

>> Thailand

A ROAD

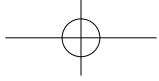
On a Bicycle Journey to Angkor Wat

OF MANY

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Photographs by Manuel Bruges

COLORS





American author John Steinbeck once said that people don't take trips; trips take people.

Last winter, I was taken by a trip. A bicycle trip. I pedaled over 300 kilometers from a sandy beach in Thailand to the silent stones of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

I didn't go willingly. A friend gave me a nudge. A friend who conceded nothing to my 57 years of age and aching knees. And the fact that I hadn't been on a bicycle since college.

A friend who spun his wheel of reasoning like this:

"If you don't go now, when will you go? Besides... it's not just a bicycle trip. It's a trip to Angkor Wat, a ride into history! How can you say no?"

And the wheel is a symbol of progress. Always turning, always moving ahead, even when pedaled by a mossback bookworm like me. Moving forward and—with the shadows of Angkor Wat before us—moving back into

antiquity at the same time.

The image captured me. And we were off.

But—thankfully—not on our own. We hired the services of Spice Roads, a Bangkok-based bicycle touring company. Spice Roads began with but one cyclist who would organize short trips on weekends. Now, a dozen years later, the company offers fully supported tours across 16 Asian destinations. Support meaning bicycles, guides, hotels, meals and a following van to pick up pooped-out riders.

Plus the gift of a Spice Roads biking shirt, a dazzling red.

Sunday, Red?

"Red is the color of Sunday," says Tonga, our Spice Roads guide. He explains that Thais color code the days of the week.

We are munching grilled squid on a Sunday beach, Wiman Beach, a three-hour drive from Bangkok. Three fellow cyclists and Tonga. A teasing surf and the giggle of children make me think we shouldn't leave. We should stay awhile and join the kids in





making sand castles. But...

We soon mount our Trek mountain bikes. The road is gravel and the sun is liquid. “Follow me,” says Tonga. And, just like that, we have only 300 kilometers to go.

But once the grunts and moans of the first small hills are past, the trip romances me.

We pedal past the easels of a university art class, transforming a harbor of fishing boats into watercolors. We glide up to a fishing co-op, to watch a troop of workers divvy up the day’s catch—over five tonnes of wriggling shrimp. We stop for a rest at the mangrove forest of Sting Ray Lagoon. We aim our bikes down a concrete pier off Chao Lao Beach, where, at pier’s end, we chat with a sun-browned couple who are prying blue crabs out from their tangled nets. They’ll earn 180 Thai baht a kilo, they say.

And we end up in a plush hotel beneath the Soi Dao Wildlife Preserve. Soi Dao means “Touch the Stars,” and the mountain—already black in the fading light—seems to do just that. It stands 1,600 meters high.

“There are tigers on the mountain,” says Tonga. “And sun bears.”

But all we see are geckos. They roam the hotel ceilings and provide for us a pleasant night, free of mosquitoes.

Monday, Yellow?

In the Thai weekly rainbow, Monday is yellow.

We pedal off on country roads, under canopies of cashew and coconut trees, and encounter not a soul. The pond beside the road reflects the mountain in a sheet of silvery water.

“Say it’s unspoiled,” says my friend, eyeing my notepad. “Say it’s pristine.”

I don’t. I say it’s perfect.

Tonga guides us into a grove of golden tamarinds. We stop and feast on fruit. “Tamarinds,” he explains, “are not only delicious, they’re a natural laxative.”

