

Bangkok to Phnom Penh

written by Marcus | 19 January, 2016



5th to 19th Jan 2016

As soon as we arrived in Thailand the culinary delights were presented to us from cafes, stalls and markets like a cycle tourist's dream drive-through restaurant. Spicy papaya salad, pad Thai, seafood, sticky rice, a dozen fruits we couldn't name blended into a smoothie. This was a country where the time eating could easily be greater than the time spent cycling.



A rainbow of fruit flavours

The day before arriving in Bangkok we pass through Nakhon Pathom and by chance come alongside an ancient Vespa with a friendly looking rider on board. This is Shoot, who happens to be a Warm Showers host with a funky bookshop/café and before we know it he's invited us to stay. The square in front of the huge pagoda is crammed with food stalls and we enjoy perusing and consuming. Shoot then suggests we go out to dinner with his friends. Dinner #2? Who are we to argue!



“Hi, I’m Shoot, would you like somewhere to stay?” (Photo courtesy of Max Peer)

On full stomachs we eventually speed into Bangkok, a vast and modern metropolis the likes of which we hadn’t seen since Europe. Here we part company with Max whose trip has reached its conclusion and luckily without his wheel disintegrating. After a few days of rest he’ll be on a plane back to Austria to brave the cold and begin dreaming of his next adventure.



The tandem arrives in Bangkok. (Photo courtesy of Max Peer)



The Elephant Building, Bangkok

Like any huge city Bangkok promises anything and everything, though here your imagination really is the only limit. Also like any huge city it takes absolutely ages to find what you want. Trying to track down some parts for our rear hub takes two days on the sky train, the subway, taxis and at one point a ride in the back of a pickup with someone who swears he knows someone who can help. All to no avail though, the hub is 16 years old but it's highly likely the parts I need are somewhere here, I just didn't blow the dust off the right box in the right workshop. Instead I grab a couple of bags of bearings and accept it will need a bit of TLC to keep it going for a bit longer, then order the parts online to be picked up in Hanoi. Our front panniers have also just about made it but this is the end of the road for them. The Vaude dealer doesn't have any in stock but an email to the main office in Germany results in some warranty replacements which are sent to the UK for later collection. Ortliebs are much more readily available so we pick up some in a fetching bright green instead.



Bangkok by night

Our host in the big city is Alex, who has shared many a perilous bus journey and roach infested guesthouse during travels with my brother. In return for letting us stay I introduce him to the joys of the Hash House Harriers who of course have a Bangkok division. Urban running doesn't get much more diverse with turns through tobacco warehouses, down busy tourist streets and past overly friendly ladies in doorways. Alex thoroughly enjoys the run so may have found a new weekly activity.



Bangkok Hash House Harriers coming through



Our wonderful hosts in Bangkok: Alex, Alison and 'Kenzie
After four days, with all errands run, or at least attempted,
we're good to go again and find the ride out of the city busy

but otherwise uneventful. Certainly far from the carnage and certain death that a few people had promised us. On the way we catch up with fellow cycling traveller Pete, who we last met in Bishkek and is now looking for gainful employment here in Thailand to postpone a return to London.



Harvesting weeds in the canal running out of Bangkok

It's flat, fast and fairly dull for the two days that take us southeast down to the coast. We get our heads down and get the job done, fueled on M150 energy drink. The monks here in Thailand are just as welcoming as in Myanmar, providing us with floor space in temples each night. There's been a costume change though and they now wear orange instead of maroon robes, often with a set of pockets across the front for holding their smart phones and cigarettes.



The many faces of Buddha



Bang Phu Temple

Then as the Gulf of Thailand comes sparkling into view we turn off the main road and a small brown sign announces we're on the 'Scenic Route'. Not only does the outlook improve with the road weaving through farmland, forests of rubber trees and past beaches but we also get a cycle path all to ourselves. The only blight is the abundance of prawn farms, polythene lined ponds with aerators churning away where the latest batch of Waitrose tiger prawns are being cultivated. It's the latest profitable farming fad for the region, replacing the mangroves, and with the salt water and antibiotics contaminating the land it's likely to be the last.



Milking the rubber trees



Snake crossing



Racks of fish meat dry by the roadside

The sea is as warm as bath water when we finally arrive at a beach for a swim nicely timed before lunch. A welcome change of scenery after the dual carriageway blast from Bangkok and worth the effort to get here quickly.



The beach at Rayong

As the light of the day begins to recede some loud music attracts us to a temple and after a chat with one of the monks

and settling in we go to investigate what all the noise is about. It's a funeral in an adjacent building.

At the front some monks are chanting, a large gathering of people watch the proceedings while others are tucking in at a generous buffet. The general atmosphere is upbeat no doubt inline with their beliefs that the body is just a vessel and the man's soul has now moved on to its next journey and life. This is a celebration rather than a mourning. The daughter of the deceased spots us and invites us to join the feast. Now we're all for getting involved with local celebrations but gatecrashing a funeral seems a bit much so we offer our condolences and return to our floorspace in the main building.

