

# Three cheers

*Cyclist embarks on a three-day cycling adventure west of Bangkok and discovers a rich tapestry of Thai history – including the famed Bridge on the River Kwai*

Words **ALEX MALONE** Photography **DAMIAN BREACH**








he journey from the airport into the centre of Bangkok is typical of a bustling Southeast Asian city: slow. Traffic crawls along. The glare of red brake lights wears heavy on our tired eyes. All the while, scooters snake their way through any gap available. It makes us wonder how we'll fare tomorrow morning when we begin our custom three-day adventure with cycling tour specialists SpiceRoads. Our on-bike guide Aum puts our minds at ease, explaining that bunch rides leave from the city every morning without too much fuss.

'You should see some of the bikes people are riding over here,' Aum enthuses. 'It's really impressive to see the amount of high-end bikes getting around.' He has just come off the exhaustive drive from Chiang Mai after competing in an annual race up Doi Inthanon, Thailand's highest peak. Despite his heavy legs, he tells us the next few days will be a real treat. Car-free roads, lush and abundant countryside,

rivers, wildlife, amazing local food, great weather, comfortable accommodation, a ferry ride, and plenty of climbing. That's what we've been told to expect. We can't wait.

#### Leaving Bangkok

We awake feeling rested after taking in a late-night feast of crispy chicken, morning glory, som tam (papaya salad) and larb. Nok, who will drive our supply van, and Aum arrive at the Mandarin Hotel early for the 60km-odd drive to our starting point. The back of the van is heavily stocked with more than enough for day one's cultural and historical experience, but with much longer rides lined up for days two and three, we anticipate a resupply trip will be on the cards.

It's time to begin our Big Ride, and we depart the bustling metropolis of Bangkok towards the city of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, and then to the riverside restaurant in the Bang Pa-In District. Now a tourist attraction, the ruins of Ayutthaya, destroyed by the Burmese in 1667, have been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage 



Kanchanaburi is full of history and includes a number of war memorials

## Car-free roads, lush and abundant countryside, rivers, wildlife, amazing local food, great weather, comfy accommodation – we can't wait



You'll never be far away from 'bonk-breaking' fuel in Thailand



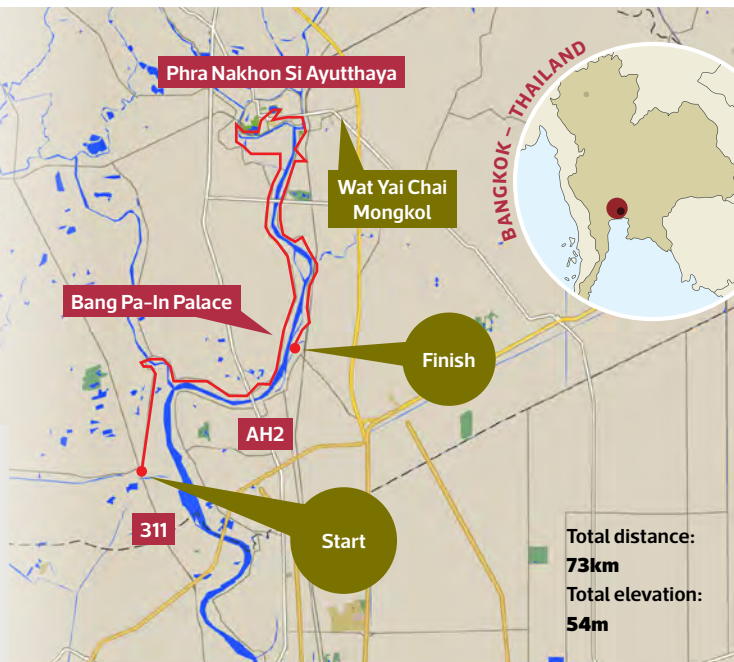
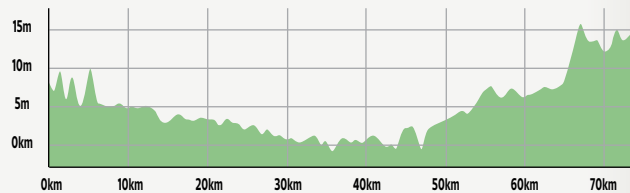




