A close-up photograph of a golden Buddha statue's hand, showing the fingers and palm. The hand is positioned in the upper left and center of the frame. The background is a textured, golden fabric. The lighting is warm, highlighting the metallic sheen of the gold.

Time travel? On a bicycle? Yes, it's possible. On Red Spokes' Lost In Time tour, time rolls backward from Bangkok's frenetic intensity until reaching the remote hillside villages of Laos' Hmong tribe, who live as they have for hundreds of years. Then, in the second half of the journey, time unfurls forwards again, through Luang Prabang and Vientiane, catching up with the present day again in Bangkok.

Shake your Buddha



The road will be flat, yeah,” says Dermot, describing our first day’s route in his thick Scottish brogue. “In the afternoon we’ll have some wee little bumps.” Owner of Red Spokes, Dermot is a dynamo who could talk the peel off an orange, and for the next two weeks, he’ll lead the

group through Thailand and Laos. Our multinational assembly includes eight riders from the UK, five from Australia, two from the US and a lone peacekeeping Canadian. We’ll learn to decode the hidden messages in Dermot’s descriptions, and quickly come to understand that a ‘wee little bump’ can refer to anything from a rise in the road to a thousand-meter climb.

Dermot introduces Khen Phetxayphone, a Laotian with a mischievous grin who will be our local guide throughout the tour. Our crew also includes Khen’s wife May and daughter Manivanh, as well as family friends Daolit, Muay and Thone. It’s clearly a family affair: we’ll even visit Khen’s home town as we travel through Laos.

The first day’s route is a gentle introduction to the tour. We ride a two-lane road alongside the Mekong toward the town of Chiang Khong.





My rented bike, a Trek 4400, rolls agreeably as fields of corn sheaves whisper and dry leaves rustle on the ground like old parchment.

Monks in tawny robes squeak along on old Chinese bicycles, holding umbrellas for shelter from the sun. Spiky temples pop up out of thick vegetation and life-size pictures of Thailand's king and queen appear at the roadside in elaborate gold frames.

Most homes we pass have a spirit house, a small temple in the front corner of their yard; surrounded with offerings and draped with flowers, it looks like some sort of spiritual mailbox, carrying messages, first-class, to the next world.

Throughout the towns and villages, golden buddhas are sold at the side of the road. For the next two weeks, it seems we'll have the same expression they do - smiling, full-bellied, contented.

CROSSING THE MEKONG

Huanthai Sophaphan, a resort with long rows of teak windows that open up onto the Mekong, is where we begin our second day. The Mekong travels from the Tibetan plateau southward for

OUR TIME IN THE SADDLE WILL BE COUNTERBALANCED BY TIME SPENT ON THE RIVERS THAT BRING LIFE TO SOUTHEAST ASIA.

nearly 5,000 kilometers through China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam before reaching the South China Sea. Across this legendary river lies Laos, where we'll spend the rest of our two-week tour.

Khen and his crew have prepared a breakfast of eggs, toast and fresh fruit. The short, thick



bananas are sweet.

"*They're a six,*" announces Matt, a rider from the UK. We all nod in agreement. Matt has spontaneously started a banana rating scale that will become a theme throughout the trip.

As we climb into a long boat to cross the turgid Mekong, we share the waterway with 'rocket boats' (passengers wear not only life jackets but crash helmets), speedboats, shipping boats, luxury boats and backpacker ferries.

Arriving in Laos after a short journey across the river, we shuffle through customs and immigration, relieved at the familiar thump of the visa stamp. We then board a luxury slow boat for our day-long trip down the Mekong to Pak Beng.

For their Lost In Time tour, Red Spokes have created a route that follows not only the roadways but also the waterways that run through Thailand and Laos. Our time in the saddle will be counterbalanced by time spent on the Mekong, Nam Khan, Nam Song and Ang Nam Ngum, just a few of the many rivers that bring life to southeast Asia.



In addition to Thailand and Laos, Red Spokes also offer tours in South America, India, Pakistan, Tibet, Nepal, Asia and the UK. Several of the riders on our tour have travelled with Red Spokes before: a third of Dermot's clients are repeat customers, drawn back by his list of exotic destinations and competitive prices. Dermot aims to price Red Spokes tours twenty-five per cent less than competitive tours, by using knowledgeable local guides like Khen and his crew, who seek out the best value in meals and accommodation.

OH-OH, LAO-LAO

The morning is misty as we begin our ride through Laos. In small villages that cling to the roadside, we pass brooding teenagers and old men forlornly smoking cigarettes. But the kids



- *the kids go crazy*. The boys shriek and the girls giggle. Some of the boys draw their arms back as far as they can to get some serious leverage for a palm-skinning high-five. We shout out *saa baa di, saa baa di* until our voices are hoarse and our hands are sore.

