



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Young monks pose for a photo; the Bridge over River Kwai; the journey to Tam Kasert; statue (?); temple (?)



BIKING BACK IN TIME

Filled with natural beauty, culture and World War II history, Kanchanaburi is perfect to explore on two wheels

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BRENT LEWIN

It's early on a steamy Monday morning as we navigate through Bangkok's gruelling rush hour traffic. Cycling helmets dangle from the van's rear windows, spare bicycle tyres sit stacked in the back and five mountain bikes are strapped to our roof. There's no mistaking our purpose today as we attract curious stares and friendly smiles from the roadside vendors we pass enroute. As the traffic starts to thin out, our guide turns to us and greets our group with enthusiasm that shakes us all from our groggy state.

"*Sawatdee krap* and welcome to Spice Roads cycle tours, my name is Nhoi. In a few hours we will arrive in Kanchanaburi to start our three-day, two-night bicycle tour exploring the history and natural beauty of the region. I suggest you get some good rest now," he advises before jokingly adding, "because we will need all our energy for this afternoon!"

Spice Roads, a veteran cycling tour operator in the region, has been providing professional, well-run tours catering to all

Spice Roads has been providing professional tours for more than 12 years

levels for more than 12 years. Over the next three days we will cover 102km through Kanchanaburi's back roads, taking in the rugged landscape and uncovering the area's infamous history, as well as the tranquil beauty of the River Kwai, nearby waterfalls and Wat Prasat Muang Singh, a 12th-century Khmer-style temple. The degree of difficulty is rated by Spice Roads at two chillies out of five, yet we're all a bit nervous about the steep uphill ride awaiting us on the third day.

With only four people, our group is small and the morning drive provides an opportunity to get to know each other. Richard, an avid mountain biker from England, explains that he came to Thailand to experience the rich World War II history, while Kim and Marie, roommates working in Hong Kong, are here taking in Thai culture before heading to Koh Samui for a friend's wedding. Before we know it, we've arrived at our first stop — the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery.

Walking through the intricately manicured grounds Nhoi explains, "There are over 6,982 soldiers from World War II buried or commemorated here, mostly



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Sai Yok Elephant Park;
a dip at the waterfalls;
temple (?); bridge (?)

British, Australian and Dutch. They all died as prisoners of war building the Thai-Burma railway, or 'Death Railway.'

The epic project began in 1942 when Japan, after invading Burma, needed a way to send supplies to their troops. Construction took more than a year as 330,000 Asian and Allied prisoners of war laboured under horrific conditions day and night. Almost one-third of them died during the construction.

After a short walk from the cemetery, we board our train for the 90-minute journey to Tam Kasert where our bicycle tour will officially begin. As the train departs from the station we soon slow to a snail's pace as we cross the famous bridge on the River Kwai. We all lean out the windows to take photos of the scenic view. As the train picks up speed, life seems to slow down as the urban bustle of Kanchanaburi melts into peaceful scenes of rural Thailand.

As we pass through lush green rice paddies and farmland dotted with Buddhist temples, Nhoi is quick to point out the different crops to us. He is full of useful

