

Lak Sao to Hanoi

written by Marcus | 21 February, 2016



10th February to 21st February 2016

“Gooooood moooooooooorning Vietnam!”. Kirsty would surely never get bored with me starting each day like this? As we leave the border behind our legs are spinning like a turbine. The freewheel just won’t budge anymore so we can’t stop pedalling. I feather the brakes to keep things comfortable as best I can while Kirsty holds on tight. There are flags out to herald our arrival. The gold star on a crimson background is interspersed with the hammer and sickle and they hang from just about every lamp post.



Welcome to Vietnam

The border guards had ignored my hints that we would love to get more than our allocated 15 days of visa exemption in the

country. Either they didn't understand or they couldn't be bothered to enter into bribery negotiations. So we have two weeks to get to Hanoi, sort out our visa for China, rescue a couple of parcels and get out again, which should be plenty as long as everything goes smoothly, which it surely will?!



Well dressed police

In the first town we find an ATM and become Dong millionaires. There are 22,000 Dong to the US Dollar so the notes have huge denominations. Most shops are shut as the Tet Lunar New Year celebrations are still in full swing but we manage to find somewhere serving tasty 'Pho' noodles.



1 million Dong

Scooters are the transportation method of choice here, outnumbering four wheeled vehicles by at least 20:1. As they buzz past we get plenty of shouts of "Hello!" and one chap chases after us to give us some oranges.

Temples seem to be tiny affairs, more a shrine than a building, so we may have reached the end of our temple touring days for now. The land is well used too with anything that doesn't have a building on it generally being a rice field several centimetres deep in water. However the rear of an abandoned house provides enough dry land and enough seclusion to get the tent up unnoticed on our first night. A frog chorus croaks away all evening from the fields in front of us.



Intensive land use



Rice Field views. Camping is prohibited and tricky, but possible with some persistence.

Through Vinh we have to weave round the mass of scooters. Cars have to beep constantly to try and battle their way through the melee making the whole experience quite intense. We stop for coffee to help calm things down and discover that we've just been playing with the idea of what good coffee should taste like up until now. Served in a tiny pot that sits on your cup and gently drips the dark brown contents down onto a bed of condensed milk, it's not a drink that can be rushed. But patience is rewarded with an extraordinary flavour, almost like bitter chocolate that makes a Starbucks seem like a supermarket instant.



The finest coffee we've ever tasted

Out of Vinh we search for some peace on a minor road that takes us round some rice fields, through villages and on to the coast. The rocky shore is shrouded in mist and dotted with people picnicking and enjoying the New Year holidays. It then gives way to a long sandy beach which we've got to a few hours too early as it would have made a great place to camp if we'd arrived at the end of the day. Instead it's lunch time so we console ourselves with some fresh squid from a beachside restaurant. I go to fill up my bottle from the water container which causes a huge commotion as several people run at me. The container is full of vodka and not water! That could have made the afternoon more entertaining.



Following the coast



A beach too soon



Fresh squid

We emerge onto Highway 1a at Cau Giat where the noise of the

traffic mingles with propaganda announcements over the town's PA system. There are huge socialist posters and angular statues everywhere and Ho Chi Minh's image is ever present reminding us that he won 'the American War', as it's known here.



Angular socialist statue



Propaganda billboard



Ho Chi Min, bringer of peace

We spend the next two days on the highway. It has a good sized hard shoulder and most of the traffic is small so it's not such a bad road to ride. The main risk is from side roads as no-one looks before they pull out. It seems to be the way things are done here but we nearly get caught out a few times and we see two separate incidents with scooters on their side and a dazed rider sprawled alongside. Expect stupid actions and stay safe becomes my policy.



Bonsai nursery



Poultry for sale by the roadside



Piglets on the move



Kids investigating our camp site

The amount of cake and biscuits being bought for the New Year celebrations is phenomenal. Some people overdo it though and

we find a stash of cakes and sweets in the middle of the road that must have fallen off an overloaded scooter. There's no-one else around to claim them so we take the 'roadkill' and make sure it is very secure on the back of our bike. It should help add a bit more variety to our diet of Pho noodles which are now becoming a bit dull having eaten them three times a day. We get presented with a complimentary dragon fruit and a puff on an enormous pipe when we buy oranges later in the day which expands the variety in our diet a bit further.



