

JOY RIDERS

ONE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA'S BEST-KEPT SECRETS, LAOS HAS REMAINED UNTOUCHED BY MUCH OF THE MASS TOURISM THAT HAS SWEEPED THROUGH ITS NEIGHBOURS. **MATT WARNOCK** SETS OUT ON A TWO-WEEK, THOUSAND KILOMETRE CYCLING ODYSSEY TO DISCOVER THE MAGICAL COUNTRY.



The stunning scenery throughout Laos is a delight to experience on two wheels.

'Sabaidee!' It's a fantastic word, right? Say it out loud: 'Sa-Ba-Dee' – it even sounds happy, doesn't it? It's impossible to be glum or feel ticked off when there's a 'sabaidee' in the air.

It's Lao for 'hello', 'goodbye', 'welcome', 'I'm pleased to meet you' and, according to the reaction we get as we cycle through some of the country's most remote villages and hamlets, it also seems to be child-Lao for 'I'm so damn happy to see you, I'm going to run from my hut as naked as the day I was born, jump up and down, and line up with my buddies to give all you crazy cyclists in your bright lycra outfits as many high-fives as humanly possible.'

Returning the greeting and the high-five gives these kids so much elation you fear they might actually explode with sheer bliss – the kind of emotion that not even a new Nintendo DS with all the games on the planet would elicit from western children.

And it's infectious. By the third day of this epic ride – which takes us from Chiang Saen just outside Chiang Rai in northern Thailand, along the mighty Mekong River, through towns such as Udom Xay, Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng, and finally wraps up almost a thousand kilometres later in Vientiane – my voice is croaky, my hands are sore from high-fives and my jaw aches from smiling. But I can't stop. The reception we receive as we pass through villages is so euphorically universal that it just becomes a long buzz of '...badeeeeeeeee', as I wave and wave.

'I thought holidays were meant to be relaxing,' was the comment I received most often when I told colleagues, friends and family how I planned to spend my annual vacation. As a self-confessed fitness-junkie with a taste for adventure and discovering new cultures, 'where's the fun in that?' was my standard response.

But it goes deeper. Exploring Laos on a bicycle keeps you at ground level. Sure, you may be able to gasp in awe at the emerald paddy fields, serene river scenes and majestic limestone peaks from a tour bus. You may even smile at the children as they trek to work in the fields, wave to women steaming sticky rice on



open fires, or take passing photos of rickety tractor engines dragging whole clans from village to village. But you don't 'feel' it. Travelling by bike, you smell the smoke of the fires, you sweat through the afternoon heat that workers experience in the fields, you dodge the pigs, roosters and ducklings that run loose through the villages, and, of course, you hear the cries of 'Sabaidee'. You can't cycle several kilometres chatting with a group of young monks if you're on a bus, can you?

Cycling also means that you physically interact with the terrain – not one bump, pothole or unpaved section goes unnoticed. Every pedal stroke, every corner turned, every whipped descent reminds me why I fell in love with cycling in the first place. And makes me fall deeper in love with Laos.

Laos has only recently opened up to tourism and, with the notable exception of the brash but beautiful Vang Vieng, the country is keen to keep its splendour and cultures intact, while well aware of the need to cash in on the tourist dollar. Cycle tours fit this brand of 'responsible tourism' and several operators offer routes through Laos. One of the first to set up in the country was London-based Red Spokes, which is providing the brains and organisation behind this tour.

'Just look around you. It's a stunning country, full of beautiful people – we don't want people to exploit it. We show the real Laos and people almost always come to love it and feel protective of it,' explains Red Spokes' founder Dermot Macward. The charismatic Scotsman cycles along with us, always with a story to tell, while our

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local guide, Ken Phetxayphone, an equally charismatic and anecdote-laden presence, drives one of the back-up vehicles.

In our 16 strong group, there's also a Canadian publisher, a pair of Australian nurses and an engineer from down under, a South African financial advisor, two giant Californian brothers and, of course, a Dubai-based journalist. The reasons for taking on such an exhausting vacation are as varied as the people themselves; each person brings a unique energy and dynamic to the group. I spend time riding with almost every person discussing life and Laos. There's a whole lot of laughter. Mostly strangers when we first meet in Bangkok or Chiang Rai, these people come to feel like my on-the-road family with amazing speed.

Some of the days are tough, and there's little doubt that a decent level of fitness is required to take part in such a cycle tour. Day seven, a 90km ride between Udom Xay and Pak Mong, for example, is an arduous one, as much of that distance is uphill. Day 10's 95km to Kiu Kacham, is even more demanding, with the remote village perched at the top of a mountain.

