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Forget What You Know About Time

By Bart Walters

Time is a human construct.

Based on the orbit of three celestial bodies, humans have formulated a system by which we measure our existence here on Planet Earth. In many ways, the ability to measure time precisely is one of mankind's most impactful achievements.

When you consider the kinds of culture shock you might experience when you move overseas, it's usually related to food, weather, or language. Most of us don't think about something like our concept of time being changed.

Tick tock, tick tock... time is time, right?

After two decades in Thailand, I realize that my concept of time bears little resemblance to that of my fellow countrymen living in America.

Please understand, I'm not referring to the old expat clichés about people in banana republics being lackadaisical about schedules and appointments and such. In Costa Rica it's called "Tico time," in Mexico it's "mañana time," in Greece we called it "Yorgo time." We North Americans are quick to criticize other cultures for what we perceive to be a total disregard for punctuality.

Here in the Land of Smiles, the warping of our time perception goes far beyond being an hour late for dinner. To start with, Thailand is 12 hours ahead of the east coast of the United States.

Usually if you are talking to someone in a different time zone, it might be three hours difference at the most. People who live in Thailand start a new day, week, month, and year a half a day ahead of people in America.



When I call my brother in Florida, he always says, "Are you calling from the future?" In fact, I am.

Another phenomenon that can blur your vision about time is related to food. In Thailand, breakfast is not limited to an eight-item menu of traditional foods everyone eats in the morning. No snarky waiter is going to give you a look because you are trying to order from the lunch menu at 8 a.m.

Menus for Thai restaurants are notoriously voluminous, and everything on the menu is available any hour they are open unless it is sold out. If you want barbecue ribs for breakfast, no problem. If you want to have eggs benedict for dinner, nobody bats an eye.

When I see people lining up at the cart of my local fried chicken vendor, it could be 7 a.m., 7 p.m., or midnight. Living here, you learn to eat what you want when you want, you no longer associate food with a clock.

And you can ditch the notion of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc. My bank is open on Saturdays until 7 p.m. Get your head around that Americans!

Most Thai people work six days a week. Whether they have off on Wednesday or Sunday makes no difference. There are still seven days per week, but

you'll have a hard time telling them apart by what people are doing or what shops are open. Without the signpost of Saturday and Sunday as weekends, weeks can slip by unnoticed.

Thailand only has two seasons. Wet and dry. It's always hot. The sun goes up and comes down without much variation. Unless you live in the extreme north of Thailand, the days pretty much stay the same length all year round.

Many of us who grew up with seasonal weather changes, seasonal clothing, seasonal fruits and vegetables, and seasonal sports are a little lost without these signposts to tell us where we are. Yesterday I stared into my closet wondering when the last time I wore long pants or socks was. I could not remember.

Another set of signals that help us know time is passing is our holidays. New Year's Day, Fourth of July, Christmas... each major holiday indicates big chunk of the year passing. How many times have you celebrated a traditional American holiday and thought back to what you were doing at that time last year or years before?

In Thailand, there are three different New Year celebrations; Solar Calendar on Jan. 1, Lunar Calendar (aka Chinese New Year) usually sometime in February,

and Songkran (aka Thai New Year) celebrated in April. Other than that, there are a handful of official Buddhist holidays, which all seem the same.

Unless you live near a big shopping mall in Bangkok, Christmas might just slip by without notice. The same goes for Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, and Easter. My mother used to live her life from one holiday to the next. She would be lost in Thailand.

Perhaps a more revealing difference in time concept is the way Thai people answer the "how long?" question. If you ask your housekeeper how long it will take to clean your apartment, she or he will give you an answer... But you shouldn't be surprised if it takes half as long as estimated or four times longer. That estimate was for your foreigner-living-in-Thailand benefit. A Thai person is thinking, "It's going to get done, so what's the difference?"

Earlier this year, I hired a Thai contractor to renovate three bathrooms in my condo. When I asked him, how long it would take, he said six weeks. After 20 years in this country, my ears heard 12 weeks, the logic being that they rarely go over double the time estimated. When the project drug on to 16 weeks, nobody, including me, got upset. It got done, and that's the important part.

These examples illustrate the difference in how we perceive time and how Thai people see it. We think about time as something we will eventually run out of. Thai people live like they have all the time in the world. They don't mind waiting hours in line for something they really want. They don't mind if you are two hours late for an appointment.

Time means nothing to people who believe in reincarnation. 🙏



About The Author

Bart Walters is an American expat who has lived in Thailand for over 20 years. He's been active in real estate development and has written dozens of articles and essays about living and doing business in Thailand. Bart has also been a teacher at a major university in Bangkok and recently published his first book titled "Sunset Vertigo," a collection of short stories about expat life in Southeast Asia.