in comparison to the guilt I felt for walking away from that bar while the girls remained.

It was about 10 PM when we got back on the road, with my stomach growling in disgust and hunger. We had left Buddha Park around 7 PM and the road home to my guesthouse was about to end. Hardly a word was spoken between the two of us while a French public radio monologue filled the void. The driver asked if the station was okay, although I was indifferent to whatever came through the speakers—my mind was still back at the bar. What happened to those girls and the future

they will have, I can't be sure, but their situation is prevalent in Southeast Asia and throughout the world. I can only hope that better days were ahead.

### Closing Thoughts

Although many who have read my original 2013 blog post regarding this experience have told me this was likely a commission scheme as described in the above literature, my driver seemed to treat these visits to the brothels as a typical “night out” with friends. He didn't charge me for my round-trip ride, and he and his friend paid the bill at the second brothel we were at (over 100,000 kip). If his motivation for taking me there was commission, I doubt he would have paid the drink tab or given me a ride home for free. That is not to say that these schemes aren't happening, although my situation seemed more nuanced.

Sverre Molland (2010) explains that the sex industry in Vientiane has become more visible on the streets, but the most common places where locals of all backgrounds purchase sex are at beer shops (known as *han bia*). Women working at these establishments sit with customers, drink, and are propositioned for sex at a negotiated price. The venues I was taken to were likely *han bia*. Perhaps, my driver's proposal to “get a beer” inferred a stop at these types of establishments, something I was not aware of before my border run. It is important to differentiate the two stops made. At the second stop, what I saw is unequivocally considered child sex trafficking per United Nations law.<sup>18</sup> Although trafficking may have been involved in the first beer house as well, these strict definitions do not apply as the women were above age 18.

As mentioned above, complicity and corruption by officials and police are all too common in these situations. Dr. Manivone Thikey, a clinical psychologist in Laos and a human trafficking researcher, read my original 2013 blog post and added a comment echoing sentiments about the common corruption of local law enforcement officials who are likely paid bribes for complicity. Thikey also mentions that the “Japanese” girl was likely an ethnic minority from Laos with limited language skills in Thai or Lao, and posits this was indeed a commission scheme and the driver was trying to make the girl seem more exotic or appealing to me. Lyttleton & Vorabouth (2011) describe the high levels of ethnic minority women in Laos earning income from sex in roadside beer shops and the relatively new emergence of onsite sex in these establishments. The young girls working in the bar are likely victims of circumstance, as child sex trafficking is most often rooted in poverty. Parents seeking better lives for their families and children are often offered



Picture 7. Buddha Park at dusk.

<sup>18</sup> Article 3 under the General Provisions of the United Nations “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime” states that any participation in the sex industry by individuals under the age of 18 is considered child sex trafficking by default (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2004).

false promises of care, jobs, and bright future from traffickers and others who are given responsibility for their children's care. Familial obligations also drive some young children and teenagers, both boys and girls, into the sex industry (Davis, Fiss, & Miles, 2016; Hawke & Raphael, 2016).

Despite working on issues of human trafficking Thailand, I, in many respects, failed to recognize where my ride home from Buddha Park might lead. Should I have accepted my driver's offer to grab a beer? Should I have been more defiant when I recognized that the establishments I was entering were brothels? So many scenarios have played out in my head of the "should haves" and "could haves." I implore everyone looking for or offered "sex for sale" to consider their role in the perpetuation and support of an economic system that largely depends on exploitation. Visibility of sex tourism and establishments catering to tourists is prevalent in Southeast Asia, but the sale of sex is often rooted in communities and local economies—going to the "beer houses" was probably a relatively normal activity to the two drivers accompanying me outside of Vientiane. Leaving a red-light district does not mean sex is not for sale elsewhere.

## Recommendations

So, what is one to do? Many male travelers in Southeast Asia will experience something similar to what I did in Laos, as there is often an expectation that men are in these countries for sex or are willing to buy sex. Perhaps my driver had taken other westerners to similar spots in the past with no objections. Before traveling, educate yourself on local practices and customs and plan to travel with others. While traveling, carry a working phone, and plan your itinerary. My naiveté led me into a situation where I felt unprepared. Traveling alone is a wonderful experience, although ignorance to social norms and local practices may lead you into precarious situations. This can be avoided by using services such as CouchSurfing (CS) ([www.CouchSurfing.com](http://www.CouchSurfing.com)) to get an authentic local experience. The website, with security features such as identity confirmation and searchable profiles/reviews, connects hosts and travelers. Just weeks before this border run, I traveled in Vietnam and stayed with a local family in Ho Chi Minh City and had an incredible experience with them using CS. The college student who invited me to stay with his family wanted to practice his English and was an amazing host. I paid \$20 for my three days and was provided transportation from the airport and around town, help to navigate the public transportation system, tips on the best places to eat, and was even treated to a meal in his family's home! From all my travels abroad, this was the best way I've had a true "local experience."