In reality, most days are far more manageable, and both Ken and Dermot continually point out that this is a tour, not a race. Each day is typically split into four or five riding sections. We set out all together but,

due to fitness, photograph opportunities and drink stops, the group quickly gets drawn out. Meanwhile, the support team races ahead in the bus and scouts a perfect, shaded pitstop so that, every 20km or so, we pull in for a snack, a spot of lunch or, on one very special occasion, deep-fried banana, giving everyone a chance to catch up before it's time to set off again.

If it sounds like a pampered way of touring, then it's certainly not a round-the-world sufferfest like that of Alan Bates (see The Hub, right) but it's also challenging enough for a holiday and anything but coddled luxury. When you're staying in small towns like Pak Mong, Kasi and Na Nam, far from the tourist trail, there's no convenient Hilton nearby.

Staying in rustic places tests and defines the group every bit as much as the cycling. After our hardest day, for example, with a gruelling 16km climb followed closely by a punishing 24km uphill into some of southeast Asia's highest peaks, we arrive at the cold, isolated and, frankly, bleak village of Kiu Kacham to discover accommodation which is clean, but uninviting. I come out of the only shower in the building to see Mary with a beer bottle in hand. 'Looks like a good night for getting drunk then,' she laughs. What could have been a nightmarish experience begins with us all wrapped up warm and enjoying Beer Laos on a back

THE HUB

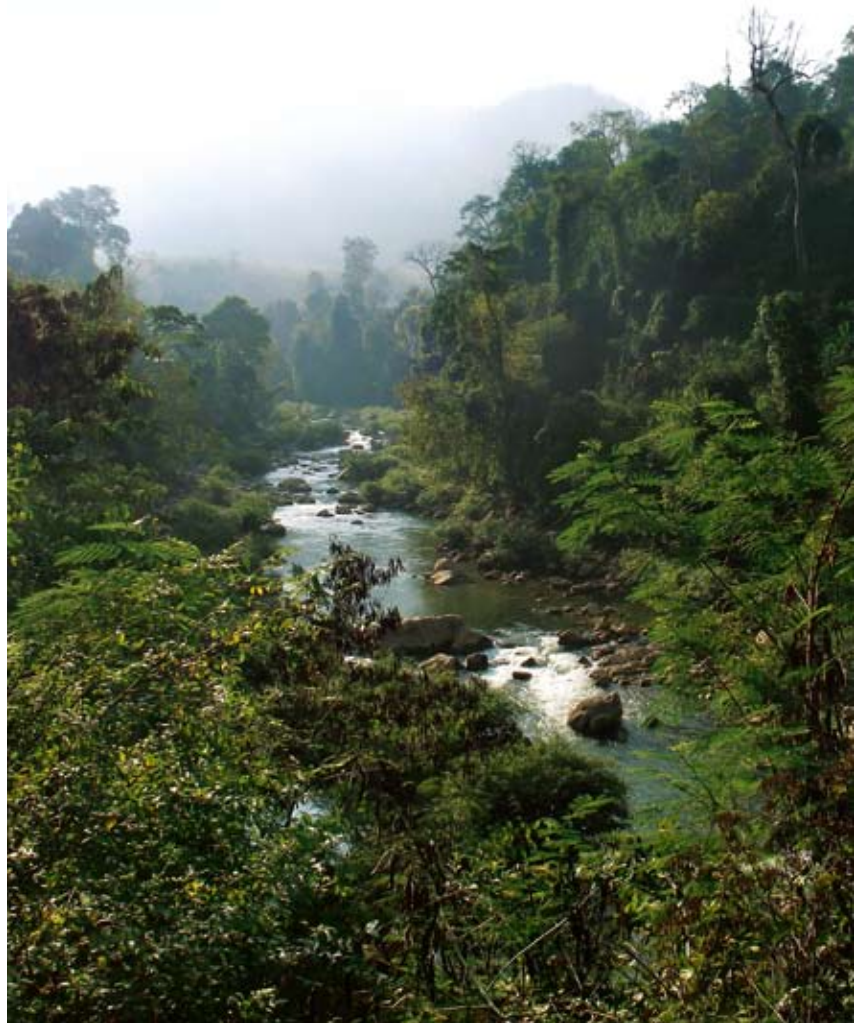
SHOULD YOU HAPPEN TO FIND YOURSELF IN NORTHERNMOST THAILAND'S CHIANG KHONG, POP INTO THE HUB – AN AMAZING BAR-CUM-CYCLING MUSEUM OWNED BY FORMER PRO CYCLIST ALAN BATES WHO IS ALSO, UNOFFICIALLY, THE FASTEST PERSON TO HAVE EVER CIRCUMNAVIGATED THE GLOBE BY BIKE. ALAN IS SHORTLY TO OPEN A HOSTEL NEXT DOOR THAT IS COMPLETELY FREE – AS LONG AS YOU ARRIVE BY BIKE!

terrace overlooking a breathtaking mountain vista; it ends with the whole group and support crew going head-to-head in firewater-fuelled party games, courtesy of Alistair, an adventurous but retired Yorkshireman. These are my kind of people.

