



Pedaling the M

“Heat and dust. One long, boring road.”

“I pedaled 140 kilometers a day just to get it over with.”

“Miserable. Just plain miserable!”

With comments like these from fellow touring cyclists, it was hard to get excited about the next leg of our journey in Southeast Asia. The route from Pakse, Laos, to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, was obviously one to be endured at worst and tolerated at best.

We had coasted down from the Bolaven Plateau, the lush, cool, cof-

fee-growing region of southern Laos. When you’ve come from a land of butterflies, waterfalls, and amazing coffee, heat and dust are disappointing following acts.

I studied our map and wanted to weep. West of this pathetic route was the Mekong. In past travels, every moment that Kat and I had spent on or near this mighty river had been bliss. But there wasn’t anything close to a contiguous route, and large sections showed no roads at all. It was a journey for a boat, not a bike (except for those

massive falls that make boat travel impossible between Laos and Cambodia).

Most of the cyclists we encountered were on a schedule. They were on round-the-world adventures or had decided to traverse as much of Southeast Asia as they could in a month. They saw two points on a map, and the main road was the only way to connect them.

But we had an advantage: time.

We had no agenda, other than wanting to experience this part of the world. If trucks were on the road and life was along the river, we’d choose the river.

What did we have to lose? We could always head back to the main road if the river route proved impossible. We

Story and photos by Willie Weir

ekong

decided to follow the Mekong as closely as we could, however we could.

It was one of the best travel decisions we ever made.

The main road, south of Pakse, is east of the Mekong. The road on the west side follows the river and leads to Wat Phu. The Laos government had (or has) great plans for this temple site (designated a World Heritage Site in 2001). It is a relative of the massive Khmer complex of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

We stayed in a delightful riverside guest house where we could sip cold Beerlaos Lager while gazing out at the river. It is a popular day trip from Pakse for locals and travelers.

What Wat Phu lacks in grandness (it is tiny in comparison to Angkor Wat), it makes up for in location and intimacy. The temple is at the base of mount Phu Kao and isn't officially open until 8:30 AM but we got up before dawn, pedaled our bikes to the site, and slipped through the unlocked gate. We left our bikes and climbed the hundreds of stone steps, breathing in air scented by giant blooming plumeria (frangipani).

South of Wat Phu the road ended and the fun began. We traveled through

community after community connected by dirt tracks, footpaths, and rickety suspension bridges. We pedaled by tiny shops, riverside monasteries and schools; by lush terraced vegetable gardens, diesel-powered rice-milling machines; and large mounds of earth filled with wood smoking down to charcoal. We passed monks and students, and groups of old women playing cards.



There were smiles and waves and greetings of “sabaidee.” And there were plenty of looks of astonishment and surprise as two foreigners on load-down bikes negotiated the tiny pathways under the cool canopy of trees and towering bamboo.

We didn't always end up on the “right” path, and we did plenty of backtracking. One dead end led to a stay with local teachers and the most amazing multi-modal school commute we'd ever seen. (You can read the tale in the August/September issue).

A massive set of falls separates Laos and Cambodia so we had to pedal back to the main highway to cross the border. There we met some touring cyclists who reconfirmed that the main road was hot and miserable. So once we cleared customs, we took the first road back toward the river.

The lack of a continuous route was part of the adventure. At one point when we could progress no further, we hired a father and son duo to take us downriver in their longboat.

In one village, we camped on a high bank of the Mekong next to the police station (police shack, really). The officers were happy to show us the flattest patch of ant-free dirt and what part of the river to watch to spot the elusive Irrawaddy dolphins.

I'll never forget cooling off at the river's edge one evening as the setting orange-red sun appeared to light the palm trees ablaze. Kids were laughing and playing in the water and small silent boats carried passengers along its smooth, ripple-free surface. A strange call from the opposite bank of the Mekong caught our attention. We looked up to see the unmistakable silhouette of a hornbill.

Our most exhausting day came with a pedal across an island in the middle of the Mekong. After being delivered by a boat we hired, we followed on old oxcart path the length of the island. The route through stands of teak trees was partially marked, which was maddening, and sections of soft sand often swallowed our tires.

By the time we'd made it to the southern end of the island, we were spent. Our bodies were coated with several layers of dust and sweat.