Mit Samlanh of the Cambodia based non-governmental organization (NGO) Friends International has recently developed a program called *ChildSafe* (<http://thinkchildsafe.org/>), that, among its many services offered worldwide, trains *tuk-tuk* drivers in an attempt to reduce accessibility of children to sex buyers. Certification with *ChildSafe* earns these drivers a sticker on their vehicle indicating the driver has received training and is a part of a movement to end child sex trafficking. Hotels and other businesses can similarly join this network and become an accredited *ChildSafe* accommodations. The *ChildSafe* website<sup>19</sup> informs tourists of these businesses looking to combat trafficking of children and has become a

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<sup>19</sup> ChildSafe Network: <http://thinkchildsafe.org/businesses/>

way to elevate these establishments among the many options in tourist destinations (Friends International, 2015). Additionally, the website provides hotlines listed by country for local and national organizations dedicated to protecting children from abuse and exploitation. Similar efforts are being made by an organization called *The Code* ([www.thecode.org](http://www.thecode.org)) which seeks to train, provide resources, and awareness to tourism companies and tourists to prevent child sexual exploitation. Businesses joining *The Code* commit to training and preventing child sexual exploitation and are featured on their easy to navigate website. Importantly, *The Code* and *ChildSafe* distribute their materials in multiple languages to maximize reach. Before traveling abroad, check out the *ChildSafe Movement* and *The Code* websites for information regarding reputable tour agencies, hotels, and other travel needs that prioritize ethical business practices and child safety.

For strong surveillance states such as Thailand, tracking internet use has widely expanded, especially since the country's military coup in 2014 (Pinkaw, 2016). Websites and promotions of the sex tourism industry are easily accessible, and investigating the promotion of the sex industry and possible trafficking should be a priority, especially on the Darknet where internet use is largely anonymous. The United States 2018 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report upgraded Thailand's status as a Tier 2 country, noting improvements in policing, prosecution, and prevention, including activities online related to child sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2018); however, the "rebranding" of Thailand's prominent image as a sex destination seem minimal over the past 10 years. Recent reports have noted efforts from the military government to suppress the sex industry (Tanakagsempipat, 2016), although websites promoting sex tourism and commercial sex remain ubiquitous (Gezinski, Karandikar, Levitt, & Ghaffarian, 2016). Thailand is undoubtedly making improvements, although broader legal protections need to be applied to victims of trafficking, as the legal system disincentivizes their participation in investigations. Many victims are prosecuted, often for not possessing proper paperwork or documentation, and promptly deported (Robinson *et al.*, 2016, p. 87-92, p. 97). In addition, strong anti-corruption laws would provide for a society where government officials and police who ignore or are actively engaged in trafficking would be held accountable.

Individuals without access to basic government services and support will remain the most vulnerable to the sex industry, particularly ethnic minorities and migrants. Men, women, and children are all susceptible to sex trafficking (Davis *et al.*, 2016, 2017; U.S. Department of State, 2018), and providing the general public and the most vulnerable individuals opportunity and protections such as minimum wage, state-issued IDs, and work permits in traditional labor sectors would make substantial progress in curbing sex trafficking and the sex industry. Empowering individuals to pursue non-exploitative and safe work environments should be the hallmark of anti-trafficking legislation. Although awareness of trafficking issues was found to be high amongst local populations in several regions of Southeast Asia, there is a common trend of identifying trafficking victims as easily deceived and unaware, providing an unproductive framework for NGOs and local governments to address systemic societal issues that allow conditions for human trafficking to thrive (Olivius, 2018). Awareness campaigns centered on describing what



human trafficking is and “raid and rescue” efforts remain a top priority of many NGOs and governments, though a focus on societal change (*i.e.*, collective responsibility rather than individual responsibility) and political accountability (*i.e.*, economic/legislative/judicial intervention) should instead drive prevention efforts. Governments should broadly seek consistency in the application of law across entire populations and provide a social safety net to vulnerable populations, which will disincentivize entry into the sex industry and possibly stem the growth of sex tourism. As drug use is highly correlated to involvement in the sex industry, harm reduction programs, including needle exchanges and addiction treatments should be readily available (Ditmore, 2013). NGO’s drive to appeal to donors’ concerns and the allure of measurable outcomes sometimes fails to adequately address the nuances and complexity of human trafficking and reasons why many enter and remain in the sex industry (Jones, King, & Edwards, 2018).

With several years having passed since traveling to Southeast Asia, I’ve been encouraged by the continued growth of awareness and attention given to human trafficking, although regional demand for commercial sex remains high and perceptions of Southeast Asia as a sex destination continue to be perpetuated in the media and pop-culture. When traveling or living in new cultures, research what you can do to support industries and businesses that positively impact locals. Plan to engage in responsible tourism which will ultimately help create social change.

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#### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

**Elliot Glotfelty**, B.S., is a research scientist and vocal advocate for vulnerable populations throughout the world, specifically in Central America and Southeast Asia, where he has worked as a long-term volunteer with non-profit organizations over the past eight years. During the time, Glotfelty has volunteered on a variety of projects and campaigns to raise awareness on issues of human trafficking and sexual exploitation, education inequities, and infrastructure development. While volunteering in Thailand in 2013, Glotfelty worked as a research assistant on one of the first studies evaluating vulnerabilities of male sex workers in Chiang Mai. This work was published in 2017. Glotfelty holds B.S. degrees in Chemistry and Biology and is currently a second-year neuroscience doctoral student researching neurodegenerative disorders and drug development. Glotfelty plans to continue scholarship and awareness efforts for human rights in the future. Email: [ejglotfelty@gmail.com](mailto:ejglotfelty@gmail.com)

**Glenn Miles**, Ph.D., has worked for over 25 years focusing on children and young people in difficult circumstances in southeast Asia. He pioneered INGOs Servants to Asia’s Urban

Poor, Tearfund UK, and Love146 in Cambodia and teaches on child rights, holistic child development and safeguarding in Wales and southeast Asia. He initiated a series of research projects on sexual exploitation; listening to boys, young men, women, and transgender survivors and perpetrators. Email: [g.m.miles@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:g.m.miles@swansea.ac.uk) or [drglennmiles@gmail.com](mailto:drglennmiles@gmail.com)

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