

# Adventure

Travel

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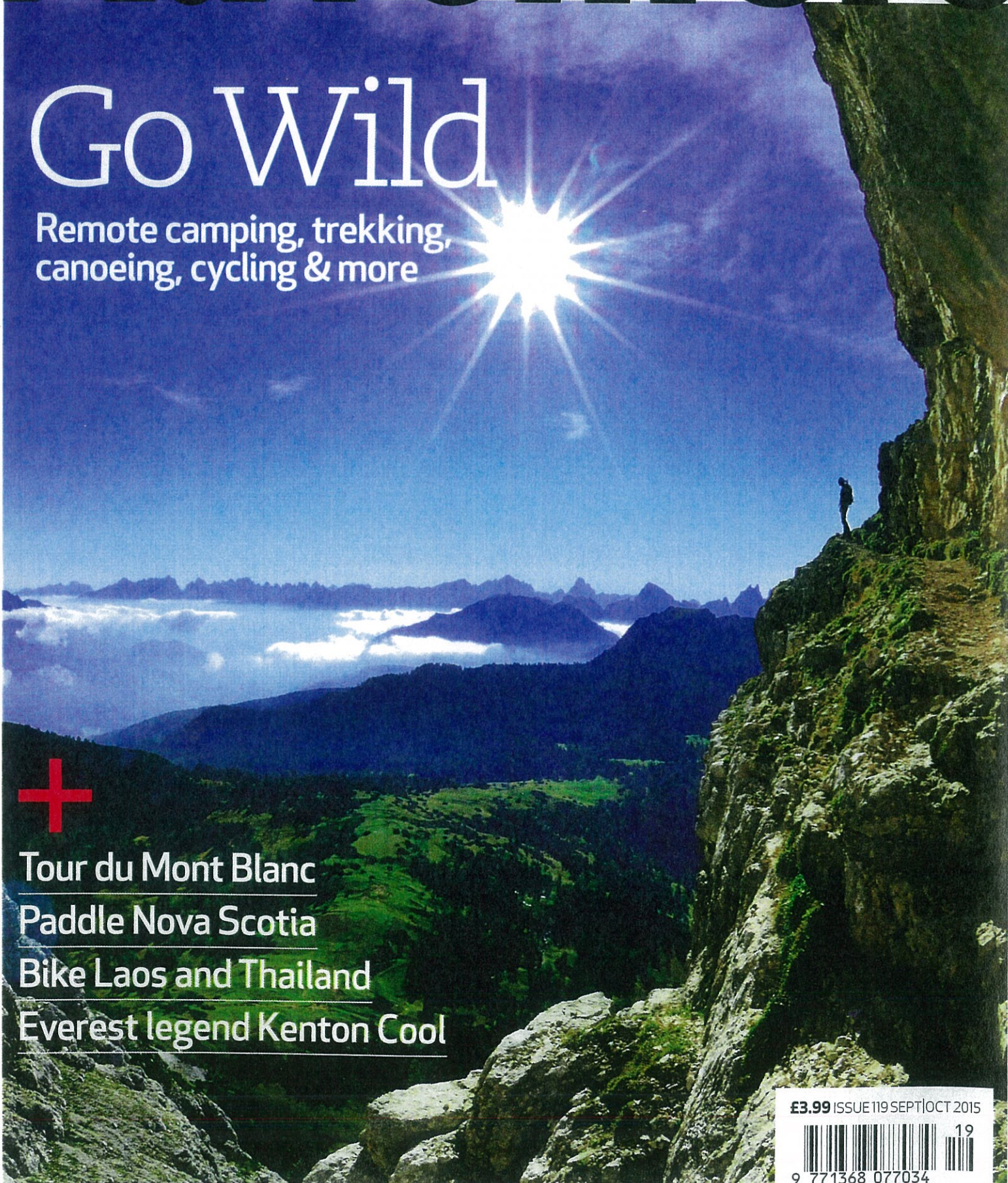
Travel

