



THE CROSSING

STORY BY **WILLIE WEIR**

→ OUR FORWARD progress appeared to be done for the day. The small road we were pedaling, which had turned into a narrower and narrower path, ended at the water's edge. A large tributary flowed into the Mekong from the west. There was no bridge.

It's at moments like these that I question our habit of finding our own way instead of following a well-worn route. The internet age and smart phones with GPS have allowed travelers to not only know the best route ahead, but also the topography, elevation gain, restaurants, and services along the way. With Google Earth, you can visually tour your next day's route in the com-

fort of a coffee shop or hotel lobby.

If we had used these tools, we would have seen there was no bridge in advance and found an alternative route. We might have even decided to head out to the main dusty highway, far from the river.

But we didn't. So here we were — wherever here was — straddling our bikes and in need of a boat.

We turned back and began retracing our route along the path, trying to remember when the last time we had seen a village. Our map was of no assistance, it didn't even show a road on this side of the Mekong.

Then we heard the whine of a motorbike. A young man appeared from the tunnel of bamboo wearing a helmet, dark glasses, and a dust mask. He was amused to find a couple of foreigners on bikes on this remote path in southern Laos. Instead of pointing us back up north, he motioned for us to follow him and he proceeded to motor down the same path we'd just given up on.

His forward motion ended at the exact spot ours had. He called out and waved his arms. An elderly woman emerged from the shade of some trees,

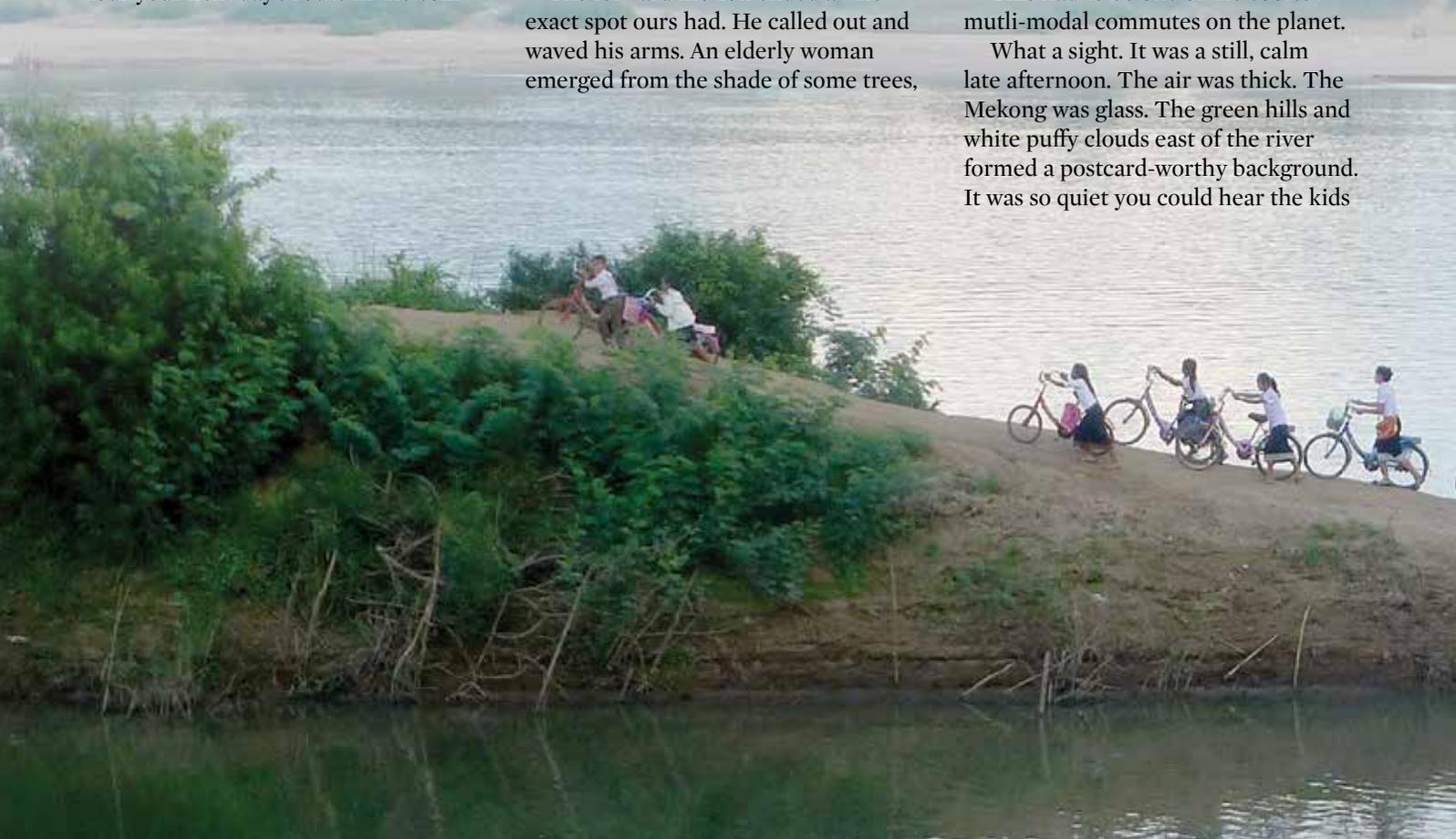
walked down the opposite bank, and got into a long, skinny, well-worn wooden boat, and slowly pulled the craft across the expanse by a worn rope.