## Map + Day 1

### Follow *Cyclist's* route

We started our ride a little way outside of Bangkok, leaving quite early in the morning to beat the traffic. Day 1 was a tourist ride, a way for us to get acclimatised to the conditions and to also venture into the old city of Ayutthaya. We rode in a northerly direction towards the historical city, once proclaimed as the capital of Siam, before making a short loop within the city walls. From here we turned south and back towards Bangkok for a riverside lunch near the King's old summer palace at Bang Pa-in.





While these docile elephants are safe to be around, we're told that it's best to do your elephant spotting at a place like Ayutthaya... in the wild is a different story



► Site. It's a definite tourist hotspot. Those familiar with the American-made *Mortal Kombat* flicks may recognise a couple of the wats (temples) from the fight scenes. The popular *Street Fighter* video game also finds itself in Ayutthaya territory when battling within the demanding Sagat stage.

It's a pan-flat ride from a petrol station situated next to the Chao Phraya river to Ayutthaya, some 40km later, but the combination of low-30s temperature, humidity, easy terrain and fast roads makes it rapid but thirsty work. We circumnavigate the old city of Ayutthaya and drop off into a few of the most impressive wats, but with the area better suited to those on foot, we decide to continue on our way – though not before having our picture taken with some of the four-legged residents. Ride next to an elephant? Tick.

A little further down the road, in the Bang Pa-In district, is one of the most popular Bangkok bunch cafes. At first glance it doesn't seem like any more than a service station, and Aum reaffirms its anonymity by telling us it doesn't have a name. Still, with enough racks to holster 30 bikes, it's obviously a well-known spot. The small cycling jerseys in the windows also indicate we've come to the right place.

Like much of Southeast Asia's developing coffee culture, coffee tends to only be available black: hot or cold. An iced coffee won't have milk in it, such are the dietary requirements of the Thai people, but thanks to the recommendation of our guides we're in no way

disappointed when a couple of black-magic type iced brews are served up. A bit of whipped cream is not off the menu, either. 'Cheers'.

There's a little stray cat sitting next to us as we cool off. His shiny fur, which makes him look straight out of a Pet's Paradise, suggests that our cafe host knows how to look after anyone who drops in – cyclists and animals alike.

After coffee it's time for lunch down by the Riverside restaurant near the Bang Pa-In Palace – a palace once used by kings during the summer season – for grilled fish, rice, vegetables and some delicious chicken stir-fry. Back in the van for an hour's snooze and soon we find ourselves in Kanchanaburi, a town close to the Burmese border. With all this great food in our tummies, it's a good thing we're going long tomorrow.

#### A new day

Today is a big one. First up, just a couple of kilometres from our accommodation at the Royal River Kwai Resort, is the Bridge on the River Kwai. Made famous by its Hollywood depiction, the 'Death Railway' and iron bridge are in fact nothing like their movie counterparts. This is, however, the most well-known section of the railway, built by the Japanese using POWs during World War II. Immaculate memorials located nearby solidify the significance of this area to both locals, who were used as labourers during that time, and for the Allies who lost their lives during its construction.

On paper today's ride isn't the most demanding, but Aum reminds us that the heat ►



## Rider's ride

2015 Giant Defy Advanced Pro 0, \$4,699, [giant-bicycles.com](http://giant-bicycles.com)

The debate over disc brakes on road bikes is one for the Internet forums and keyboard warriors. We're not going to pass our opinion on that debate here except to say that on the mega steep and long descents of Thailand we were glad to have them.