NUTS & BOLTS *Mekong*

WHEN TO GO

The dry season is October through April, with March and April the hottest of those months.

LODGING

A tent or a hammock with mosquito netting is a good idea. There are guest houses and hotels, and some home stays along the Mekong, but in some of the more remote stretches, having backup shelter is wise. Ask permission from a family (or the police) before pitching your tent. With the hazards of land mines in Cambodia and unexploded ordnance in Laos, wild camping is not worth the risk.

PAKSE

Bangkok is the epicenter of cheap flights when it comes to Southeast Asia. From Bangkok you could put your bike on a Thai train to Ubon Ratchathani, and then it's just a couple days' bike ride to Pakse, Laos. The Bolaven Plateau to the east of Pakse is lovely and worth at least a week-long loop trip. Pakse is also the gateway to 4,000 islands, a beautiful archipelago popular with the backpacker crowd in the Mekong, 85 miles to the south.

MEKONG DISCOVERY TRAIL

When searching the Internet for information about traveling the Mekong River Basin in Cambodia, you'll likely

come upon the Mekong Discovery Trail. It isn't really a trail in the traditional sense, but a series of eco-adventures to help promote tourism in this region. It is great in concept, but presently it's a disorganized mess. From the pamphlets and web information we could find, phone numbers didn't work, trails weren't marked, and now the official website is down, with the link instead taking you to tourismcambodia.com. So, if you are trying to plan a trip in advance or book a trip with a tour company, double check your sources and try to find someone who has recently used the guide service or tour company. Or wing it like we did!

The tourism department has a program in which families offer homestays. The homes participating have a small — and very subtle — sign. After much searching, we found a home with a sign and inquired about staying.

Due to annual flooding, all the dwellings along the Mekong are built on stilts. Stairs lead to an open room under

a thatched roof. The floor was made up of woven bamboo mats.

We parked our bikes below and were shown our sleeping area, a corner of the great room partitioned with sheets. It was stiflingly hot, and we both knew we wouldn't sleep. With a combination of hand waving and sign language, we communicated that we'd like to set up our

tent outside instead. Why anyone would want to sleep on the ground with the pigs, snakes, and bugs was beyond comprehension. They reluctantly agreed.

But before we could set up our tent, the head of the village came by and indicated it was dangerous to sleep outside and we'd have to sleep upstairs. I was hot and cranky and hungry.

"Fine. We won't stay here then," I grumbled.

We got on our bikes. The family was obviously upset. They were losing out on much-needed income.

Not more than 300 meters down the little dirt road, we found an opening near the river where we could pitch our tent. I had it nearly set up when a woman came over and with a stern look and a wag of her finger indicated we couldn't camp there. We were to follow her, and she'd take us to a place to stay. Exhausted, hungry, and annoyed, we walked our bikes slowly behind her and finally arrived at the house we'd just left — awkward.

Kat went down to the river to wash up, and I carried our gear up the stairs and moved into our hot and humid corner. This was going to be a long night.

Opposite our sleeping space was Grandma's corner. Her few remaining black-stained teeth and bright red-orange lips pegged her as a long-time betel chewer. I watched as she extracted a huge wad of betel from her mouth, took a large glug of water, swished and spit a stream of brown/orange discharge straight into the air. It disappeared through the porous floor.

