



Thailand
LAND OF
Smiles



Under a veil of low morning fog, we quietly slide our motorcycles onto the pontoon and cross the Mekong River for the last time, exiting Laos and entering the most northern realm of the Kingdom of Thailand. After successfully getting the bikes off the float on the other side, without dumping them (or ourselves) into the river, we are riding the spine of the Daen Lao Mountain Range in a stifling heat.

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All that Shines is not Gold

The mountains are a towering natural border separating Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), and Laos. We climb higher by the second on a narrow strip of tar that twists and turns at an ever-increasing angle. This is one of the steepest roads we have ever battled, and we are forced to push our weight over the bars while standing on the pegs in the hopes of keeping our front wheels from launching skywards. Cresting the peak, we ease on the brakes, release our death-grip on the handlebars, and pull to a stop near a clearing. Through the tangle of branches, we see Burma sprawling into the distance—tropical, primeval, and for now, unreachable.

We're riding inside the once notorious "Golden Triangle." In the not-so-distant past, these 367,000 square miles of viciously guarded mountainous jungle (where warlords held sway and wandering visi-

tors are still unwelcome), were Asia's most prolific opium-producing area.

Curves ahead ...

On the outskirts of Mae Rai, we smile as we pass a plethora of imaginatively named guesthouses. "The Opium House" and "The Drug Den Lodge" catch our attention. We are cruising southward on the new silky smooth tar of Route 107. After 103 miles of dizzying curves, we are 20 miles north of Chiang Mai, Thailand's second city, and at the start of one of the top ten motorcycle routes in the world. I flick on my blinker, lean the bike, and turn west as Lisa follows suit. "Welcome to the Mae Hong Son Loop," I shout to Lisa as I twist the throttle and blast ahead.

Riding this route is to be our Asian pilgrimage. Ahead of us is 380 miles of curvaceous tar with 10,000 hairpins and 4,000 fast bends that take us across moun-

tains, through remote villages, and past rivers, lakes, and scenic hilltop temples.

With our energy spent, we pull into The Ton Pai View Doi resort and agree on a price of 500 baht (\$16) for the night. We transfer our gear from the bikes into a small log cabin before digging in to a delicious mix of stir-fried pork and morning glory (a type of spinach). The valley beneath us slowly darkens to the tune of a frog chorus.

The City of Three Mists

We're hard on the throttle and climbing through a steep valley where loftier mesas are scattered with small tribal settlements. We negotiate potholes in the sleepy village of Soppong and ease on the brakes to control our decent into a long, deep vale as we cruise into the center of Mae Hong Son (The City of Three Mists). Isolated for an age from the outside

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world, Mae Hong Son exudes a rhythm that harks back to ancient times.

Not what you Think

I scan the GPS screen for Joe's Guesthouse where we plan to spend the night. As we pull up, Mrs. Benja (the owner) is already at the gate, and when Lisa removes her helmet exposing her long hair, wide-eyed Mrs. Benja erupts into high pitched shrieks of Thai laughter. "I do not know you are woman; you are woman," she blurts. "How is this possible with such a big bike? You are woman," she repeats even louder just to make sure. Excitedly she calls for her neighbors, and with equal incredulity each of the three women gently pokes Lisa with a finger. Lisa's now fit to burst with laughter and confirms with a grin that she's definitely of the female persuasion.

With our room settled and the afternoon turning to evening, we are sipping sweet iced coffee on the

broad steps of Wat Jong Klang. Its gold-lacquered chedis (stupas) are perfectly reflected in the serene waters of the Jong Kham Lake.

Jamming with the Kayan Long Necks

An entire day of heavy rain after our arrival delayed us at Joe's. Today's intense humidity from that deluge now exacerbates the furnace-like heat. We're high in the Shan Hills and bouncing across an uneven dirt track hemmed in by steep-forested banks. Fat emerald-green banana leaves droop from above and slap our helmets when we duck too late. The air is pungent with the smell of wild garlic and damp tropical woodland as our GPS leads us through a densely foliated basin. Pulling to a stop, we quickly kill the din from the engines and kick down the sidestands. We are on the outskirts of the Kayan tribal village inside the Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp, temporary home to the Kayan Hill Tribes or as they are better known, "The Long Necks."

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Zemba and her mother, Mor, in their traditional dress of tightly wound brass neck rings, look other-worldly. Lisa and I are keen to understand their traditions and their current situation as refugees having been pushed out by conflict with the military regime in Burma. In tentative but clear English, Zemba explains the significance of the metal coils and how, as the women grow older, bands are added until 25 pounds of metal pushes down on the clavicle, giving the impression of the elongated neck. "They make us look beautiful; the more rings we wear the more beautiful we look," Zemba explains.

