The mountains of Vangvieng offer all manner of adventure sports.
In Southeast Asia, Laos is unique. Landlocked and without any major cities, it is the poorest country in the region and suffered the worst bombings (albeit secretly) during the Vietnam War. Much of its population fared even worse during the years that followed when those who supported the CIA’s secret war against the communists were punished by the new Vietnam-backed government.

While the country has suffered greatly, today it’s seeing better times, including a growth in tourism. Its hilly north has increasingly drawn adventure tourists, including cyclists, to its quiet roads, rugged landscape, and lush scenery. It’s been a place long on my riding radar. And in late 2018, I suddenly realized I’d better get there soon.

That year, I read about a $6 billion railroad that China was building across Laos, linking the world’s most populous country with Thailand. It was part of China’s trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, which calls for spreading a web of transportation infrastructure across Asia to benefit commerce.

The Laos railroad, which began in 2016, is 250 miles long and expected to be completed in 2021. The railroad could be a boon to Laos’s seven million citizens. Or, depending on which critics you listen to, it could leave Laos in debt while its richer neighbors benefit from access to its raw materials and cheap labor.

One thing is for sure: when China, a nation with a middle class of 550 million people, suddenly has easy access to this scenic, rural paradise, Laos is going to change. I envisioned a huge growth in resorts, second homes, casinos, and other outlets catering to the Chinese. If I wanted to see the country’s rural splendor, I realized, now was the time.
That's why I decided, at the last minute, to book a two-week trip in February of 2019.

My route was relatively short: 271 miles from Laos's capital of Vientiane north to Louangphrabang, a city popular for its French colonial architecture, gastronomic delights, and scenic location on the banks of the Mekong River. I planned for five to six days of riding, knowing the northern half would be hilly.

Since it was a short trip, I barely gave my bike and gear the once-over one should always do before a tour. Also, being winter back in New York, I didn't do any cycling to get in shape. Both decisions would later come back to haunt me.

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At least that was the plan. When I arrived in Bangkok, I had about two hours to retrieve my gear, check in for the new flight, pass through security, and find my gate. The customs man laughed when he saw my itinerary. “You might make it,” he said doubtfully.

It took way too long for my bike box to show up at the oversized luggage desk. When it finally did, I threw my gear onto a luggage trolley and fairly ran through Southeast Asia's biggest air terminal with my bike sticking out both ends like a cardboard snowplow. I nearly took out several children and at least one elderly monk before I found the check-in desk.

I did make the plane, though it was close. And less than two hours later, I was at my first hotel in Laos.

Vientiane is Laos's biggest city, but it's small by Asian standards — about 800,000 residents. I spent the morning assembling my bike, then I wandered through town visiting Buddhist temples, watching the novice monks, and admiring the many gold Buddha statues. In the evening, I headed to the banks of the Mekong.

A quiet afternoon at the hot springs north of Kasi, a great place to spend the night (except for the noisy trucks).

There, when work is done and temperatures go down, the locals flock to enjoy the evening. Entrepreneurs set up carnival games, women in tights do aerobics set to Asian pop songs, and tourists and locals alike dine al fresco at pop-up sidewalk eateries. I wandered from stall to stall, sampling barbecued squid and a noodle dish. It was a good first day.

I woke up the next morning ready to ride. I loaded my bike, anxious to get as many miles as possible before the afternoon heat, and pedaled off.

I got four blocks before disaster struck. First, one of my panniers popped off. It turned out that, since the last time I had used them, the bungee cord that binds it to the rack had lost its elasticity. When the pannier came off, it fell into my wheel and snapped off my tube's valve. I had brought one spare tube for the short tour, which meant I now had none. And when I pulled off my tire, I discovered it was dry-rotted and falling apart.

No spares, no functioning tires,
no working panniers. This is what happens when you don’t check your gear before a trip!