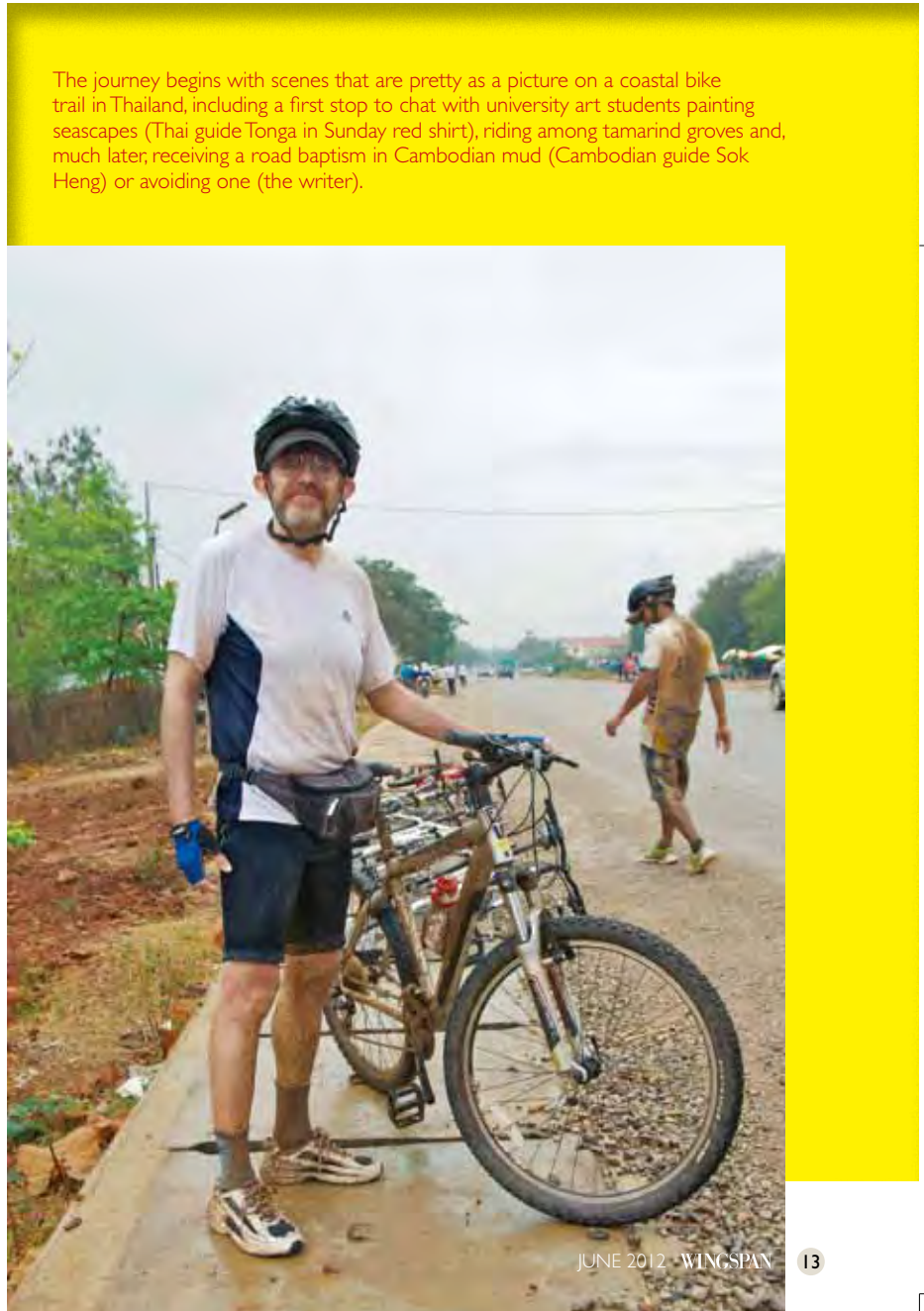
Words that stay my appetite. Laxatives and bicycles? Surely not the best combination.

We spill from our country road onto tarmac. Now, Tonga tells us, the hills will “undulate.” A term that for me had always seemed sensual and beguiling.

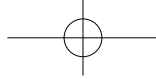


But now I drive the bike up a gentle rise—one that has been rising for several minutes—only to find another rise beyond. I inhale humidity and command my legs to keep pumping. Each roadside market is a temptation to leave the group and rest.

Yet the wheels turn and I follow along, one



The journey begins with scenes that are pretty as a picture on a coastal bike trail in Thailand, including a first stop to chat with university art students painting seascapes (Thai guide Tonga in Sunday red shirt), riding among tamarind groves and, much later, receiving a road baptism in Cambodian mud (Cambodian guide Sok Heng) or avoiding one (the writer).



eye on the sights, one on the undulating road. For two hard hours, Thailand changes from the “Land of Smiles” to the land of miles.

We arrive at the Cambodian border and file through immigration procedures. Tonga passes us to Sok Heng, our Cambodian guide. I note he has cyclist’s thighs, thick with muscle. I ask about the hills on the Cambodian side.

