

# Spice World

## *Cycling with Irishman Sean Kelly in Thailand*

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It's not very often you get to ride with a cycling legend and when I heard that Sean Kelly, one of the most respected and prolific cyclist in the 1980s, was coming to Thailand for a week-long bicycle trip I was all ears. As a blogger who covers European road racing like the Tour of Spain and the Tour de France, a trip with a two-time Paris-Roubaix champion like Kelly is something many cycling enthusiast would die for. When I was invited to join the ride by SpiceRoads Cycle Tours, my reply was faster than Mark Cavendish sprinting for the line.

There was the option to join the eight-day tour from Bangkok to Phuket or a two-day option for those short on time. Though riding through some of the most scenic bicycle routes in Thailand down to the island resort of Phuket was tempting, regrettably, time was not on my side so I opted for the two-day weekend trip.

We met in the heart of Bangkok and transferred out of the metropolis two hours to start our riding on a quiet and scenic road in the countryside. After the requisite group shot it was on the bikes. The pace was steady as we were also all chatting, getting to know each other. Positions were switched

often and we all had a chance to ride next to Kelly and chat with him as well.

During one of these mobile chats I asked him what cycling has meant to him. "It's everything," said Kelly. "It gives me so many things, an opportunity for an amazing career and financially I did well. I made some great friends. I'm still very happy to work in cycling and of course riding my bike."

As a native Thai, we tend to plan our own trips and this was my first time on an organized riding holiday. Struan Robertson, CEO of SpiceRoads, who also rode along with us, told me that Thailand has become one of the most popular countries for





### THE AUTHOR

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cycling amongst Europeans in the past few years. "They are attracted by the agreeable year-round climate, variety of terrain from high mountains in the north to the coastal roads of the south and of course the great food," said Robertson.

Our first day of riding was just over 90 kilometres and it quickly became clear to me, not knowing what to expect, that this tour was focused on the pleasure of riding with an iconic cyclist. There were no distractions of busy towns and though we took a few refueling breaks, the emphasis was cycling. Kelly obviously had experience with these group rides as he was very conscious of all the riders abilities and even asked the leaders to slow the pace down to keep the group together.

Though Kelly no longer rides competitively, he remains very much in the centre of action, now commentating on major races for Eurosport. What a unique opportunity for a follower of the pro racing scene to chat with somebody who is in the midst of it all. At our resort hotel just outside the beach town of Hua Hin I asked Kelly what it was that gave him the edge when he dominated much of the Spring Classic races. Known as one of the toughest riders in the sport and earning the infamous 'hardman' moniker, Kelly's answer didn't disappoint.

"Having to work on the farm since 10 years of age, that helped me a lot. When it was really difficult in the race, I would think back at the work on the farm and how difficult it was, and I did not want to go back to that. Racing was easier. Push on, hang in there and never give up," said Kelly.

Asked his biggest regret in his long

cycling career, Kelly replied without hesitation, "The World Championship is a very special race, and one I always did well in. I had many top 10 in this race but never actually won it. You might be standing on the 2nd or 3rd step of a Grand Tour podium like the Tour de France or Tour of Spain, but no one remembers you. If you win a World title, nobody forgets you."

The second day of riding was longer, 123 kilometres, and more varied. We rode through small villages to Pranburi, known for its beautiful mangrove forest. The road was so quiet it felt as if we were racing on a closed course. We rode along the coastal road, stopping briefly half way through the total distance for a sumptuous seafood lunch at a beachside restaurant. The pack slowed a bit post lunch but truly gathered steam after a water break. Knowing there was only 15 km left to go, the gauntlet was thrown down and Kelly left his position at the back of the pack and initiated a fun breakaway. I was not able to latch onto the front group, but the leaders had fun all the way to the finish line where fellow Irishman Alan Benson was declared the unofficial winner of the sprint and received a kiss from Kelly and was summarily doused in some beer for his efforts.

It was very tempting to continue riding the entire 860 km to Phuket and though I couldn't, Singapore-based Benson rearranged work commitments and stayed on.

"Half way during the second day, I made the decision to stay for the entire tour, which tells how much I was enjoying myself," said Benson. "It also helped that Sean personally convinced me to ride on





too. Riding with Sean was mighty, he is a pure gentleman!"

Benson grew up in Ireland in the 70's and 80's and watched Sean Kelly on the TV winning. "Sean Kelly was an icon back then, he still is! To have the chance to actually ride with him for a few days was, for me, a once in a lifetime opportunity."

Phil Liggett and Paul Sherwen commentating during the Tour de France always refer to Kelly as the "Great Sean Kelly" and how much of a character he was in the peloton. That certainly hasn't changed.

To Benson the "Great Sean Kelly" was evident when he launched a surprise attack on the last climb on day five to get behind an ice-cream motorcycle and win the KOM!

"A character he certainly is, as we say in Ireland, "he's a bit of a messer" in the peloton," said Benson.

Recollecting the fun moments while I was on the way back to Bangkok, it became clear why this sort of organised holiday ride has become popular. Even as a native Thai, it would be difficult to find a good route to ride by yourself. It would take a lot of preparation and one must also know the locale rather well. Having a team of professional prepare the route, accommodation, and support for you definitely takes out the hassles, and one can focus entirely on riding.

For Benson cycling is all about meeting new people and friends, "then throw Sean Kelly in the mix, what's there not to like!"



**TOUR INFORMATION:**

Sean Kelly will again ride with SpiceRoads Cycle Tours in February 2015. They also offer a range of biking holidays throughout Asia and Eastern Europe.  
[www.spiceroads.com](http://www.spiceroads.com)

