

red spokes adventure tours
what the press say...

The Kingdom Of Lang Xang

When cycling novice David Kemp rode through the remote Asian republic of Laos, he discovered more than just a new love of cycling.



People get hooked on cycling for all sorts of reasons; maybe it's a first tentative commute to work, a pleasant canal path pootle or the desire to be just like Lance. Not me. My cycling baptism was in at the deep end, riding across one of Asia's least known countries tackling mountains and unmade roads in the company of a small but diverse group of people from all walks of life and including a Laotian woman making her own journey to visit the family she hadn't seen in years. I may have been a cycling novice when I rode into Laos, but I was hooked by the time I left that magical country.

Mention Laos to most people, and if they've heard of it at all they will trot out the statistic about it being per capita the most bombed place on Earth. Get on your bike and cycle through it and you will soon discover that there is an awful lot more to Laos than huge amounts of unexploded US ordnance. Laos is one of the world's last remaining communist states, it's also one of the world's poorest countries, with over 80 percent of the population still living off subsistence farming. A quick look in the encyclopedia reveals that after centuries of domination and interference by its powerful neighbours, Laos was first united as the Kingdom of Lang Xang (million elephants) in 1353, and then enjoyed over 500 years of prosperity and independence. In more recent times though, having suffered heavy bombing by the US during the Vietnam War, it's now struggling to catch up with some of its faster developing neighbours. This poverty means the country's infrastructure is at best sparse, keeping Laos off the itineraries of all but the most hardcore travellers or organised group tours like the one I was taking. It promised to be an interesting and challenging trip, not only physically, but as an insight to an ancient culture.

The tour began in Northern Thailand, where we crossed the mighty Mekong River into Laos, and then followed a southerly route through stunning natural scenery of jungle and limestone peaks to the original capital, Luang Prabang, finally ending in the modern capital of Vientiane. All in all, about 850km of varied cycling on rough tracks and tarmac roads, uphill and down dale, taking in villages lost in time and cities displaying great history and ancient culture.



The cycling promised to be difficult, but not impossible. The Laotian leg of the route would begin in the northern mountainous wilds of Laos, in the small riverside port of Pak Ben. The difference to Thailand became immediately obvious, as the roads here were dirt, with stones hammered into it, as opposed to the metal surfaces in Thailand. Likewise, local accommodation was a good deal less developed. No ensuite showers on offer here. But the welcome was friendly and the food wholesome. The first couple of days were spent on these rough roads, but the geography of the area meant that there were not too many hard hills to climb. The main problem was dust from the track, and the occasional dust storm kicked up by passing trucks (about one per hour).

Gut busting climbs

There were two road bikes in the party, and they suffered badly from punctures on the early stage of the tour, eventually resulting in them riding out the last few kilometres on the support truck. However, after two days of bone shaking, we hit tarmac, and stayed on it for the rest of the journey. The days in the mountains were filled with gut busting climbs and breathtaking descents, all on winding single-track roads. The party normally split up, with everyone cycling at his or her own comfortable pace. We would gather again at the food and water stops, where Khen, our local chaperone and Mr Fixit, would have fresh pineapple and tuna sandwiches among other delights waiting for us. Depending on the terrain, these stops were anything from 15km to 35km apart, but no matter how far it was, there was always that uplifting feeling when you rounded a bend to see the truck, table and chairs out, and Khen's beaming face as he applauded you in. On reflection, our enjoyment of the tour rested heavily on the truck - it ferried our heavy kit, provided us with food and drinks, and was always there if someone fell ill, or just wanted a day off.

As a non-cyclist, but as a relatively fit, gym-going individual, my challenge was to complete as much of the route as I could, but to definitely conquer 'the Big One' - a full day of climbing, some 40km. In the end, the physical side was tough, but manageable. Possibly the hardest aspect was dealing with the heat, which by midday would be mid-30s centigrade. Our group was small, (nine in total), resulting in tangible bonds of friendship developing between us. It included people from a wide range of backgrounds, from banker to cycle courier, male and female. Dermot's own commitment drives the whole experience, and as he casually encourages and takes care of his group, there is a very personalised feel to the holiday. The physical demands quickly reduce inhibitions and the group becomes a team. Cycling means you are really in touch with the people and the countryside; you truly feel at one with your surroundings, and judging from the uplifting shouts of 'Sabaidee!' (Hello!) in the loveliest singsong voices of the kids you pass, who then dissolved into the most excited giggles, we were very welcome.

As well as Khen and our driver, Somphanh, who both took great care of the group at all times, we were also fortunate to have Khen's wife and son on this tour. Mae was going to visit her own family in the south for the first time in several years. It is a measure of where this country is that she would be arriving unannounced due to the lack of telephones - one can only imagine the excitement her surprise visit would cause.