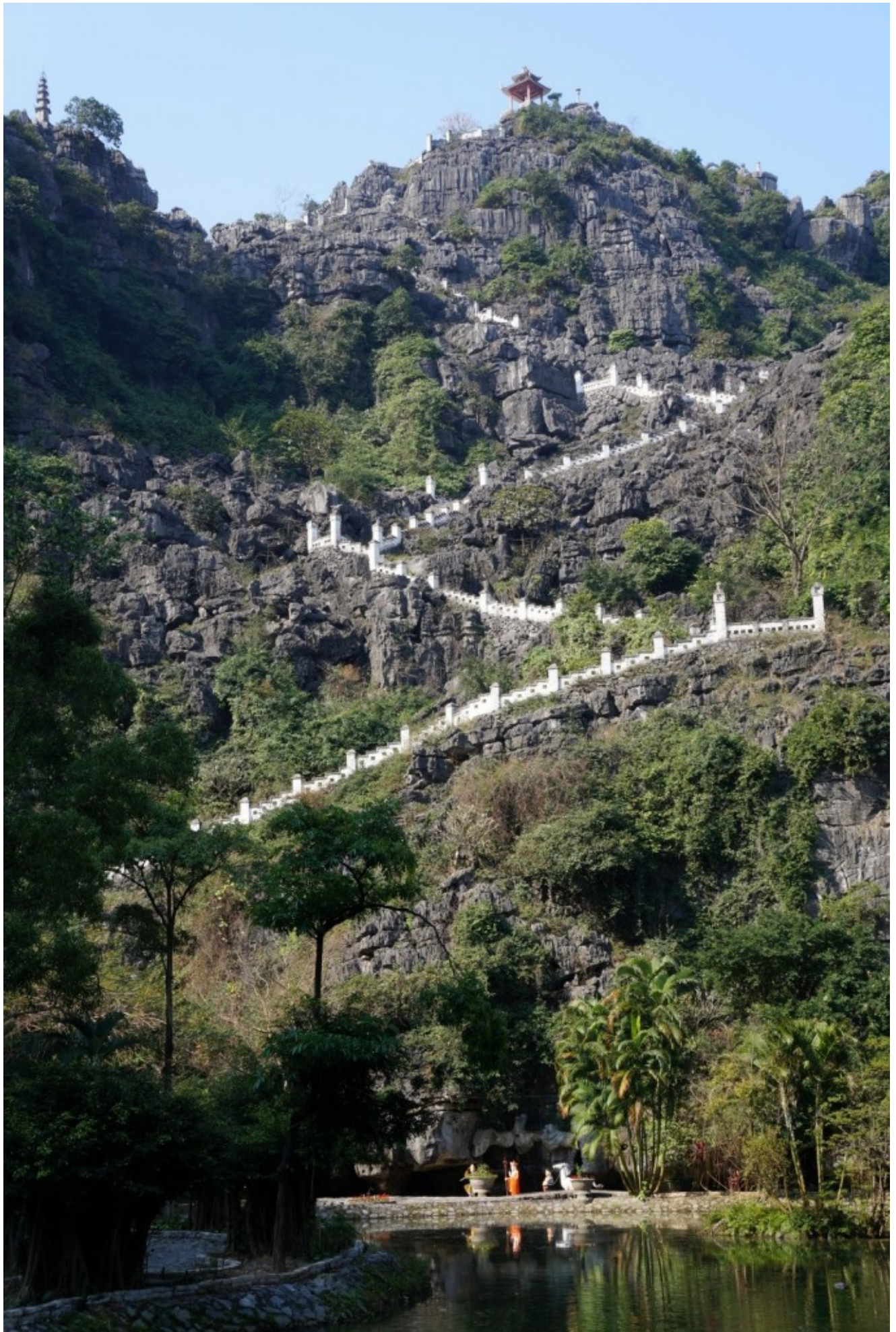
The festival of cake and biscuits



Rescuing cakes from the road

For most of the last few days the landscape has been mostly flat but then we turn away from the coast at Nam Dinh and

plunge between tall limestone karst hills. Stopping to climb Lying Dragon Mountain we get great views down to the waterlogged farmland below. Every square metre is being used, right up to the edge of the cliffs. Almost all of the roads sit on raised causeways between the fields of rice. Hundreds of thousands of people work the land, 60% of the national workforce, spending all day stood in ankle deep mud, planting, rotavating, harvesting. It looks to be a tough way to make a living.



Lying Dragon Mountain



View towards Nam Dinh



Rice planting



It's a muddy business

Weaving through the karst mountains, the view provides a good distraction from the headwind. This smaller road, away from

the highway brings us into contact with more people who are intrigued by the tandem and its riders. In the bigger towns we had found a few people who could speak a little English but here in the countryside communication is a bit trickier. We manage to translate the frantic waving of a man who had sped past us on his scooter and stopped by a house though. We want us to pull over, so we do and he sits us down to enjoy a beer and then sends us off with a huge parcel of sticky rice wrapped in a banana leaf. Vietnam feels much more friendly and forthcoming than its neighbours and already we know we'll want to use all of that 15 day limit to explore as much as possible.



Hundreds of boats ferry people out amongst the karst hills at Trang An



Enjoying a drink in a village house



(c) Kirsty McGaul Professional Photography 2016



Karst Monolith

The towns get bigger and busier until we finally arrive in Hanoi itself. The mass of scooters swarm around us and I have

to control the space around the bike as best I can to try and stop them catching a pannier. Train lines cut between cluttered streets and a few modern apartment block stand tall in amongst older, colonial style buildings.



In the thick of it



The starting grid



Hanoi train line



The old and the new in Hanoi

We make our way to meet Quyn, who has offered to host us for a

couple of days. After a warm shower and putting almost all our clothes into the washing machine we sit down for some dinner and listen to some of Quyn's stories about life in this rapidly changing country. Although the communist regime has loosened off since the 1970's Quyn thinks they are still 10 years behind China in terms of their political and economic development.



Quyn, an IT manager at a local university and expert in the cultivation of shrimp

And it's China we want to see next so in the morning, as a chilly wind whips round the city, we make our way to their

embassy. We're armed with a sheaf of booking confirmations for flights and hotels covering our entire 'intended trip'. This is one of the farcical requirements for making a visa application and we'd cancelled all of them immediately after booking, counting on the fact that no-one would check.



Ladder street, Hanoi



Well co-ordinated policemen on bikes



Veg stalls on a side street in Hanoi

Earlier in the year there had been a timely announcement that China and Britain had made a reciprocal arrangement to give each other's citizens two year, multi entry visas. With this in mind we hand everything over to the lady behind the bullet proof glass and she immediately crosses everything out that we'd asked for. "I can only give you 30 days and two entries". It's clear this is non negotiable even with a big smile and an explanation that we want more time to enjoy their country and more entries so we can visit Hong Kong and Taiwan. She doesn't go for it and tells us to come back in four days to collect our passports. Looks like our Plan A is on it's way out the window.

