



The Ivory Smuggler

It was the eyes that gave Mohammed Sanoussy away—his eyes, together with the fact that the man attempting to pass through a line reserved for airline crew and diplomats was neither an embassy official nor a member of any airline. That mistake cost Sanoussy the chance to obtain a hefty cut of the US \$25,000 the ivory in his bag was worth. It also led to the Thai authorities arresting him.

Sanoussy had come from Oman, one of many bounty hunters looking to make a killing. He had taken the twice-weekly Gulf Air flight from Muscat that arrives at Bangkok International Airport at about 10:15 a.m. When customs officials stopped him, they discovered sixty large pieces of ivory weighing 195 kilograms—the equivalent of nineteen dead elephants.

The day after Sanoussy arrived in Thailand, another shipment of ivory was found in four pieces of unclaimed luggage at the airport. The ivory had been transported on the same Gulf Air flight from Muscat, suggesting that it was due to be collected by the same man. Sanoussy was taken into police custody where he was charged with bringing smuggled goods into Thailand and with violating the National Wildlife Conservation Act. Several days later, he signed over the ivory to the government and was released.

To find one of the major ivory carving centers in Thailand, you must drive three hours north of the capital to the town of Phayuha Kiri. For at least a generation, this prosperous little town has been the ivory capital of Thailand. One ivory shop is said to have been there for almost 200 years. Like many traditional skills in the country, ivory carving is on the wane. But as recently as 2001, Phayuha Kiri still boasted fifty craftsmen mainly working freelance out of their own homes.

Inquisitive foreigners, however, are not welcome. Within minutes of our arrival, locals were alert to the presence of potential troublemakers. A brand new Isuzu four-wheel drive cruised slowly

alongside us as we walked down the street and a driver checked us out carefully. It's only a warning, but in Thailand, as numerous incidents have proved, warnings such as this are to be taken seriously.

The craftsmen of Phayuha Kiri have good reason to be on their guard. In March 2001, private investigators counted 39,649 individual items made from ivory displayed in twelve shops along the main road. Most of the ivory is wholesale, destined for tourist shops in Bangkok where it is sold at prices marked up five- to six- times.

The Thai authorities claim that ivory comes from domesticated elephants, which are not subject to the international ban. But the reality is different. In late 2002, Thailand was named by CITES as one of the world's major ivory trafficking centers. Since then, several more illegal ivory hauls have been seized at Bangkok International Airport including sixty-five elephant tusks worth US \$70,000. The consignment, which was labeled as gems, had arrived on a flight from Ethiopia. Given the high demand for ivory in Thailand, it is unlikely to be the last.



△ A piece of ivory like this one can sell for up to US \$15,000. As the stockpiles of ivory are being sold off, so the demand for more ivory increases. This demand is met by illegal poaching which continues at high levels.