But in the morning it's all still going on and again we're invited to join them so we pay our respects by lighting some incense sticks then sit awkwardly with plates that are quickly loaded up by the generous hosts. I hope this is what he would have wanted.





Camp dragon guarding a temple

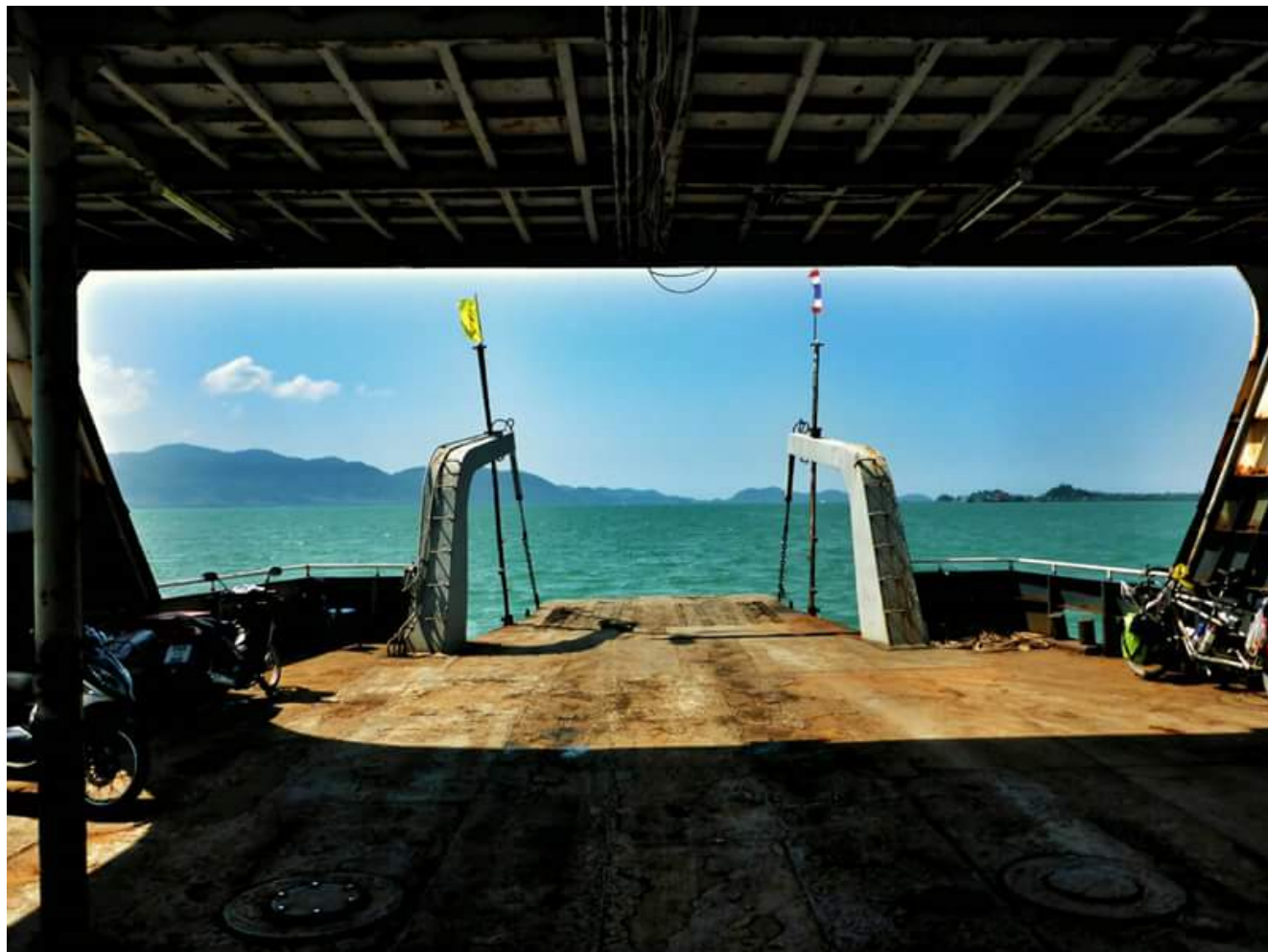
We're constantly surprised by how affluent a country Thailand is and like any modern society bikes become playthings rather than just essential forms of transport. Middle aged men in lycra potter around on smart looking road bikes and super-fat tyred mountain bikes, giving us a smile and a wave as we cruise past. The roads are good for cycling and we see nothing of the bad driving that gives Thailand the title of the 2nd worst country in the world for traffic accidents (after Libya). Apparently 80 lives are lost every day, 16 times more than the UK.



Fat tyre bike, perfect for nipping to the shops

It's hard to travel far along the coast of Thailand without finding an island so we feel we ought to hop onto one on our way through to see what's all the fuss is about. Koh Chang is a short ferry ride from the mainland and when we disembark two things quickly become apparent: the hills are steep, really

steep, and the island is packed with people, really packed. Hired scooters weave all over the roads while pick-up trucks of backpackers try to squeeze past on blind corners. Not quite the paradise at sea that we had envisaged.