Despondently we venture out to see a few of the cities sights. Walking round Hanoi is very difficult. The pavements are packed full of parked scooters and any space left is occupied by street stalls with tiny chairs and tables for their customers to perch on. It's easier to walk in the road but then you run the risk of being run over. There is an elevated metro line being built and by the looks of things it's long overdue.



Pavement business meeting

CHỦ TỊCH
HỒ - CHÍ - MINH



The final resting place of Ho Chi Minh



Souvenir Ho busts



Street Barbecue



Cook-it-yourself

The \$20 rear wheel has done us proud by surviving the last 900km to deliver us here. It may have shed a few spokes along the way and not being able to stop pedalling wasn't ideal but it kept spinning which is all we ever asked of it. I have a good mind to send a congratulatory message to the manufacturer for building such a fine wheel for such a low price. The new hub has cost us many times more and we're keen to get our hands on it to get it built onto the old rim. But Vietnamese Customs have got it and we're waiting to hear where we need to go and how much we'll need to pay to release it.



A group back patting exercise in one of the parks

To pass the time we catch the 6am train to Hai Phong and then a hydrofoil to Cat Ba island on the edge of Ha Long Bay. Cat Ba town is an ugly concrete strip of tall hotels but it sits amongst one of the most beautiful collection of islands in the world. We go to find some 2nd breakfast and investigate our options for getting around the bay. While perusing the menu in an all fresco seating area there's an almighty crash and we're

showered with dust. A brick has fallen onto the canopy from high up on the building site next door and knocked a speaker off the wall a few millimetres from my right elbow. A very close shave resulting in a very embarrassed café owner and a free breakfast. Escaping serious injury never tasted so good.



Views over Ha Long Bay

None of the multitude of tour boats on offer appeal to us so instead we book something a bit different. The next day we're out on the water learning to use Stand Up Paddle boards (SUP) instead. With instruction from Max from Asia Outdoors we move from sitting to kneeling to standing to swimming several times before we get the hang of it. Then it becomes a very tranquil way to move between the massive towers of limestone that jut out of the turquoise water.



Kneeling paddle boarding



Stand Up Paddle Boarding



Fisherman rowing with his feet



Floating village





We move away from the busier parts of the bay and it feels like we've got the place to ourselves. We're being watched though. High up on one of the rocks we hear the calls from a

troop of Cat Ba Langur monkeys. These are the most endangered primates in the world with only around 70 existing in the wild so to catch a glimpse is an extremely rare treat. Overlooking us are 7-8 of them, 10% of the world's population.



If you look closely you can see the rare Cat Ba Langur
It's a short visit to Ha Long Bay and by late evening we're
back in Hanoi. Quynh has been a great host but we've also been

helped out by Nick who provided an address for our parcels to be sent to. He has invited us to stay a night with him so we pack up and trundle across town to join him for lunch. He's just got back from a trip that covered about 10 countries in 3 weeks, the route determined by finding the cheapest flights between the most interesting places. While we chat and munch an email pops up on my phone. It's FedEx telling me that our parcel has cleared customs so we can collect it. The bad news is that bike parts are slammed with a 45% import tax so the bill is enormous. An already very expensive hub is now costing us a small fortune but we either pay up or go without. At the depot a large chunk of dong is reluctantly handed over and in return I'm handed a box containing a very shiny new hub.

We also take delivery of some smart new merino jerseys courtesy of Vulpine, a long overdue wardrobe refresh.



Nick, second Warm Showers host in Hanoi

In the morning we drop the parts off at the Hanoi Bicycle Collective with instructions to turn them into a working rear

wheel and then make our way to a boat house on the West Lake. I'd been in touch with Mr Hung, the coach for the Vietnam Rowing team who train here, and arranged for a paddle in one of their boats. Vietnam don't feature strongly in the International rowing scene but they did qualify a double scull at the London Olympics and it's the very boat that was used in 2012 that we take out.



The Vietnam Olympic training centre

Being on the water again feels great despite some very rusty technique and some chop from a gusty wind. It's very different to the sedate stand up paddleboarding but also a fair bit faster. Afterwards Mr Hung tells us that the squad will be racing in South Korea in April to try and qualify for the Rio Olympics. With any luck we'll be there at the same time so will see him again.



Taking to the water



Rowing on the West Lake, Hanoi



With the national coaches, Mr Hung on the right.

The wheel takes all day to be built so our plans to leave Hanoi that day are scuppered. Instead we make a call to Nick and he very kindly lets us come back to stay another night.



Reassuringly expensive Phil Wood hub

It then takes two days to get up to the Chinese border. Along the way I try to give the old wheel to several bike shops but they all turn it away, clearly not knowing a quality product when they see one. Eventually a bemused man takes it off my hands along with the few remaining spare spokes. As the kilometres tick down we take the opportunity for a last few bowls of Pho noodles and savour a final, oh so tasty, coffee.



Long Bien Bridge



He doesn't realise how lucky he is to be given this wheel



The misty road east from Hanoi

It's fair to say that we are apprehensive about China. We've heard so many accounts from other cyclists who've hated it for various reasons. It's just so big and our map is covered with massive towns and cities with no obvious scenic route between them. With the limited Visa, our plan B is to aim directly for Beijing so we've drawn an arbitrary line across the Eastern corner of the country to get us there. It's over 3000km that we need to cover, similar to riding from London to Istanbul.