The Giant Defy has been the touring workhorse in the Giant road endurance stable for quite some time and the 2015 Defy Advanced adds a little "race" to that pedigree. With a stiffer bottom bracket and front end the Defy is very supportive of those sprints and climbs but we like how the caboose-pounding harshness of the long days is somewhat softened with a more compliant rear triangle and seatpost. And that's how we found the Defy: pretty comfortable on those long days.

We found the spec to be right on point and having a bike with so much advanced





The combination of low 30s temperature, humidity, easy terrain and fast roads make it rapid but thirsty work

tech in a country like Thailand was an easy ice breaker for roadside conversations. Shimano Ultegra Di2 takes care of all the shifting like you'd expect, even if you don't worry about using the front derailleur [hence the name 'Big Ring Breach']. The Shimano R785 disc brakes with 140mm rotors worked very well, however there were times we maybe wanted some better cooling power and a great upgrade would be swapping the OEM rotors for Shimano Ice-Tech.

The bike we took to Thailand was pretty much out of the box with only a change to the stem (length) and tyres. They say that fat is the new thin and 28c tyres added to that endurance feel without the loss of much else. All in all the Defy performed super well with the only issue being the white bar tap and seat. When you're sweating like a bull on the hills of Thailand it gets nasty quickly.







**Above:** At this time of the year many farmers burn their crops to make way for the new season, hence the somewhat hazy backdrop

**Left:** The iron bridge over the River Kwai is vastly different from what we expected. That'll teach us for believing everything we see in the movies



will start to take its toll later in the day. There are four relatively small climbs to take on across the 146km route, the first coming after 30km. Up until now we've been twisting and turning our way through small village roads, across sections of soon-to-be-built roads and past countless sugar-cane fields. It's mid-morning before we hit the first ascent of the day and the heat has already surpassed what we had expected to be around the low 30s. Seems the weatherman may have got it wrong today.

We clamber up the first ascent with relative ease; it's made even smoother by the lack of cars passing. The sun has started to bear down on our backs and our computers are already creeping towards the 40-degree mark. At this time of the year the surrounds are fairly dry, at least in this area, but there's certainly no shortage of water – as evidenced by the body flowing underneath us as we cross the Kwai Noi river in Sai Yok.

Our second climb of the day is a little more interesting and offers two ascent options: the

**The sun bears down on our backs and our computers are already creeping towards the 40-degree mark**



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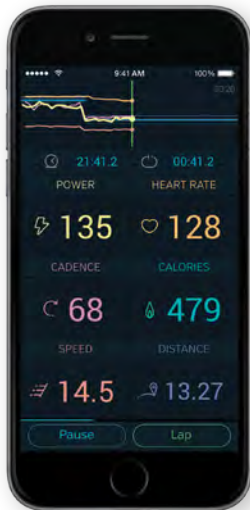


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## By the numbers

Because everyone loves stats

# 4,500

Elevation gained over two days of riding, starting in Kanchanaburi and finishing in Dan Chang

# 1944

Year the iron bridge over the River Kwai was bombed by Allied forces. The bridge is an important part of history in the Kanchanaburi area

