

RIDE INTO THE SUNRISE

SEDUCED BY THE THOUGHT OF BREEZES CARESSING YOUR FACE AND THE SUN ON YOUR BACK, AS YOU WHIZZ DOWN A DIRT TRACK? JUDY YEO EXPLORES HOW YOU COULD VENTURE OFF THE BEATEN PATH ON YOUR NEXT HOLIDAY, ON A BIKE!



Photo by: Barbara Walton, SpiceRoads



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Once popular with a select group of neo-hippies, students and backpackers, cycling tours have grown increasingly popular with many other travellers. Though there are many traditional cycling hotspots in Continental Europe and the United States, it is Asia that has come into focus for travellers who wish to experience the unfamiliar and the unknown.

The Appeal

Cycling tours appeal to a wide range of travellers including families, groups, couples and bike clubs. Ms Naomi Skinner, co-founder and Managing Director of Bike Asia, a regional adventure cycling tour company, outlines the draw of such tours. "It's not just the cycling, but the culture, history, scenery (going from steppe land and limestone karsts to snow-capped mountains and gorges). Not forgetting, of course, the food!"

Companies specialising in cycling tours note that travelling by bike is one of the fastest growing niche markets for professionals wanting a break from the ordinary and those who would like to incorporate energising activity into their holiday plans.

Ms Patricia Weismantel, Product Manager with SpiceRoads, which operates bicycle tours in Asia, explains what differentiates cycling tours from other travel options. "The advantage of being on a bicycle is that you are travelling at a comfortable pace, so you get to see many places. At the same time, riding a bicycle removes the barriers between you, the countryside and the people. This exposes you to so many more sights, smells and sounds which enhance your travel experience."

At The Crossroads

Unsure if a cycling tour is for you? Listen to the experiences of others. Mr Simon De Vere, an Australian traveller, had not done any serious biking for more than 25 years when he decided to join the SpiceRoads Chiang Mai to Bangkok tour in December 2009. He said, "It has been

great fun and I am really proud that I can now say 'I rode my bike from Chiang Mai to Bangkok - not a problem!'"

For Ms Christine McKay, her journey on Bike Asia's 'Tiger Leaping Gorge' tour in Yunnan, South West China, was poignant and memorable. "China was never on my list. A dear friend, with a much more adventurous soul than mine, was first in line when my cycling club decided to explore Yunnan Province in China, on bikes. Sadly, he succumbed to leukaemia before the adventure was realised. Life's lessons are sometimes blunt. It's not always about your comfort zone. I had to go on this trip for my friend."

Some of the more challenging parts of the trip included the tracks, byways and cobblestone descents which proved particularly jarring for a road rider. Despite being "gravitationally challenged" and labouring over the climb out of the Yangtze Gorge, she felt rewarded by the breathtaking vista of 'Tiger Leaping Gorge' – a view few have seen. Furthermore, the stay in a village clinging to the sheer mountain face, was "surreal".

Recalling her trip, Ms McKay said, "The challenges were more than physical. As we cycled out of one valley and into the

next, we experienced rural China up close – sights, sounds, smells, hardship, ingenuity, all up close and personal! Cycling has to be the best way to travel through a country, and short of staying in their homes, I don't think we could have felt closer to the people of the region."

Food was a focal point of the tour. "Regional food, freshly prepared in roadside cafes or restaurants, was a highlight. We ate like gourmards but never seemed to clear the table. We even expanded the local drinks menu. Mango and rice wine slushies were a hit in Er Yuan," she said.

Her conclusion? "Even though some parts of this trip took me outside my comfort zone, I always felt safe. And some of my cycling buddies are my new best friends!"

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Get Fit as a Fiddle

Lesson 101 for any biking trip begins with your fitness level naturally. Though much depends on the route or trail of your choice, you will need to have a very good overall level of fitness. Certain trails, that involve mountain biking or off-road travel, require good physique and high stamina levels. Here are some tips from Ms Skinner for those who wish to work on cycle fitness or what is known in the trade as 'bike legs'.

- Start training 11 to 12 weeks leading up to the trip.
- All work on your strength and aerobic fitness will help. For example, walking, running, swimming, sports, as well as cycling of course!
- Do not train to a peak too early or train too hard.
- In order to get any aerobic benefits from training, generally you will need to be exercising for a minimum of 20 minutes. During this time you do not need to push yourself to exhaustion. You can go at a more relaxed pace, but insert 10 to 20 seconds of accelerated cycling, running, walking or swimming throughout the workout intermittently.
- Cycling on rolling hills is much better training than on flat terrain. If there are no hills where you live, cycle in a high gear to simulate going up a gentle hill.
- Remain in your seat on hills to improve your aerobic fitness and endurance. Practice peddling whilst standing up on the bike if you want to improve your power and strength. This cannot be maintained for long periods of time. A combination of the two will work best.

Your Cycling Tour Options

When it comes to cycling tours, travellers have some options.

1. Travel solo with all your gear packed on the bike, chart your own cycle routes, go where you want, when you want. All control and responsibility for arrangements are in your hands.
2. Go to a company that can provide you with some basics like maps and accommodation bookings. This allows you the freedom of travelling 'free and easy' and the ability to tap on the resources of experienced parties.
3. Go with a company that provides everything from bikes, guides to vehicle support and accommodation. This takes care of all the hassle. You just need to make sure you are in the best condition for your holiday.

Most cycle tour companies offer at least two types of travel options. One is a journey-style trip where you start cycling at point A and finish at point B. Some examples of this style are routes that run from Tibet or China to Kathmandu (Nepal), or Guiyang to Guilin (China) and Kyoto to Hiroshima (Japan) and so on.

The other is destination-based, where you stay in one location and go on day rides. These locations tend to be tourist hotspots where facilities are up to par. Some examples are Yangshuo (China), Hoi An (Vietnam) and Changmai (Thailand).



Photo by: Barbara Walton, SpiceRoads



Photo by: Aaron Davis, Bike Asia



Photo by: Stuart Blackhall, Bike Asia

Writer's Recommendations

All fired up and ready to go? Here are some contacts you could consider:

Bike Asia
www.bikeasia.com

SpiceRoads
www.spiceroads.com