



11-year-old Anna was the oldest daughter in the Fabulous French Family; an incredible group of traveling companions on the roads of Laos.

THE FABULOUS FRENCH FAMILY

STORY BY **WILLIE WEIR**

→ OVER the last 17 years that I've written and spoken about bicycle travel, many people have thanked me for inspiring them. I can't think of a higher compliment.

Last year it was me who needed the inspiration.

My wife Kat and I had just finished our journey in Myanmar, which culminated in being in Yangon for President Barack Obama's historic visit, the first time a sitting U.S. president traveled to the country. We had flown back to Bangkok, eager to eat at every street stall in sight, and now had two more months of travel ahead, with plans to pedal in southern Laos and Cambodia.

Yet rather than being excited, I was depressed. I didn't have any rational reason to be in a funk — no injuries, no illness, no financial woes. But I've since learned that depression often doesn't need a reason, it just is.

Maybe all I needed was to get moving again? We took the train to the city of Ubon Ratchathani, a couple of

days pedal from the border of Laos. My depression came along for the ride, an unwanted traveling companion that hung on like a bad winter cold.

I needed help.

Enter the Fabulous French Family. Well, they didn't call themselves that. We gave them that name. It seemed appropriate. A family of six, none of them serious cyclists, had taken off on a year-long journey of discovery on bicycles. They got the idea from friends who had taken a similar journey. They didn't get corporate sponsors or donations of high-end gadgets. Their bikes and gear were all secondhand.

They began in northern Europe and had traveled in China as well. What an amazing journey! What incredible parents (Henry and Isabella)! And we loved these kids:

Jacob (13): able to bring his bike to a stop and have a book out ready to read in five seconds flat. He was currently on the third book in the *Hunger Games* trilogy. A budding artist, Jacob had a tiny sketchbook filled with intricate drawings of people, plants, buildings, and vistas from their journey.

Anna (11): her dream is to become an aerialist while simultaneously running a bicycle repair shop.

Claire (9): she learned to ride a bike at seven. She is already more mature than many of the high school students I've met.

Bartimaeus (5): our first encounter with Bartimaeus was in a restaurant. He came up to me, his face inches away from mine, and asked, "Do you like spicy? I NO like spicy!" Thailand's cuisine had been hard on him. Bartimaeus rides part-time on a kid's seat behind his dad and part-time on his own bike which is attached to his dad's but can also be unattached, allowing Bartimaeus to pedal on his own.

I talked with Kat. "I want to travel with this family, if only for a day."

They agreed to let us tag along.

The eight of us left the city of Pakse,



PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIE WEIR

Laos, in the early morning (well, as early as you can get a family of six out of bed and moving). Bartimaeus was not a fan of the early-morning departure. He nodded in and out of sleep as we negotiated city traffic. We pedaled past roadside fruit stalls and up, up the long grade that would ascend 4,000 feet to the Bolaven Plateau. We didn't ride in a pack. These are not hovering helicopter parents. There was often quite a long distance between us. Jacob would pedal hard to get far enough ahead to earn himself a couple of minutes of reading time.

At one point, I positioned myself about 200 feet behind Claire. I loved watching the faces of the locals reacting to her. The burliest truck driver's scowl would melt into a beaming smile the moment he realized that the cyclist approaching was a little girl. I watched as mothers grabbed their young daughters and pointed at Claire. I don't know exactly what they said, but I'm certain it was along the lines of, "See that girl. She's your age. Maybe you could do that someday!"

Her father told me this story: It was early on in their trip in northern Europe. They were fighting headwinds and rain. Everyone was miserable. Claire stopped and said she couldn't go on. She was in tears. Her dad told her that he needed her to get back on her bike. They had 16 more kilometers to pedal to get to a campground. She put her head down and pedaled into the wind.

The campground had hot showers and a playground. The family washed up and changed into dry clothes. Henry found Claire on the swings and sat down next to her. He asked her what she had learned that day. She thought a while and then said, "I learned that I have the power to do it."

I don't know about you but when I was nine years old, the most adventurous thing I did was select my own cereal at the grocery store.

Our climb was gradual but unrelenting, and I couldn't help but wonder how my five- or nine- or 11- or 13-year-old



self would have handled it. I'm sure it wouldn't have been pretty.

We took shelter from a thunderstorm underneath the awning of a little shop where we slurped instant noodles and later found one of the best cups of coffee on the planet. The local kids gathered to admire the bikes, gear, and the kids who were riding them.

We continued climbing as the sun dipped lower in the sky and visited towering waterfalls, where birds and butterflies played in the mist. We splurged on rooms at the nearby resort. It was time for bed. Schoolwork would wait for another night.

We spent four days up in the cool, moist air of the Bolaven Plateau—pedaling through villages and coffee plantations that produce some of the best beans in the world. We watched elephants with their handlers come for their morning baths in the river and blood-red dragonflies perch on telephone wires. Each night the kids would do their homework, and Henry would go off in search of some sweet treat as a reward for finished schoolwork.

On our last day, Kat and I got an early start and pedaled down from the

mountains, back to Pakse. We stopped at an Indian restaurant with tables out by the road to grab a snack. Suddenly we heard familiar voices, and there were Anna and Claire pedaling toward us. They were excited. This was the first day in their lives that they had cycled 100 kilometers. Kat insisted on buying them sweet lassies (an Indian yogurt drink) in celebration. They slurped them down, and then Claire attempted to teach me to count to 10 in French: "Willie, you must concentrate and repeat after me."

I looked across the little roadside table at these two girls and thought of the wonders, hardships, cultures, and diversity that they and their brothers had been exposed to on this adventure. I wanted to know the adults they will become.

Sometimes it takes seeing the world through younger eyes to remember just how fortunate you are. Simply being with this family on the road made our hearts soar. At some point during the long climb up into the mountains, I realized my depression hadn't made the journey.

We saw our friends one more time in Cambodia. We shared a late night-meal on the streets of Phnom Penh. After we parted, the Fabulous French Family traveled in India and then finished up their trip in Nepal.

I am proud to say that my current cycling hero is a nine-year-old little girl. Thanks to her and the rest of her fabulous family, I relearned a valuable life lesson: I have the power to do it!

For photos, poetry, and reflections of life on the road with this amazing family, you can visit sixtette.blogspot.com.

If, like me, you don't speak French, use Google Translate when viewing their blog. 

Willie Weir has been a featured writer for Adventure Cyclist since the late 1990s. To read more about his adventures, you can visit Willie and Kat's blog at yellowtentadventures.com.