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RIDING WITH NO HANDS

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It's hard to eat big races, so I'm leaving

SINGLETRACK, SPIDERS and KFC

Words and photos by Jay Goodrich





THE CITY:
CHIANG MAI, THAILAND
Chiang Mai is a city built upon a city. A place where history totals many hundreds of years instead of the mere 100 that my current home in Wyoming has under its belt. It's a place in northern Thailand that boasts the highest mountains in the country, and I was going there to ride them.



I WAS TOLD THAT THE CITY ALSO POSSESSED some of the best food in the country and that Chiang Mai was considering applying for creative-city status from UNESCO (a project that celebrates, maintains and protects cultural diversity and past industry). This area has not been without its conflicts over the course of history, though. The current, or “new,” city has essentially been built upon the foundations of the old. You can still see the walls and moats that were part of the city’s defense during the days when the Burmese and Mongols continuously attacked the location.

From the standpoint of population, Chiang Mai is rather small compared to other Asiatic regions I have visited. The main city boasts a population of a mere 140,000—just over a million if you include the surrounding urban sprawl. Believe me, though, after getting off of the plane, I definitely knew that I wasn’t in Kansas anymore. I mean Wyoming.

Andrew Whiteford and I met our guide, Win Jalawin, and our driver for the next week, Mr. Sak, almost immediately after exiting the airport, and the heat hit me like running blindly into a brick wall. I almost had to drop a knee. Shooting photos and keeping up with Whiteford in this environment felt like it just became a bit harder.



THE JUNGLE: DOWNHILLING DOI SUTHEP

Whiteford was a famous skier and mountain biker from the mountains south of Yellowstone. One look at him and you wouldn't believe he ever threw a backflip in his whole life, but he definitely has the scars to prove it. Win—Mr. Win Jalawin—was from Chiang Mai, and the light and space of Thailand really put the helmet on his head and the hardtail between his legs. Then there was Mr. Sak, the driver. It might have been our trip, but it sure as hell was Sak's pickup truck.

After assembling bikes for about an hour, getting eaten by about a thousand mosquitoes, sweating out a gallon of water and realizing that Whiteford's rotors had somehow been tortured so badly on the flight over that eventually he was going to ride brakeless, we got into the truck: a fairly new, standard-issue Toyota Hilux diesel that I have seen in force in every other country but the U.S. Our goal was to drive up to the Doi Pui Summit of Doi Suthep at 5,400 feet above the city and get in our first shuttle-assisted downhill jaunt. We immediately noticed how many people were cycling on our exit from town. And I am not talking about those people riding the beat-up townie bikes you might think would be commonplace in an Asian city. I was seeing riders motoring around on full carbon road and mountain bikes dressed in shrink-wrap Lycra matching that of Tour de France racers.

The twisting switchback road had me ready to let go of my lunch thanks to my backseat location and sightseeing out of the side window, but within a few minutes of unloading bikes and standing on terra firma, I was ready to chase Whiteford down the beat-up doubletrack used by local hill-tribe people to harvest coffee, mango, tea and lychee. Loose limestone marbles, super-packed sand, river and stream crossings and high-speed descending were all served up to us on this 11-mile descent.

It wasn't 10 minutes into our ride that my worst jungle nightmares came into focus. I set up against a tall embankment along our ride to shoot some photos when the frightening discussion began.

"Win, I have been to Costa Rica, and there my guide pushed a long stick into some embankment holes just like these to pull out some of the biggest spiders I have ever seen."

Win, laughing: "Yes, Andrew, that is the same situation here."

As I looked into the hillside that was supporting my leaning arm and camera, I saw hundreds, if not thousands, of web-covered holes. Snakes, spiders, plants, lizards, frogs and insects all seem to carry the moniker of "very dangerous, you go first." Maybe I will just choose a faster ISO that doesn't require me leaning into the hillside for support ...