"Are you forced to wear them?" Lisa asks gently. "No. Many of my friends have chosen to remove them," Zemba says matter-of-factly. She laughs and exclaims, "It's OK when we take off the rings. Our necks do not break. My friends tell me it just feels strange, and it is hard to sleep for the first two weeks." Mor begins to play a simply made local instrument that looks like a 4-string violin. The melody is delicate but haunting. When Mor is finished, Lisa gestures for the instrument. Visually bemused, Mor hands it over. Lisa, her head tilted with concentration gently arcs the bow across the strings and perfectly plays the tender tune. Zemba and Mor's faces are lit with delight, and within moments Mor is singing. With each breath more of the evocative song comes to life. Music is definitely the language of the world.

Open-heart, 4-stroke Surgery

It's been three weeks since we arrived in Chiang Mai. The unremitting G-forces exerted on our bodies by the Mae Hong Son Loop left us giddy and my R1150GS in need of attention. Weeks of "four-stroke



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surgery” at Joes Bike Team Garage ensue as we pull open my engine, clear massive carbon build up, and replace rods, piston rings, valves, and gaskets. Back at Riders Corner Bar & Restaurant (a Chiang Mai bikers hotspot), Phil the owner looks up from behind the bar and with a cheeky smile exclaims, “Leaving Chiang Mai now? At the start of Songkran? You’d have to be bloody mad!”

The Wildest Festival on Earth!

Songkran, once a gentle celebration marking the passing of the traditional Thai New Year, has morphed into a good-natured, nationwide, 3-day water-throwing frenzy. Hoses, buckets, and toy pistols are the weaponry for an army of 69 million Thai people. Described by Lonely Planet guidebooks as “one of wildest festivals on earth,” Songkran kicks off tomorrow. Happily, it falls during the hottest time of the year, and the wet spray is a welcome relief.

Thirty seconds after stepping out on the street, I’m yelping like a scolded puppy as liters of ice-laden liquid drench my head and body. I leap in the air with shock and am hit by three more containers of freezing water before I even land. Off to my right, Lisa laughs uncontrollably as a firing squad of 20 grinning Thai boys massacre her. The vast, oblong moat that encircles Chiang Mai’s ancient core provides an endless source of ammunition. Hundreds of pick-up trucks now circle the town as entire families armed with oil drums of ice-chilled H2O look for their next victim. The spectacle is overwhelming, and every street is flooded. Thumping music blares while a carnival procession dances its way down the main street. Everyone is soaked, everyone is laughing, and for three days we revel in a magnificent

blend of ceremonious hedonistic fun that is unique to the Kingdom of Thailand.

The Glue that Bonds a Nation

We leave Chaing Mai early feeling exhilarated and happy. The easily found Route 11 winds us through an elephant-festooned rainforest and a treasure trove of gleaming temples and ancient ruins in Lampang Province. Southward bound we transfer to Thailand-Route 1. In the towns of Mae Tha and Hang Chat, exotic street markets showcase Thailand’s edible bounty. Stopping at countless stalls, cafés, and gas stations we begin to appreciate the Thai’s dialogue with the celestial world. Buddhism is ubiquitously woven into everyday life from the humble stone shrines of the local mechanic’s shop to the holy, cloth-bound banyan trees honoring the resident spirits. Buddhism here is integral—the social and spiritual glue that binds a nation and its people together.

The Death Railway

Four hundred miles south of Chiang Mai we twist our throttles west and choose to shun Bangkok’s bright allure for the more rustic experiences offered in the Kanchanaburi Province near the southern Burmese border.

Making a pit stop in Kanchanaburi town, we pull up on Saeng Chuto Road. A simple, low-stone archway marks the entrance to the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery. We’re here to pay our respects to the thousands of British and allied POWs forced to give up their lives at the hands of their Japanese captors during the construction of the Death Railway. Most that now lie here died of disease and maltreatment in one particularly merciless (and now notorious) section, which was later immortalized in the film Bridge over the River Kwai. For one hour in the scorching heat, we try to take in the enormity, senselessness, and sacrifice of it all. Back on the bikes, we leave Kanchanaburi in a somber mood.



Serenity Personified

Mountain chicanes for the past 140 miles have delivered us just eight miles short of Burma and to the remote border town of Sangkhlaburi. Sitting on the edge of the huge Khao Laem Dam, Sangkhlaburi is an ethnic melting pot of Thai, Karen, Mon, Lao, and Chinese. On the traffic-free streets, we feel conspicuous as our engines seem to growl, and we negotiate a maze of worn cobbled lanes before finding the P. Guest House & Country Resort. Camping on the manicured grass is \$2, but a self-contained room with a fan is a bargain at \$2.50. With a stunning view across the river, the location is perfect. We swap our riding gear for shorts and T-shirts and are soon strolling across the Mon Bridge. Second-longest in the world, the Mon is an immense hand-built, bamboo masterpiece spanning the Tsonga Lick River.