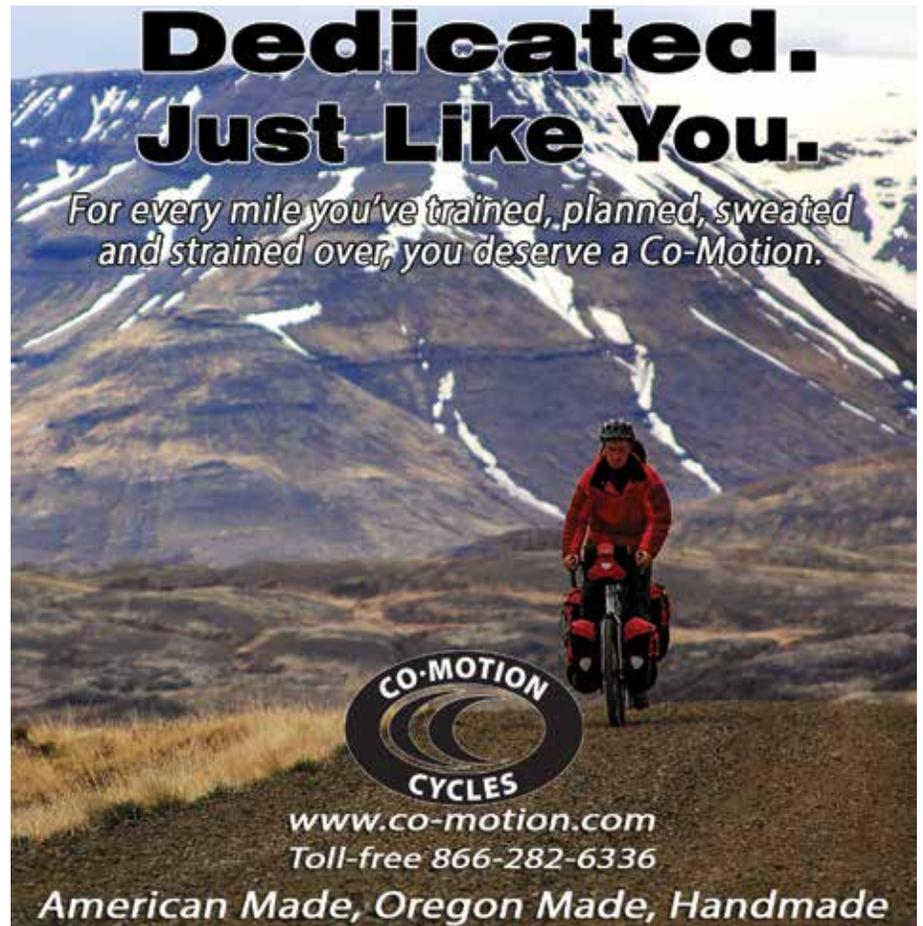
There was a two-second pause, and a voice from below said, "What was that?"

It was Kat. She had returned from the river's edge and was hanging up her towel.

A look of horror flashed on our host's face as she realized that her mother had just spat on their guest.

After cleaning herself off, Kat arrived in the doorway. There was a long, silent, awkward pause. I didn't know what to do or say. Sure, this woman's mother had spat on my wife, but that was an accident. We had initially turned down their space for us in their home, and instead we had asked to pitch our tent where the pigs normally sleep. What message had that sent?

Grandma had her head down, avoid-



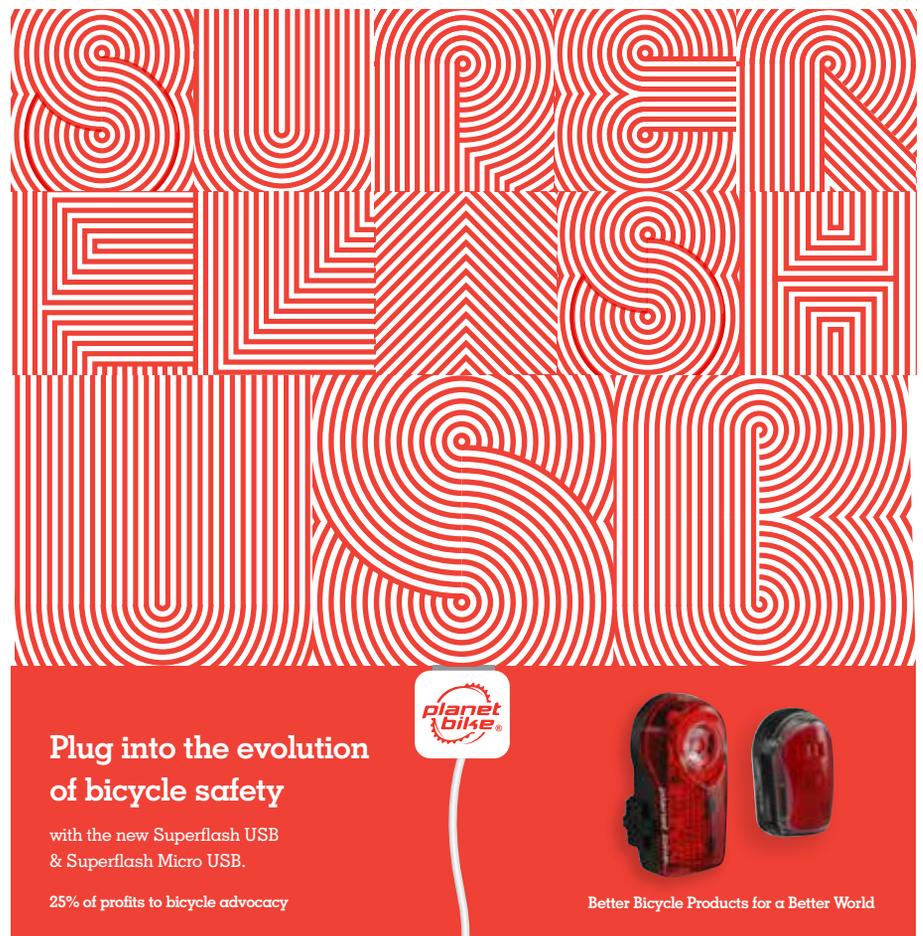
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ing eye contact. Our host was looking out the window toward the river.

