

Lifestyle | Feature



This photograph shows rows of custom-decorated trucks parked in a field at a fancy truck party in the Thai coastal province of Rayong.



This photograph shows a painter working on the front panel of a truck at Soonchai Industry, a truck assembly factory in the central Thai province of Nakhon Pathom. — AFP photos



This photograph shows a Transformer-inspired detail on a painted truck at Soonchai Industry.

Anime, Michelin Man, Transformers: Truck art thrives in Thailand



This photograph shows a painter cutting away a masking tape for a stencil design on a truck panel.



This photograph shows a man standing next to his custom-painted truck.

Music pounds from the speakers and LED lights ripple across the customized cabs at a “truck party” hosted by proud Thai drivers showing off their lorries with swag. They own 20-wheeler behemoths that turn heads on the roads with lurid graphics and paint-jobs of everything from unicorns to “Transformers” and Disney characters on their cabs and containers—while large Michelin Man dolls often add to the visual assault.

Thailand is a major logistics hub and long-haul truck routes connect goods from Myanmar and Laos to the North, Cambodia to the east to Bangkok and Malaysia in the south. Like their South Asian peers, Thai truck owners are enthralled by decorous vehicles—with new designs spinning out across social media and the best artists charging up to \$1,600 for their work.

“These trucks are used in real life,” said Teerasak Inklom, while controlling the state-of-the-art sound system on his heavily decorated 10-wheeler at the party in a disused field in Rayong, on Thailand’s eastern seaboard. “The relationships it creates can also be useful when you have accidents or technical issues on the roads,” he added, of a job that is often lonely and also prone to be targeted by criminals in remote areas. “These friends can help.”

Michelin mania

At a vast warehouse near Bangkok, dozens of workers cut stickers and spray on designs ranging from traditional flower patterns to Japanese robot anime craze Gundam. It belongs to Sirintra Phichitphajongkit, managing director of Soonchai Industry, one of Thailand’s largest truck assemblers that has recently devoted one section to painting the trucks. “I think it’s about psychology” Sirintra said.

When the trucks are “nicely decorated, drivers are motivated to be extra careful and not to leave any scratches on them.” Thailand’s lavish vehicle decoration originated with bus paintings—and the Michelin Man. The tubby white mascot known as “Bonhomme Michelin” in French are given by the Lyon-based tyre company to customers who buy a certain number of tyres.

Many drivers say they then use the figurines for decoration as a way to show off their wealth. But truckers today are adding wackier local designs to the mix and installing accessories like loudspeakers and extra wing mirrors. Though decorating vehicles

is prohibited by Thai law over safety concerns, drivers mostly get away with small fines and sympathy from admiring police officers.

Saddam and Che

That wasn’t always the case. The community was long perceived as led by shadowy, drug-ridden machos who idolize “bad boy” icons from Che Guevara to Saddam Hussein with stickers on the sides of trucks. “That reflected the tough guy lifestyle of people who endure long drives on the roads,” said Suphot Saengow, leader of The Artistic Mind Truckers Club of Thailand. “I think now we look more polished and friendly.”

That is certainly the case for Wichukorn Wongdara as he drives a bright green truck carrying rocks from an out-of-town quarry destined for a Bangkok construction site. The unicorn on his truck—designed by his daughter—aims to attract admiring eyes and deter thieves, who sometimes siphon off fuel from parked trucks. “It’s been a dream to create my own fancy truck,” Wichukorn said. “What do I get out of it? I get the feeling of pride when people come to look at my trucks and praise how beautiful they are.”—AFP



This photograph shows men putting a fancy sticker on the window of their truck.