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CUTTING OUT PREJUDICE AND RACISM FROM OUR PHUKET COMMUNITY

Not my words, but words you and I have heard: "I don't like to go there, too many Russians", "That event is 'very Thai' so not for me", "Foreigners need to learn how to behave in Thailand", "Thais need to stop cheating foreigners". "I don't trust foreigners with dark/black skin".

Just a snippet of some of the prejudiced and racist echoes out there in our Phuket community and now in semi-rabid rants for various online 'vloggers' aiming their poison, sometimes dressed up in pretty filters and poses, at whatever they see as 'local' or 'foreign'. In addition, social media applying to both domestic and international news – and the news outlets themselves – continue to engage in deliberate provocative 'extreme' reporting methods designed to enrage and engage readers to click and comment. The algorithm, the advertisers and those benefitting from the revenues, don't generally care about the content and how inflammatory or socially destructive it may be.

In the sauna and spa that I like to frequent, many Eastern European, Russian and other dialect/related language voices can be heard chattering away, furtively or conversationally. As a previous London resident, educated in London and working there before heading here, 'foreign' voices do not disturb me in general.

We can all detect, even if we can't understand a language, if there is ill intent in a 'foreign' discussion. Body language, stares and intent might be positive, neutral or actively negative. Unfortunately. what I can see – and have seen in other countries with migrants and changes in demographics – is a 'friction' and 'resentment of differences' often accelerated by a catalyst of miscommunication. That sauna and spa is a source of business, an employer, a social hub and a very positive addition to Phuket's amenity offerings. I love the fact it is a symbol of upscale and innovative Russian investment. More of that please, I love to have good choices.

Perhaps ironically, a lot of the do-good 'pretenders' jumping on the 'social justice theme of the day bandwagons' don't actually realise that contrary to the divisive politics being played out in the media, there are in reality many Ukrainians, other Eastern Europeans and Russians, and Israeli Russians and Middle Easterners mixing in Phuket in the same social circles, playing sports and engaging in other activities – together. They are not government representatives on the whole, and as smart people know – most of us don't actually truly choose our governments, even those who have a right to vote.

In the murky undergrowth of our 'Reels', 'Threads', 'Shorts' and other video feeds on our 'smartphones' and devices, we are regularly fed incidents designed to provoke us to comment, as aggressively and as controversially as possible. News outlets might show a foreign man running partially naked and drunk after a very heavy night out on the town, mumbling nonsense and not behaving very well – bait for those that like to cast the first stone.

Many years ago, the risk of being caught on a video was low, and said miscreant might wake up with a sore head, a lot of regret, an angry spouse and maybe even a police interview depending on how far things went. But now, the comments flow freely, without accountability for rationality or disciplined analysis: *"Cancel their VISAs!" "Kick them Out!" "We don't need visitors like this!"*

If it is an objective to 'secure' millions of tourists from a 'source country' then, statistically speaking, the more visitors the more likely there will be some bad eggs in the mix. But they will always be… in the minority.

On the anti-Thai prejudice and racism side, the situation is equally unacceptable. Witnessing Tuk-Tuk drivers or taxi drivers in a public fight, apparently all Thais become condemned as somehow linked to a very niche segment of Thai society: *"Violent Thais". "Always the aggressor". "Always teaming up on foreigners", "Bunch of Scammers".* Again, not my words, but unfortunately words we can see on comment forums and hear in lazy conversations.

The battle for a better society is being waged invisibly and nature will take its course. However, 'nudging' societal behaviours towards a more positive direction is possible with some concerted effort from residents and visitors to avoid being sucked in as suckers to the prejudicial racist provocation mantra.

• Are you rushing to make a judgment on a news or information piece on-line, so you can move on to the next reel/snippet? Take a moment to consider whether there might be bias or inaccuracy – or if the objective of the piece is to provoke you to engage.

• Is the news organisation the type of low-grade double standard outlet using a well-dressed (sometimes not so well dressed) 'front-man' or 'front-woman' to hyper-moralise stories by adding their often outrageously subjective and poorly supported 'opinions' to news without any opportunity for direct challenge other than 'commenting in the box below' (feeding the algorithm) or 'clicking like or subscribe'?

• If the news or gossip relates to an allegation of criminality, and the masses start jumping on the bandwagon of hurling rocks and stones at the 'accused', consider whether you believe you deserve to be 'innocent until proven guilty' and whether you would like others to be treated in the same way. If you see a photo of someone arrested, and in a police station, that isn't quite the same as a final judgment after appeals…

• In a social setting, if someone is openly racist, talking about "Russians do this", "British do that", "Thais always are this", consider expressing an alternative explanation, or differentiating the story from the people you know so that it is clear you don't agree in blanket stereotypes. Whilst this can create social awkwardness because many express opinions wishing only to be agreed with, it will have an impact over time if you stick to your values and principles

• Do you stick to your own social group that you feel 'comfortable with, due to language or culture? Many people do this, and sometimes it is fine. However, it is also worth making an effort to break the routine and tendency for comfort, to create a more interconnected local community and find common ground and harmony of interaction.

• Children are, in certain educational institutions, being taught to be 'inclusive' and 'non-discriminatory', at least with some 'theory'.

However, what they see in practice, including amongst their teachers, are the back channel prejudices and stereotypes, and the same children also go home and witness their parents and guardians actually behaving contrary to the 'noble' values on billboards and marketing materials.

True inclusion doesn't mean singing five different national anthems. True inclusion means not leaving somebody out because they are different, not making assumptions about their preferences based on their nationality or religion or other beliefs – and encouraging your own children or friends to mix it up with people from different walks of life.



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