



In this photo taken Thursday, July 29, 2009, tourists make their way through the arrival hall at Suvarnabhumi international airport after their arrival in Bangkok, Thailand. Travelers to Thailand have braved a variety of hazards in recent years but foreign governments are now warning about a new and different one: duty-free shopping at the airport. Several European tourists said they were falsely accused of shoplifting at the Thai capital's main airport and held until they paid hefty sums to buy their freedom.

AP Photo

Warnings issued about alleged Bangkok airport scam

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Travelers to Thailand have braved a variety of hazards in recent years but foreign governments are now warning about a new and different one: duty-free shopping at the airport.

Several European tourists say they were falsely accused of shoplifting at the Thai capital's main airport and some recount being taken to seedy motels where they were shaken down for thousands of dollars by a shady middleman.

A British couple paid the equivalent of \$11,000 to secure their release five days after being accused of stealing a Givenchy wallet that was never found, say police, who along with airport authorities deny any wrongdoing.

The Thai government has vowed a crackdown at Bangkok's scandal-plagued Suvarnabhumi Airport, which has barely recovered from last year's public relations disaster when anti-government protesters shut it for a week and stranded 300,000 visitors.

The airport opened in 2006 and has been dogged by corruption allegations, taxi touts with "broken meters" and baggage thefts - prompting a recent order for luggage handlers to wear uniforms without pockets.

But the allegations of extortion take things to another level.

"We are quite concerned about this," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Vimon Kidchob said Thursday. "The government of Thailand is doing everything we can to ensure the safety of tourists."

It's hardly the image the self-proclaimed "Land of Smiles" wants to project, particularly as Thailand's vital tourism industry faces its worst crisis in years after political instability, the global financial crisis and swine flu scares.

The scandal has spawned lengthy chatter on travel blogs about other scams to watch for in Thailand and a string of overseas travel advisories on the perils of duty-free shopping in Bangkok.

Ireland is warning its nationals to "be extremely careful" when browsing at Suvarnabhumi (pronounced "sue-WANNA-poom").

"We have received reports that innocent shoppers have been the subject of allegations of suspected theft and threatened that their cases will not be heard for several months unless they plead guilty and pay substantial fines," says an Irish government travel advisory. It tells shoppers to keep receipts to avoid "great distress."

The advice was posted after a 41-year-old Irish scientist, who was visiting for an international genetics symposium, was accused of stealing Bobbi Brown eyeliner June 25. The embassy declined to discuss details of her case.

Britain and Denmark have updated their online travel advice to warn that Suvarnabhumi's sprawling duty-free zone has hard-to-detect demarcation lines between shops and patrons should not carry unpaid merchandise between them.

British couple Stephen Ingram, 49, and Xi Lin, 45, technology experts from Cambridge, took the alleged scam public in late June. Their ordeal was pieced together based on accounts from police, airport and embassy officials and an interview the couple gave to British media.

The couple was approached by airport security before boarding a flight to London on April 25 and told that security cameras showed they had taken a Givenchy wallet.

King Power, the company that owns the duty-free store, has posted CCTV footage on its Web site that appears to show Lin putting her hand in her bag while browsing a wallet display. The security guards found nothing, but turned the couple over to police, said Sombat Dechapanichkul, managing director of King Power Duty Free Co.

"We are not aware of what happened next. It was then the job of the police to proceed with the case," said Sombat.

Ingram told The Sunday Times of London that they were questioned at an airport police office and then transferred to a nearby police station where their passports were confiscated and they spent the night in jail. The next morning they were introduced to a translator - a Sri Lankan named Tony - who said he could arrange bail and get their case dropped, warning it could otherwise drag on for months.

Tony took them to a nearby motel, called the Valentine Resort, Ingram said. The couple managed a visit to the British Embassy on April 27 but then returned to the hotel fearing Tony, who had warned they would be watched, Ingram said. They didn't leave Bangkok until May 1.

An investigation found that the couple transferred into Tony's bank account 400,000 baht (\$11,800) - half for bail and the other half for Tony's "fees," said police Col. Teeradej Panurak, who oversaw the case.

"Tony came in to translate for us. We can't control what the accused agree to with a translator," said Teeradej. He said the couple was released because there was not enough evidence to press charges.

A visiting British government official recently raised the case with Thai authorities, and the British Embassy was consulting other embassies about the alleged scam, said embassy spokesman Daniel Painter.

Tony resurfaced in June, when a Danish woman was arrested.

Danish Embassy Consul Tove Wihlbrot-Andersen says the woman was accused of stealing an item worth about 1,500 baht (\$45) after she unknowingly crossed from one shop to another. Her allegations mirror those made by the British couple: She was taken to a police station, contacted by Tony the translator, released on bail and then "taken to a bad hotel in the vicinity for almost a week," until she reportedly paid Tony 250,000 baht (\$7,400) - for an offense that normally results in a 3,000 baht (\$90) fine, the consul said.

Newspapers have published a steady stream of outraged letters-to-the-editor that note the Thai police force's reputation for taking bribes and to call for arrests in the airport scam.

One recent letter in The Nation newspaper came from Mike Gilman in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, who lamented the scandal's potential damage: "More nails in the coffin of an already devastated Thai tourism industry."

Associated Press writer Ambika Ahuja contributed to this report.