THE NEVER-ENDING ROAD: CHIANG MAI TO CHIANG DAO

It was on this day that I began to worry that I wasn't going to have a story to tell, but that is when stories always seem to form. We rode 32 miles in 100-degree heat and 100 percent relative humidity. Mostly on pavement, which seemed to be uphill both ways, or maybe it was just my lack of tolerance for heat that made it seem that way. They say when you are given lemons it's time to make some lemonade.

Although I was disappointed by the lack of mountain biking on my mountain biking tour on this day, both Whiteford and I realized something that we never have in years of traveling: By being on a bike, you get to see, experience and immerse yourself into the local culture like nothing else you have ever experienced. Bus, car and plane just don't allow it, and it was at our lunch stop where the lemonade came pouring out.

A local ranger who was in charge of protecting the surrounding forest from wood poachers decided to make himself a meal in a kitchen that was outside next to our open-air lunch table with only a roof to protect him from the elements. There was a small Singer refrigerator, a bucket of water, lots of dishes on a shelf and this little clay thing (for my lack of a better word) with ashes in it. Since there was no door or windows, we quickly became engaged with our new friend. As he cooked, I began to see a scene unfold. The ranger was going to cook everything over fire; he was

making chicken, eggs and crickets. The aromas coming from his very basic cooking scenario and kitchen was amazing. Whiteford was, of course, about to become the guinea pig for tasting our local menu. I personally coined him my coal mine canary from this point on.

So what do crickets taste like? Sautéed onion, garlic and Thai basil, with a crunchy texture. That's what the canary told me, anyway.

From here we rode more pavement in the same 100-degree heat and humidity to the Chiang Dao Cave. Although this cave is a bit touristy, it was a welcome additional cultural experience for the lack of the singletrack I was craving. Even though the cave was out of the elements and in complete darkness, I think it was hotter and more humid within this heart of darkness. We did get to see some amazingly ornate and detailed Buddhas within the cave and in the jungle surrounding it.

Finally, there was a trail to end our day. It was short, but ended in a rice paddy right as the sun set over the prominent peak we were circumnavigating on this trip. Whiteford and I then thumbed a ride on a sidecar motorcycle with one of the locals, who brought us right to the elegant resort we were going to be pampered at for the next 24 hours. We decided that we needed to return to northern Thailand and rent one of these things for each person on the trip to create our own personal mountain bike shuttle system.

SQUEAL LIKE A PIG: DOI BUAK HA DESCENT

I woke up at 5 a.m. in that dusky darkness before sunrise to the sound of a rear hub clicking. There was a moment where I thought I was going to be chased for my two dollars, but Whiteford was already up fixing what seemed to be the 10th flat of our trip so far. Remember, the jungle is full of things that bite, squirm and generally freak me out at night, and along with that comes plant life full of spines and thorns. All of our tubes had been patched, re-patched and then patched again. All of our wheels were now spinning with the help of Stan's NoTubes sealant.

As Whiteford fixed his flat, we began to realize that his warped and bent brake rotors were about to finish off the pads that were mounted in his calipers. We couldn't head down to the local bike shop and solve the problem, even if there was one in town. His brake rotors were about to rear their ugly head on one of my top rides of all time.

We left the Marisa Boutique Resort with a mascot dog sharing with us his basket of swept-up flower blossoms collected on the resort's grounds. On the way out of town, Mr. Sak told us he needed to stop to get dinner for this evening: KFC. We were staying in a hill-tribe member's home somewhere in the mountains. Both Whiteford and I didn't understand the KFC connection that Mr. Sak kept talking about for dinner. I was interested and worried; there are many things in the jungle, and none of them are connected to the KFC I knew.

After about two hours of fairly difficult 4x4 driving, breaking through multiple cattle herds and getting our insides bounced around like the

chrome ball in a pinball machine, we arrived at the 5,200-foot summit of Doi Buak Ha. Fir trees, fog and finally cool air surrounded us. I almost felt like I was home in the Tetons. This trail was the golden nugget that Whiteford and I had been looking for.