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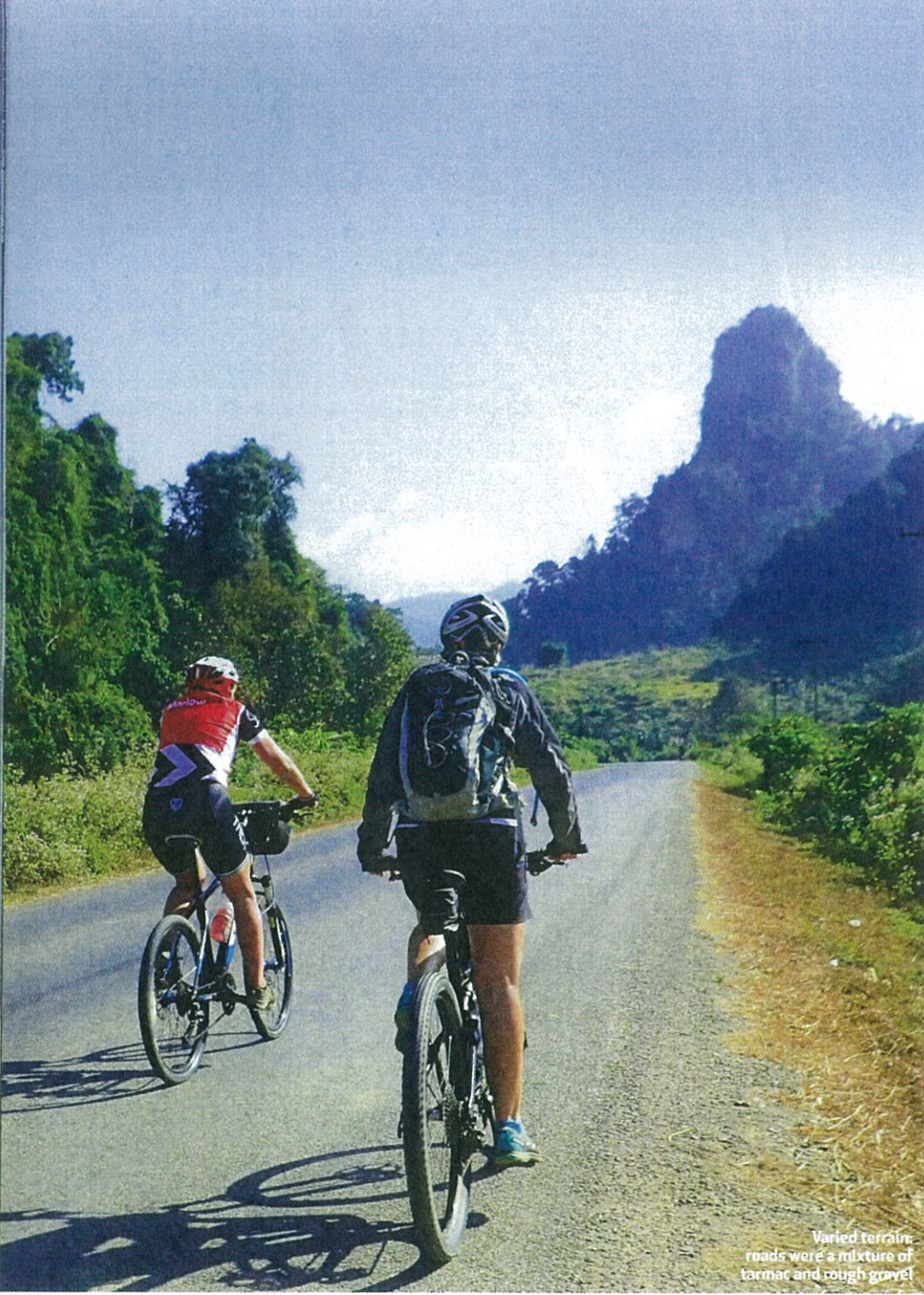
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# South East Asian adventure

**Tracey Croke** cycles 800km through the jungle and remote mountains of Thailand and northern Laos - and gets the odd boat ride...





Varied terrain: roads were a mixture of tarmac and rough gravel



View stop: scenery in northern Laos

Photo: Gilt Newman

**I**'ll give you a special price for five," says the stall-holder. I put on the hat and look at my fellow bike adventurers. "What do you think?" Their reply is a burst of laughter.

