



A Spicy Ride through History

Four days on a bike revealed ruins, rice fields and a railroad

By Ingvill Solbo Christiansen

Our friends challenged us to do something different during the autumn school break, so here we are – four adults and four kids embarking on a four-day biking trip in Central Thailand. With the children in mind, we have chosen a route with a difficulty level of two out of five possible ‘spices’. This translates into a biking distance of 25-35 kilometres a day over relatively easy terrain.

Our guides meet us at the hotel in Bangkok with two mini buses and all the biking equipment we need. We head for our first destination, the Chao Phraya and Mae Klong, the major rivers of central Thailand. A stop en route at a floating market and a brief trip on a longtail boat show how life revolves around the waterways. People still build their houses beside the *klongs* or canals, which serve as roads, gardens and bathtubs.

After a delicious Thai lunch at a waterside restaurant, we’re off on a pleasant afternoon ride through lush plantations. Apart from the occasional van and stray dog, the roads are quiet and the riding easy. Afterwards, we unwind in the bus as we drive towards Kanchanaburi province. We spend the night at a small hotel with a beautiful view of the River Kwai. The kids enjoy the pool but I find the option of a Thai foot massage with a view of the river irresistible.

The next morning we head for the bridge over the River Kwai. At the Death Railway Museum we step back in time as we learn the gruesome history of the railway’s construction between Thailand and Burma during the Second World War. We take a 90-minute train ride on the Death Railway – further food for thought. Winding through the landscape along the River Kwai brings us to some great biking in the highlands. Our mountain bikes are put to good use as we head onto the dirt roads.

We spend the next two days in Kanchanaburi province enjoying rides on slightly more challenging roads. The countryside is abundant with vegetables of all kinds and the friendly Thai people offer the ‘crazy’ bikers fruits from their gardens.

As we ride we come across many examples of Thai religious practices, from a lone Buddha in the midst of teak tree fields to ancient ruins bearing evidence of former kingdoms. Late in the afternoon we reach a beautiful, quiet spot – the Khmer ruin of Prasat Muang Singh. Dating back to the 13th century, when the Khmer Empire was one of the most powerful in Southeast Asia, this ruin was an outpost, testifying to how far west the Khmer empire had stretched at the height of its power.

The hills having somewhat stretched our own powers, we cross a shabby wooden bridge and jump into the cooling water of the Sai Yok waterfall. Refreshed, we head to the ancient capital city of Ayutthaya to spend the final day of our journey discovering its beautiful temples.

A network of canals surrounds the city and as we bike around the ancient town on our last morning, we understand why Old Ayutthaya was dubbed the ‘Venice of the East’. This is the tail end of the wet season and the soft rainfall is cooling, though the rain makes the paved roads slippery. We explore several temples and even take part in the seasonal ceremony of dressing a Buddha statue in a new robe.

We reach our final destination drained and muddy (thanks to the rain) but happy to have accomplished four days of biking in great form. From lush green jungles and farms to peaceful villages and friendly locals, to historical sites that brought alive the past, our experiences have far exceeded our expectations. Needless to say, we are planning another trip!

For more information on bike touring through Asia, see www.spiceroads.com

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Photos courtesy of the author

- ① Elephants always have the right of way over cyclists
- ② Stopping to pick starfruits