

A taste of Thailand

Over five days on a bike **Kara Murphy** gets to wine, dine and experience some moving historical insights in the fascinating Land of Smiles.

If you're a biking enthusiast who loves Thai cuisine, what could possibly be better than pedalling through Thailand's countryside, pausing every couple hours or so to sample yet another Thai treat?

I'm about to embark on Bangkok-based operator Spice Roads' two-day Khao Yai Wine Trails tour, followed by its three-day Kanchanaburi Explorer. The tours average 30km per day, are relatively easy (for difficulty, Spice Roads gives the former one out of five chillies and the latter two out of five), and provide a no-hassle opportunity for experiencing several intriguing sites beyond Bangkok via a combination of van and bike (if the kilometres per day sound like a recipe for restlessness, there are some tougher options available).

BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI

Following a relaxing night at the luxury Siam City Hotel Bangkok, Nhoi collects me for my next adventure. We drive west for a couple of hours, eventually reaching the touristy but historic town of Kanchanaburi, where we amble over the Bridge on the River Kwai (Saphan Mae Nam Khwae), visit the sobering Thailand-Burma Railway Centre and the Kanchanaburi Allied War Cemetery across the road, and board a local train for an hour-long journey further north-west into Kanchanaburi province on what's become known as the Death Railway.

Between October 1942 and 16 October 1943, approximately 60,000 Allied POWs and 270,000 Asian labourers (known as 'romusha') were forced to

build a 415km railway through jungle and mountain between Ban Pong in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat in Burma so that the Japanese could maintain their armies in the latter country. Lack of proper food, inadequate medical facilities, and brutal treatment (forced to work 18 hours days, even for the sick, as well as physical punishment) at the hands of Japanese and Korean guards and supervisors led to the deaths of 12,399 POWs and between 70,000 and 90,000 romusha.

The 130km section of the railway (between Nong Pladuk and Nam Tok) in use today is one reminder of the many lives lost; however, I don't feel that I grasp the tragedy of this railway's history fully until we visit the Australian-built Hellfire Pass Memorial on the tour's final day. Here, I learn more about the POW

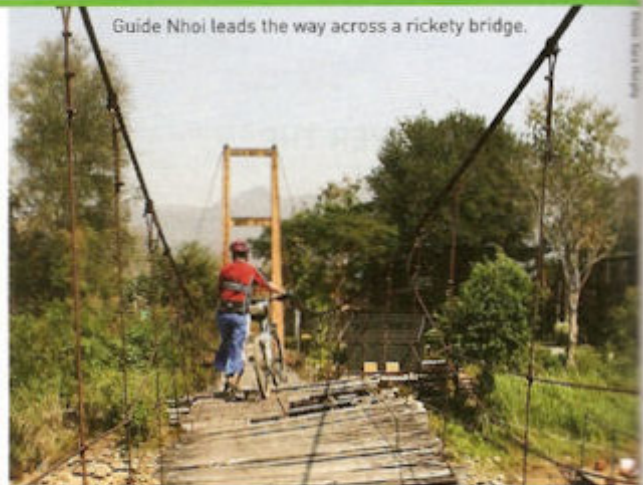
and romusha's experiences, watch painful footage of emaciated, nearly naked men heading to work, and walk along a short part of a 4km trail that follows this disused section of the railway.

The biking on this tour, slightly more strenuous than the first, takes me along blissfully quiet country roads, past picturesque sugarcane and rubber plantations and curiously-shaped limestone mountains, and towards archaeological and natural wonders such as Muang Sing Historical Park (a 13th-14th century Khmer city) and the eerie, sublime, and sweaty Lawa Cave. But, for me, the sombre history lesson leaves the most lasting impression. I'm grateful that, thanks to the province's historical sites and the tourists who visit them, the men who toiled here won't be forgotten.





Photo: Shutterstock



Guide Nhoi leads the way across a rickety bridge.

GRAPE-GRAZING, THAI STYLE

Nhoi, my guide, hands me a plastic bag filled with deep brown, sugar coated, thumb-length morsels. "Tamarind, from the tree," he says, pointing to a lofty beauty nearby. The preserved fruit is delicious – mostly sweet, slightly salty, with a hint of chilli. Though I could eat the whole bag, I take a single piece. Our group is ten strong, including two guides, and I don't want to be seen as the piglet among us, even though my appetite for just about anything offered in this country is enormous.

This seemingly unscheduled break is sandwiched between a family-style Thai lunch (featuring papaya salad and two lengthy grilled fish) and a mid-afternoon fuel break, when our support van's boot opens, revealing a generously stocked cooler of chilled water and fresh

pineapple, papaya, and watermelon as well as other delights such as prawn flavoured crisps and locally-produced sweet potato and banana chips.

Food and drink is a definite focus of this tour, which visits an area about two hours north-east of Bangkok. We drop in to two of the limestone mountain-lined Asoke Valley's wineries, PB Valley Khao Yai (owned by Dr. Piya Bhirombhakdi, the former president of the company that makes Singha beer) and GranMonte, and conclude with a long, lazy lunch at the former's onsite restaurant, the Great Hornbill Grill. Between mouthfuls of a spicy prawn-filled soup, one rider remarks that she could be in the Adelaide Hills ... except, of course, for the exotic Thai dishes.

Drinking wine in Thailand is fairly uncommon, possibly because of the price. Among the wines we taste, my favourites range from about 19 to 46 Aussie dollars

per bottle at the cellar door and are similarly priced at our accommodation's onsite restaurant. Some tour participants purchase a bottle of wine to go with their dinner, but I opt for a large Singha beer (which costs about three Aussie dollars).

This tour also pauses at the beautiful and well frequented Heaw Narok waterfall in Khao Yai National Park. Warning: as you motor up the park's main road, occasionally passing macaques, you'll likely grow jealous of the independent, lycra-clad cyclists on road bikes. In addition to the popular training route, the park, UNESCO World Heritage-listed as part of Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex, boasts resident wild elephants and hornbills. It certainly deserves more than a brief visit, but if you join this tour you'll have to leave more extensive exploration for another trip. ☺

KANCHANABURI EXPLORER TOUR

OPERATOR: Spice Roads, www.spiceroads.com

COST: 9,900 Thai baht (\$324)

KIND OF BIKE: hybrid or mountain bike (included)

DISTANCE: 102km over three days

SCENERY: countryside cut by a lazy river; sugarcane, cassava, rubber plantations; spectacular limestone mountains

KEY ATTRACTIONS: Bridge over the River Kwai, the Death Railway, the War Museum, ruins of an ancient Khmer city, Hellfire Pass Memorial

DIFFICULTY: Easy to moderate

IDEAL FOR: Reasonably fit travellers interested in experiencing Thailand's countryside from a bike seat while delving into the area's history

KHAO YAI WINE TRAILS TOUR

OPERATOR: Spice Roads, www.spiceroads.com

COST: 7,750 Thai baht (approx. \$254)

KIND OF BIKE: hybrid or mountain bike (included)

DISTANCE: 57km over two days

SCENERY: Khao Yai National Park, vineyards

KEY ATTRACTIONS: a waterfall and wineries

DIFFICULTY: Very easy

IDEAL FOR: Tourists interested in combining Thai wines with some easy pedalling

TOURIST RESOURCES

Tourism Authority of Thailand: www.thailand.net.au

Siam City Hotel Bangkok: www.siamhotels.com/siamcity