“They undulate,” he announces. A word that has lost all attraction.

But I bike those hills—the foothills of the Cardamom Mountains. They are Cambodian hills, dustier and leaner than those of Thailand. The fruit trees give way to fields of corn and beans. Bone-white cattle chew dry grass as we swish on by.

And every kid yells, “Hello!” Hello, hello, hello... We wave nonstop as we pedal.

After a shower at our hotel, I end up in an Internet café in the old gem town of Pailin. The truer gem is the proprietor. He tosses



out schoolbook English and entertains with stories of the Khmer people and culture. Cambodia has known dark days; he focuses instead on the sun of tomorrow.

I listen with apprehension. For to me, tomorrow means 85 kilometers. Sok Heng says it’s uphill.

We push onto the road at 6:30 A.M. The first “Hello!” comes at 6:46. The rain starts soon thereafter.

I am pedaling a mountain bike on a clay road in the heartland of the Khmer Rouge. In pouring rain. Potholes soon fill with water and each passing car sprays us with mud. Our tires rock through the puddles. We drip water, lower our heads and keep going. The hills no longer matter.

Khmer people are known for their friendly, welcoming manner—similar to the morning sun shining down alike on rice fields and Angkor Wat’s tapered towers (seen from Phnom Bakeng)—and children are no exception, greeting foreigners and locals with bright smiles. Adding colorful reflections to the river are villagers selling vegetables by boat to fellow boaters.



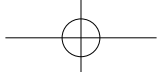
People wave at us and laugh. A loudspeaker from a roadside temple pipes Buddhist chants across the fields. I work my legs and study the mud of the road. Would I call it rose-petal mud? Milk-tea mud? Then it hits me.

Tuesday, Pink?

The mud is pink. The color of Tuesday.

It takes till noon for the sun to find us. Around a curve a procession of revelers invites us to a wedding party. We stand in our mud-





Painted clothes and watch the groom and his friends slide past in golden silk. Each guest carries a platter with gifts—fruit, fish, drink. We have nothing to offer but our best wishes.

Later, we rest at a Buddhist temple. Under a banyan tree, a priest confers with two

novice monks. A master instructing pupils? No. The youngsters instead teach the older man how to use a cell phone.

At our Battambang hotel we encounter another Spice Roads group, theirs a journey in our opposite direction.

“It’s a fantastic way for a holiday,” says a cheery woman from Belgium. She has been biking since Hanoi, now a week behind her.

“You see a lot and you’re out in the open air. What more could you want?”

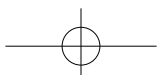
I decide not to speak of the undulating hills in her way.

Still... I have just ridden 85 kilometers. Uphill. Much of it in the rain. And I have surprised myself. My backside aches from the endless bumping, but I have met the challenge.

Wednesday, Green?

Wednesday is green. But it begins brown.

Today we put the bikes aside and proceed by boat. Yet, the roads have been softened by yesterday’s rain, and our ride to the river ends up stuck to the axels in mud.





When we are winched out and at last reach the river, we meet the opposite problem. The water level is so low that the crew has to push the boat ahead with poles. They lean into the wood and we crease our way down the river. It takes an hour to make deeper water.

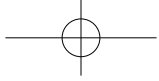
Grass huts, wooden houses, beached fishing boats—the riverbanks are lined with assorted dwellings, some dilapidated, some fresh with paint, the color of choice being Cambodian blue. Mothers rock little ones to sleep in riverside hammocks. Schoolboys fish waist-deep in the muddy river with their fathers.

It is a world where wealth is not in possessions but in family and pace of life. We glide through this scene for half a day, before entering into the majestic silence of Cambodia's great, green lake, the Tonle Sap. For the next hour all we pass are lily pads.

At last we exit the lake and dock up at the city of Siem Reap, the doorstep of Angkor Wat. Back on our bikes, we pause on the road to our hotel to watch the sun set over a field of blossoming lotus.

Among delights of any road trip is the pleasant surprise just around the bend. Coming upon guests arriving in the early part of a traditional Cambodian wedding was a bonus when the daylong rain let up; another was seeing two children in a highly sustainable form of transportation. Less reliable than oxen, the support car foundered in mud until help arrived.





Thursday, Orange?