At Dongdang a huge imposing wall looms up in front of us and after clearing the border checks we take a deep breath and ride through into our 39th country. Nihao China.



The Chinese border at Dongdang.

Phnom Penh to Lak Sao

written by Marcus | 21 February, 2016



“How many bikes have you used?” is a surprisingly common question when we tell people how far we’ve ridden. It never ceases to amaze us what the trusty steed has put up with over the last 18 months on some of the worst roads and with a hefty load of luggage on board, but it’s still going strong. Apart from changing the consumables like tyres, brake pads, chains and cassette it’s kept us going through rain, sun and snow. OK the front rack mounts have had to be welded a couple of times. Oh and I took a drill to my saddle the other day so that I could lace the sides back together. But other than that it’s all good.



Drastic measures to repair my saddle

If you ignore the rear hub that is. To be honest this old thing has had a hard life lugging the two of us up and over all those mountains, revolution after revolution, in first gear straining away. It has a right to complain a little from time to time, a call for fresh grease and new bearings. That hub had been serviced several times so far on this trip but of late the complaints have become louder, more frequent and an irritating pitch that is hard to ignore. The next reliable address we have is in Hanoi where we can pick up the new parts (new cones) but there's nearly 2000km of road to ride before we get there. It doesn't matter how good the rest of the bike is, if we haven't got a functioning rear wheel it's going nowhere. Come on hub, you can make it!



Cambodian bus, hopefully we won't need one



Or we could ride a monkey

19th January – 20th February 2016

Out of Phnom Penh the wind is behind us and we speed along following the Tonle Sap river on a flat plain. Highway 6 is a friendly place with smiles, waves and 'bye byes' a plenty from pyjama clad women and children. You can find mobile 'shops' that serve up refreshing iced coffee in a bag from the side of a scooter or sugar cane juice freshly squeezed in the markets. To combat the high summer temperatures the houses are built on stilts to catch the breeze, hammocks are slung underneath for lazy afternoons in the shade.



Iced coffee to go



Happy in the hammock



Sugar cane press

There's music all the way too. Every few km marquees by the road, or sometimes on the road, contain wedding partys that last for days. It's a young country with 68% of the population under 30 so it's not surprising there are so many couples ready to tie the knot but it's like hosting your reception on the hard shoulder of the A4.



Pavement wedding party

At one point we ride into a dust cloud caused by some road works and emerge 20km later a fetching shade of mahogany. It's not much fun for the people who live along that stretch as entire villages are coated in dust. Even the temple we stay in on the first night, which is 300m back from the road, has a few cm on every surface.



Visibility: Poor



Adventure face

Siem Reap comes into view after 3 days and we're greeted on arrival by Seyha, our Warm Showers host who offers us a bamboo

hut to stay in. Overnight the countryside around us reverberates to the sound of Cambodian pop music as several more weddings reach the 'dance till you drop stage' but we're tired and ready for a few days rest so let the beats lull us to sleep.

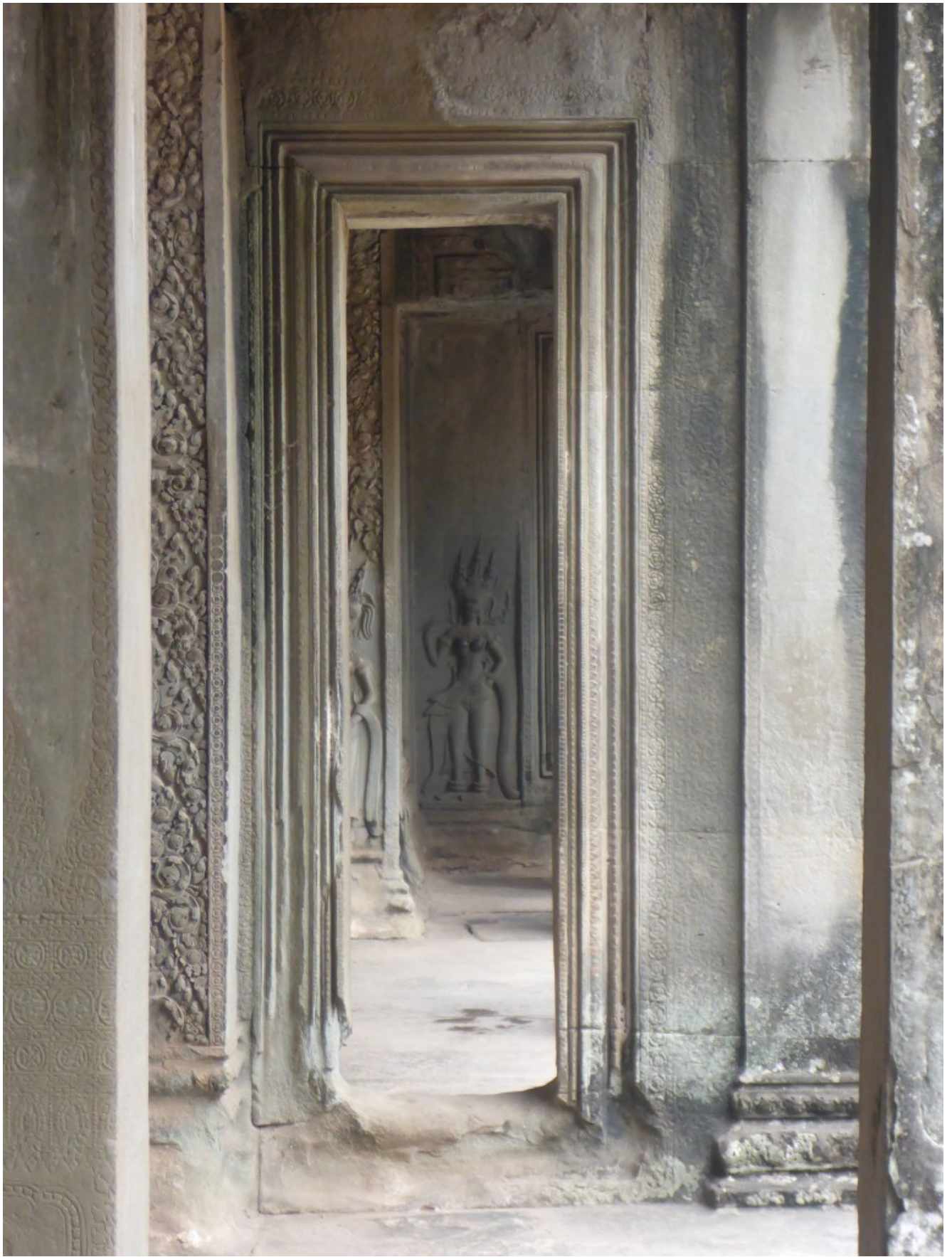
Siem Reap has grown to serve the two million visits to what Lonely Planet described as the best tourist attraction in the world: Angkor Wat. Days could be lost exploring the vast area of dense jungle that makes up the main site. Wandering through some of the many hundreds of temples that hide in the undergrowth, some of them now engulfed with tree roots, is mesmerising. We're never alone but manage to avoid most of the crowds by following advice from Seyha on where to go and when. A second day of exploring with one of the guides from Seyha's tour company, Sokha, on mountain bikes is even better as he shows us some great single track through the woods linking up some less visited sites. Joining us is Ola, a Norwegian spending time teaching in Siem Reap and with plans for his own bike tour expanding into something more ambitious after speaking to us. In the words of the famous sports brand "just do it!" we tell him.



