

Betting the farm

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Whether it's an agreement that the loser buys the next round before the billiard balls are broken, a Super Bowl or FA Cup office pool, or practising your poker face during a game of Texas hold'em with the guys, gambling is well integrated into the fabric of societies around the world. While betting a little money during any of these pastimes can add a bit of excitement to a sporting or recreational event, they are all illegal in Thailand. Loser buys the drinks? In Thailand, even the winner can go to jail.



Gambling in Thailand is regulated by the Gambling Act BE 2478 (1935) with accompanying amendments that stopped in 1962. "Gambling" is not actually defined in the Act itself, but is instead described in the Royal Institute Dictionary BE 2542 (1999) as a game of wagering for money or valuable things by chance or intelligence. This definition is very broad, and the specific list of prohibited gambling activities has not been updated since Maverick was playing blackjack on steamboats. However, not all forms of gambling are illegal. Domestic horse racing and the national lottery are both government-sanctioned and are legal for the public.

Horse racing in Thailand dates back to 1897. When King Rama V returned from Europe, after having attended various races, he bestowed land for the first race course, which became the Royal Bangkok

Sports Club. One Sunday every month, this track and the Royal Turf Club of Thailand each host a horse racing event where Thais and foreigners alike can wager on their steeds. The minimum bet is 50 baht, and there is reportedly no maximum. Similar to horse races worldwide, guidebooks are available, in both Thai and English, to provide you with odds and other statistics necessary for an informed wager on your favourite blazing saddle.

The other form of legalised gambling in Thailand is the national lottery, which is participated in on a regular basis by roughly one third of Thailand's 67.5 million citizens according to a recent Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute study. Numbers are hand-picked live on television on the 1st and 16th of each month. Throughout the month, vendors with wooden cases hanging around their necks can be seen selling tickets street-side. The face value of a ticket is 40 baht, but particularly lucky numbers, or lucky pairs of tickets, will command a premium price, and the vendor will also add a markup of perhaps 20 baht (or more if you are a farang with an unscrupulous vendor).

There are two lottery pools; one with a jackpot of 2 million baht which is designated as general government revenue, and one with a jackpot of 3 million baht which is used to fund community-based projects. Jackpot hopefuls can choose from tickets with different six-digit number combinations printed on them; making the odds of winning the big prize one million to one. Both pools award prizes for getting all six digits correct, consolation prizes for being one number above or below the jackpot, and prizes of 2,000 baht and 1,000 baht for getting the last three and two digits correct respectively.

Although the picking of lottery numbers is random, there are countless stories nationwide of people praying to natural anomalies such as ant hills and extra-limbed amphibians, having dreams interpreted for secret messages from the spirits and even making offerings of food to other food that happens to be shaped like a prominent figure – all in the hopes of predicting winning lottery numbers. One auspicious method that proved profitable, as reported in this newspaper amongst others, was to use the digits on the license plates of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's vans – which ended up appearing seven times in the 40 bimonthly cycles since the start of her administration. The same number even came up three times consecutively: Ying-luck indeed!

Foreigners can buy lottery tickets as well, and only need a valid visa of any form in order to claim their winnings. To do so, you must bring the winning ticket to the local lottery agent if the value of your prize is 20,000 baht or less, or, if you are a big winner, bring your ticket to a branch of the Thai government.

Outside of these two instances of legalised gambling, all other forms are prohibited in Thailand. However, the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute's study found that an estimated 100 billion baht is generated annually from illegal lotteries, while the government lottery follows in second with a capital of 76.77 billion baht. So the underground gambling economy is huge, and next week we'll be exploring some of its variations and the potential penalties.

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