The ferry to Koh Chang

We somehow find a spot for the tent between a reggae bar and a pedicure salon on a rare patch of undeveloped land with a sea view. We find it hard to settle for long in this kind of place. Perhaps we've been spoilt by the tranquility and beauty of our many previous camping spots or we've become travelling snobs and want it all to ourselves. Either way one night of Thai island life is enough.



Ok, so Koh Chang wasn't all bad

On the ferry back to the mainland we meet two brazilian cyclists, Fabiano and Flavia with a very sad story. After

months of saving for a year long trip they were about ready to set off when the Brazilian Real collapsed. This halved the value of their savings and so 12 months on the bikes had to become 6. Undeterred, they are about to return home, earn more cash and try again. We wish them better luck for their future travels.



Fabiano and Flavia. Flat broke

Thailand squeezes down to a narrow strip between Cambodia and the sea as we follow the mainland coast again, at one point

only 450m wide. It's much quieter here and a more secluded beach front provides our final overnight stop before the next border crossing. The nights have been warm and dry for weeks so we pitch the tent without the waterproof fly sheet for the first time. Of course it rains at midnight.



Seaside camping on our last night in Thailand

At the Cambodian border the next day the smiling guard suggests we pay for our visa in Thai baht despite all prices being quoted in dollars. We decline given his price works out to be \$10 more expensive and hand over good old USDs. I wonder how often this scam works though?



The Cambodian Border at Cham Team

Thailand had been a very easy country to ride through and a useful dose of developed infrastructure compared to the previous countries. As we bump over the bridge into Koh Kong City things look to be more of the rough and ready that we have become used to. We're into the Cardomon mountains and the heat of the surrounding jungle makes the climbing a sweaty affair. The rivers that weave through the hills provide useful cooling off and washing facilities so we sleep in a hut by one on the first night. Yet again a temple provides refuge on the second night. Shelter and pot noodles are provided in return for some English lessons with a class of young students. Unfortunately we'd sent our 'Teacher' shirts home though.



Making use of the en-suite river

We reach the most southerly point of the trip so far at the turning to Sinoukville, 11 degrees North. From here we turn north and won't be going any further south for a few more

months. The temperature has been climbing to 37 degrees during the day so we hope that things might cool off again from here.

The extensive Thai menus are fading from memory as we return to basic meals of rice and chunks of meat on the bone. However the coffee steps up a level or two and is served over ice unless we request for it to be hot. Asking for milk results in a large dollop of condensed milk in the bottom of the cup and a taste sensation.



Cambodian breakfast: ice coffee and doughnuts

We're on the main highway towards Phnom Penh now and have huge trucks and a dusty hard shoulder as constant companions. The former forcing us onto the latter with a blast of the horn. The towns we pass through are lined with a ramshackle collection of stalls with piles of rubbish grazed by cows, reminiscent of Nepal and India.



Krong Chbar Mon High Steet

The timing of our arrival in Phnom Penh is perfect. It's a Sunday afternoon and we make our way to the train station where a group of people in running gear has already begun to assemble. It's time for the Phnom Penh Hash House Harriers. The 'Hash Bus' takes us out of town for a lovely run around some reservoirs and villages before the usual social activities. It's always interesting to see how diverse the expat community can be and amongst the group are textiles experts for Ralph Lauren, ecologists about to move to an elephant sanctuary, some water engineers who have been working on the Mekong and a Frenchman who once drove from Paris to Afghanistan.



Phnom Penh Hash House Harriers coming through
Cambodia has a difficult history and I can still remember the
news stories from when Pol Pot died. The pictures of the mass

graves as a result of the brutal killings during the days of the Khmer Rouges were shocking but I'm not sure I fully understood the extent of what actually happened.

Near Pnom Penh are 'The Killing Fields' where we plug into an audio guide and listen to the harrowing details as we wander around a place where some truly barbaric actions took place. One of the quotes that strikes me most is "...that it is better to kill someone who is innocent by mistake than to not kill someone who is guilty by mistake...". During this dark period in the late 1970's 1/4 of the population was wiped out, 2 million people.



Inside the memorial stupa at the Choeng Ek Genocide Centre

This is now a place of quiet contemplation as visitors walk slowly round the meadows and soft hillocks where an unknown number of people were buried. Although most of the remains have been exhumed, when it rains bones and clothing are still being revealed and have to be carefully collected. It's impossible not to catch a lump in your throat as the voices on the audio guide give first hand accounts of their experiences. We leave feeling shell-shocked and emotionally drained much as we had when we visited the Museum of Occupation in Riga. As we've seen, 99.9999% of the world is full of immense kindness but the remaining 0.0001% seem to be able to do so much damage.