It's December and the dry season is chillier than I thought in Northern Thailand. Tomorrow we head into Laos, higher into the mountains, and I don't have time to be choosy. Chaing Rai's famous night market is not known for beanies, so I settle for a bright blue woolly hat with earflaps, a red nose, whiskers and plastic eyes with wobbling pupils, then we head to the trip briefing.

We have a short cycle tomorrow to get to the border and cross into the

more remote and colder climes of northern Laos. Then we'll head south to the capital Vientiane through 800km of mountain and jungle landscapes, flirting back and forth with the mighty Mekong River along the way.

Local guide Khen immediately sets the pace. "I'm the turtle, I'll be at the back," he says, laughing. Khen reflects the laid-back, gentle and cheery personality Laos people are known for. His pace will allow for total immersion into the hum and chatter of daily life. I can stop where I like on a whim. If I can make the daily distance in the set time, the rest is up to me.

Laos' upper northern regions are best known for their rugged mountains and diverse ethnic cultures. As Khen lists the many highlights of the tour, he doesn't shirk away from hard realities

**Who's writing?**



**Tracey Croke** is a travel writer and photographer who loves writing about roughy-toughty travel, off-track adventure and anything involving a bike. Her quest for a good story has seen her venture into post-conflict Afghanistan to join a pioneering expedition across the Pamir Mountains, sleep in a swag next to a croc-infested billabong and have her smalls rummaged through with the muzzle of a Kalashnikov. See more at [www.traceycroke.com](http://www.traceycroke.com) and follow her on twitter: @TraceyCroke.



the people of Laos have endured. During the Vietnam War, the US dropped 270 million cluster bombs on Laos, which made this land-locked country of six million the most bombed in the world per capita. The operation was aimed at destroying the North Vietnamese supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Cluster bombs open up mid-air to release hundreds of smaller 'submunitions' about the size of a cricket ball, which can saturate an area of several football fields. The National Regulatory Authority in Laos estimates that 30% failed to detonate, leaving 80 million live unexploded bombs (UXO) scattered across the landscape. Clearing them is an enormous task (only 1% to date) and a quarter of Laos' villages are still contaminated. ➤



## LAOS ABOUT THESE...

Six more things to do if you're travelling through Laos

### 1 Night market

Luang Prabang's ambient, colourful market is packed with local crafts, curiosities and devoid of hard selling.

### 2 Sunset balloon ride

Surrounded by karst hills, the picturesque former anything-goes party town of Vang Vieng on the Nam Song River has recalibrated in recent years to attract a more sober traveller.

### 3 Pak Ou caves

A sanctuary built by the Lao people in a limestone cave between the Mekong and Nam Ou rivers. More than 4,000 ancient Buddha sculptures decorate its interior.

### 4 Waterfall swimming

Roughly 30km outside Luang Prabang you'll find the multi-tiered Kuang Si Falls, where turquoise water tumbles over a series of limestone terraces and collects in pools surrounded by lush greenery.

### 5 Picnic cruise

Ang Nam Ngum Reservoir is a 250-square-kilometre expanse of water with islands, secluded beaches, swimming spots and floating restaurants serving fresh seafood dishes.

### 6 COPE visitor centre

Learn about the unexploded bombs (UXO) problem in Laos and COPE's work providing rehabilitation services for people affected by UXOs. More at [www.copelaos.org](http://www.copelaos.org).



Another one bites the...  
Laos' dusty roads

While Khen reassures us that the mix of tarmac and unsealed roads we will take are well-travelled and safe, the local farmers working their small fields face the daily risk of losing a limb or their lives from the impact of their hoe or by simply lighting a fire. Forty percent of the victims are children who mistake the small bombs for toys.

Redspokes, the adventure company I'm travelling with, is committed to ethical cycling and supports communities through its Laotian Village Community Fund ([www.lvcf.co.uk](http://www.lvcf.co.uk)), a charity established by Redspokes' founder Dermot Macward and a group of cyclists.

Dermot and his team have been working with Khen and several villages

in northern Laos for over 10 years.