Khen's village, Ban Faen, has over 1000 residents: it has a school, electricity from generators, no computers, no telephone and two TV sets. The visit there was both uplifting and humbling, an experience to be treasured for a lifetime. It is a rare chance to step back in time to meet people who greet you with open arms, who are simply awestruck that westerners would choose to visit, let alone

contribute to their future. For our part, it made us think about the lack of community in our own society. Since it started tours to Laos Redspokes, the company I was travelling with has helped support the village school, paying for building work and helping foster links with a school in London. The company is now looking to fund a feasibility study into providing running water for the villagers who currently have to fetch it from the nearest river a kilometre away.

Hokey Kokey hospitality

The villagers organised the equivalent of a full civic reception for us - an event which Khen informed us happened once or maybe twice a year. We visited the school to see progress, received speeches from the Elders (translated by Khen), made our donations and headed to the reception. The level of humility felt by all was extreme and reached its peak when we were each given a ceremonial sash to wear for the occasion. Here were people who had very little, who asked for nothing, and yet offered so much. There wasn't a dry eye in the group, and a lot of swallowing went on! The reception turned into a full-on party - a meeting of friends who couldn't talk to each other, but (with the help of some local hooch and beer), thoroughly enjoyed singing and dancing together. The party ended with everyone doing the Hokey Kokey - which made us paranoid about our lack of culture, but gave the villagers (particularly the older women) their best laugh in ages. It wasn't the standard of the dance that counted, it was the fact everyone took part - about 50 in all. For Khen, this was a watershed - the Elders had all attended for the first time, therefore acknowledging the importance of what Khen and Redspokes had done so far. Khen was beside himself with joy at the success of the evening.

And so the tour swept onwards, now concentrating on the business of cycling - there were kilometres to cover (some 650), places to go,

“Challenging cycling in isolated areas —
not somewhere to forget”





people to meet. It was interesting to witness the different mental approaches. For me as a novice, each day held a certain amount of trepidation; could I take on 120km, or would I complete the Big One? For others, more confident in their cycling abilities, it was possibly less stressful on this score. In the end, I did complete the Big One, which took a lot of effort, time and sweat, not to mention sheer bloodymindedness. I was very pleased with myself.

The outstanding beauty of this country, with its tree-covered hills and wide rivers never failed to impress. But above all, the constant interest shown by the people simply blew me away and often made the difference between finishing or not finishing a day's ride. Every village, every town, as we wheeled through had the same welcome, children and adults alike, cheerfully wishing you well, waving, lining the roadside. At times it felt like you were in the Tour de France and at others you felt like an ambassador of sorts, such was the interest shown.

As we moved south, leaving the hills behind, the roads improved and the gears got bigger. The speed increased and it got hotter. Early starts became the key, covering miles before the heat built up. We visited the old capital with its magnificent temples and Royal Palace (a world heritage site). We spent a couple of days in boats (one in kayaks arriving in ViengViang), and the growing impact of tourism began to become more evident. Finally, we arrived in Vientiane, tired but satisfied, and slightly relieved to have successfully avoided any trouble from the few pockets of bandits known to operate in the southern area.

For myself, the tour was an eye-opener on many levels and a watershed. The cycling turned out not only to be a challenge, but also a pleasure - a way to see and feel a country at a pace which allowed you to take it in. The people were a joy and the country beautiful. Now I'm home, with time to reflect, I realise I'm hooked on riding my bike.

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Words by David Kemp**

your spanner"
The Sunday Times



Essential Info

Getting there and other info

Getting there and general tips Redspokes Tours organises everything from the moment of arrival in Bangkok. This includes transfers, internal flights, all accommodation, food and soft drinks. It also includes the support vehicle, which not only carries the bulky kit, but also brings along the day's food and water. I travelled out with Thai International Airline (excellent), but there are a host of airlines offering flights to Bangkok. My advice is to check out Expedia.com, or any other web-based travel company for the best fares available. My flight was £450 and this seemed a good deal. If you want to take your

own bike, it is probably best to box it up, but otherwise, transporting shouldn't be a problem on the flights. All the experienced cyclists said they had no difficulty at all.

The currency in Laos is the Kip, which hovers around the 16,000 to one pound mark, or 10,000 for one dollar. You can tell that money will go far in this country when you exchange a few notes for a wad of local cash. If you were considering going solo, be aware that accommodation is difficult to find in the earliest stages in the hills. Once you reach Kiu Kachan, or Luang Prabang, there is plenty of good quality accommodation around. Find out more at www.visit-laos.com

Redspokes

The tour was organised by Redspokes, a small company founded by a London-based Glaswegian, Dermot MacWard, a man with boundless enthusiasm for cycling a wealth of experience of the wilder areas of the world and a huge ability to engage and interact with people of all backgrounds. The company stands on a socialist philosophy, insofar as its prices are pitched some 30-40 percent lower than the larger operators (thereby opening up travel opportunities to a wider social group) and also because it has a real commitment to investing back into the local community in Laos.