Bracelets left as a mark of respect at the Choeng Ek Genocide Centre

A more heart warming story comes from the charity Daughters of Cambodia who my uncle had told me to look out for as he knows the founder. Their mission is to take girls out of the sex industry and provide them with the skills to take on new

careers. Their cafe, Sugar and Spice, sells great food and beautiful products all managed and made by girls from the programme. It's great to see that it's been such a success and represents a more promising future for the country.



Backpack made by the Daughters of Cambodia

This capital is vastly different from Bangkok. The decrepit French colonial architecture gives it a 19th century feel. The traffic makes its own rules based on force of numbers so we have to gang up with a cluster of scooters to be able to pull out from any junction. The alloy wheels and polished exhausts of the tuktuks in Thailand have been replaced by battered scooters towing four seater wooden trailers. It has a charm and character that is appealing though and perhaps this is how Bangkok once looked before modernisation took hold.



Monks collecting food in Phnom Penh



Typical traffic mayhem in Phnom Penh

Although Cambodia is lacking in the food department compared to its neighbour it does hold the trump card when it comes to historical sites in South East Asia. Angkor Wat is so important that it's shown on the national flag and one of the most popular beers is named after it. After a breakfast of eggs and bacon (imported from Thailand) we set off in the direction of Siem Reap to have a look at this most famous of temple complexes. North being our chosen direction now.



Shes not pedalling on the front!



Selling fruit is tiring work

Naypyidaw to Bangkok – Myanmar Part 2

written by Marcus | 19 January, 2016



Reincarnation is a funny thing. One lifetime you're a monk, the next you're a 17 foot python. Is that an improvement or a step backwards? It's possible to sit face to face with the 125 year old serpent/former holy man in a small monastery in Bago. We watched several worshippers offer money in return for a blessing in the form of a few flicks of its forked tongue. No cage, no glass, just a quietly chanting minder keeping an eye on everyone and making sure they don't get too close. Every day presents a surprise in Myanmar.



The old, long snake that once was a monk in Bago



Python worshippers

21st December 2015 – 5th January 2016

Leaving Naypyidaw on our way to Bago the multi-lane, landscaped boulevards soon gives way to the more familiar dusty, handbuilt 'main' road. At a market a man tries to sell me a piglet but we settle for plates of miscellaneous e kawe kwei doughnuts with deep fried fruit and veg that have become our staple for 2nd breakfast. Full of taste, calories and fat, all washed down with Premier coffee.



Piglet for sale



Deep fried breakfast



At intervals the sound of terrible music can be heard at a distance, rising to a distorted racket as we approach roadside

collections for the local temple. Ladies in conical hats topped with coloured pom poms rattle bowls, hoping for spare change while a monk chants into a microphone with the reverb turned far too high.



M to the O to the N to the K



Pom pom hats



Pom pom hats

The monks are intrinsically linked to the community. Every morning a procession of red robed boys with bare heads and bare feet and arranged in height order can be seen in any village or town. Their ceramic bowls are filled with food offerings by the homeowners and shopkeepers in a daily trick or treat round where the 'trick' would be the disapproval of Buddha.