Riding round the Angkor Wat site



Arriving at Angkor Wat

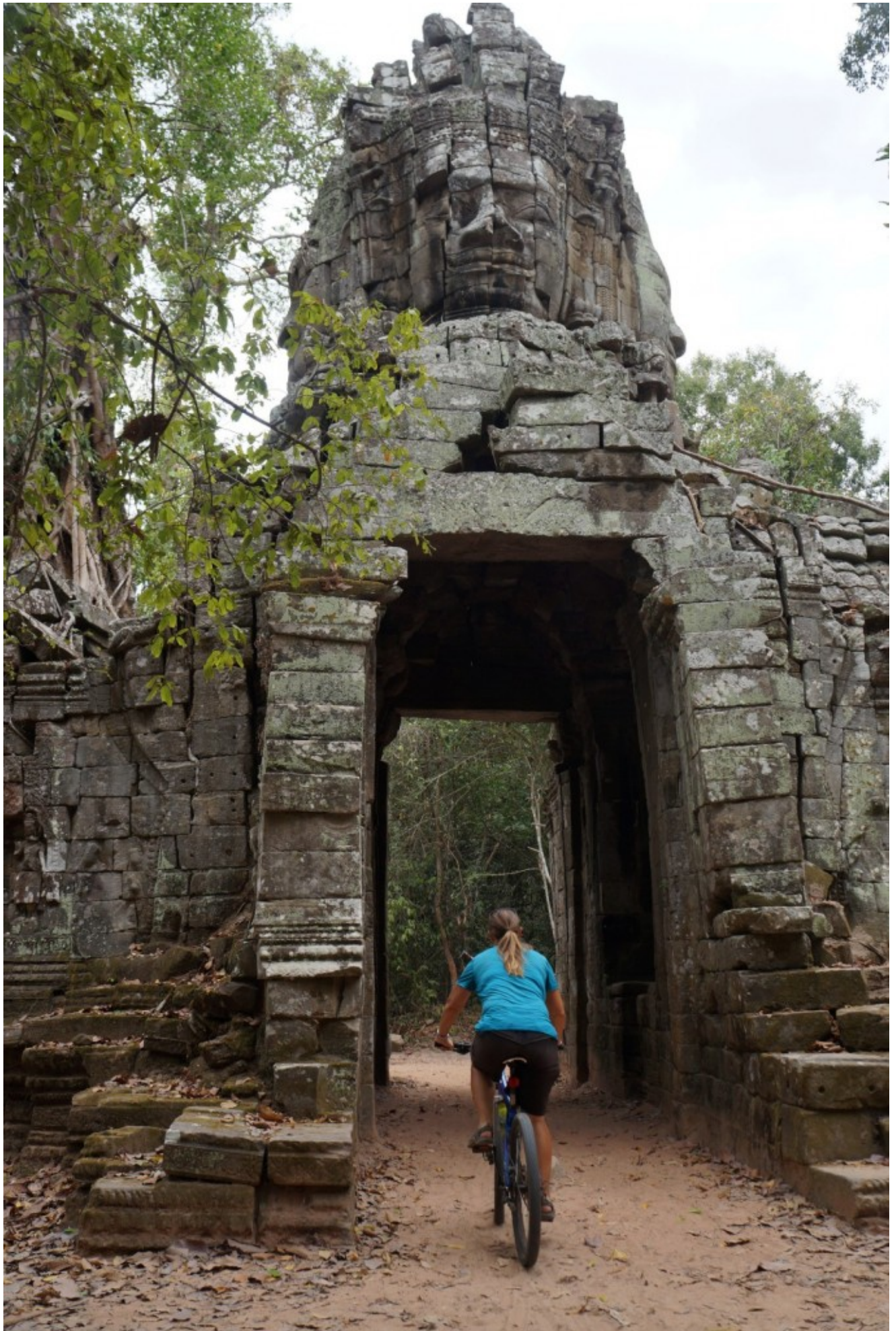




The largest temple in the world



Hidden Buddha



Tearing up the trails























Seyha is a busy man. As well as running a company offering mountain and motor bike tours around the region he also helps out at a local orphanage and church. We're invited to attend their Saturday service, as they're 7th day adventists. Afterwards we help distribute some food that has been gifted by some generous visitors. The children live in several houses as large families with adoptive parents looking after them, the idea being that they feel a greater sense of security by belonging to a defined family. It's the life's work of Tim, an Australian literally on a mission, who has built the project up from scratch over the past 20 years. It looks to be a wonderful environment that he's created and there are many more plans to keep developing the project including a butterfly farm that will take shape this year.



Tim with the food aid for his orphanage



One of the children shows us her hand puppet

A familiar bearded face arrives in town on our last evening in Siem Reap. We last saw our Irish friend Will in Bishkek back in July. Since then he's been robbed in Kazakhstan, fought off a drunk Mongolian and narrowly avoided freezing to death in China. He's just arrived in Cambodia with Elana and we have a few stories to swap so dine out at Bugs Café. Run by an imaginative Frenchman, this restaurant offers a unique menu of 'insect tapas' with the battered tarantulas and scorpion salad being particularly tasty. Will paints a bleak picture of riding China in the winter so we hope our experience will be more enjoyable. In the meantime here's an ode to his endeavours in the traditional form:

*Across China Will wanted to pedal
A challenge made hard by the devil
The weather was poor
His bum became sore
But he did it so give him a medal.*



A lot, lot tastier than it looks, believe me.



Battered tarantula

We leave Siem Reap as a cold snap takes hold. Seyha's mum is wrapped in a scarf, gloves and hat and fears for us riding in this weather. It's 18°C so we pull our socks up a bit.



Seyha with his parents, braving the cold

The Angkor Wat 'city' covers a vast area spread over 154 square miles so we find a couple of other sites far from Siem Reap including the curious Kehal Speam, a set of Hindu carvings in a stream bed and a couple of days later the hill top ruin of Preah Vihear. Access to this one up on the border with Thailand is via the steepest hill we've ever seen (from the back seat of a scooter).



Kehal Speam, carved into the rock of a stream bed



Kehal Speam



A worthwhile \$5 to get a ride on a scooter up the steep hill to Preah Vihear



Preah Vihear