The pace is easy going and the sights of rural Thailand are tranquil



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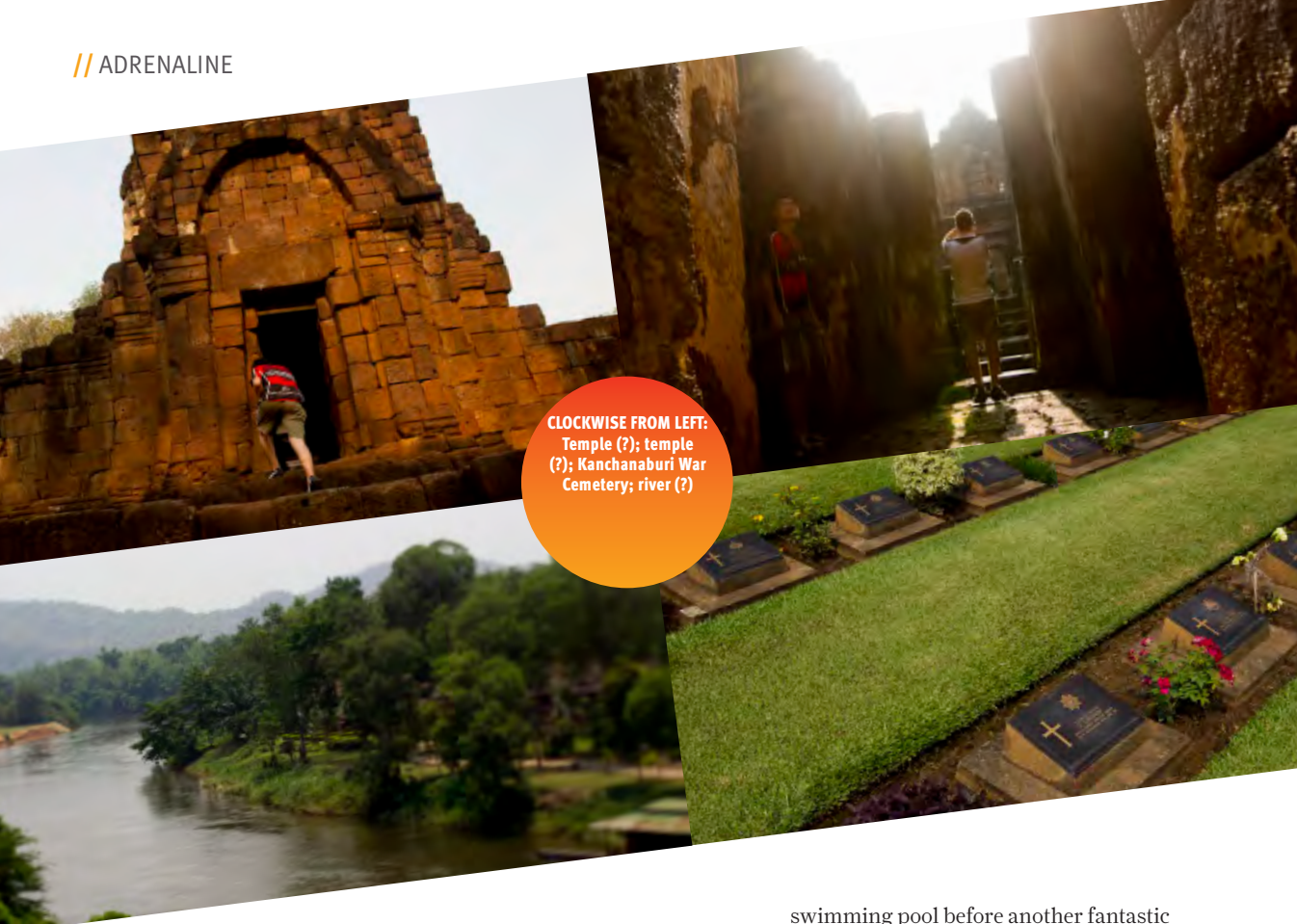
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information whether it's the history of the region, the Thai way of life, or choosing local dishes. We arrive at Tam Kasert where our driver Panupong is waiting for us with our bikes fully assembled. After adjusting our seats and strapping on a helmet we're off. We ride at a leisurely pace through scenery full of the greens and browns of tapioca and sugarcane crops.

All of this is surrounded by the rugged mountains in the distance which, along with the fresh air, makes for a refreshing ride. We come to a stop 10km later at Sai Yok Elephant Park, home to more than 40 elephants. We watch mesmerised as a large herd eats lunch and socialises. "The are over 5,000 registered elephants in the country," says Nhoi. "Most used to work in logging but now they're all retired and only work in the tourism industry." After snapping some pictures we're back on our bikes riding over a series of scenic bridges.

The pace is easy going and the sights of rural Thailand are tranquil. We never seem to go too far without a rest stop where our driver is always waiting for us with a variety of drinks and fresh fruit to refuel on.

Before we know it we've covered 27km and reach our final destination for the day, Wat



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Temple (?); temple
(?); Kanchanaburi War
Cemetery; river (?)

Prasat Muang Sing, a 12th-century Buddhist monastery featuring an excavated burial site and a well-preserved stone temple. There are few tourists here, so we all take pleasure in wandering around the peaceful complex. After arriving at the charming Pung Waan Resort nestled on the River Kwai, we enjoy a delicious meal of curries and fish which we all share “Thai-style”.

Waking up slightly sore, we’re greeted by Nhoi who warns us about our hilly route.

“Today will be much more up and down on the trail, but nothing to be scared of.”

Setting out past local shops selling fruits we depart from the main road and onto a bumpy dirt path. Traditional Thai music blends with the rooster’s crow and aside from the odd putter of a motorbike, the sounds of nature create a welcome feeling of isolation and peace. We take rest stops at a Buddhist temple, a basket workshop and a local bridge before lunch.

The afternoon is spent on a main road leading to the River Kwai Resotel. We arrive mid-afternoon and are more than happy to indulge in the hotel’s massage service and

After one last stop at the Bridge on the River Kwai, we take in more World War II history

swimming pool before another fantastic dinner of delicious Thai food.

Knowing the third day will be the most challenging so far, we all feel blessed to wake up to an overcast sky. On the road again we slowly tackle the 20km ride back. Just outside of Kanchanaburi we all congratulate each other on a cycling trip well done and hop back in the van to continue on with our afternoon itinerary. We cover a lot of ground, first taking in the Hellfire Pass, a patch of the Thai-Burma railway said to have resembled a scene from hell, with labourers working day and night to cut through rock.

After one last stop at the Bridge on the River Kwai for a final photo op, we take in more of the region’s World War II history at the War Museum. Soon enough we’re back on the van and heading east toward Bangkok, reflecting upon how relaxing the past three days have been.

As Noi says, “Cycling is the best way to see the country.” ★

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