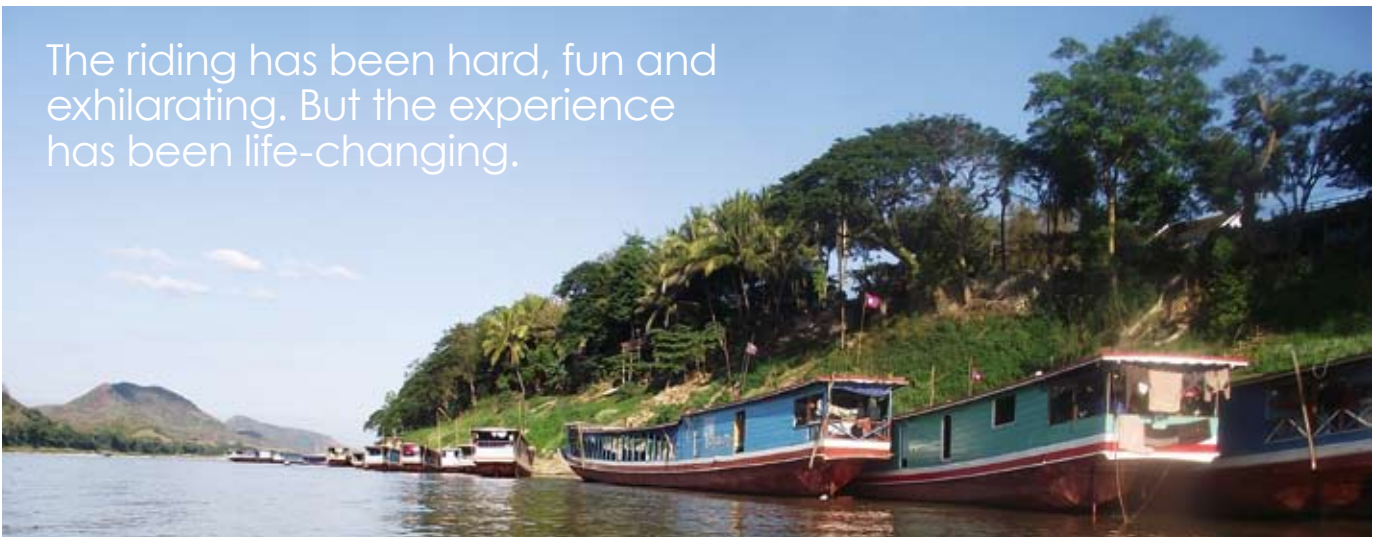
Dermot and Ken both play substantial roles in creating this atmosphere and spirit of adventure, and are part of the group as much as leaders of it. Ken's genius is in the behind-the-scenes logistics. At each rest stop, there are drinks and snacks waiting, while the water bottles on our bikes miraculously seem to fill themselves. When we finally arrive at the hotels and guesthouses at the end of a long,



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hard day, our bags and room keys are already waiting. And just when you've finished your evening meal and are finally starting to relax, Ken appears with the LaoLao firewater. 'Just have a little one,' he pleads, making it hard to say no.

One of the most socially and politically astute and interesting people I've ever met, Dermot started Red Spokes in order to give other people the kind of experiences that he and his friends were enjoying themselves, cycling some of the world's least travelled and most beautiful roads. Laos was one of Red Spokes' very first tours and has a special place in the company's heart and history.

'When you sign up for a Red Spokes tour, you know you're getting something a bit different, hopefully a bit special,' he explains. 'For a start, there are the charities and projects that we, as a company, support. But we also want to show

our groups the reality of a country; we give groups a chance to interact that few others ever get.'

And Laos is a fascinating country to interact with. Midway through the first week, we arrive in the small village of Ban Nalay where Red Spokes has provided money and goods for the school and other projects. We bathe in the river before being led to the main village hut where an elder begins a traditional baci ceremony. We sit in a circle around a pah kwan flower arrangement draped with string threads, and water is dripped from a banana leaf horn into our hands to call all our spirits back into our bodies, before a series of mantras are chanted. Finally, the elders take the string threads and, one by one, tie them around our wrists to represent the blessings that the villagers wish upon us. It's an otherworldly and amazing experience that we're all touched by.

