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TRAVELLERS' TALES



Thailand, Laos & Myanmar

Jeff Trueman's redundancy inspired him to make a ten-week trip through South East Asia

Disaster? Not really. It became my opportunity to fulfil a lifelong ambition: to go on a long cycle tour. My time window was January to March, and I was recommended to try South East Asia as this is the time of year that it's coolest.

I flew to Bangkok and spent the next ten weeks riding around Thailand and Laos, fitting in a day-trip to Myanmar as well. From Bangkok, I headed north, visiting the ancient capitals of Siam at Ayutthaya and Sukhothai, before having a few days off in the northern city of Chiang Mai.

Navigation proved tricky as the best maps I could find were at a scale of 1:550,000. I met some Belgian cycle tourists who

had GPS and were able to find smaller, quieter roads than those shown on my maps. How I wished I'd bought one!

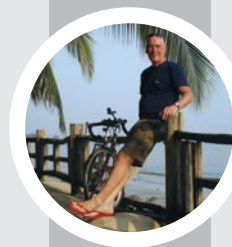
After Chiang Mai, I went into the mountains: great scenery and quiet, but such steep roads. I got a 24-hour visa for Myanmar and then came back to Thailand, travelling east beside the Mekong to the Golden Triangle where Thailand, Myanmar and Laos meet.

I took a two-day trip down the Mekong to Luang Prabang, with my bike strapped on to the roof of the boat, and then turned south, travelling along the virtually traffic-free roads of Laos. Getting food and accommodation was sometimes a challenge

in rural areas. Electricity was usually available, running water only in bigger settlements.

I crossed back over the border near the Laotian capital of Vientiane, then went south to the coastal area of south-west Thailand, near the border with Cambodia. Accommodation was plentiful. I often took a cooling dip in the sea to end the day, with temperatures now in the high thirties. I ended my trip in gridlocked Bangkok, which is not a great place for cycling, yet surprisingly has a good selection of bike shops, one of which boxed up my bike for the flight home.

My blog is at: jefftrueman.wordpress.com



◀ Between January and March, South East Asia is at its coolest. Cool, however, it's not

AN EXMOUTH EXODUS

Chris Cassidy and his friend Gary cycled through the night from Bristol to Exmouth

THE EXMOUTH Exodus is a free-to-enter, semi-organised ride through the night, from Bristol to the seaside. At 9:15am, with other cyclists departing in small groups, we begin. In five minutes, we're crossing the Clifton Suspension Bridge, brightly lit against the night sky, with the lights of Bristol twinkling below.

9:35pm: Rain. Wardrobe adjustments required. At 9:39pm, it stops. Jackets off. Then it starts. And stops...

9:57pm: A couple leaving a local pub give us a cheer. When a man puts his arm up to hail a bus, I go for the high-five. He leaves me hanging.

11.12pm: On Blagdon Hill, three wild looking men with wilder looking dogs ask what all these cyclists are up to.

They'd been watching the lights steadily climbing the hill. We say we're riding to Exmouth. They ask why. We struggle to answer.

11.25pm: We descend Cheddar Gorge with ear-to-ear grins, the steep slopes of the gorge looming up on either side.

01.10am: We haven't seen any other riders for a while. A missed turn? Yes.

04.40am: An old boy on a classic racer stops with us at the top of a hill. When he has caught his breath, he sets off. 'You'll pass me in a few minutes,' he says. We never see him again

05.00am: The gathered bike lights at the final tea stop are a welcome sight. The sky starts to brighten.

06:30am: The call of a seagull tells us we're getting close.

7.24am: We reach the Harbour Café and the end of our 109-mile adventure. A fried breakfast and a paddle in the cold sea awaits us.

Chris and Gary raised money for East Devon Cystic Fibrosis, edcf.org.uk



Route: canals

FELICITY FROST AND HER PARTNER STEVE FOLLOWED FRANCE'S CANAL DU MIDI AND CANAL DE LA GARONNE

THE FERRY and trains were booked and we'd bought the maps months ago: Steve and I were ready to cross France, following the Canal du Midi and Canal de la Garonne. A last-minute purchase of lightweight sleeping bags and some front panniers meant we could take our inherited Saunders Spacepacker tent too.

I'd read about the rough surface of the cycle path along the Canal du Midi – and it was rough. However, our rigid, everyday bikes coped well, and conditions greatly improved

west of Toulouse. Early on, where you really have to pick your line through the tree roots, a tandem passed us with a small child in a trailer!

Crops grown along our route varied from vines through apples, plums, peaches, kiwis and back to vines again near Bordeaux, and we supplemented our diet with a few pilfered apples and grapes, and many delicious foraged figs. On our many coffee stops, I enjoyed some great hot chocolate, which was more like chocolate soup.

The canals are huge and impressive, with many locks, some double or triple. The aqueducts at Moissac and Agen are amazing. Moissac itself is a pretty, arty little town where we bought possibly the most unsuitable souvenirs: a pair of hand-blown wine glasses. They made it home okay.

A couple of caveats: we got from Paris to Narbonne by 'sleeper' train. It's pretty awful – hard to get the bikes into their space, no food or drink, noisy and cramped. I resorted to some pants over my head to cut out the lights flashing by!

Cycling through Paris rush hour in the dark is also not recommended. Other than that, it was a great holiday with beautiful scenery.

We used two Voie Verte maps (canaletvoieverte.com) and several IGN 'tourism et découverte' maps. We could have done with a cycling map of Paris.

Riding the Rallervegen

Frances Wilson's three-braked bike helped her enjoy Norway's most popular cycle route

THE RALLARVEGEN is Norway's most popular cycle route. It covers 80km from Haugastøl to Flåm, and is used by 20,000 cyclists each year. Constructed to convey men and materials during the building of the mountainous section of the Oslo-Bergen railway, it combines stunning scenery with history. I planned to cycle the 55km section from Finse to Flåm, which goes over the highest point and descends to the sea.

Leaving Finse, the gravel track climbed slowly, giving excellent views of the Hardangerjøkulen, Noway's sixth largest

glacier. After 10km, I stopped at a former railway cabin, Fagernut, for tea and waffles, a Norwegian delicacy. Refreshed, I continued on over the highest point of the route, Fagervatn at 1,342m, passing lakes and mountains to arrive at the small community of Hallingskeid, where I stopped for lunch.

The cycling was harder after this, as the track steepened, descending through the Klevagjelet Gorge. Warning signs were posted, and on several occasions I was forced to dismount and wheel the bike where the surface of the road had deteriorated due to flash floods. A kiosk at

Vatnahalsen provided a welcome drink.

For the descent, my bike's coaster brake (the third brake) came in very useful. Over the next two kilometres, the track plummeted in 21 hairpin bends at very steep gradients. The coaster brake allowed me to stay in control whilst reducing strain on my hands and wrists, enabling me to enjoy the breath-taking views on the descent. Eventually the road flattened and the scenery changed from mountain to valley. I sped along through farmland to Flåm, a harbour on the Sognefjord, the world's longest fjord. I could see cruise ships.

▶ Gradients are relatively easy when you follow a canal, thanks to cuttings and aqueducts



▶ When in wine country... buy some fragile wine glasses and put them in your panniers?

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Two drop-bar all-rounders on test

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A great ride around the city

CAFÉ SOCIETY
What makes a good cyclists' café? And which is your favourite?

XCALIBRE DRAWS CLOSER
Find out more about this multi-day mountain biking event

