

Idled Thai taxis go green with mini-gardens on car roofs

By Jerry Harmer
The Associated Press

BANGKOK — Taxi fleets in Thailand are giving new meaning to the term “rooftop garden,” as they utilize the roofs of cabs idled by the coronavirus crisis to serve as small vegetable plots.

Workers from two taxi cooperatives assembled the miniature gardens using black plastic garbage bags stretched across bamboo frames. On top, they added soil in which a variety of crops, including tomatoes, cucumbers, and string beans, were planted.

The result looks more like an eye-grabbing art installation than a car park, and that’s partly the point: to draw attention to the plight of taxi drivers and operators who have been badly hit by coronavirus lockdown measures.

The Ratchapruk and Bovorn Taxi cooperatives now have just 500 cars left plying Bangkok’s streets, with 2,500 sitting idle at a number of city sites, according to 54-year-old executive Thapakorn Assawalertkul.

With the capital’s streets deathly quiet until recently, there’s been too much competition for too few fares, resulting in a fall in drivers’ incomes. Many now can’t afford the daily payments on the vehicles, even after the charge was halved to 300 baht (\$9.09), Thapakorn said. So they have walked away, leaving the cars in long, silent rows.

Some drivers surrendered their cars and returned to their homes in rural areas when the pandemic first hit last year because they were so scared, he said. More gave up and returned their cars during the second wave.

“Some left their cars at places like gas stations and called us to pick the cars up,” he recalled.

With new surges of the virus this year, the cooperatives were “completely knocked out,” as thousands of cars were given up by their drivers, he said.

The situation has left the taxi companies in financial peril, struggling to repay loans on the purchase of their fleets. Ratchapruk and Bovorn cooperatives owe around 2



GARDENS ON WHEELS. Miniature gardens are planted on the rooftops of unused taxis parked in Bangkok, Thailand, on September 16, 2021. Taxi fleets in Thailand are giving new meaning to the term “rooftop garden,” as they utilize the roofs of cabs idled by the coronavirus crisis to serve as small vegetable plots and raise awareness about the plight of out-of-work drivers. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

billion baht (\$60.8 million), Thapakorn said. The government has so far not offered any direct financial support.

“If we don’t have help soon, we will be in real trouble,” he told The Associated Press.

The taxi-top gardens don’t offer an alternative revenue stream. The cooperatives staff, who were asked to take salary cuts, are now taking turns tending the newly made

gardens.

“The vegetable garden is both an act of protest and a way to feed my staff during this tough time,” said Thapakorn. “Thailand went through political turmoil for many years, and a great flood in 2011, but business was never this terrible.”

AP video journalist Tassanee Vejpongsa contributed to this report.



UNIVERSAL STUDIOS BEIJING. A family wearing raincoats and face coverings to help protect themselves from the coronavirus pose for a selfie with an icon near the entrance to Universal Studios Beijing, located on the eastern outskirts of Beijing. Thousands of people braved the rain to visit the newest location of the global brand of theme parks. The Hollywood studio’s Jurassic Park, Kung Fu Panda, and Harry Potter film franchises, plus Minions from Despicable Me feature prominently at Universal Studios Beijing. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Universal Studios opens Beijing park under anti-virus curbs

BEIJING (AP) — Harry Potter fans came dressed as wizards as Universal Studios opened its first theme park in China last month under anti-virus controls.

The Hollywood studio’s Jurassic Park, Kung Fu Panda, and Harry Potter film franchises, plus Minions from Despicable Me feature prominently at Universal Studios Beijing on the Chinese capital’s eastern outskirts.

The opening went ahead despite coronavirus outbreaks in China’s southeast that prompted the government to tighten travel controls in some areas.

“We’ve been longing for the opening for quite a while,” said a visitor, Niu Haoxuan.

Visitors were required to wear masks and display a smartphone-based health code that shows whether they have been to regions deemed at high risk of infection.

After a report of a possible case in Beijing, “we were very worried,” said Zoe Shi. “We thought about whether we should still go. It turned out to be untrue in the end. We feel lucky.”

Universal Studios Beijing is the Chinese capital’s first foreign-branded amusement park. It is the fifth worldwide for Universal Studios and the third in Asia, after Japan and Singapore. Universal Studios is part of NBCUniversal, a unit of Comcast Corp.

The park received high-profile support from the Beijing city government despite tension between the ruling Communist Party and Washington. The city extended a subway line and added a station named for the park.

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