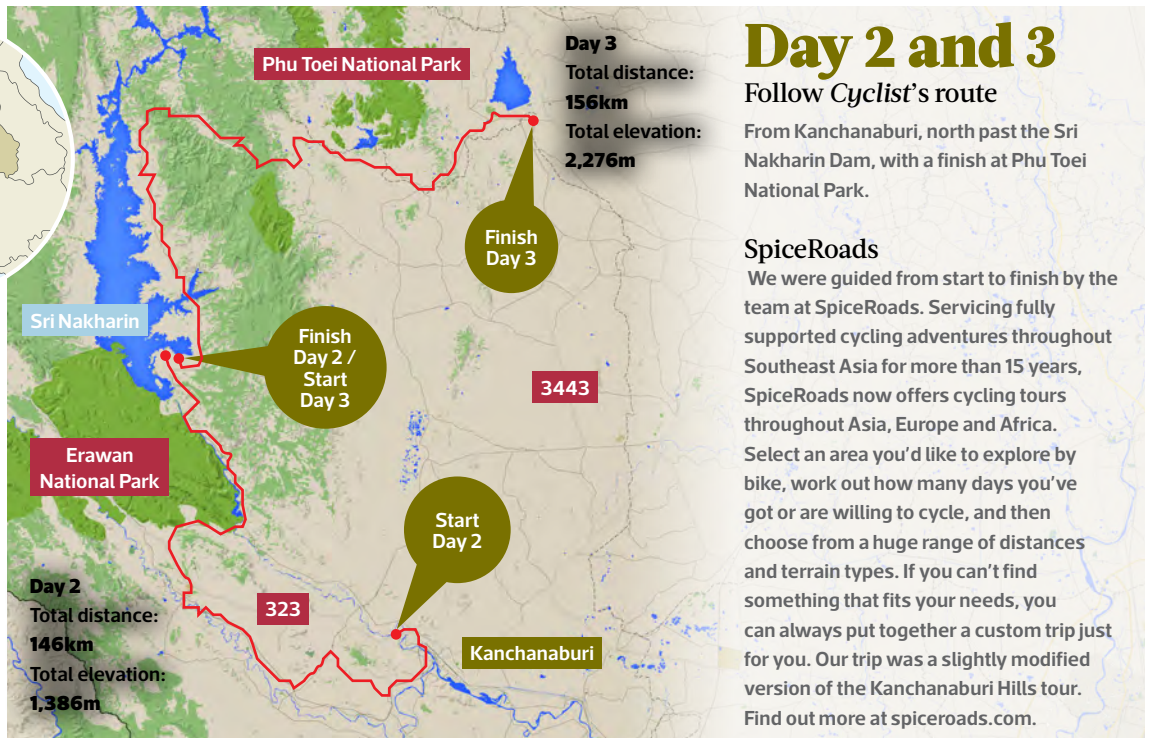
# 380

Distance in km covered during our three-day trip with SpiceRoads. Like any great trip, there are always options to make days longer or shorter.



Number of punctures incurred during our time in Thailand. Bonus.

The heat on Day 2 took its toll early in the piece. A lone cafe along the route provided us with a much needed rest stop



## Day 2 and 3

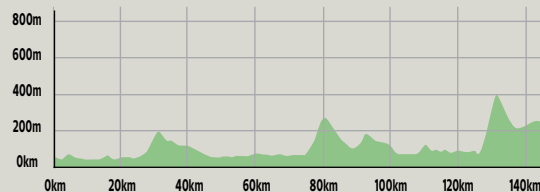
Follow *Cyclist's* route

From Kanchanaburi, north past the Sri Nakharin Dam, with a finish at Phu Toei National Park.

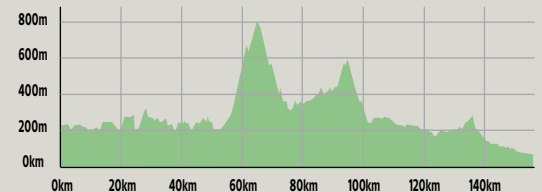
### SpiceRoads

We were guided from start to finish by the team at SpiceRoads. Servicing fully supported cycling adventures throughout Southeast Asia for more than 15 years, SpiceRoads now offers cycling tours throughout Asia, Europe and Africa. Select an area you'd like to explore by bike, work out how many days you've got or are willing to cycle, and then choose from a huge range of distances and terrain types. If you can't find something that fits your needs, you can always put together a custom trip just for you. Our trip was a slightly modified version of the Kanchanaburi Hills tour. Find out more at [spiceroads.com](http://spiceroads.com).

Day 2



Day 3



◊ main road, and a secondary back road that is wickedly steep. We decide to check out both, with the alternate route feeling more like a (very) hot autumn day back home. There are leaves scattered all over the hot mix road, and when we get to the top we discover a collection of spirit houses, which the Thai people use to ward off bad spirits. Offerings of red Fanta with a straw on top are plentiful – the spirits are big fans of sugary drinks, it turns out.