THE KIDS GO CRAZY.
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HANDS ARE SORE.

I ride behind James and Tara, who have brought their bright yellow Co-Motion tandem from Australia. The bike never fails to get a reaction from locals when they see it: some laugh, some shriek, some simply stare. They're quite accustomed to seeing two people on a bike, but are awestruck by the idea that the person on the back can actually contribute to the effort, instead of simply being cargo.

When we sit down to dinner of soup, rice, chicken curry and vegetables at the end of the day, Khen introduces us to *lao-Lao*, a Laotian rice whiskey. Although *lao-Lao* sounds like the same word twice, the first word means alcohol and the second means Laotian. It's strong stuff, and after a few sips, the impression of hearing double soon turns into seeing double.

Like any cycling trip, food will be a constant source of discussion and fascination for the group. The days will begin with eggs, bread and cake, tomato and fresh fruit: papaya, bananas, oranges, jackfruit and dragonfruit. Lunchtime soup will often be a meal in itself, a big bowl filled with noodles, chicken, coriander, dill and lemongrass.

Dinners will be several courses, which may include rice, pork, fish, vegetables and the ever-popular 'foreigner potatoes' (French fries). Along the way, we'll be treated to a range of



flavours from the exquisite (transparent sheets of dried seaweed sprinkled with sesame and garlic) to the unexpected (Laughing Cow cheese from France).

SHAKE IT ALL ABOUT

Riding east through Laos, we visit the village of Ban Faen, Khen's home town. Chickens and children run wild in the dusty street as we're introduced to Khen's mother, who smiles broadly at our arrival. We then ride on to Ban Nalay, a small village just down the road, where we will spend the night in the homes of the locals.

In the evening, we take part in the *baci*, the Laotian 'calling of the soul.' A ceremony with both animist and Buddhist roots, the *baci* is intended to guarantee our safe journey through the country. For Laotians, the *baci* can also celebrate births and marriages, entering the monkhood, returning from a journey, beginning a new year . . . well, they clearly like to celebrate.

After being greeted by the locals, we walk into the community center and sit in a circle. In the middle of the room is the *pah kwan*, a silver tray with flowers and banana leaves covered with white cotton threads. The ceremony begins with a prayer to bring our bodies into union. Then the villagers pull lengths of string from the *pah kwan* with great delight and tie them around our



wrists. Eager to ensure our good luck, dozens of locals feverishly knot the strings, murmuring prayers, as our wrists grow thick with scraggly white bracelets.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, we join the community for a feast of food, Beerlao, the national beer, and untold amounts of lao-Lao. Local children give a performance of traditional dancing, then it's our turn: one by one, it's time for the foreigners, the *falang*, to join the dancing throng.

The culmination of the evening is when James, the front half of our tandem duo, takes the microphone and leads us all through the Hokey Pokey. At first, the locals seem perplexed by this unfamiliar dance, but they're soon waving their body parts with abandon.

THE INSIDE TRACK

While in Luang Prabang, you'll find excellent Lao coffee and croissants at the Morning Glory Café. The Night Market offers an almost unending assortment of silks, coffee, tea as well as oddities like pickled snakes.

Although local products and services are cheap, imported products like sunscreen can be expensive. Be sure to bring enough to see you through the whole trip.

*You put you left foot in
You put your left foot out
You do the Hokey Pokey
And you shake it all about
You do the Hokey Pokey
And you shake it all about
That's what it's all about*

At 4 AM the next morning, the village roosters start a competition to see who can crow the



loudest and the longest. It isn't long before the dogs join in, yapping and fighting, and soon everyone in the village is up. None of us are feeling particularly Hokey, just Pokey.

Matt and I sit down to sticky rice and eggs with the family who have hosted us for the night. We have only the most basic words to share with them, but our hand gestures and facial expressions seem to convey our gratitude. We've been literally embedded in the community overnight, warmly welcomed by the family and the village.

Before we leave, we visit the local school. Dermot, who takes a keen interest in the social and political climates of the countries he runs tours in, has helped fund the building of the school, and is helping create a local community center. After we tour the school, the students give each of us a bright bouquet of flowers. We fasten them to the handlebars of our bikes and set off down the road.

Dermot checks in on each of the riders with a "Top o' the mornin'". We'll have three more days

UNWILLING TO UNDERGO THE HUMILIATION OF DANCING IN LYCRA AND CYCLING SHOES, WE POLITELY DECLINE.

of riding, through the hilltribe villages of Udom Xay and Pak Mong, before enjoying a rest day in Laos' jewel, Luang Prabang.

