

# Ever thought about putting your out of office on for four months?

Author Jo Usmar took herself on a liberating solo trip to SE Asia and had an absolute ball...

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We can tape a wing mirror on if you really want," the man at the rental shop mutters, like he's bestowing a great favour. I take a quick step back

and assess the scooter I'm considering renting for £1.50 a day. It looks like a kid's crayon drawing, all bright primary colours, wonky angles and missing parts.

"I'll leave it, thank you," I say and start trudging towards the bus station. And then I stop. Doing a scooter ride around the jungles of Northern Thailand is on my bucket list. I'm a good driver. And besides, the people in the bus queue look and smell like they're part of an anti-shower cult – and one of them is holding a ukulele. I turn and head back to the shop. "Find me one with wing mirrors and a working speedometer, and you've got a deal," I say, flushed with exhilaration. "Ah, you want a *posh* drive," he sighs. "Why didn't you say?"

It's September 2018, I'm 34-years old, and Thailand is the first stop on my inaugural solo travelling trip. I have four months and five countries to visit, and every day I make choices based upon my own completely arbitrary (and often ludicrous) whims, with no one but myself to answer to. I'm having an absolute ball.

## NOTHING IS OFF-LIMITS

After Thailand, I visited Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. I'd pitch up somewhere, see if I liked the place and the people, then decide to stay or move on. I had no plan and nothing was off-limits. I travelled 500 miles on not-always-'posh' scooters, ate 500 tons of mystery meat, trekked up one too many mountains ("If we're not nearly at the top, I'm going to throw myself off") and chased sand dunes on a dirt bike.

I also lost *everything*, including but not limited to: my UK SIM card, a pair of sunglasses in the Mekong River, a second pair in a tuk-tuk, my flip-flops in a Chiang Mai karaoke bar called



Loco Elvis, and any desire to explore another cave as long as I live. I even managed to get lost while cycling to Angkor Wat – one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. I ended up trapped in a bull field during a rainstorm with a local kid pointing and laughing at me.

I met the most extraordinary and the most awful people. But I had something in common with every single one of them: we'd all chosen to leave our 'normal' lives and do something different. There's a connection hard to explain to someone who hasn't taken that kind of risk.

## NEAR-MISSES AND BIG REVELATIONS

I went travelling after realising I kept finding excuses *not* to. But what would I remember when I was 90-years old and assessing my life from the comfort of my Italian villa (because that's where I intend to end up)? That I *nearly* went travelling once? Or that I actually did? Sure, I had a mortgage, but I had enough savings to cover it for a bit. I had a job, but could try and find the same work again once I got home, or get a job in a pub.

Yes, I was terrified, but that was part of the challenge – I experienced tough times out there, but they were as important as the great ones. Knowing you survived a bus nearly rolling off

a cliff in Vietnam or a visit to a medicine man with no teeth, puts small daily annoyances into perspective. You come home and realise you *do* have choices – you just have to be brave enough to make them. And that is truly liberating.

## BREAK FROM THE NORM

Aqua Libra is an infused sparkling water with natural fruity flavours that's completely free from any sweeteners, sugar or artificial ingredients. It tastes refreshing, clean and unsweetened. Plus, it's available in two delicious flavours – Raspberry and Apple, and Grapefruit and Pineapple. Liberate yourself with Aqua Libra...

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