A quick glance down at the Garmin, currently reading 42.8, combined with all of these delicious roadside beverages – strictly not for consumption, of course – insists we down tools for a break. A cafe called MUKAfe gets us out of the heat for a round of iced coffee. We're 80km in, with a descent, small climb and some flat roads to go before the final climb up to the top of the Sri Nakharin Dam.

The remaining 60-odd kilometres follow the river all the way to a dam wall. For the most part now, everything has turned green. The Kwai is in fact part of the river that flows through Kanchanaburi and into the Gulf of Thailand. It would seem that regardless of the time of year, these rivers rarely, if ever, run dry.

### Monkey business

We're now more than halfway into our Big Ride, and while we've seen elephants – though not in






We encouraged Damian to climb high up onto a cliff to capture this great shot



the wild, admittedly – we’re yet to see a monkey. That all changes quickly, however, when we stumble across what seems to be a wild monkey hang out. Clearly here for the fruit and food scraps scattered around by the attendant sitting under the shade of an umbrella, Aum and Nok – who are regulars around these parts – don’t seem overly interested. Damian and I, on the other hand, are excited to be able to get so close to these cute characters – though keeping a little distance is apparently a good idea. They are wild animals, after all.

‘Monkeys are fine, but you don’t want to see an elephant in the wild,’ says Aum. Not too far from here, elephants have been known to “attack” vehicles by sitting on them. We chuckle, despite Aum’s stern face, get a few shots of the locals basking in the sunny rays and then carry on. The life of a monkey seems pretty good right about now.

We hit the wall – of the dam – and immediately request Damian venture high above the road. After a kilometre of over 10% and tipping into the 15% range, he’s not overly impressed, but once atop he realises he has come across a race-track-like S-bend. We’re not sure what’s better – riding a twisting road or looking at the amazing imagery afterwards and knowing you were there. The final challenge – a little under 4km long – is over soon enough, 

**Not too far from here, elephants have been known to “attack” vehicles by sitting on them. We chuckle, despite Aum’s stern face**







**Above:** Aum recommended we take the ferry across the lake. We gladly obliged

**Right:** Elephants, check. Monkeys, check. These little guys were truly living the good life







**We're already laughing about the ride back out tomorrow morning. Laugh to hide the tears, as they say**

and while there hasn't been much noise for most of the ride, we're now in real whisper-quiet country.

The roads become narrow and we come upon a surface constructed from large concrete blocks. Often used as a way to combat the contraction caused by the heat, our worn-out bodies take each separator like a small slap to the face. It's a little more than 10km before we finally reach our destination and make a short but viciously steep descent towards our accommodation. We're already laughing about the ride back out tomorrow morning. Laugh to hide the tears, as they say.

We arrive to a lakeside view that, in many other parts of the world, would render surrounding accommodations astronomically expensive. In Thailand, however, a stay at the Raya Buri Resort will cost around \$150 for the night, including breakfast. A large room awaits, with plenty of the usual creature comforts to satisfy any weary traveller, and we've heard the restaurant is top-notch. More good food? We could get used to this.

**And on the third day..**

We arrive at breakfast the next morning to find Aum fastidiously preparing a number of pour-over coffees before our departure. A man with a real appreciation for caffeine is always welcome on any *Cyclist* trip, and the strong hit does well

to wake up our bodies ahead of the day to come. 'We're going to take a different route to the original plan,' Aum says. 'There's a ferry we can take across the lake, which is really nice.'

We require no further convincing. After managing to keep down our fried rice and egg brekky following the steep climb out of Raya Buri, we're greeted with 25km of flat roads before reaching the ferry crossing. There's a serious abundance of produce growing around here with tapioca, tobacco, bananas and plenty of other delicious fruits following our every pedal stroke. But it's not all sugar and spice...