"All the projects have been completed at minimal cost, with community involvement and without payments to a middle-man," explains Khen. Projects include bringing clean running water to villages, building a school and supporting UXO survivors.

My heart beats a little faster when I hear we'll visit projects to see the impact of their work. I already sense that South East's Asia's poorest country has many rich experiences to offer.

The next morning, after a nippy cycle to Chiang Kong, we board the houseboat home of Mrs Vieng Kham. She welcomes us and our bikes into her boat of polished dark wood, comfy seats and a bright green metal roof.

As we set off up the river, Mrs Vieng Kham rustles up a feast on her tiny stove. We observe life on the river through the open sides of the boat, and when the chill hits us, she wraps us up in bright pink Hello Kitty blankets.

Six hours later we dock in Laos at Pak Beng, and as we prepare our bikes for the following day, we watch the sun dip and glimmer across the river. It soon sinks out of sight and the flowing soul of South East Asia bids us goodnight.

Our time in Laos coincides with Hmong New Year celebrations – a religious and cultural festival to acknowledge the end of the harvest and the start of a new year. The Hmong have maintained their own language and customs, which have been passed down

'The US dropped 270 million cluster bombs on Laos during the Vietnam War, which made the country the most bombed in the world per capita'

the generations through ceremonies, textiles and art.

The next day in the mountains, I'm constantly distracted by elaborately embroidered and colourful dress unique to each village we pass through, and I can't resist the invitation to join in roadside ball games with giggling girls.

In the remote village of Ban Nalay, we stay in a homestay with the families of elders. First the village Shaman wants to bless us to protect us from accidents caused by negative karma.

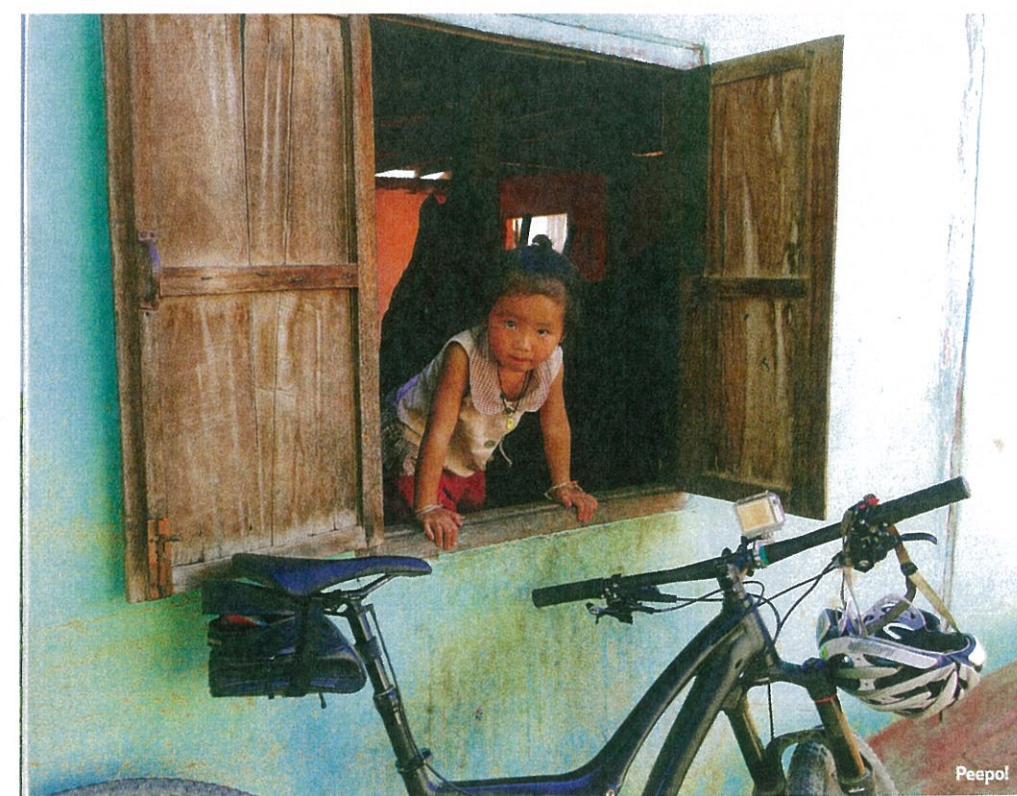
We sit cross-legged in a circle around a mini temple of fragrant flowers. "Lean in," the village elder urges. We squeeze our hands tightly together and push them forward. My thighs thought they had clocked off for the night so my

muscles are groaning. Soon the chants and cheers of the villagers take over and our grimaces turn to wide grins.

