



# WHY CYCLE IN ASIA?

*Patricia Weismantel* thinks there are too many reasons for two pages, but has a go at explaining some of them ...

**T**he strains of traditional Thai music reached us just as we turned left into a temple. Tucked off to the side was a small stage with a dozen youngsters holding, not the expected instruments, but puppets. Manoeuvring the hands of the stick puppets in a graceful dance the preteens moved delicately in sync to the music. We crept up to watch and tried not to be obtrusive, but with our helmets and colourful biking gear we were equally a curiosity as the kids were to us. When the music finished they rushed to show off their beautiful puppets, let us hold them and of course insisted that we take photos with them. This was another unplanned but precious moment that tends to happen frequently when cycling in Asia.

Asia, the Orient, the Far East, conjures up many exotic images and it is a massive place full of contrasts and there is no one experience that can define it. When trying to tackle it by bicycle it can be daunting, so much is different, but that is exactly what makes it such a great place to explore on two wheels.

Whether touring on your own or in an organised group, sightseeing, training, or downhill mountain biking, there are all types of riding available in Asia. The choice is yours, but how to choose where to go?

Start by looking when you can go. In many Asian countries the weather is best when it is bleakest in the United Kingdom. October to February is the high season for much of South East Asia and the sun is always shining. There are monsoon and typhoon seasons to watch out for and avoid in the Philippines and Vietnam, but even in the rainy season of countries like Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia the riding can be pleasant, and in fact refreshing. The rains are usually short and though hard for many Brits (newcomers to Asia) to put their heads around, the downpours aren't cold. So you can keep on riding and you dry quickly when the shower is over.

What can be too much of a good thing for some is the heat. Even in the "cool" season it is hot and humid in much of South East Asia. But by drinking lots of

water, riding in the early morning hours and taking frequent breaks in the shade, this can be managed by even those who think 16°C is a heatwave.

The warm climes mean that people are out and about. The rice planters will stop their work to wave, kids are so excited to see you they are jumping up and down, the fruit picker will insist that you taste a red

**Above: In the Mekong Delta**

**Below: Going coconuts in Sri Lanka**





and hairy fruit called rambutan. Similarly, on our bicycles we aren't sealed away behind glass and speeding by; we are visible and accessible, able to ride alongside Burmese students on single speed bikes eager to practice English on their way to school.

"The friendly people" is the most frequent reply when you ask cyclists why they love to ride through Asia. And perhaps this is the number one reason to come.

Dutch cyclist Linda rode solo from Bangkok to Beijing and never felt threatened, in fact she was often overwhelmed by the kindness of strangers. "I think being a woman may have been an advantage; men would be protective, as if I were their daughter and women just took me by the hand and led me to whatever I needed at the moment, be it food or accommodation."

In the six months that Linda was on the road, she found that many of her "vulnerable" moments turned into the most poignant interactions she had. "Those ended up being the memorable ones."

Carl Rubin from the USA heads out twice a year on his Bontrager mountain bike converted for off-road touring. Though he has many stories to tell, he is still moved by a local cycling group that found him having an early breakfast in the

northern Philippines. "The whole town must have known I was there and word spread so that at 6:30 am there were about 15 riders gathered and ready to accompany me for about 30 kms on my route. I still don't know how they found me, but It was great to swap biking stories with these guys and of course get information about the area. But I should have listened to their advice, when they said the road up ahead was rocky, they weren't kidding!"

The road conditions can vary vastly from country to country, but more often than not there are small country roads to take to avoid busy ones – but they may still be dirt. In Japan there are so many roads it is quite easy to find a quiet one. In Laos, where there are few roads, it is more difficult to find quite alternatives, but, luckily, traffic is still minimal there. In Mongolia no roads is the appeal! No matter where you are you will be sharing the road with all types of vehicles and often animals.

Australian Paul Hamon and his wife challenged themselves to cycle every province of Thailand for their honeymoon. They succeeded in riding 8,500 km in just over five months, and for Hamon what made his tour so enjoyable was riding on a plethora "of quiet scenic roads... with the added plus of food at almost every intersection."

Ah yes, the food. Exploring a culture through its food is a highlight of any trip abroad, but one of the pure joys of cycling is being able to eat guilt-free knowing you have just burned through thousands of calories. Asians love food, they talk about it constantly, and with fresh ingredients readily available the results are creative, and sometimes spicy, dishes that far surpass the corner Chinese takeaway.

Language is never a problem for self-proclaimed foodie Annie Miniscloux who has cycled extensively in southern China, Bhutan and Vietnam. "I just look to see what other people are eating and if that doesn't work I'll head into the kitchen and find the ingredients that I want to eat. It's no problem to do this in Asia, in France, where I come from, a chef would be appalled to have customers in the kitchen, but here they love it if you take an active interest in your meal."

"If all else fails it is pantomime time, but the result is usually good, and interesting. I have yet to miss out on a meal!"

Whether you are flapping your arms to get an egg, singing karaoke, taking a shower from a bucket, or drinking coconut juice as a substitute for water, you are experiencing cycling in Asia and you'll be back for more.

**Top Left:** Linda goes dancing in China

**Top Right:** Lunch in Thailand

**Bottom Left:** Annie, with coconuts

**Bottom Right:** East meets West



**INFORMATION**

Patricia Weismantel is based in Bangkok and has been cycling throughout Asia for the last decade. She is the Product Manager for SpiceRoads Cycle Tours, where she puts her extensive knowledge of the region to use creating new cycle tours.

You can read about Paul and Natt Hamon's honeymoon here: <http://everyprovincechallenge.com/>

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