We rode a short but steep ascent, then reached a screaming downhill totaling 4,800 feet in 15 miles. Whiteford rode multiple passes along our upper-elevation singletrack while I shot composition after composition. I could see that our guide, Win, was getting worried about time, but I could spend all day on a trail like this one. We found air after air, rock transition after rock transition and even a section of washed-out hillside that made a perfect wall ride for Whiteford.

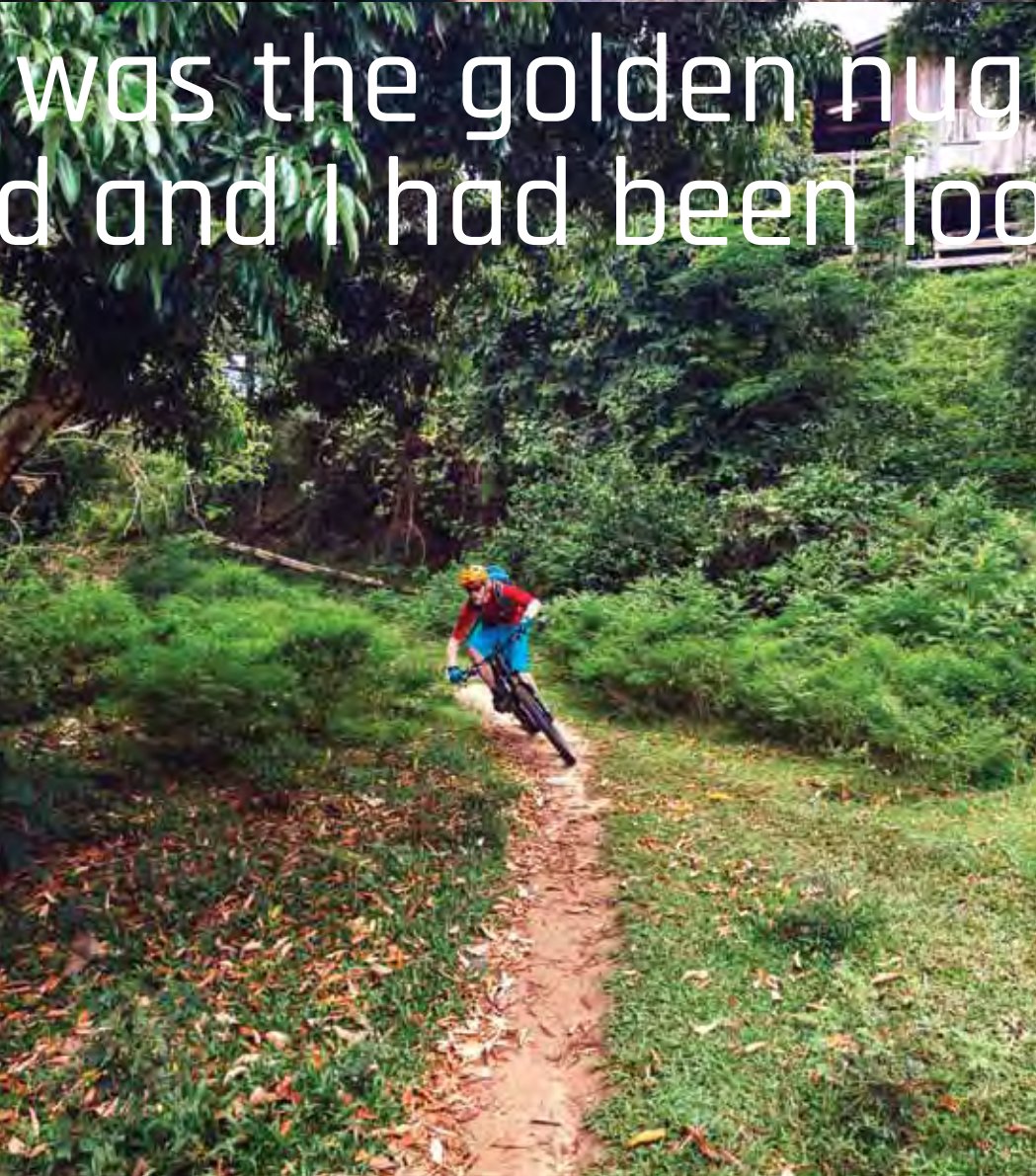
As we descended, the environment began to heat up, but the trail was so steep and fast that we didn't care. This is when the brakes on Whiteford's bike decided they'd had enough. His pads were now significantly worn in such a warped way, just like his rotors, that in every braking section they squealed like a stuck pig. Everyone now knew we were coming down the trail, including the spiders.

