

Cycling: the spice of life



Renowned Irish cyclist joins SpiceRoads Cycle Tours from Bangkok to Phuket

By Jeremie Schatz

WITH surprising speed given the temperature, the amorphous speck approaching in the distance gradually revealed itself to be a group of 14 cyclists. Maybe it was the promise of a cold beer and big plate of food at Bill Bentley's Pub and Restaurant in Mai Khao that provided the final surge of energy, or maybe they were downright tough and unfazed by the stifling midday heat. Either way, the sweat-drenched group was all smiles and high-fives as they dismounted their bicycles and congratulated each other on a successful ride.

Having left a week prior, the group, riding with SpiceRoads Cycle Tours, had just completed a Bangkok to Phuket trip of some 900 kilometers. Although the route is a fairly common one for the company, this particular trip had an uncommon element – the participation of former professional road cyclist Sean Kelly.

In case you aren't familiar with him, Ireland-born Kelly was a big deal in the cycling world. During his official career, spanning from 1977 to 1994, he won 193 races all over the world. In the 57-year-old's post cycling life, he has established the Sean Kelly Cycling Academy in Belgium and holds a position as an English language commentator for the European television sports network Eurosport.

Although he is retired, Kelly is still a prominent figure in the cycling world, participating in charity events and rides and associating himself with companies that he believes in. "I was approached last year by SpiceRoads

to come along and put my name to the tour and create a little more interest," recalls Kelly. He was not only impressed by the better-than-expected road conditions, "The local guides we had were really good – they know what they're doing."

When asked why he chose to get involved with Spiceroads, he said, "When you do things like this, you can look about, see the countryside. When you're competing and doing a lot of events in America, Colombia and Europe, of course you don't get any occasion to see the countryside – when you're racing, it's not for pleasure."

Also joining on the ride was long-time SpiceRoads CEO, Struan Robertson. Robertson joined SpiceRoads when they first rooted down in Bangkok eleven years ago as a fledgling company. Back then, they were blazing their own trail. "Nobody went biking in Cambodia ten years ago, but we did."

SpiceRoads now has another office in Chiang Mai and has expanded to offer scheduled trips to 26 locations throughout Asia and Europe. "We just expanded into Europe last year, so we do six destinations in Europe and we will add several more. It's been growing steadily every year despite the various setbacks we've had in this part of the world," says Robertson optimistically.

In addition to the broad selection of scheduled trips, SpiceRoads offers can cater any



Sean Kelly was happy to reach their destination at Bill Bentley's Pub in Mai Khao.

of their trips to suit a group's needs. Robertson explains, "They like the trip but they can't do the dates, or they want to upgrade

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the accommodation, or they want to shorten it, so we have a team that will take those trips and customize them for groups." With 44 full-time staff on hand, a collection of hand-picked, English

speaking guides available in all the countries they offer rides in and over 400 bikes ready to roll, Spiceroads certainly has the resources ready for whatever two-wheeled adventure you may be contemplating.

The company has no qualms with getting off the beaten track, demonstrated by their off-road mountain biking excursions in Bali and Bhutan, and even into Mongolia and Pakistan. Long-time friend of Robertson's and

participant in the Bangkok to Phuket ride, David Ertle, told the *Gazette* of his history of cycling adventures with SpiceRoads, "I've done loads [of cycling trips] but mainly mountain biking. I've done Thailand, Bali and Vietnam, and Kazakhstan is next." Ertle will join Robertson for a ride through Kazakhstan next year in celebration of Robertson's 50th birthday.

The group was quite obviously relieved to be sitting in the shade on the second-floor porch at Bill Bentley's, holding frosty mugs of bubbly brews to their foreheads, but the metaphorical wheels were still turning, scheming about the next ride.