'Those fences are to keep the elephants off the road,' says Aum. It's not the Jurassic Park style fencing you may be thinking of, but it's more than enough to deter a wandering beast from venturing into vehicle territory. Thankfully (though with a hint of disappointment), we fail to see any real signs of a wild elephant today.

It's a short descent down to the old punt ferry. A 20-minute park later and it's onto the other side of the Sri Nakharin. There's a morning mist covering much of the surrounding hills, and even with the ferry's motors humming along, it's incredibly peaceful.

Back on our bikes and we head uphill for a kilometre or so as we make our way north, following the path of the lake. Our van has left to get supplies, so we're completely alone for a while. It's so secluded - something quite





Top: No one seemed to have an issue with us sitting on the front of the ferry for the early morning cruise

◊ unfamiliar for most of us city folk – that I can't help but play a bit of Michael Jackson through my iPhone. Fan or not, it's hard not to smile when "Billie Jean" comes on.

It seems like the van has been gone for no time at all before we see it up ahead, at the base of a 12km climb. It's not a categorised or named climb in Strava's eyes, but that doesn't take away from its imposing stature. It twists and turns its way up to the 850m summit, and while we know we've been climbing for some time, it's tough to check our progress, such is the dense bush and scrub surrounding the road.

With the end of the dry season not far away, a large majority of the trees have been scorched into oranges and yellows, with splashes of greenery thrown in the mix. Aum and I decide to race to the top, where our recently packed lunches await. We're not sure where Nok went to get them but the takeaway containers are filled with still-hot fried rice and eggs. It sure helps to have locals on board when venturing out in these parts.

With our lunches firmly packed into our guts, Aum happily tells us it's more or less downhill all the way into Dan Chang, roughly 40km 'down the road' – and as such we should feel free to open up our collective competitive spirits.

It's an enticing thought. Up until now we've been soaking it all in, with a little under 400km covered over the three days. It has been more than enough to satisfy our desire to devour huge amounts of local cuisine while leaving enough in the tank to truly embrace the experience. While something of a detour from the standard Big Ride, when you've travelled more than nine hours to another country just to ride bikes, there will always be more than one story to tell.

'Let's do it,' says a buzzing Damian. 'Catch you at the finish.' 🌸

## How we got there

Follow in our wheeltracks

### TRAVEL

We travelled to Bangkok from Sydney on Thai Airways. The non-stop flight takes approximately nine hours and you'll be treated to more than enough food to arrive fuelled and ready to ride. Thai Airways has plenty of options for additional luggage including bicycles, but make sure to book prior to your departure as the airline is known to be strict with baggage weight – something we would experience with a photographer who packs for all occasions...

### ACCOMMODATION

The standout spot to kick back after a long day was the Raya Buri Resort in Sri Sawat. Situated above Lake Sri Nakharin, you'll have to do little else but drag your weary legs down to the lakeside restaurant at meal time. You can even stay in a floating pontoon room if you so choose.

### FOOD & DRINK

Leave your usual energy bars and snacks at home and try living off the land. Depending on the time of the year you may

want to pack a good electrolyte, even if as an Aussie you feel you're used to the heat. It's the humidity here that gets you, and it'll make you sweat like a session of Bikram yoga – even before the hottest part of the day.

### THANKS

To SpiceRoads and Thailand Tourism for a seamless experience during our four-night, three-day riding adventure. Our on-ground crew, Aum and Nok, ensured we didn't go hungry or thirsty

neither on nor off the bike and made the riding experience all the more enjoyable. Thanks to our clothing partner Santini for keeping us cool and comfortable during a couple of long days and showing forgiveness to Damian for doing his very best to ruin everything he wore through repeated bush-bashing in search of the perfect angle. Focus Australia supplied the writer with a Cayo 1.0 while Damian 'Big Ring' Breach rode a Giant Defy Advanced Pro 0. Both performed flawlessly.