Monks off to collect their alms

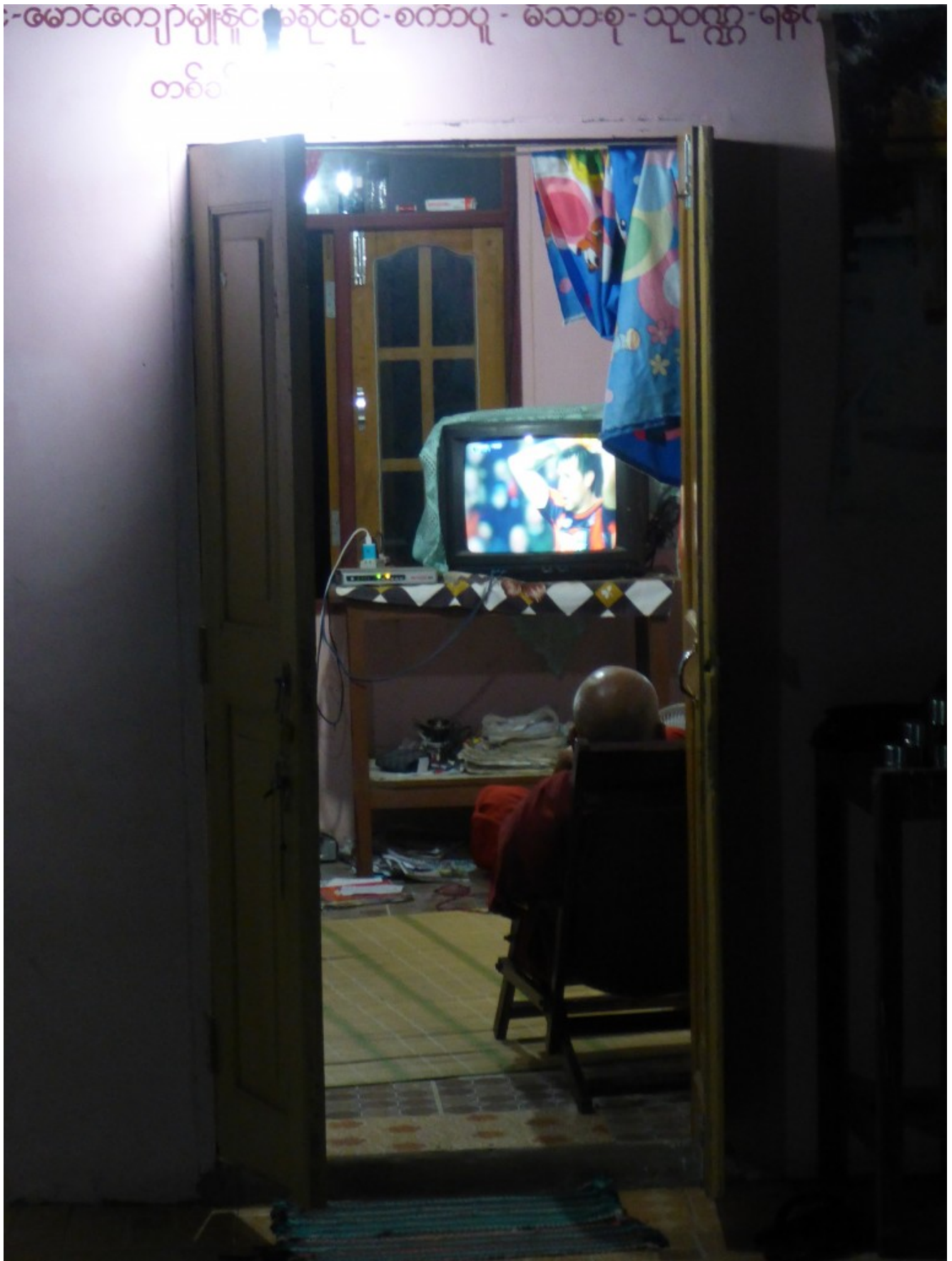
In the temples we stay in there are often villagers sitting chatting with the monks, watching their TV's or sharing a cigar. It's like a community centre but with gold statues and coloured flashing lights. We watch the comings and goings from behind our mosquito net in our allocated corner, sometimes with a tasty dinner provided from that morning's food collection.



Disco Buddha



Our hosts in Nyaunglebin



In front of the football



The ladies wear pink

After Bago, with its snakes and buddhas, we forego continuing south to Yangon and instead turn east to arrive in the town of Kin Pun Sakhan. It's Christmas Eve and for Christmas day we have a mountain to climb.



Always watching



Muslim children in Bago



Temple in Bago



Bago children resplendent in thanaka face paint

At the top of Mount Kyaiktiyo, 1100m above sea level sits a boulder that has become one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in Myanmar. The rock precariously balances on the edge of a cliff with legend claiming that it's held in place by a strand of Buddha's hair. Every day people make the climb to paste gold leaf onto it so it's now known simply as The Golden Rock.



Christmas day at the Lotus Guest house, Kin Pun Sakhan



Hiking with a hand/head bag

It's a hot, humid day and we're joined on our hike by thousands of Burmese visitors. They laugh that we're sweating so much in the heat so I return with some jokes about how short they all are. It's a national holiday making this one of the busiest days of the year and we later hear claims that 20,000 people made it to the summit (most riding up on the back of a truck). The scrummage to glimpse the holy boulder is almost too much to bear, but once we're in the crowd we get carried along without much chance to escape. Alongside us are children in baskets and the old and infirm lie on elaborate thrones carried by four long-suffering bearers.



Riding through the crowd to the golden rock



Riding in style



Into the melee

The application of the gold leaf is surprisingly haphazard with some blowing straight off in the wind. Only men are allowed to touch the gravity defying rock. Maybe if women could get to it then they'd do a neater job.



The Golden Rock



Applying gold leaf



Thousands of people camped out on the mountain top. It looked

like a refugee camp.

We drop off the mountain like a rollercoaster wedged into a row of seats on one of the trucks. Luckily none of our fellow passengers get motion sickness as it's a wild and bumpy ride.



Keep your arms and legs inside the truck at all times

Back in the town, as we settle down to our Christmas dinner of rice and chicken and avocado smoothie, a familiar face arrives. It's Jens, who we'd crossed the border from India with. We're also joined by two Dutch cyclists making for a great cycle tourists Christmas party.



Colourful, tasty and we have no idea what it is.

Jens joins us for the following day's ride. It takes ages to pick our way through the traffic jams as 20,000 visitors try to leave while 20,000 more try and arrive. Tandems and bikes with trailers aren't very manoeuvrable through traffic so it's slow progress giving Jens time to have a coffee while he waits for us.