I'm invited to stay in the spacious stilted wooden home of Mr and Mrs Myankal. With no common language, we manage to get on famously with the help of expressions, gestures and a small tittle of Lao Lao, a strong locally made rice wine, usually laced with something that flies or slithers, in this case giant wasps. Although the intact corpses stick in the neck of the bottle, the liquor still stings my throat and yet leaves a strangely comforting sweet, mildly rotting-leaf-like infusion on my palate.

My bed has been made up in their living area. Fresh sheets lie on a thick padded mat under a pile of ➤

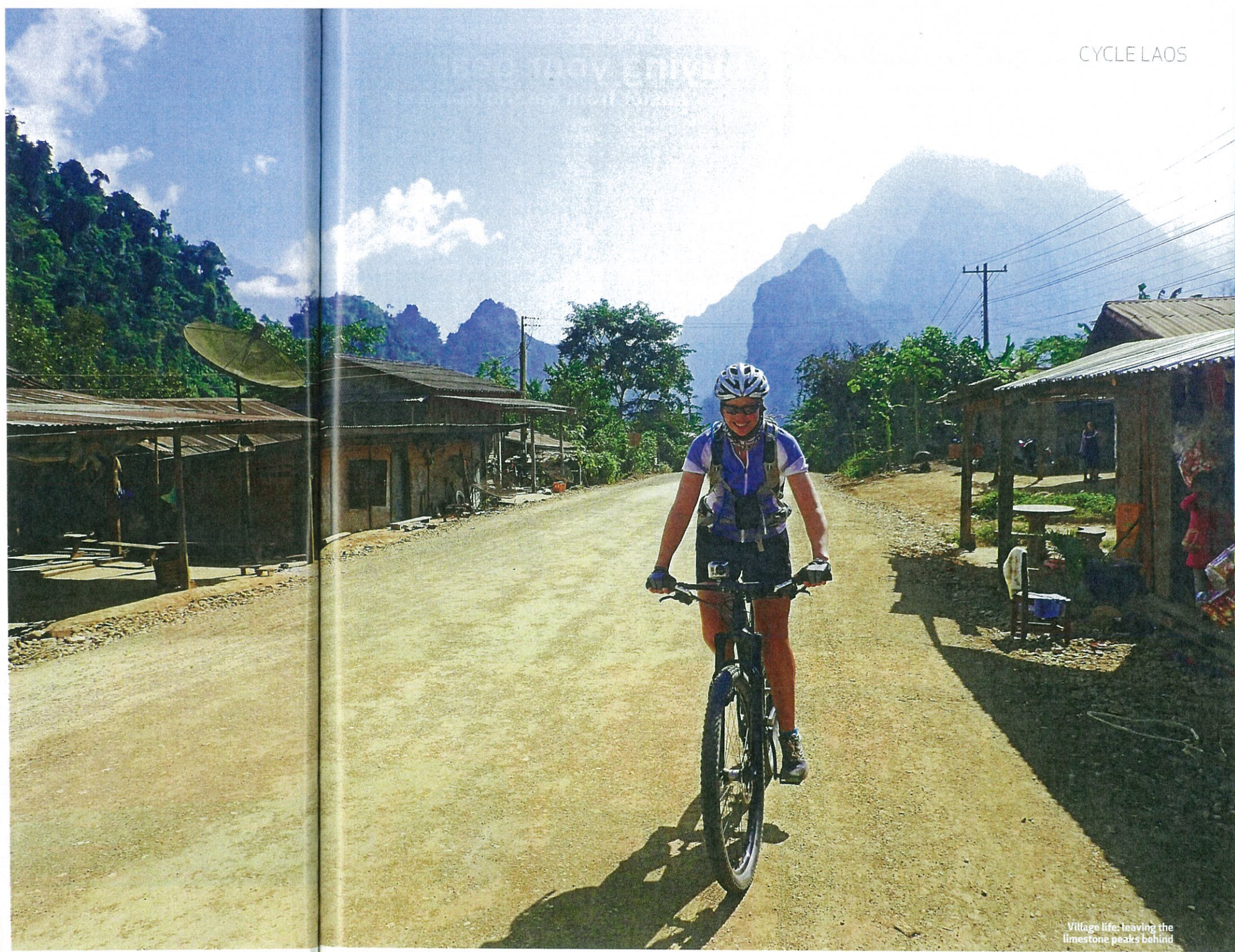




Peepol



Elaborate: a headdress for New Year



Village life: leaving the limestone peaks behind

multicoloured blankets topped with a bright magenta mosquito net. I go to sleep with the decaying taste of wasp whisky on my lips and wake up to a warm fire and fried eggs with yolks richer than the rising sun cooked by Mrs Myankal's son.

Studies show that two secrets to happiness are leading an active life and giving back. Today we get the opportunity to do both when we visit a village school supported by Redspokes, where we find the roof is in need of repair and classes are continually disrupted in the rainy season. We get to see the work cyclists before us have

funded, such as adding toilets and leveling a playing field in the hilly site. My funny-faced quirky hat fits in perfectly with the little ones.

Many Laos people can't afford the luxury of choosing their meat, and in the roadside markets it's not unusual to see moles, bats and forest cats on offer. I catch a waft of sweet meat sizzling on a stick at the side of the road. "The rats are especially good this time of year after fattening themselves up in the cornfields," shouts Khen, bursting into laughter behind me.

"I'll take your word for it," I shout back, deciding to wait for lunch

'Lao Lao is a strong locally made rice wine, usually laced with something that flies or slithers, in this case giant wasps'

prepared by the support team, which is usually a tasty plate of mildly spiced stir-fried fresh vegetables and rice with protein I'm more accustomed to (such as chicken, fish or pork) or baguettes stuffed with tuna and salad.

