

Cycling from Saigon to Bangkok: 400 Miles in 2 Weeks

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Having spent much of twenties and thirties during the Vietnam War, I couldn't foresee that I would be voluntarily traveling to Vietnam five times in my life and greatly enjoying every minute of it!

I have now traveled to Asia over a dozen times, mostly for biking and always during our winter which been a period of excellent weather there and has been much less than excellent here in the New York area.

My January-February trip is the first journey in which I cycled in 3 countries (Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand). This epic trip, which was organized by Bangkok-based Spiceroads.com, had actually 3 segments. We had different guides/leaders, money, border entry and exit formalities, bikes and even helmets in each of the 3 countries.



Where we went? The trip started in Saigon, Vietnam on January 14 and ended two weeks later in Bangkok, Thailand on January 27. The first four days we cycled through Vietnam's flat and lush Mekong River Delta. The following week we pedaled in Cambodia, including its dynamic capital Phnom Penh and 3 days in Siem Reap where we cycled to its famous Angkor Wat ruins. The final 2 days found us along Thailand's coastal beach front areas.

In addition to the 600 km of cycling there were planned stretches of bus/van transfers out of cycle unfriendly areas (because of heavy traffic, poor road surfaces, etc.), there were also two long boat transfers on a lake and river.

Our group consisted of 8 men and 8 women ranging in age from 30's to 70's (guess who!), mostly married couples. Most were from various U.S. locations with a few from Brazil, Denmark and England.

Weather and Topography Temperatures were in the 70's and 80's and just an hour of rain in the two week period. The terrain was itself was not very challenging—the only real hills we encountered were during the last few days in Thailand. However there were long cycling days starting as early as 7:30 AM and ending just before dark. Only about half of the roads we used were paved. Frequently the pavement was potholed and rutted. The non paved half was hard packed dirt or loose and/or powdery sand. I am not used to the latter and I frequently found myself at the slower end of the pack on these stretches.

Happy and Some Not Happy Trails we crossed numerous small (and the big Mekong!) Rivers, only few on large or small ferries. We transverse the other ones on over dozens of bridges over narrow streams, mostly in Vietnam. The pathways were sometimes only 5 or 6 feet wide and small motor scooters were sharing them with us, frequently approaching us in the oncoming "lane".



The bike paths and trails mostly lacked guard rails and were along bodies of water. One of our female co-cyclists, Tricia encountered an unusual experience with a Vietnamese waterway when she ran off the road and she (and her bike!) fell into a shallow, but filthy stream. Luckily the only injury she sustained was to her pride.

The longest cycling days were 100 kilometers—not that much by NYCC standards, but given the conditions, I felt we “earned our pay” for these days.

\$\$\$\$ The cost of the tour was \$2750. Single supp was an additional \$525 and bike rental (very good for this terrain Trek and Giant Mountain bikes \$200) these charges are much less than a US company would have charged. Almost all of the (good local style) meals were also included.



Costs in these countries are lower than in the US, especially in Vietnam. Thai costs are also lower in Thailand but no to the extent that they once were. Several NYCC members have moved or have considering moving or moving to Thailand or even to Vietnam for all or part of the year. I noticed a number of Caucasian males (mostly middle age) with Asian significant others. I also noticed seeing in

bookstores guides for moving to and living in these locales.

While during my first Viet visit in the early 90’s everyone was on a bicycle, they are now riding motorcycles and motor scooters. Judging by the traffic and construction projects

everywhere their economies must be booming. The Vietnam War was supposedly about communism but now everyone seem to be in business. The Asian stock markets have been doing well. I recently moved some of our small investments into this area

Hotels Spice Roads “got their act together” and unlike the five previous tours I was with them, all had hot water, A/C and pools. I rated them 3 or 4 stars on the Europe scale. All but one of our hotels were “one night stands” because we were moving along on our route. In mid-trip we did stay three days at one hotel in Siem Reap, the home of the famous Ankor Wat ruins. The 3 day sejour afforded an ideal “laundry-opp” There was even a (very!) low priced laundry abutting our hotel which provided much needed same day service!

Staff I also felt that the local guides/leaders were very well qualified—in each of the three countries the English-fluent leader were highly qualified. They each had about ten years’ experience leading group bike rides in their country. Each also had three assistants who drove a baggage and supply van which carried baggage, bikes, water, tools, snacks and a (comfortable) bus which transported tired cyclists and all of us on non-cyclable stretches and to evening dining venues.

Of the 16 of us about 6 of us suffered from “Delhi belly” or “Montezuma’s revenge” at one time or another. No one had a major accident or incident with a car, motorcycle or dog. I was gratified to hear from the Cambodian leader that in his 10 years of leading these groups in his country I was the oldest visiting cyclist to complete virtually all of the kilometers of the tour.

We saw, smelled, heard, tasted and touched lush green scenery including pineapple,



Rubber, banana, sugar plantations, rice paddies, lotus flower ponds, orchards, and bamboo and coconut trees.

In addition to Ankor’s thousands of year’s historic sites, we visited other religious shrines and temples. We visited Cambodia’s infamous “Killing Fields” and relics of their holocaust.

There were serious environmental concerns in the areas we rode through. Air pollution was rampant, especially in cities as much of the population wore breathing masks. Garbage

and litter removal left much to be desired. Discarded paper and plastic items were everywhere along the roads and in the countryside. Buried utility wires are apparently non-existent. Giant tangles of back wires in urban areas created visual pollution.

After the Spice Roads tour was finished Joan met me and we enjoyed two weeks at several exquisite resorts. At two of them, the hotels arranged bike tours of the lovely coastal Phuket area for me.

What did I enjoy the most? The answer: the PEOPLE! All were friendly and polite—none of the cyclists had a problem. What stands out in my mind is multitudes of children excitedly screaming to us welcoming us to their country...“Where are you going? Where are you from? Hello!!!” As even in my first bike trip to Vietnam in the early 1990’s, it was hard to believe that we were their enemy!



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