The investment programme supports the development of the school in Khen's village in northern Laos. The tour encompasses a visit to this village, and proved to be the undoubted highlight of a journey filled with many breathtaking sights, sounds and experiences.

As well as tours to Laos, Redspokes also organise trips to Peru, Pakistan, Laos, China, Nepal, Scotland and Ireland. Each offers a different experience and has its own unique itinerary. You can check it out at www.redspokes.co.uk, where you can also find out more about the help going to Khen's village in Laos. It is a great way of giving to charity %100 percent of donations go to where you intend.

Our Cycling Over the Andes and down to the Amazon Holidays...

We are delighted to introduce two fantastic new tours this year. The Lhasa to Kathmandu trip is an awe-inspiring experience that is a must for adventure cyclists. Starting and finishing in two of Asia's most exotic cities, in 16 days you will cycle 5 major passes over 5000m, traverse a distance of 1000 km over the backbone of the Himalayas and complete the world's longest downhill. Manali to the Khardung-La Pass in Ladakh is a spectacular trip too, it takes you over the worlds two highest road passes, to a breath taking height of 5,603metres. These classic routes will offer personal challenges as well as some great rewards. Its not for the faint hearted this is cycling with Altitude!

In 2006 we will be introducing a new trip to Vietnams North West region. This very remote and underdeveloped area offers the finest mountain scenery in the country.

Please contact us:- If you have an enquiry about any of our holidays or would like a brochure.

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Come and meet us:- If you would like to meet us, we meet by-monthly at Nomad Travellers Store. Please phone to reserve a place Tel: 44 (0) 207 502 7252



KARAKORAM HIGHWAY

Red Spokes - 020 7502 7252; www.redspokes.co.uk

Red Spokes was formed in 1990 when a collective of like-minded cyclists began to take small groups of friends and acquaintances to interesting destinations. Now you can join them on one of their tours that are committed to supporting local economies and respecting local cultures. The tour follows the ancient trade routes used by merchants travelling between China and the Middle East. Spectacular scenery combines with challenging cycling to make this an unmissable trip for adventurous travellers. Cost: £749 includes all meals, internal transport and accommodation but not international flights. Bike hire extra. Departs 27th September for 18 days.

The Observer

RED SPOKES

www.redspokes.co.uk

Red Spokes 'Karakoram Highway' while mostly a road-based trip, certainly isn't some meander down a foreign 'A' road. Karakoram's peaks reach height of 7000 to 8,000m encompassing K2 — the world's second highest mountain. Starting out from Rawalpindi, the route follows the river Indus between the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush ranges. Ride through the likes of Karimabad and the capital Hunza, which until recently was cut off from the outside world, amid dizzying peaks and glaciers. Absorb and explore the surroundings on this 17-day trip. May and October dates. £749 land only, the trip meets at Islamabad. 0207 502 7252 or office@redspokes.co.uk

MBR Magazine



JUNGLES OF LAOS

Red Spokes is a suitable name for a company that devises fascinating cycle routes through the Lao People's Democratic Republic. But politics isn't the attraction — Laos's chief draw is its reputation for ceaseless hospitality, even more evident if you've managed to pedal many miles from the beaten track. This tour enters Laos across the Mekong from Thailand, then explores the cliffs and jungles of the northern mountains, visiting monastery towns, remote villages and some of the country's national parks. The cycling isn't tricky, but the hills can be long and the air steamy, so fitness and experience will be rewarded.

When: leaving on November 14 or January 18.

Details: 18 days start at £595, including local hotel accommodation, all meals, vehicle support and transfers from Bangkok. The operator can offer advice on booking flights to Bangkok.

Contact: 020 7502 7252, www.redspokes.com

Sunday Times



RED SPOKES

www.redspokes.co.uk

The Andean Dream is just one of Red Spokes' trips aimed at smaller groups, which also features a few days off the bike, trekking on Inca Trails. Biking wise, this 15-day Peruvian adventure includes a 2,100-metre descent down Misti Volcano and a ride along the world's deepest canyon. Following a flight from London to Lima, there's a flight transfer to Arequipa for Southern Highland acclimatisation at over 4,500m before the tour begins proper' Land-only price £845.

MBR Magazine



CYCLING FOR TOUGHIES

Red Spokes Adventures

(020-7502 7252)

Red Spokes Adventures are definitely not for softies. This company specialises in Peru and Pakistan. The 15-day "Unseen Peru", which takes in the Central Highlands as well as the Inca Trail (on foot, not on bikes) costs £795 - though a six-day extension, involving a descent of 4,500m in a single day, adds £300. Flights from the UK are extra. The Karakoram Highway trip goes along the "Big China/Pakistan Friendship Road" from Gilgit in Pakistan, as far as the Chinese border. It covers 580km, and costs £749 plus nights.

The Independent