As we pedal further south we hit the steamy heat of the lush lowlands. We have regular stops to fill up our water bottles and quench our thirst on sweet, juicy pineapple. The roads get busier, particularly with excited children on bikes who travel long distances to school and love to race us. It's clear in Laos that a bike is more than a hobby – it's the route to an education.

We take a rest day in the World Heritage town of Luang Prabang, described by UNESCO as the 'best-preserved city in Southeast Asia.' After lazing around for the day I head out to enjoy the town's cuisine. At first I'm tempted by the world fares offered from menus pinned to pretty French-influenced buildings. But my nose insists I venture down a narrow windy ramshackle street where I find a food market, and trade my pasta craving for steamed dumplings bursting with juicy vegetables, ginger and mild chilli.

A quick Google brings up the top things to do in Luang Prabang.

With aching legs I wasn't in the best condition to clamber up hundreds of steps, but I do to see the 'best sunset around,' only to find the view is blocked by hundreds of outstretched hands holding smartphones. I can't wait for the morning to get my sore butt back in the saddle and return to my rolling flow of uninterrupted views.

We reach the capital Vientiane and take our final bike photo under the iconic Patuxai Victory Monument, built to mark Laos's resilience and independence – a fitting end to our enlightening journey. My eyes are gritty, my face is slightly burnt and puffy with





Colourful one of the many Buddhist temples

fatigue. I'm keen to stand under a cool soothing shower, but first there is one more place we're all keen to visit.

Mr Beng has agreed to meet me in the COPE (Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise) visitor centre. COPE is a not-for-profit organisation that provides prosthetics and rehabilitation services to UXO survivors. Mr Beng sits, pulls his left leg in and nervously begins to tell his story.

Three years ago, at the age of 21, Mr Beng was digging up crops in his family field. He doesn't remember anything else until he was on the back of his friend's motorbike. His friend took him to a clinic where they saved his life but couldn't save his leg. "I thought my

life was over," he told me through an interpreter. "I thought I would never be able to support a wife and a family."