Thursday and the wheel has turned.

In 1860, French explorer Henri Mouhot is said to have “stumbled upon” the temples of Angkor Wat.

We do not stumble. We pedal.

The various temples beckon us back through time. Says one of our group: “It’s an archaeological Disneyland.”

Sok Heng, our guide, lectures us in practiced English. We hear of fearsome kings—Suryavarman II, Jayavarman VII and more.



We hear of laterite-stone blocks lugged by barges and elephants. Of bas-reliefs wrapping the monuments like ribbons. Of ferocious Garuda guardians, willowy *apsara* angels and other creations of stone.

Our first stop is the temple of Banteay Kdei. Inside the walls we purchase good luck strings from a Buddhist nun with a shaved head. “For good fortune,” she smiles, “and long life.”

A long life, like that of this temple—over 800 years old.

Next is Ta Prohm, just as aged, with its time-forgotten trees twisting and cracking the stone, man teaming with jungle to create a monument to the glory of centuries lost. Indiana Jones would be at home here.

The wheel turns more. We bike through the tall, spiderlike gate of ancient Angkor Thom and nearly collide with a sleek elephant taking tourists for a ride. From Angkor Thom, it’s on to the ruined splendor of

Bayon, with its 54 towers and 216 giant faces of Buddha, each with a cracked and frozen smile. These faces smiled on busy courtiers 800 years ago. Now the recipients are tourists from every corner of the globe. Bayon almost demands that visitors sit and reflect in this footprint of history. And so we do.

But only until sundown. Then we churn to Phnom Bakeng, high on an Angkor hill. Here we climb more temple stone to join with our international brethren for the final finest sight of any Angkor day—sunset over the monuments and the distant waters of the Tonle Sap.

The sun winks and sinks gracefully and reminds me of the Thai color code. Thursday is orange, and Saturday is purple.

Friday, Blue?

Friday. We arise and pedal in the predawn. With our goal being the grandest temple of them all, the one that adorns the Cambodian national flag.

Angkor Wat.

Sunrise at Angkor Wat is why we have come, the reason thousands have come. We park our bikes and mince across the 125-meter walk that spans Angkor Wat’s massive outer moat. In less than an hour the sun will burn its way into the morning sky, hanging as a ring of fire over the temple. The shot all tourists want.

But I walk on and am soon separated from my cyclist friends. I hear distant roosters and follow turns that I hope will lead me back to the crowds.

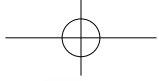
Yet, I end up in the rear of Angkor Wat, the jewel of Asian culture. And I am alone. The throngs are in front, awaiting the rising sun. Before me, the three temple towers rise in predawn silence.

I lean on the temple wall and try to absorb both distant history and my recent journey.

Fifty-seven? Aching knees? My own struggles hardly echo off the grandeur before me.

Yet, my friend was right. I could do it. And there was glory both in the Spice Roads journey and the nobility of the destination. I did not build an Angkor Wat. I built a memory. One that will last as long as I do.

I try to return to the front before sun-



rise. Yet, I walk not *around* Angkor Wat but *through* it. The stone entranceway gapes like a black mouth, and I am in. From somewhere deep inside come drums and gongs. But I see no one. I am alone in the temple.

The gate of Angkor Thom casts its ancient shadow on a path where some journeys end, bikes poised at rest as riders wander the magnificent Angkor Wat complex. The excitement of watching a breathtaking sunset from Phnom Bakeng sweeps up Buddhist novices as well as 50-something bikers immersed in the golden, glowing finale of their two-wheeler pilgrimage.




The corridors and courts lighten with the coming of dawn. On each side I am watched by sly apsara angels. My shoes patter across the stones. Stones that begin to glow in the morning light.

Glowing light blue. The color of Friday.

I pause in the archways. I pause by the long bas-reliefs. And when I finally make it through, I am too late. The sun is already up.

I exit through the main entrance of Angkor Wat to find a field of tourists with cameras. The three towers are behind me, the sun now flaming from above.

The cameras flash and flash. The wheel has stopped turning and my trip is complete. I stand in the center of history—and in everyone's souvenir photograph of Angkor Wat. 

Getting There

ANA has daily service to Bangkok from Haneda, Narita, Kansai International, and Nagoya Airports.