Fortunately, Vientiane has one decent bike shop. And it was only a short roll away. When I got there, “Tiger,” as he called himself, was happy to help. He soon set me up with new tires and two new spare tubes (I learned my lesson about taking just one), and he fixed the tension in the bungees by removing the bolts and shortening them with a knot. For good measure, I picked up some boot laces from a nearby store and lashed the panniers to the rack. There would not be a repeat of that incident!

By now it was mid-morning and the temperature was creeping up. I rode as fast as possible through the city’s busy streets, enjoying the last of the morning shadows and looking forward to escaping the diesel exhaust. An hour after departing, I was in the country cycling past traditional Lao houses built on stilts and locals selling tropical fruit at roadside stands.

I had chosen my route from several sources: an out-of-print Lonely Planet guide to cycling in Southeast Asia, an excellent website describing the route created by a Canadian couple, and a digital Hobo Map. What is a Hobo Map? They are drawn digitally and sold online by a retired American who has been cycling through Southeast Asia since 2005. These fantastic mile-by-mile maps can be downloaded onto a phone for one American dollar each, and they list everything from restaurants to direction of climbs and quality of roads.

I rode for about four hours on Highway 10, a much more low-key route than the congested main highway, stopping only to refuel on a 30-cent bunch of tiny bananas. By 2:00 PM, I was ready to escape the heat. I found a small motel with A/C near Nam Ngum Lake, a reservoir that is home to a new resort. No one spoke English, but I was able to claim a room and then wandered across the street to a shaded, open-air café get some food.

Laos’s staple meal is much like Vietnamese pho — a large bowl of broth with noodles and vegetables. It makes a fine lunch, and the salty dish has the
added benefit of providing electrolytes to a sweaty cyclist.

In the evening, I climbed a steep hill to view the lake and then stopped at a pub where a man was barbecuing chicken outside. It turned out to be a karaoke bar, and I listened to locals belting out Asian melodies as I ate my meat, wrapped like a taco in leaves of lettuce. I noticed the waitress pointing her phone at me. She was showing me off to her father, who waved to me over the tiny screen. No doubt they were marveling at this strange, pale-skinned man who had wandered into her shop.

I left at dawn the next morning and rode several hours before stopping for a meaty breakfast sandwich served on the ubiquitous baguettes that are a vestige of the former French colonization. As I slowly climbed in elevation, I saw the first traces of the Chinese railroad — concrete abutments for bridges that had not yet been built, level beds for track that had not yet been laid. The tracks, if nothing else, could be a boon for Laotian construction workers. Except, according to some critics, many of the workers are Chinese. Indeed, I would pass several large Chinese work camps during the ride.

I stopped for a fish lunch at a café at the north end of Nam Ngum Lake, where I chatted briefly with a Chinese engineer who spoke perfect English (“And French,” he added). From there the last two hours to Vangviang were torturous.

Vangviang is surrounded by tower karst and riddled with caves and streams. All that limestone has attracted a large cement industry, and the road in this area was covered in dust and filled with noisy trucks. Definitely the worst section of the tour.

Vangviang lies on the banks of a cool, clear river and is a popular stop for backpackers. In the past, a popular pastime for party-minded tourists was to get loaded and then ride tubes down the river. Some tourists drowned this way so the town has been moving away from the party scene and embracing ecotourism in its place.
GETTING TO LAOS
Flights for around $1,000 are available from the U.S. to Hong Kong, Bangkok, and China, where you can pick up a regional flight to Vientiane. Bikes fly free on most Asian airlines. Plan for extra days to see Vientiane, Vangvieng, and Louangphrabang.

WHEN TO GO
December and January are the best months for cycling, although people ride all year long. From March to May, the temperature is at its hottest and smoke often obscures the scenery. The rainy season over the summer helps cool things down, but the roads will be muddy.

WHAT TO BRING
Wide cyclocross, hybrid, or mountain bike tires are your friends. Food is readily available for the southern half of the route, but from Kasi north, you’ll want to carry more snacks and lunch between towns. Most of the larger villages have decent food selections, and you can always buy fruit from roadside stands. Bottled water is widely available, with springs and streams along the way (purify first). Decent bike shops are found in Vientiane and Louangphrabang, with nothing in between (however, bikes can be rented for the day in Vangvieng). With numerous hotels en route, camping is not necessary, but there are rural areas where a tent could be set up.