Meanwhile the rear hub has been particularly unhappy. I found that the freehub was loose when I had the bike in bits at Seyhas house but it's still making a racket. I dismantle it again on the forecourt of a tool shop with the owner handing me alan keys as I perform the surgery, but it only takes 50km before it all comes loose again. Having to do this twice a day is not an exciting prospect.



The main occupation seemed to be chopping up tapioca and laying it on the side of the road to dry

The road is now heading east towards Stung Treng. If the ground wasn't scorched enough from the sun its also now on fire. They use the slash and burn technique to clear old scrub before the new season of planting begins. The fires are left to do their thing without any control and often come very close to houses and huts. We've slept in a couple of abandoned buildings and spent half the night sniffing the air for smoke. The other half is spent brushing away irritating biting ants.



Slash and burn



Home for the night, comes complete with 100,000 nibbling residents



After the fires have passed through

From the huts that are occupied and haven't been burnt down children watch us quizzically. They're naked up to about the age of 2 when they get a T-shirt to wear until earning the right to be fully clothed when they're 4. These communities live from hand to mouth and it wouldn't surprise me if their diet included some of the spiders and grubs we thought were just a tourist novelty in Siem Reap.



A towel is perfectly acceptable attire



We cross the mighty Mekong just before Stung Treng, sadly not by boat as the huge bridge has killed the ferry business. Our last night in Cambodia is in a welcoming riverside temple with the monks watching with interest while I pull the hub apart yet again.



We may be waiting a while for this ferry to leave



Our final Cambodian host complete with utility shirt for storing his smart phone and cigarettes

Then we reach Laos and the fluttering flag bearing a hammer and sickle announces that it's our first communist country. On top of the cost of the visa we're liberated from an extra \$2 at the border "to pay for the stamp". It's a known scam but for such a small amount we don't spend much time arguing.



The Laos border from Cambodia

Straight away the shouting starts: "SABADEE!" "SABADEE SABADEE SABADEE!". The kids love shouting the Laotian greeting for hello whenever they see us and it becomes a constant chant as we spin past each house. The scenery is much like the northern parts of Cambodia with shallow hills and not much colour. Off to our right is the Bolavan plateau where a lot of the excellent coffee we've been drinking is grown.



Sabadee!

We find more greenery as we come back closer to the river. The Mekong broadens out and fractures through 4000 islands just

north of the border. We catch a boat across to one of them: Don Det, which is the allocated tourist island. The most popular past time here seems to be drifting down the river in an inner tube while drinking beer. As we ride up to the top of the island we hear one gap year traveller ask "Do you think they're using that bike to travel around?".