I felt ashamed. I wanted to make it alright, but I was socially paralyzed.

Kat broke the silence.

She walked over to our host, pointed out the window toward the bright orange glow of the sunset over the Mekong, smiled, and said, "You live here. This is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. Thank you."

The woman didn't understand a single word Kat spoke. But Kat's emotion said it all, and a smile swept over our host's face. I swore I saw a mischievous grin on Grandma's face as well.

It was by far the hottest night of our long journey, but we both slept well.

The closer we got to Phnom Penh, the wider the roads got. We chose the side of the Mekong that had the smallest road. "Traffic" now included bicycles, scooters, oxcarts, motorcycles, and the occasional car. It was more chaotic than the small paths up north, but it was a delightful chaos. I declared one stretch "The Day of a Thousand Hellos" because that is the number of times I answered back to someone greeting us from the side of the road.

We stopped frequently for refreshing glasses of sugar cane-juice squeezed fresh by women with muscular arms who passed the stalks of cane repeatedly through a manual press (they have gas-powered presses in the big city). I asked to have a go at one stop, and I soon learned that cycling does nothing to prepare you for a job as a cane juicer.

We stayed in hotels in the cities of Kratie and Kampong Chan, wandering the streets late into the cooler evenings.

After two weeks of pedaling, walk-



ing, and floating our bikes down the Mekong, we pedaled into Phnom Penh during rush hour traffic. It was crazy, noisy, and chaotic. We spent four days exploring the city before finally saying goodbye to the Mekong. Its course winds southeast into Vietnam and the

Mekong Delta, whereas ours turned south to the Gulf of Thailand and then northwest back to Bangkok.

When I think back on our time along the Mekong, my mind keeps revisiting an encounter with a busload of Australians.

We were visiting the 100-pillar pagoda in Sambor when we were approached by some men who were outside a tour bus. They looked Cambodian but had thick Australian accents.

This was no ordinary tourist trip. The bus was filled with native Cambodians who had all fled the terror of the Khmer Rouge back in the late 70s. They all attended the same temple in Sydney. The group had pooled their money and filled the bus with food and medical supplies. They were traveling around to each other's home villages and distributing the materials. For many of them, this was their first visit back to Cambodia. We asked them what it was like to come back. One man tried to answer, but tears soon choked him up and he excused himself.

What an extraordinary journey: It was one of the few times in my life that I wished I could have stopped riding my bike and boarded a bus. And, truth be told, we could have. We met the group again in Kratie outside a hotel where they were packing up their bus. Some of the women came over and gave us gifts of fruit, snacks, and bottles of water. We laughed and talked with the group until it was time for them all to board. As the bus pulled away, I turned to Kat and said, "If we had asked to join them, if only for a couple of days, they would have said yes. We could have left our bikes in Kratie and found a way to return."

It was a moment in time I'd like to revisit, allowing myself just 30 more seconds and a chance to change the course of a journey.

Then I recall that we only met them because of another choice we made — to slow down and make our way along an unknown path less traveled. It was a decision that transformed a portion of our journey that we had initially dreaded into a treasure of travel memories. 🇦🇺

Willie Weir is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist. He has learned that slowing down is not a sign of aging, but the bedrock of wisdom.



Chatting with school children along the Mekong in Cambodia.