The night descends into revelry as we dive into the food prepared by the village's women, and Beer Lao and LaoLao (a locally brewed whiskey). Local children perform traditional dances, the women try to teach us Laotian dance and, finally, fuelled by sticky rice and beer, we show the whole village how to dance the Hokey Cokey. That night, we each stay in the home of a Ban Nalay villager. Chatting is impossible, but we all find a way of communicating through hand signals and expressions. No matter where you go, and how different your lives may be, people are still people and our shared humanity shines and connects us all. I sleep like a baby, until the roosters decide it's time for breakfast, when we thank our gracious hosts and say goodbye. It's a great honour, we're told, to have a stranger stay in your house and enjoy your hospitality. The honour is surely ours.

A few days later, cycling through the highlands of Laos, we stop in a Hmong village where Red Spokes has built a rudimentary classroom. The Hmong are a mysterious and almost mythical mountain people who, in villages such as these, have seen life change very little over the past few centuries. We're invited into a small wood and mud home in which, Ken translates, 12 people sleep and a fire burns 24 hours a day, for warmth and cooking purposes. Even after a few minutes, the smoke is almost unbearable and the permanent fumes are one of the main reasons for Hmong's short life expectancy.

Across the road, a knife outside the door and calls emerging from a hut tell us that a young boy is very ill inside. The village shaman has been jumping up and down on a chair and chanting since sunrise in an attempt to rid the boy of bad spirits. The shaman, an old man, may have to do this all day.

'The cultural element of Red Spokes' tours are so important,' say Mary and Donald, who have already ridden through India, Argentina and Chile with the company and are heading straight off to Vietnam to join a Red Spokes tour there once the Laos trip finishes. 'Dermot and Red Spokes are so engaged in the cultures and communities – they give you real insight.' For Mary, the highlight of the trip was the night spent with the villagers in Ban Nalay



THE RUNDOWN

RED SPOKES (WWW.REDSPOKES.CO.UK) RUNS SIMILAR TOURS IN THAILAND, VIETNAM, CAMBODIA, INDIA, TIBET, NEPAL, LEBANON, KYRGYZSTAN AND SOUTH AMERICA, AS WELL AS MORE STANDARD CYCLE TOURS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM.

THE LAOS TRIP COSTS AROUND DHS.5,500 EXCLUDING FLIGHTS. YOU CAN TAKE YOUR OWN BIKE, OR RED SPOKES CAN PROVIDE YOU WITH DECENT WHEELS. ONCE ON THE ROAD, ACCOMMODATION, SNACKS AND MOST MEALS ARE PROVIDED, SO ADDITIONAL SPENDING IS MINIMAL.

FOR OTHER TOURING OPTIONS CHECK OUT *BICIKLO* (WWW.BICIKLO.COM, OR SEARCH FOR 'BICIKLO' ON FACEBOOK). THIS ANNUAL GUIDE BOOK COVERS BIKE TOURS EVERYWHERE FROM ANDORRA TO ZIMBABWE.

– something that most of the group agrees on. But the lowlight was seeing the Hmong village. 'It's affecting. I was so saddened by everything we saw – the poverty, the illness, women still being kidnapped from their families and married off, and the fact that we know the good that proper care and medicines could do.'

Perhaps the saddest point of interest about Laos is that it is, per capita, the most heavily bombed country on earth. After being dragged into the Vietnam War, which in turn led to the Laotian Civil War, the USA began a systematic bombing campaign that resulted in more shells being dropped on Laos than were dropped during the whole of the Second World War. It's often cited that the US' massive aerial bombardment that took place between 1964 and 1973 was the equivalent of one B52 bomber dropping its load on Laos every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for nine whole years.

With 80 million unexploded cluster bombs leaving a lethal legacy for a country where scrap metal is a valuable commodity, it's fitting that we finish our epic journey at the visitor centre for Cope (the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise) in Vientiane. It's another

charity that Red Spokes is deeply involved with and, after spending two weeks exploring and falling for this diverse and beautiful country and its people, we're made vividly aware of the horrors of war and its aftermath. But Cope, along with people like Dermot, is working hard to make people's lives better. The message we leave with is one of determination, spirit and hope.

'We've loved it and would definitely do something similar again,' say Aussie academics (and tandem riders) Tara and James, although they'd want some extra gears on their bike to help tackle the hills first. 'Fantastic,' adds Alistair. 'Although, as a mountain biker, I think if I were to do another tour, it'd be an off-road one.'

My two weeks on the roads of Laos was more than I ever expected it could be. The riding was hard, fun and exhilarating. But the experience was life-changing, and I feel like I learned from the country and also the people in our group. In two weeks, I've grown, but also learned more about the type of person I'd like to become. How many people have come back from a fortnight at an Indonesian spa resort saying that? And so I board the plane for Bangkok and, finally, back to Dubai. Sleepy eyes, sore legs, full heart.