Taking to the water on the Mekong

We use another boat to travel the short distance to the next island Don Som. More a few planks strapped to two canoes than a boat but it gets us there safely. In contrast to Don Det this island doesn't get many visitors and when we arrive at a small temple they're happy to help us out by letting us set up our bed on an outdoor platform. The wide river is a stones throw away and begins to light up with reds and oranges as we take our evening dip with a few of the monks. They bring us candles and pillows later while we settle into our al fresco bedroom.



Open Water Swimming Society's photo of the week



Every monk in every temple we've stayed in starts their day by sweeping



An old US army shell is used as the bell for the call to prayer.

After the rural and roadless Don Som comes the biggest island Don Kohg, linked to the mainland by a bridge and much busier as a result. It's easy to forget that we're in the middle of a river as we ride the 10km to the northern tip of the island. We decide to have an easy afternoon after several long days in the saddle so I spend the time relaxing with the hub in pieces again. But this time there are far too many pieces. The interface where the freehub sits against the hub itself has disintegrated with a set of broken teeth that a bare knuckle boxer would be proud of. In short it means we have no ability to drive the rear wheel and no means to fix it. I begin to wonder whether Max's idea of towing a canoe might not be such a bad one for this scenario as we could take to the water instead.



Riding on Don Som

Squeezing a tube of super glue into all the offending parts and trying to tighten it up buys us another 37m before it packs up completely. The pedals turn uselessly while the bike stays still.



A very broken hub



Temple accomodation on Don Khong

A long walk, a short hitch then an 100km bus ride and we arrive in Pakse, the nearest city. Some people run away scared

when I begin enquiring about bike shops. Most others know they can't help before I've even finished asking them.

"Do you know where..." "No no no no!"

"Do you have a..." "No no no no!"

"Where can I find..." "No no no no!"

It's a frustrating reaction as I can't even begin trying to mime or point before they turn me away. Even a mountain bike hire company unhelpfully tells me that there are no bike shops in Pakse which seems highly unlikely.



Pakse

I want to replace the entire rear wheel as there is zero chance of finding a hub with the necessary specification to suit a tandem. It should be easy to find a new wheel though as the bike has 26" wheels, a size chosen for being ubiquitous around the world. Except in Laos it seems where almost all bikes have 24" wheels. When I eventually get to the main market and find a shop filled with roughly bicycle shaped items there's a stack of the small wheels in the corner and my heart sinks. But then, up on the wall like some kind of trophy hangs a single bright red hoop with a shiny black rear hub laced onto it. It's 26", this could work! They screw on a 5 speed block for me, I hand over \$20 and everyone leaves happy.



Pakse market



"Do you have this iPhone in orange?"



After an hour sanding the red paint off the braking surface then with some careful bodging I get it onto the bike and a

brief test spin brings positive results. It's 900km to Hanoi, where a new hub that I've ordered from The States should be waiting for us, and 'the red menace' has a weight of expectation to get us there now. This will be tougher than anything the Chinese manufacturers had ever imagined possible when they built this wheel but we have to hope it's been massively over-engineered.

Seeing me fixing our bike outside a café a man turns up with his bike and asks if I can take a look. A few tweaks here and there and I've got it running smoothly again so we celebrate with a Beerlao. A career as a mobile bike mechanic joins the possible job options list.

We share our monastic accommodation in Pakse with fellow temple touring cyclists Jacob and Alex and enjoy stories from each other's journeys in the town's only Indian restaurant. They have come up against the "No no no no!" response a few times too in cafes that clearly have food but refuse to serve them. Jacob's theory is that perhaps the state looks after their businesses so they don't need the hassle of trying to help troublesome foreigners. Communism at work perhaps?



Jacob (UK) and Alex (Canada)

Back on the road everything seems to be going smoothly again. The wheels go round when we pedal. People in the villages seem to be friendlier than the townies and enjoy serving us the now staple noodle soup occasionally livened up with some BBQ chicken feet or an embryonic boiled egg. A policeman invites us to join him for a beer where he keeps telling me how pretty Kirsty is and how handsome I am. We're not sure if we should be more worried about his advances or the loaded pistol on his belt given his state of inebriation.



Crunchy chicken feet



Laos' number one export

The turning for the next town, Savannakhet comes and goes. We decide to skip it as we're preferring the rural roads. But a

couple of km later there's an ominous 'ping' from the back wheel. Picking it up and giving it a quick spin produces a sound like a tinkling wind chime. There are 3 broken spokes and we don't have spares or a tool to take the freewheel off. But we'd always wanted to see Savannakhet so hitch a lift in a pickup to see if we can find a spoke vendor.

"I'm too busy" is the unexpected response when we arrive at Holier bike shop. "Don't worry, I just want to buy the tools and spokes and do the work myself". I can see the freewheel tool sat in a locked cabinet. "My wife has the key and she's not here so you can't have it. We're closing now so you'll have to leave." Confused and annoyed we're bundled out of the shop and told they open again at 9 tomorrow.

This is the only decent bike shop in town and though 2 other shops try and help they don't have what we need. We have no choice but to stay the night and try again in the morning, hoping they'll be more helpful after a nights sleep. We spot a patch of ground in a park by a derelict café and begin setting up the tent.

"No no no no no!", the now familiar Laotian greeting is being shouted at us through the tent walls. We'd been given the thumbs up by some men who are living nearby but now someone else has turned up and wants us to move on. "Yes yes yes yes yes! " I reply. The man mimes an attacking animal, then an axe murderer so it appears he's worried about our safety. But we're not scared so tell him we're happy to take our chances. He gives up and reluctantly says "OK OK" before leaving us in peace.

