



LOCK, STOCK AND BULAWAYO

HUMANITY WRAP
By Roger Beaumont

When it comes to coping with bad driving and traffic, theory and practice are poles apart. We need to think outside the box, outside the car and completely off the map

If the car is primarily a tool for enhancing freedom, then driving at high speed is one of the basic manifestations of liberty, as anyone who has ever fanged along the autobahn in a convertible with hair flying and cheeks flapping knows only too well.

But then, for those whose motto is "driving by the people, through the people and over the people" are generally not long for this world.

One of the great virtues of capitalism is that through the car, speed has become available at a price more people can afford. If a man's car makes a statement, then its speed creates an attitude, which in turn spawns a petrol head.

That's the theory. However, sitting motionless in the heat of a Bangkok gridlock when the air often smells as if someone's been frying goats, it tends to dull one's "auto libido". As usual, theory and practice are on different planets.

But the problem with the practice is not your car. It is the existence of other cars. Too many of them. The success in making cars universally available has crippled cars as instruments of freedom.

Still, people continue to drive at every opportunity, which is not surprising when the alternatives are considered. The Skytrain and Metro are brilliant but, frustratingly, don't go far enough.

So what about cycling? Way too slow. Far too hot. What's more, bicycles demand a

level of fitness beyond most self-respecting Thais. They also expose cyclists to all the risks and dangers.

Horses? There are only 78 in the country. And they all play polo. Anyway, cars are cleaner. Don't believe me? During the 1880s the Noo Yawk Sanitation Department removed 15,000 dead horses a year, while coping with 1,300,000 kilograms of horse poop a day. Imagine the rich whiff of that coming off Sukhumvit on a hot day.

That leaves public transport. Yet the vast majority of buses are so uncomfortable and inefficient, the only people who use them are those who must. Which is most of us.

Ministers talk endlessly, but seem totally unaware of how bad Bangkok's public transport really is. This is hardly surprising. They never use it. The ministerial limo sees to that.

What's more, driving standards are basically dreadful. We conducted an exhaustive survey of 12 people at The Nation with the following questions:

Q: When turning left on to a main road do you look right?

A: No. Why? I'm not going that way.

Q: Do you slow down when a blind pedestrian is crossing the road?

A: What for? He can't see my licence plate.

Q: When driving through heavy rain, what should you use?

A: Your car.

Q: What problems would you face if you were arrested for drunk driving?

A: I'd probably lose my buzz a lot faster.

Q: What changes would occur in your lifestyle if you could no longer drive law-

fully?

A: I would be forced to drive unlawfully.

Q: What are some points to remember when passing or being passed?

A: Make eye contact and wave "hello" if she is cute.

Q: What is the difference between a flashing red traffic light and a flashing yellow traffic light?

A: The colour.

Q: How do you deal with heavy traffic?

A: Heavy psychedelics.

Q: What can you do to help ease a heavy traffic problem?

A: Carry loaded weapons.

Another possible solution to free up our clogged roads is to introduce traffic wardens and professional wheel clampers, from which the Thai government can take great comfort from the British example.

Granted, wheel clampers have joined traffic wardens at the top of the British motorists' list of "serious" irritants. One firm even clamped a van belonging to a dead man - and then refused to waive the Bt26,334 fee. But now "clampers" can gain a qualification in being nice to the public. The award promises to teach "immobilisation operatives", as those who qualify will be able to describe themselves, the skills to "handle situations where conflict might arise".

What's more, the Brits will soon have a new Traffic Management Bill, which is poised to transform traffic wardens into civil enforcement officers - "CEOs" - empowered to nail drivers for all manner of traffic offences.