We hadn't even considered the availability of a local on-call ferry. After landing and securing the boat, the woman waved us on. We boarded after the motorcycle. During the two-minute ride across, we both wondered just how many passengers you could get on this little boat.

We would have our answer within minutes. A school bell rang and a stream of students appeared dressed in school uniforms (white button-down shirts, the girls in dark blue skirts, the boys in long khaki pants), all walking their bikes down to line up for the ferry. We wouldn't have believed it unless we'd seen it with our own eyes, but it appeared the maximum capacity of this craft was 18 students, their bikes and two boat handlers (the woman had been joined by a young man to help pull the now-heavier boat across).

This had to be one of the coolest multi-modal commutes on the planet.

What a sight. It was a still, calm late afternoon. The air was thick. The Mekong was glass. The green hills and white puffy clouds east of the river formed a postcard-worthy background. It was so quiet you could hear the kids



chatting and laughing as the boat made its way across.

As they approached the opposite bank, there was a chorus of “hay-yo, hay-yo” as the students coaxed a little more momentum forward.

They disembarked one-by-one, pushing their bikes up the bank and along the path. I was taking photos, and at one moment, the kids were all perfectly lined up, and a giggle of spontaneous joy came from deep within me.

I don't know exactly why I was so emotionally moved. It was combination of the river and mountains and the way the reflections of the students on the water mimicked the trees. It was kids on bikes. It was forward motion. It was magic.

There were two more crossings before all the students were on the other side.

Before Kat and I could even worry about where we were going to sleep, a local student intercepted us and led us to his teacher. The young man, a little shorter and stockier than myself, was the school's English teacher. He offered us a place to stay.

The schoolhouse consisted of a couple of cinderblock rooms with earth floors under a corrugated tin roof. Plain wooden desks and benches were the only furniture, and a cracked and peeling chalkboard hung sadly on the wall.

But what they lacked in supplies and structures, the teachers made up with enthusiasm. They gathered a group for a spontaneous volleyball game, and I was tossed the ball and given the serve.

Kat wisely opted out of the game to take photos of her sweating husband, lunging and diving to save a point or two — and some of his dignity. Gulping for air, I looked around and no one else had even broken a sweat. I'm pretty sure they prematurely ended the game for fear that their guest might have a heart attack.

We pitched our tent next to the teacher's quarters, a typical wooden and bamboo structure on stilts.

Before dinner, we'd have a bath in the river. We walked down a steep path to the Mekong and one of the teachers graciously showed Kat the art of modestly soaping up and rinsing off while simultaneously manipulating a sarong.

Tooth brushes appeared from I don't know where, and I found myself trying not to think about what all was suspended in the murky river water.

The night air was filled with bird song. Bats skimmed the surface of the river snatching up bugs.

After our bath, we were invited upstairs for a shared dinner of spicy hot fish *lap* with sticky rice and greens. We cooled our mouths with water and our skin with a small oscillating fan.

I looked around at the smiling faces of our hosts, people we'd share this evening with, and then most likely never see again. We were strangers and family at the same time. I glanced over at Kat. She had one of the most satisfied looks I'd ever seen on her face. Hours before we were hot and tired with no idea which way to go, let alone where

■ To see images and video of “the world's coolest multimodal commute” go to adventurecycling.org/laos

we would sleep. This is not how we had imagined our night would progress.

Over the years, we've seen so many epically wonderful places on our bike journeys: grand vistas, temples, churches and ruins; stunning mountain ranges, river gorges, and vast fields of flowers. And yet it is the small encounters with people in out-of-the-way places that are indelibly etched in our memories. Possibly because they are so personal. They are not found on bucket lists of places to visit or experiences to have before we die. They're our moments alone.

Over the years, we've learned to plan and schedule less and just let the adventure happen. Not knowing what's around the next corner or where we'll eat or sleep is part of that adventure.

We never knew how moved we could be by watching 18 school kids with their bikes ferry across a river in a little boat until we stumbled upon them on an unnamed path in Laos.

We may never see the statues of Easter Island or the pyramids of Egypt. We can die happy without those items checked off a list — and countless others — as long as we continue to explore and observe the nooks and crannies of this incredible world from the seat of a bicycle. **AC**

Willie Weir is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist and the author of Spokesongs and Travels with Willie. Learn more at willieweir.com.