We cross into Karen state, home of the Karen people and the Karen National Union. They have been fighting for independence since 1949 making it the world's longest resistance. Just outside the state capital, Hpa'An we pull into a small riverside town and find two more familiar faces. Morgan and

Poreh, the two French backpackers who also crossed the border from India are there, completing our reunion. We all share stories of adventures over the last 3 weeks with the others having a few troubles with officious immigration officers. It seems we really have been lucky not to have been moved on or made to stay in hotels.



Into Karen State



To the Bat Cave Robin!

We all make our way through the grounds of a temple, following signs to 'The Bat Cave'. As the sun sets there's an increasing sound of flapping and then suddenly thousands of bats emerge from a cave part way up the cliff face. The cloud of grey and black wings pours out over the river and swirls up into the sky for 20 minutes. There must be hundreds of thousands of them and this amazing spectacle takes place every evening. Hungry eagles swoop down and pick off a few of the stragglers but there's safety in numbers for most of them.



Bats at dusk



Jens (on the right, not dressed in gold) and Max
We then part company with Jens, Morgan and Poreh, who head off

to a guest house and have Thailand in their sights for tomorrow while we negotiate our stay in the temple. The locals say no, the monks say yes, luckily for us the monks win.



Bedtime with Buddha

By far the most popular entry and exit point by land into Myanmar is from Thailand at Mae Sot as no permit is needed and its an easy ride/drive from Bangkok. We have time left on our visa and feel like seeing some sandy beaches so prolong our stay by riding south to a border crossing further down. We've also heard that New Years Eve at Dawai can be quite lively so we make that our target.



The road to Sadan cave



Buddha maintenance in Sadan Cave



Rock carvings, Sadan Cave



Boat ride, Sadan Cave

Somehow Myanmar extends in a narrow strip down the coast of the Andaman sea, depriving Thailand of most of the western sea border. The region is more sparsely populated and begins to get hotter and hotter as we ride the rolling road through forests and over rivers. The appearance of an enormous, partially built seated Buddha is no longer a surprising thing to see, he's everywhere in this country. The building site is already sacred so the workers climb all over the structure in bare feet while inside there are hundreds of small statues overseeing the work.



Another Buddha being built, near Mawlamyine



Health and safety...



Insurance



Buddha's eye view

That evening we have our first and only two rejections in quick succession with one set of monks giving a straightforward "no" to our accommodation request while another tells us they don't allow women to stay. A proper bed in the nearby hotel feels like an unnecessary luxury but the absence of the early morning bells and broadcasts is more welcome. Being close to the border the army presence has increased and on the wall of one base there's the ominous slogan "Move, Shoot, Communicate". This could be the reason for the extra caution by the monks.

As we continue we cross the famous Saigon to Rangoon railway line, also known as the Japanese Death Railway due to the number of prisoners of war that died building it. The people we meet are more surprised to see us in this less visited region. Their English amounts to one simple phrase: "Hey You!" and we hear it shouted at us dozens of times each day.



The 'Death Railway'



Hey You!

After an evening in a rural monastery we're woken by a gong being rung directly above our heads. It's been raining but still very muggy. The monks send us off with cakes and 'M150' energy drinks onto a road through bamboo plantations while the side of the road is lined with drying betel nuts.



Drying betel nuts



..which are then wrapped with tobacco and chewed.



...for a unique scarlet smile.

A rough climb takes us up and over into Tanintharyi, the most southern state, but the bumps have taken their toll. Our front

panniers are cracked near the hooks so have to be secured with bungees. Max's rear rim has cracked with no solution other than to ride gently and hope it lasts until Bangkok.



Warm greetings into our next state

It's another day and a half before we reach Dawai and then the coastal town of Maungmagan. Having been away from the sea for so long it's a wonderful feeling rolling up to the palm lined beach and running over the sand into the warm sea. We come from an island country so the sea will always have a special meaning to us. As an Austrian, Max is more of a mountain man so just sees the water as a barrier.



Kids on the beach at Maungmagan



The Andaman Sea



Sunset Dip

We stay for two nights, camped out in an old fishing shelter, drinking coconut juice and getting our fix of sugar (co)cane. Kirsty has a puffy eye and both Max and I have had upset stomachs so the rest is much needed.



Nosy neighbour on our beach hut

We've made it in time for the New Year celebrations which build through the evening as more families arrive and set up picnics and fires on the beach. At midnight the sky lights up with fireworks and huge paper lanterns float out over the water. The party goes on for most of the night and first thing in the morning the strangled sounds of karaoke can still be heard in the distance.



Paper lanterns sail off into the New Year

There's now just 150km left before we cross into Thailand and we give ourselves 2.5 days so as to ease ourselves into 2016. But Myanmar likes to surprise so after leaving Dawai the road narrows and is quickly consumed by jungle. After a precarious bridge we lose the sealed surface on the road and bump over a dusty track for the remainder of the way. But the surface is manageable with caution even with our broken equipment. What is more difficult is the gradient of the hills that now hit us hard and fast. 20%, 22%, 23%, the cranks are set to break at any second!



