

# Minivans can be **MAJOR DANGER**

## CONSUMER WATCH

Travelling can be cheap and convenient, but it isn't as safe as you might think

STORY: **SIRINYA WATTANASUKCHAI**

**P**ublic buses, minivans, BTS, MRT, BRT, boats and taxis — with a wide variety of public transport, Bangkok commuters seem to be more fortunate than those living in other provinces.

But do they really have a choice? Public buses are unpredictable, inadequate and slow, thanks to traffic congestion. The BRT and boats are limited in certain areas, and the BTS and MRT are accessible only in the inner city. Taxis are too expensive for most daily commuters.

Minivans seem to be the best solution to get around Bangkok, with a large number of vehicles and routes to inner Bangkok, its suburban areas and other regional destinations. But whether to take a minivan is becoming a big question — it can be a mistake to travel in an illegally operated vehicle.

Problems have frequently been found in minivan services, said Sawanee Chumchalieo, an official from the Foundation for Consumers (FFC). The most common issues are illegally operated vehicles, a disregard for passenger and speed limits, and improper travel distance.

There are currently about 5,000 legally operated inter-city minivans and 5,400 minivans covering 128 routes throughout



A legally registered minivan will have a yellow number plate.

PHOTO: APICHA JINAKUL

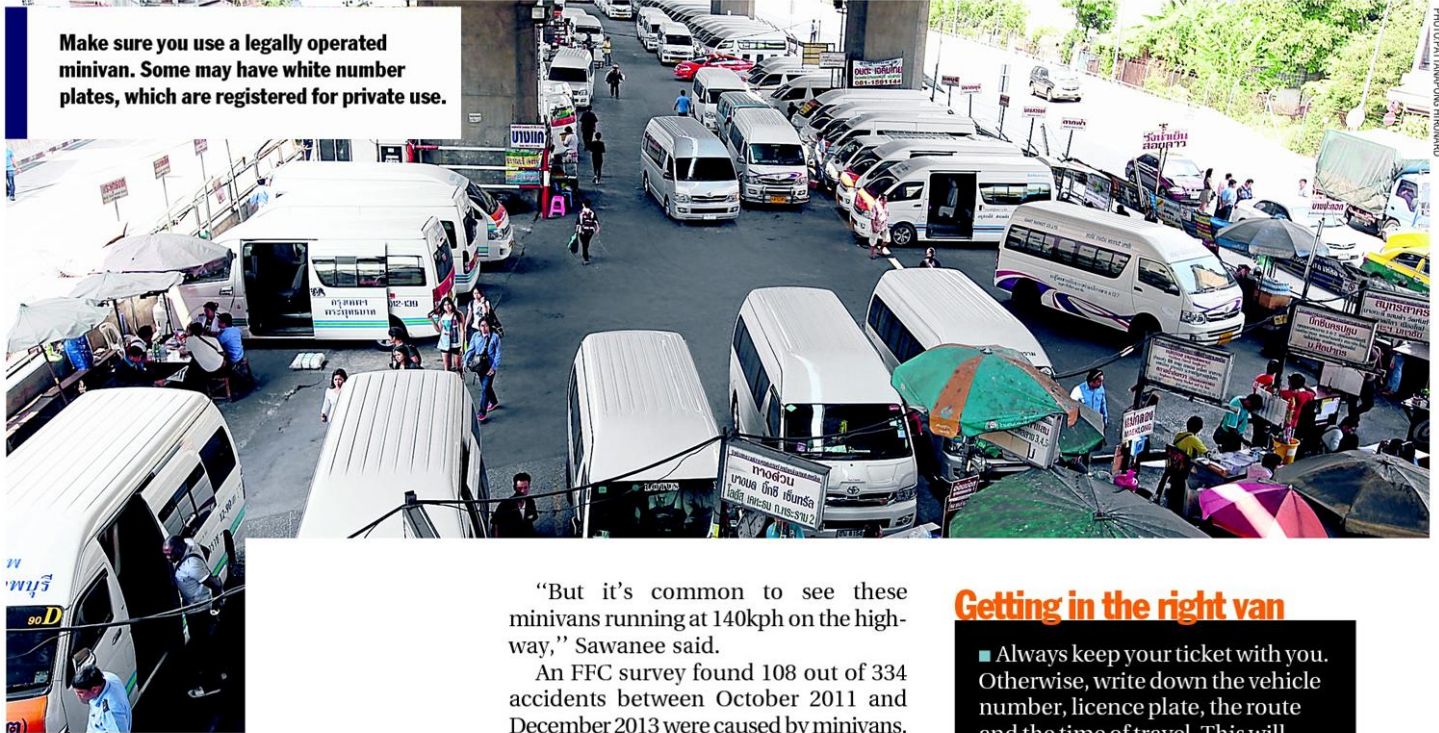


A survey by Foundation for Consumers found there are seven accidents every day.

PHOTO: SONTANAPORN INCHAN



**Make sure you use a legally operated minivan. Some may have white number plates, which are registered for private use.**



the capital and greater Bangkok.

To ensure the minivan you are using is legally registered as a public vehicle, look for a yellow number plate, with the first two (out of six) numbers between 10 and 19. Registered vans under the 1979 Land Transport Act must display yellow number plates, while illegal vehicles carry a white or blue plate — the colour issued to privately owned vehicles. If you are unfortunate to be injured in an accident while travelling in an illegal vehicle, it is unlikely you will be reimbursed for medical bills or be able to file a claim for compensation.

Just because a minivan has a yellow plate, however, doesn't mean you can sit back and relax — there are still a few more things that could go wrong.

The number of passengers is the next worry. A minivan isn't supposed to carry more than 15 passengers, including the driver.

But Sawanee said minivans are often packed like sardines and exceed the legal limit for passengers.

A single minivan sometimes carries as many as 25 passengers, she said. The third worry is the speed limit. The speed limit is 80kph for highways and 60kph for city routes.

"But it's common to see these minivans running at 140kph on the highway," Sawanee said.

An FFC survey found 108 out of 334 accidents between October 2011 and December 2013 were caused by minivans. Those accidents resulted in 823 injuries and 146 deaths.

Sawanee suggested a passenger call 1584 for domestic routes or 1193 for inter-city routes if they want to report reckless drivers.

"Or if you can't talk, the TraffybSafe app is the answer," Sawanee said. Developed by the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center, available for Android and iOS, the app shows the speed and precise location of a vehicle.

A passenger may report his or her whereabouts and route through the app, which is monitored around the clock. The information is immediately forwarded to the highway police.

Another worry is the distance. Minivan services are limited to a distance of 300km. Always check your destination before getting in a minivan.

It's fine to travel to Nakhon Pathom or Ayutthaya in a minivan, but if you are heading to Phitsanulok, Chaiyaphum or Roi Et, find another method of transportation — the distance to these destinations is over 300km, which means you will end up travelling in an illegal minivan.

## Getting in the right van

- Always keep your ticket with you. Otherwise, write down the vehicle number, licence plate, the route and the time of travel. This will help if an accident occurs.
- A registered public van must have a yellow licence plate.
- Check your route distance. The easiest way is to check with Google Maps. The distance shouldn't exceed 300km.
- Passengers must not exceed 15 people, including the driver.
- To report illegal service, call 1584 for city routes, 1193 for inter-city routes or use the TraffybSafe app.