Mr Beng's nerves dissipate when he tells me how he learned of COPE through a friend. Now rehabilitated with a prosthetic leg made to fit him, he doesn't need to describe the difference COPE has made to his life. When he speaks of his wife and baby daughter, the joy in his eyes completes his story.

Our group sits down to share our final beer. This normally upbeat bunch is quiet. I'm feeling a tinge of melancholy. Most of us came together as strangers, we are leaving as friends and I wonder what each one of us is thinking about. It could be the laughs, the characters

we've met or the hills we've raced up against Strava. I sense we are all grateful to be resting our aching and weary legs.

The Chiang Rai to Vientiane tour is a balance of challenging cycling and cultural immersion. It's a trip for those interested in learning about the history and politics of Laos. It's an emotive journey where you are free to enjoy a connection with the landscape and people in a way that can only be experienced on a bike. **AT**

*The author donated the fee for this article to COPE ([www.copelaos.org](http://www.copelaos.org)) and also the Redspokes LVCF Fund to contribute to a new roof for the school in Ban Nalay. See [www.lvcf.co.uk](http://www.lvcf.co.uk).*



Wow: a sunset balloon ride over the Nam Song River

## LET'S GO Want to do what Tracey did? Here's how you can...

### The tour

I joined Redspokes Cycling Adventure Tours' 14-day Laos and Thailand Lost in Time trip, which costs from £1,295 (not including flights). See [www.redspokes.co.uk](http://www.redspokes.co.uk).

### How to get there

Flights from the UK direct to Bangkok include BA, Thai Air, Emirates and Etihad. Thai Airways and Bangkok Airways fly from Bangkok to Chiang Rai for about £50, and from Vientiane (the finish point) to Bangkok, which is about £90. Extra charges may apply if you are bringing your own bike.

### Where to stay

We stayed in guesthouse and hotel accommodation, chosen on the basis of comfort rather than luxury. The trip price is based on sharing a twin room; single rooms are sometimes available at extra cost.

### Visas

British passport holders can enter Thailand for 30 days without a visa. Your passport should be valid for a minimum of six months from the date of entry into Thailand. A 15-day visa is required for Laos, which is arranged by Redspokes on arrival in Laos. The cost is approximately US\$40.

### Bikes

The route is a mixture of tarmac and rough gravel roads. You can bring your own bike or hire a hard-tail mountain bike from Redspokes for £150 extra. If you bring your own bike, ensure it is in good working order before you leave – maybe have it professionally serviced. Redspokes advises that you check all wheel spokes, grease bearings, check your brakes/gears cable, tighten all nuts and bolts, check the chain, the quick release clamps and the tyres, put in new inner tubes and check the wheel rims are not worn.

### What to take

I travelled during the dry season (October to late April), which has minimal chances of rain. Take cycling gear and clothes for 14 days and daytime temperatures of up to 30°C and down to 5°C in the mountainous areas.

Leaders carry a good tool kit and will help to fix any bike problems, but there is no guarantee that there will be equipment for all repairs. If you bring your own bike, it's essential to have the spares specific to your bike. A bus transferred our main baggage from each overnight stop to the next; the additional support vehicle stopped often. All we needed to carry with us was water, extra clothing, valuables and a camera.

### Food

Laos food is mildly spiced and generally consists of tasty meat/fish dishes with vegetables, rice and noodles. The support team prepares breakfast and lunch designed for long days of cycling, and there are several snack stops during the day. Dinner is prepared by the team or at a restaurant.

### Vaccinations

Seek medical advice at least six weeks before travelling. Redspokes recommends vaccinations against typhoid, polio and hepatitis A, and a tetanus injection is essential.

### Money matters

The currency in Thailand is baht. In Laos, the majority of transactions will be in kip. Notes come in denominations of 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000 and 100,000 kip. Small vendors, especially in rural areas, will struggle to change 100,000K notes. For larger transactions the US dollar and baht are favoured.

### Medical and insurance

Insurance policies should cover any potential risks involved in a mountain cycling holiday. It's also advisable to carry your own first aid kit while cycling.