The end of the 'good' road



Dusty hills



The houses have thinned out with up to 10km between any kind of civilisation. Luckily at the end of the first day we find an army checkpoint who agree to let us stay. The soldiers are just boys, bored to tears by their remote posting so seem glad to have some company. We bed down next to a rifle, some ammunition and half a dozen chickens after a swim in the river to clean the dust off.



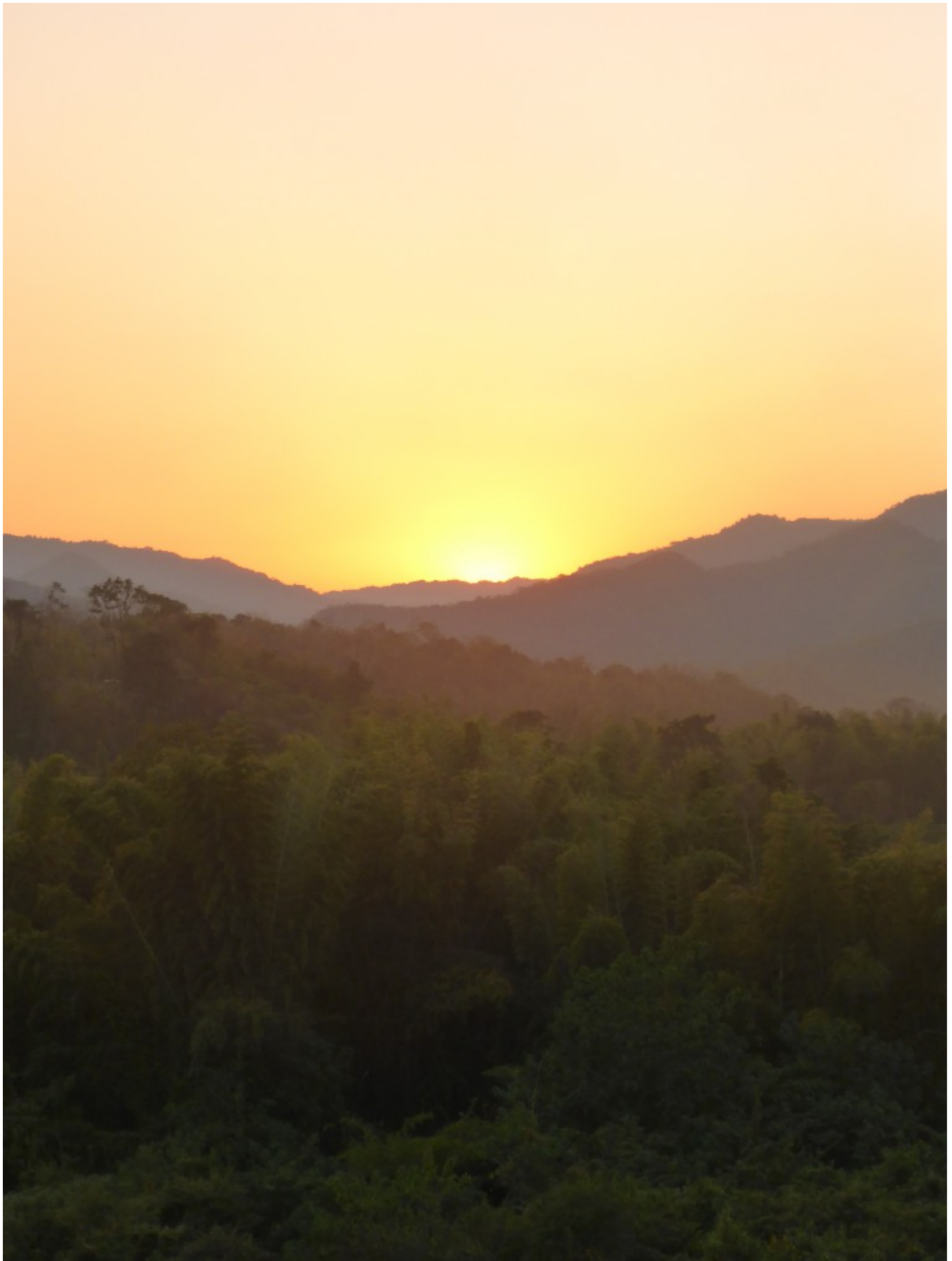
Our military hosts on the way to the border



Night time protection

Myanmar really isn't giving up without a fight and the steep gradients continue the next day. Max now has brake issues so carries more speed down the hills than he would have liked. Luckily for him there are no elephants to get in his way though we had hoped to see some on this stretch.

With all energy reserves running dangerously low we face one last climb at the end of the day and then there it is: the last monastery in Myanmar and as usual appearing with perfect timing when we most need it. It comes complete with cats and some very welcoming hosts who prepare a tasty dinner for their weary guests. Myanmar, we're going to miss you.



Our last evening in Myanmar

After a final climb in the morning we arrive at the border and are glad that it actually exists (Google Maps shows nothing).