We were really late getting back to meet Mr. Sak, so I took the reins and changed our scheduled afternoon ride to the next day and decided to ride only a section of the amazing Bamboo Tunnel Trail, which was supposed to happen the next day as well. This allowed us to shuttle to our homestay instead of riding to it. This took, again, more bouncing around for hours, but the scenery along the way had us drooling for potential singletrack descents in amazing evening light diffused through thick humidity.





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A MEAL TO REMEMBER:

KFC

It was nearly dark when we pulled into the tribal village for our evening stay. We were truly about to experience how the locals live: little to no electricity and running water only to the individual cisterns that held water for flushing the toilet and taking a shower. Now I was pretty much as sweaty and disgusting as they come after riding for 20 or so miles in moderate to extremely hot temperatures, so I became the canary for the shower. Even though the outside temperature was still hovering in the mid-80s, when the first bucket of cistern water hits the body there is considerable shrinkage for most mortal men, but not me. Never me. Refreshing nonetheless after a long day.

After my shower, I was ushered into the kitchen area and into complete darkness (no lights, remember). There, Mr. Sak was cooking up dinner in dueling woks over an open flame created by the wood he'd chopped. Think of Mr. Sak as a much younger, much happier Thai version of Mr. Miyagi from "The Karate Kid." As soon as he noticed my presence, his face transformed into that special Thai smile that I had witnessed from almost every person we had met on this trip. "Jay ... KFC!" as he handed me a plate of beautifully presented and cooked chicken wings that were deep fried in wok number one. I couldn't believe it, freaking KFC, only free-ranging, killed this morning, served at the perfect temperature and amazingly seasoned. I toasted Whiteford with opposing chicken wings. Dinner was going to be simply amazing.

I sat at the dining table, again in the open air, with a bunch of candles and a single lamp off in the distance, drinking ice-cold beer as Mr. Sak brought up the courses of his meal of green curry, fried chicken and rice. All made on an open flame in a kitchen without any lights, and to this moment in time I can safely say that it is in my top five meals ever. And I am a snobby foodie akin to Anthony Bourdain. It was that good. In addition, for the record, every meal that I had in Thailand was absolutely amazing. Just make sure you don't drink the water.

SQUATTING IN THE BUSH:

BAN SOP GAI

What started out as a cool, overcast, bridge-jumping, singletrack-riding perfection of a morning quickly turned into a bit of a brush with hell. The sun popped out on our climb to the top of our extraction point with a force that left me breathless. The heat decided I was going to lose today once and for all. I started seeing stars. I couldn't focus on pedaling. I could barely push my bike. Whiteford noticed, grabbed everything he could of mine and forced gallons of water down my throat as we made a painful push to the top of a peak that was going to take a bite out of me.

After a 15-minute session of squatting with diarrhea in the bush,

I, remarkably, felt much better and ready for another insanely fast downhill. This one, though, was full of loose rocks the size of baseballs in the steepest section and choked with some crazy shrub close to the bottom that liked to rip the skin right off our arms. I was totally stoked that I decided to roll with flat pedals on this trip; it completely kept me alive on this little nugget of trail and out of the shrubs that would have left me a bloody mess.