The following morning, we join in the local custom of serving orange-robed monks their breakfast of rice and fruit. The afternoon sees us playing tourist perched high on the backs of elephants from a

nearby village as we explore the local forests. Having walked the steep, narrow streets of Wang Kha (better known as Mon Side), we explore the dragon-adorned Wat Wang Wiwekaram. The atmosphere is calm, and we have plenty of opportunity to say, “dangoon,” which is the Mon world for “thank you.” At sunset, and with an unhindered view across the waters, we take in the last of the sun’s amber light as it settles behind the rolling contours of the distant hills. Below us small fishing boats putter across the lake. Near the shores of both banks, generators cough to life and dim bulbs illuminate the decks of the floating houses, showcasing the river-centered life of the city.

The City of Sin

A quick descent through the mountains gives the bikes a chance to let loose, and my bike feels all the better for the overhaul in Chiang Mai weeks earlier. Excited and unfazed, we plow into Asia’s most dynamic and intoxicating city, Bangkok. We negotiate scattered concrete skyscrapers that dwarf the re-

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maining squat traditional wooden homes scattered throughout the city. Cruising Sukhumvit (Bangkok's central road), we meet the city head-on. Our senses overload as gaudy temples vie for our attention among monolithic glass and steel malls while neon signage scars our retinas. Under the glare of a million bright bulbs, Thailand's famous "Lady Boys" pout and strut. "You want good time?" one shouts shrilly as we sit through another set of traffic signals.

The smells of lemon grass, jasmine, and grilled street food is inescapable. On Soi 18, we sit at a street café with our good friend Peera, the owner of Touratech Thailand, and amid the delicious din, we slurp on noodles and scoff down plates of pad Thai. Peera leans over the shaky tin table and asks, "So how was your ride?" His huge smile suggests he already knows my reply as I finally blurt out a befuddled, "Wow."

Thailand has some of the best riding in the world, enough flavors to appease the most serious of gastronomes, and possibly the friendliest folks in the world. We will have to leave soon, but we can't wait to return. **RR**

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Facts & Information

Thailand

Total Mileage
Approximately 5,165 miles

In General

Known as the Kingdom of Thailand, the country is just more than twice the size of Wyoming. Divided into 76 provinces, its capital and largest city is Bangkok.

Thailand is well known for its islands and wonderful beaches, but in the north it's quite mountainous.

The primary language is Thai, but English is spoken in main tourist areas. Approximately 95% of the population is Buddhist. The exchange rate is currently 30 Thai baht (B) to \$1 USD. Credit cards are accepted in big cities and resort hotels. Use cash elsewhere. ATMs are in most cities and U.S. dollars are easy to exchange.

Be aware of Thai taboos (don't touch someone's head or point with your feet), and be respectful of Thai culture by offering the traditional greeting, the wai (hands together at nose-level, head bowed, say "Sawasdee khrap" (masc.) or "Sawasdee ka" (fem.).

November to February is the best time to visit. The rainy season is usually July to October. March to June can be very hot.

How to Get There

U.S. citizens are granted free 30-day visas upon arrival at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok. A 60-day tourist visa should be applied for prior to traveling. Free 15-day visas are available at borders.

A temporary import document must be completed for your own vehicle and is usually granted for the length of your visa. Local vehicle insurance is mandatory. Huge fines can be levied if you and your bike overstay!

Food & Lodging

To experience Thailand properly, you must eat the local Thai food. Each province has a specialty and uses fresh, local ingredients. Try everything from the local market places and street stalls. It's delicious and inexpensive!

Guesthouses everywhere suit budgets from \$5 upwards.

Roads & Biking

Traffic is a little chaotic in the cities but not overly aggressive. Many drivers ignore the standard rules of safety! Major thoroughfares are generally in good condition.

Contact Information

- Up to date information on visa requirements and travel advice:
www.travel.state.gov/travel
- General motorcycle travel information in SE Asia
www.gt-rider.com

Books & Maps

- *Thailand (Country Travel Guide)* by Alan Murphy, et al, Lonely Planet, ISBN 978-1741797145, \$27.99
- Thailand Nelles map, ISBN 978-3865742629, \$13.95

Motorcycle & Gear

1999 BMW R1150 GSA
2002 BMW F650GS
Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega
Jacket and Pants: BMW Trail guard and Touratech Companero
Helmets: BMW System 5 and Airoh Enduro Aviator
Boots: MX boots - Alpinestars Tech 6 and Gaerne SG10



Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.