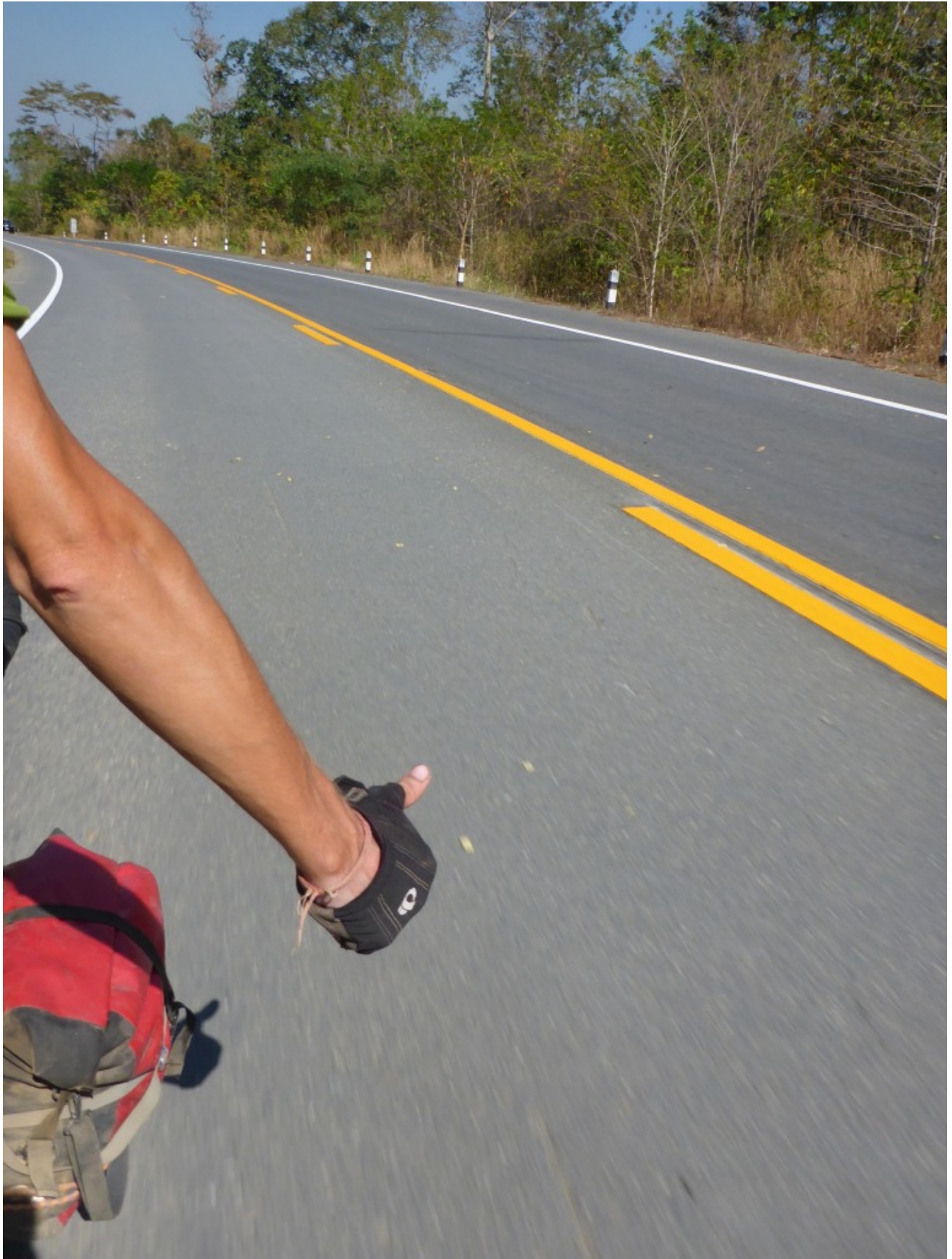
Once through the barrier we drop down a hill onto buttery smooth tarmac. Welcome to Thailand!



The remote border crossing to Thailand

Brits get 30 days visa free in Thailand and somehow Max gets the same, even though Austrians should only be allowed 15. The guard must have forgotten to change his stamp.

Straight away it's clear that this country was going to be different from most of where we'd been for the last few months. As well as the perfect road surface, there are shiny new cars, 7 Eleven convenience stores selling 10 types of Red Bull, western style clothing. It's a culture shock in many ways to be somewhere that feels so familiar.



Smooth riding in Thailand

It takes us just over two days to reach Bangkok. On the way we pass Kanchanaburi and the Bridge Over the River Kwai. A luxury

train pulls in while we're there with immaculately dressed passengers climbing off it. Looking from their pressed safari suits to our ragged shorts and t-shirts it's clear that our travelling experiences have been slightly different. Unsurprisingly I don't think any of us would want to swap though.



East Orient Express or Tandem Express? No contest.

If this little lot wasn't enough for you, there are loads more in our Myanmar Gallery