GOLDEN TEMPLES

Our rest day in Luang Prabang begins with the Banlao Hotel's strong black Lao coffee and a thick pancake with bananas, papaya, pineapple and honey. The bananas are a seven, the coffee is a nine. Afterward, we walk through town,

WHAT RIDERS SAID

"The trip was an incredible kaleidoscope of experiences, the highlights being the home stay, the friendly Laotians, Red Spokes' passion for the country and their charitable sponsorship. I could go on, but suffice to say I enjoyed it very much."

Alastair

"We were all touched by the charm and beauty of the most hard-working, attentive, sweet, and loving local support staff that truly made our entire journey the wonderful pleasure that it was: an absolutely incredible experience!"

Dave

temples shining gold in the sun. All around, the rasping of scooters and tuk-tuks, the clang of temple bells, the squeak of backpackers on rented bicycles. Vendors sell sausages on banana leaves and silvery grilled fish on bamboo sticks.

The former royal capital and seat of government, Luang Prabang is a city of 100,000 known for its Royal Palace Museum and Wat Xieng Thong temple. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the town is lined with French provincial storefronts offering locally-crafted textiles, ceramics and artwork.

By dinnertime, we find ourselves at the riverfront. We sit down at a long table in an open-air restaurant to sample the incomparable Luang Prabang salad. Capturing all the flavours of Laos, the salad mixes watercress, mint and coriander with tomatoes, cucumber and boiled eggs, topped with a dressing that's both sweet and tart. Served with a cold Beerlao, it's the perfect end to our day of rest.





THE ULTIMATE BANANA

The next three days take us from Luang Prabang southward to Vien Viang, then onward to Vientiane, Laos' capital city. "There are only two turns between Luang Prabang and Vientiane," goes a local joke, "left . . . and right." Soon enough, we understand. Left turn. Right turn. Left turn. Right turn. Flat rides give way to longer climbs and freewheeling descents; valleys of green slowly change to the jagged peaks of karst mountains.

"*Today we've got a cheeky wee little hill,*" Dermot announces. This is the first time we've heard the adjective 'cheeky' so we know it's bound to be a significant climb. We'll reach 1,900 meters on this leg of the journey.

Thankfully, the weather is unseasonably cool, so the temperatures are comfortable. The morning mist moves across the hills as slowly as we

ascend them, then burns off by noon.

In the village of Phoukoun, we discover a vendor selling deep fried bananas, which rate a 10 on the banana scale, a score previously thought unattainable. They're that good. We buy an extra dozen and stuff our pockets.

Not far beyond Phoukoun, I'm riding alongside Dermot when we hear music blasting from a small village. As we get closer, we discover it's a wedding celebration. Thrilled to see us and eager to welcome us, the locals invite us to dance. Unwilling to undergo the humiliation of dancing in Lycra and cycling shoes, we politely decline, so they then insist we have a drink of lao-Lao. Dermot sips his slowly, but I make the rookie mistake of downing mine, so the glass is instantly refilled and thrust toward me again. I drink the second more slowly. We thank them for their kindness and set off, our path now slightly less direct than before.






BUNGALOWS & BLISS

On the second-last day, some in our group opt for a boat trip down the Ang Nam Ngum reservoir. I join a few riders who have chosen the bike option, which includes the tour's toughest climb, a two-kilometer switchback up to the hotel. It's blazing hot, and off-the-charts steep, but it's worth it: the Longngum View Resort at Na Nam has comfortable bungalows, cold Beerlao, even a billiard table.

Our journey is nearing its end, after nearly 800 kilometers of riding. Our final stop is Vien-

tiane, Laos' capital. Although the city offers ancient temples, the din of the traffic makes it clear that we're back in the present day.

Once again, golden buddhas appear to welcome us: in temples, in markets, at the roadside in spirit houses. Have we achieved our own enlightenment, as the Buddha did? Probably not, but we have enjoyed two blissful weeks on empty roads and tranquil waters, two weeks of simple pleasures and spectacular landscapes. Oh, and some pretty fine bananas. We all agree that's near enough to nirvana for now. 

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Departure dates for Red Spokes' Lost In Time tour are October 2011 through January 2012. The cost ranges from £1050 to £1095, depending on the date. You can have your own room for an additional £175 and rental bikes are available for £120. Prices include all transportation and local guides within Thailand and Laos. All food is provided on the tour, except lunches and dinners in Bangkok, Luang Prabang and Vientiane. All accommodation, in hotels or guest houses, is selected for comfort rather than luxury. International and local flights are not included in the tour costs.

THE IDEAL TOUR FOR:

- Intermediate-level riders ready for some hills
- Those looking for a relatively unexplored destination
- Riders who don't mind a mix of accommodations throughout the trip