OTHER DETAILS
English is widely spoken in tourist towns but rare elsewhere. A printed sheet with English-Lao words is helpful, but I mostly got by with a smile, sign language, and the words “khop jai” (thank you) and “sai bai dee” (hello). Translation phone apps would also work, although I didn’t use them. Food and lodging is quite cheap — a cyclist on a low budget could get by on $20 to $40 per day. Most of the route has low traffic, and drivers are courteous. There are significant climbs on this route, so cyclists should be physically prepared (there is also a less-scenic, lower-altitude route between Kasi and Louangphrabang).

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Guidebooks like Lonely Planet, Moon, or Rough Guide contain information on Vientiane, Vangvieng, and Louangphrabang. For ride info, check out travellingtwo.com, a wonderful blog written by Canadian couple Friedel and Andrew, who describe the route in great detail. Be sure to download route maps from hobomaps.com.

Hilly grasslands greet riders at the start of the huge climb to Phou Khoun.

Today one can kayak, mountain bike, swim, cave, rock climb, hike, and ride hot-air balloons. There are loads of decent restaurants and cheap lodging.

I spent an extra day here, but the crowded river scene convinced me to skip tubing. Instead I got up at dawn to hike up a nearby hill. On the way, a stray dog befriended me. I named him Karst. He followed me to the peak, even up several wooden ladders (which I later had to help him down). He even waited at the mouth of a cave as I explored the subterranean world. But when I got to the edge of town, he left me for another tourist who was headed off into the hills. Man’s best friend indeed.

Up early again the next morning. I joined a sort of bicycle rush hour of students heading to class and monks heading to temples. But soon all was quiet. This was the riding I was looking for — small farms, narrow roads, and little traffic. I stopped for lunch in Kasi and then rode an additional five miles to a small hot springs resort.

There I was lucky enough to snap the last of five simple bungalows. “I just varnished it,” the hostess told me. “Are you sure it’s okay?” It did smell a bit, but it suited me fine.

I spent the afternoon soaking in the springs and enjoying the views of the
green peaks soaring above us, walls too vertical for any man to scale. Tomorrow I would face the biggest climb of the trip.

The road from Kasi to Phou Khoun climbs nearly 3,000 feet. It’s a reasonable pitch, with streams and occasional springs for water (be sure to purify before drinking). It’s a hot climb, but a good part of it is shady in the morning, and the temperature cools the higher you get. At the top, there’s a restaurant with a world-class view — a good place to stop and refuel.

By the time I reached Phou Khoun in the early afternoon, I was done. I had originally planned to ride on to the next town, but I decided to take an extra day to recover. I found a basic guest house and lay down under a fan to recuperate. In the evening, I was joined for dinner by a young British lady who had cycled all the way up from Phonsavan, home to the world-famous Plain of Jars, more than 80 miles to the east and mostly uphill. An impressive accomplishment in this heat.

It was a hilly but short ride to the next destination, Kiu Kacham. On the way, I passed numerous tiny villages. Girls wrapped in sarongs bathed under communal taps while grandmothers cut grass in the field and carried it back home on their backs. Families, members of the minority Hmong tribe, sat in front of their one-room huts, waving. Several times I stopped to take photos of a young child, but each time the kid burst into tears.

At Kiu Kacham, I was wandering through town when a man emerged from his one-room house and beckoned me inside. The room was carpeted but empty, save for two things: a stereo and a bottle of rice wine sitting on the floor. The man picked up the bottle, filled a glass with liquor, and offered it to me.

What could I do? Hoping the alcohol would kill any germs, I smiled and downed the fiery drink. When it became clear the man was well into his cups, I thanked him and excused myself.

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Above: The author takes a break at the top of a grueling climb.
Below: A novice monk sweeps the grounds outside a Buddhist temple in downtown Vientiane.