After lunch we rode the lower piece of the Bamboo Tunnel Trail. It was section after section of firm, sand-lined singletrack through tunnel after tunnel of bamboo. Once we finished giggling like schoolchildren, we headed back to downtown Chiang Mai for two days of riding that, although slower, was going to completely change my perspective on riding in Thailand.



What started out as a cool, overcast, bridge-jumping, singletrack-riding perfection of a morning quickly turned into a bit of a brush with hell.





HEAVENLY EXPERIENCE

“Spiders. Why’d it have to be spiders?”

“Bird-eating spiders, very dangerous. You go first.”

We arrived back in Chiang Mai in early afternoon, right as shopkeepers were setting up for the Night Bazaar. Whiteford and I decided to throw our tiring legs over our bikes and explore the goings-on. I can only say the size of the Night Bazaar is nearly overwhelming. You can buy anything from shoes to food to pieces of art. We found everything but brake rotors and pads that Whiteford desperately needed. As we finished exploring the Bazaar, we headed back to our hotel and spent the evening sitting in the pool drinking cocktails constructed with all types of exotic fruit and topped off with those obligatory little umbrellas.

In the morning, Win and Mr. Sak shuttled us up to the top of the Mae Wang trail. There is typically a bunch of climbing to get to the top, but since we had a 4x4 truck, we made Mr. Sak take us all the way up for another wonderful piece of Thai singletrack without any of this climbing nonsense. This trail went right past a massive waterfall where we saw one of the biggest spiders I have ever seen on the planet. It definitely ate birds and I still get goose bumps talking about this thing. I most certainly made Whiteford go first; he was still the canary or guinea pig, your choice.

The dirt on this ride was very different from what we’d experienced up to this point. Red and packed between what seemed to be sharp and crusty volcanic limestone, it rode amazingly fast and super grippy. We ditched the spider and screamed back down to the valley floor, where we both agreed we wanted Mae Wang again. Back to the pool and more umbrella drinks.

For our final day, we dropped another downhill line off of Doi Suthep, right where this whole journey began. This day was the only one where we encountered a lot of water from a rainstorm the night before, so not only did we get hammered with the usual sweat from the humidity, but we also were covered in mud from our watery surroundings.

Northern Thailand is one of those places that every person needs to experience. I am personally not built for heat and humidity, and am completely freaked by snakes and spiders, but I would go back in a heartbeat. Maybe in December rather than October, though, when this destination is at its coolest. The food is great and the people will become your best friends with nothing more than a simple smile. The riding covers every gamut I have ridden to date in my 30-year mountain biking experience, but in general the trails ride way tackier than they appear on first examination. Lean into your turns and your bike will hook up. This place is not the new-school manicured, groomed descents we are becoming accustomed to here in the U.S. They are old-school, super-steep, hardcore doubletrack and singletrack of years gone by. **DR**

THIS TRIP WAS PROVIDED BY:

SPICEROADS

We did a shuttle-infused, shorter version of their Tribal Trails of North Thailand adventure with jungle-filled valleys, mountaintop temples, meandering rivers and plenty of opportunities for cultural encounters.

For more tour information, visit: spiceroads.com

TOUR AT A GLANCE:

- 280 total miles
- 11 days/10 nights
- Moderately difficult or fairly spicy

WHAT'S INCLUDED:

- Researched routes led by an experienced guide to assure you the best scenery and the best terrain to ride
- Great accommodations, including a good mix of homestays to more luxurious lodges
- Delicious, fresh and authentic Asian meals

OTHER TOURS THAT THEY OFFER:

- Mountain Biking Vietnam’s Northwest Mountains: Variety of riding conditions, majority on singletrack trails and dirt roads. Lots of culture mixed in with great riding.
- Bali Mountain Biking Adventure: An epic trip made up entirely of off-road excursions on a series of challenging surfaces. Lots of climbs and descents, as there is little flat land in Bali.
- Mountain Biking the Philippines: Singletrack trails to gentler dirt roads. Many trails traverse the base of volcanoes. Great locations to visit if you are looking to go remote.
- They will also build a completely custom tour for you if you so desire.