

When the going gets tough Aussie travellers

Australians expect the government to rescue them no matter what if there is a problem overseas.

Story Anne Hyland
BANGKOK

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's the Australian government coming to your rescue.

Earlier this month, the Australian government, with the help of Qantas Airways and Jetstar, undertook an extraordinary logistical operation to air-lift 1700 Australians out of Thailand, who were stranded when a mob of protesters shut that country's two key airports for nine days.

Australians were transferred by road from Bangkok, where the two main airports were closed, to Phuket Island, 13 hours to the south. From there, Australians could take a flight home and escape from the paradise that had become their prison.

But now the question being asked is whether the rescue was worth it? The cost of the operation, which is apparently running into millions of dollars, is still being tallied. The government and the airlines are expected to split the tab.

Perhaps the more important question to be asked is whether the Australian government, and taxpayers, should have borne the responsibility for rescuing thousands of Australians who were inconvenienced, but not endangered, by the Thai airport closures? What was a reasonable level of government service that should have been provided to these Australians who were clearly distressed but unharmed? The Thai airport closures were not another Asian tsunami or Bali bombing where Australian bodies were piling up in morgues.

Many Australians stranded in Thailand, however, expected the government to come to their aid and get them out, even if their next destination wasn't even home. An Australian businessman, who was on Phuket with his colleagues,

demanding to know how the Australian government was going to help him get to Hong Kong.

Phuket Airport was functioning with direct flights to Hong Kong; it was only the two key airports in Bangkok that were closed. A travel agent could have helped the businessman, and his colleagues, but instead he took his problem to the Australian government to solve.

Australians, who know the risks of travelling abroad, have over the years increasingly come to expect to be looked after by the government every time they face a problem in a foreign country, no matter how trivial.

The Australian embassy in Thailand, for example, receives at least one Australian tourist a week demanding that Medicare pay their Thai medical bills.

Hugh White, former strategy secretary for the Defence Department, blames in a Lowy Institute report these rising expectations on the former Howard government, which moved the government's responsibility of caring for Australians overseas

from the margins to near the centre of the priorities of the Foreign Affairs Department.

This became evident in that government's response to a number of high-profile crises from rescuing Australians caught up in Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006 to securing Douglas Wood's release from Iraq. Each time the government acted, the bar was

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raised higher in what the public expected.

White says he's not arguing that the government shouldn't help Australians in trouble abroad but that at some point limits have to be placed on what is promised and offered before successive Australian governments get trapped in a cycle of rising expectations.

Already, it would appear the government, under the leadership

of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, has been caught in that trap with the response to the Thai airports closures.

To be fair, if the Rudd government had refused to ask Qantas to put on the four emergency flights to bring home Australians, or for Jetstar to take on additional passengers, then it would have been harshly criticised by voters for its inadequate response.

Powerful images of weeping and emotional Australians stuck in Thailand were plastered across television screens and many people back home were thinking it could have been them.

Certainly, the government, as well as Qantas and Jetstar, won an enormous amount of goodwill for getting Australians home from Thailand and it wasn't the only government to do this. China, France, Holland and Spain also put on emergency flights to fly out their nationals that were similarly stuck in Thailand.

Yet the governments of the United States and United Kingdom did not put on any emergency

GALLERY DAVID ROWE



bring its cars into Australia next year. "Tata motor vehicles will be available in Australia in the course of 2009," says Tata Motor's head of corporate communication, Debasis Ray. Tata declined to give details but it is unlikely these models will include the ultra-cheap Nano, which costs about \$2500, because it would need substantial upgrading to meet Australian design standards.

All this competition will come on top of a fall in car sales, a global financial crisis and a \$2 billion shortfall in Australia's automotive finance market that provides credit to car dealers for their inventory.

But the outfit most probably a key target of the Chinese imports, Korea's Hyundai-Kia Group, does not sound too bothered, having had years to work on their designs, quality and target markets.

Hyundai spokesman Ben Hershman says the company initially made a splash in Australia through selling a new car at a price that was closer to the cost of some second-hand cars.

It's now the fifth-largest car maker in the world, recently won a few gongs at the Australian car of the year awards and sells everything from the small Getz at \$13,990 up to a \$46,990 SUV.

"We're now selling world-class product," Hershman says. "We're obviously aware the Chinese brands are coming in, but we are moving along with our plan to grow our market share in Australia by bringing in product that consumers want,

that are reliable and safe and are fun to be in."

Kia spokesman Jonathan Fletcher says nobody underestimates the emerging competition from China and India, given that Australia already has the highest number of competing brands in the world.

He says the Kia brand, through features such as a five-year warranty, plays well to the current stance of taking a "less risky view of purchasing vehicles".

"I guess the aspirational purchasers will be the ones who will be tightening the belt a bit," he says.

So where does that leave home-made Australian cars? They're shifting to greener technologies but Holden and Ford, in particular, need to lift their sales. GM Holden chief executive Mark Reuss, who is also president of Australia's Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries, argued in a recent speech that the stronger Japanese yen would make local producers and component suppliers much more competitive.

"There's plenty of talk about the possibility of a Chinese car invasion, but the yuan has appreciated against the US dollar and the Australian dollar," he said.

"That's going to make that proposition much harder at the bottom end of the price ladder. Currency stabilisation, not only the yen but the Chinese yuan and Korean won, could offer greater opportunities for [Australia] component exporters."

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flights and the message from both those governments to citizens was clear. They didn't consider the situation dangerous enough to warrant their rescue and their nationals had to take responsibility for their own wellbeing and security.

British Airways did eventually put on a special flight to Thailand to collect some of its marooned passengers but at no cost to the UK government.

White says the Australian government's response to the Thai airports fiasco, and the bailing out of Australians that get into trouble abroad, is coming at a high price. He argues it is placing an even greater workload on Australian embassies around the world, which in turn means less time for diplomats to undertake other important roles such as analysing political and economic developments in countries that are strategically important to the Australian government and businesses. And also less time for diplomats to promote Australian political and economic interests or to seek influence in countries that

are important to Australia's future.

During the airport closures in Thailand, Australian embassy staff were working 18-hour days providing information to stranded Australians from how to get access to prescription medication to organising accommodation and flights.

All hands were on deck, which meant less embassy resources were available to analyse the economic damage that the airport closures were inflicting on Thailand's economy and also potentially on Australian trade and investment in Thailand.

It also meant that embassy staff were stretched in providing analysis on Thailand's political problems back to Canberra. The protesters who closed Thailand's two main airports for nine days were demanding the resignation of Thailand's prime minister and his ruling party. Meanwhile, Australian travellers inconvenienced by the protesters' actions were demanding the government get them home.

In both cases, the demands being made were too high.

RELATIVITIES DEIRDRE MACKEN

The economically challenged

Fifty years ago shopping was simple – you needed something, you saved up and bought it. Twenty years ago it got more complex – you wanted something, you bought it on credit. Today, you need to be a polymath before you pop up the shops.

In the past week, we added economically correct (EC) considerations to the list of things to consider before you buy. The challenge to be EC with the \$10 billion handed out by the government to prop up the economy occupied everyone from the pulpit to the parliament.

Tim Costello, the Reverend, was walking around malls telling us to buy goats for Ethiopians. Kevin Rudd, the Prime Minister, suggested iPods for the grandkids. Gerry Harvey made a pitch for plasma screens. Myrta tagged its gift cards with "My True Rudd Gave to Me". Retail lobbyist Richard Evans insisted we "shop for Australia", reminding everyone that the country doesn't need you anymore, it just needs your money.

A few politicians got EC consumption mixed up with moral consumption by warning of mobs who'd drink it away and pensioners who'd gamble it away. But, hey, as long as they gamble it on state lotteries and drink Australian wine it might be just what the country needs. And since when did economics fuss about morality?

Spend or save? Send it to the poor overseas or splurge on the family? A Target solution or a restaurant rescue package? It's lucky former PM Paul Keating gave us a crash course in economics or we'd be lost with all these calculations of the economically correct.

But we shouldn't be surprised that we now have to be economic patriots when we buy a bunch of bananas. The good consumer already has to be an environmentalist, agricultural scientist,

corporate watchdog, fair trade specialist, ethicist and dietitian when a wallet gets whipped out.

For those who have been distracted by the past week's challenge to figure out the multiplier effect of a banana buy, here's a quick recap of what the good consumer considers when the wallet is opened.

Supporters of slow food are across agricultural systems, both modern and ancient. They must know where their food is grown, its genetic background, when it's in season, how it was harvested, the name of the farmer and his family motto. If the food is cooked, they should ensure it was cooked in an oven with a wood pile beside it.

They might decide it's too complicated out there in the malls of our morality.

Those who work at being green consumers will know whether the food is genetically modified, cloned or likely to contain genes for pigs ears. They'll find out about pesticides used, whether it's organic or biodynamic and whether the moon was rising when the backpackers did the midnight harvest.

Ethical consumers have so much to consider that philosopher Peter Singer wrote a book about it. Where was the food grown, which company owned it, were the workers paid decent rates, did corrupt bureaucrats get a cut and did the AWB have anything to do with it?

Healthy consumers have to do a lot more than read the nutrition panel. They should know the GI of the food; whether it's full of trans fat or good fat; whether it has any fibre, omega 3, antioxidants or any of those additives that send the kids psycho. Oh yeah, check the calories. And the salt. Sugar and

fat, too. Stop press – if it's made in China, check its chemical profile.

We haven't finished. Those who have cottoned onto food miles will want to conduct a supply chain analysis to find out how much their food is contributing to climate change. So, find out how far the food has travelled, how far the farm hands travelled to harvest it and whether the dairy products from Europe have a lighter footprint in London than dairy from New Zealand (they don't).

The anti-globalisation gang wants to know which company made the stuff. Is the company a good corporate citizen with a triple bottom line mentality or does it pay chief executives massive bonuses, use child labour in Asia and offer private jets for bosses to go begging?

We're guessing that not too many Australians spent their Rudd bonus on a down payment for an American-built sports utility vehicle with a pedestrian-unfriendly bumper bar, a 1977 dashboard design and eight cup holders for polystyrene cups.

We'd also hazard a guess that the poor villagers of Ethiopia won't get too many goats out of a bonus that is meant to prop up a First World economy. And I'm guessing that a new plasma screen won't be a boasting point among the relatives this Christmas, if only because it is a symbol of the era of oversized confidence, easy credit and simple decisions.

But there's a possibility that the economically correct calculation will be the one that breaks the consumer's confidence. Some might decide it's too hard to be an ethical consumer and a fair trade supporter and a healthy consumer and a slow food supporter and a food miles calculator and a corporate watchdog.

They might decide it's too complicated out there in the malls of our morality. And they'll put the money in the bank.