At 9 the next morning I wait for the shutter to come up at Holier bike shop. At 9:30 a women in a helmet peeks out, pushing a scooter. "No no no no no!" she shouts when she sees me. I'm not giving up that easily though so get past her and point at the tool and at a wheel they have hanging from the ceiling. "No no no no no!" She repeats. I drop to my knees and

muster the most desperate, pleading look I can, hands pressed together in prayer but she now won't even look at me. "No no no no no!". I'm back on the pavement as she locks the door and scoots off leaving me close to tears and standing helplessly with the broken wheel. Was it too much to ask for a bike shop to sell me a bike tool? Is she afraid of tall men with beards?

I wander aimlessly along the street not sure what to do next. My saviour appears from a small, grubby shop front, behind him sits piles of bike bits. "Can you remove this free wheel and replace the broken spokes?" I ask. "Yes, no problem, do you want it done right now?". This is the polar opposite of the Holier experience and without wanting to cast aspersions the difference could well be that this shop is run by a Vietnamese man.

Soon after, with a full compliment of spokes on a true wheel and a few spares for good measure the tandem is off again. It's sunny, we're smiling and nothing can stop us now.

'Ping'. 10 km later another spoke breaks. Shouting and kicking the bike would not help in this situation I calmly say to myself. The spoke is on the free wheel side again and we still don't have the tool to get it off. But having only 5 gears means there are big gaps between the cogs. Possibly big enough to pass a spoke through and with some careful bending maybe I can thread it up into the wheel? It works! We're off and riding yet again.



Push



Bend



Tighten

In total 11 spokes broke during our time with the 'red menace'. All of them on the drive side and on the leading edge so it seems the torque from the tandem going up hill was the problem rather than the weight. By feeding new spokes through the gears they could all be replaced on the road without taking the wheel off.

As we move quickly north on Highway 13 there's an evening with Mr Kong, an English teacher, involving an aborted rendition of Bohemian Rhapsody at a karaoke bar. A lucky escape for all concerned. Then we arrive in Thakek in time to watch the celebrations for Chinese new year from the bell tower of a temple as the town's skyline blazes with fireworks.



Thakek, with views across to Thailand on the far bank of the Mekong



The sky at night in Thakek on New Years Eve

It's fair to say Laos hasn't been our favourite country so far but it's ready to try and redeem itself. From Thakek we're joined by Jan from Belgium who we'd met outside a cake shop. Together we ride into the limestone karst landscape that Laos is famous for. Huge, vertical towers of rock loom alongside us, there are inviting swimming holes and interesting caves. This is much more pleasant riding than the flat main road that had brought us here.



Riding with Jan



A vastly improved view



Morning dip

As lunchtime approaches we spot several tables outside a building filled with people eating so stop to investigate. It's actually someone's house rather than a restaurant but the owner invites us in anyway. He's throwing a party for the new year celebrations and wants us to join them. More food and drink arrives than we can possibly get through, even 3 hungry cyclists are beaten.

Our stomachs are heavy once we manage to get going again and winch up a long steep hill to a large reservoir. Jan continues on to the next guest house while Kirsty and I stop at a small temple.

From a house behind the temple an old monk appears at the window and beckons us up to see him. Hapengun seems thrilled to meet us and we sit cross legged on the floor while he serves up some coffee and biscuits. Next the bedding is

brought out and he climbs under the covers to demonstrate how this is where we should sleep. The rice cooker goes on, he switches the TV to one of the karaoke channels and we spend the rest of the evening trying to converse through hand signals and laughter.



The most amazing monk



Friends for life

In the morning there's more karaoke and he presents gifts of toothpaste, washing powder and soap. It must be time for our weekly wash. Finally he hugs me and places a pendant with a small brass figure around my neck. This has to be the nicest monk we've stayed with. He wants us to stay longer and we'd dearly like to but Jan is waiting for us and there's more road to ride so reluctantly we say our goodbyes.



Kirsty receiving her lucky bracelet

Winding round the petrified forest that sits in the reservoir we then climb up and over another ridge, bump over some roadworks and arrive in Lak Sao. Sat outside a café are two loaded touring bikes and two dusty figures are sat just behind them. We last saw Sven in that great cyclists meeting place, Bishkek and like many others he chose to ride through China to get down to SE Asia. With him is Mike, an American who has accidentally found himself riding around the world. He has spent the last 4 years working in Vietnam as he fancied taking a break from the bike, but now he's on the move again. His is an open ended plan with no fixed agenda or time scale so I suspect it'll be a very long time before he's back in New York.



Flooded jungle is now a petrified forest



Mike's Fuji. He's lost count of the number of punctures those skinny tyres have suffered

After lunch we all go our separate ways as Jan, Sven and Michael are continuing in Laos while Kirsty and I head up towards the Vietnamese border. On the way we get given some banana leaves filled with sticky rice while I'm busy replacing a spoke. Then we're dragged into another new year party to drink something green and strong while throwing bean bags at each other. A camp spot overlooking a stream is the scene of our last night in Laos. We'll be leaving with mixed emotions but if the last two days are anything to go by this country deserves a second chance so we may well be back one day.



More New Year partying

It's a climb to the border in the morning and once up and over we try and coast down the other side. The chain goes slack and

there's a nasty grinding noise. The freewheel is jammed so now we can't stop pedalling! This should make the next stretch through Vietnam more challenging.



It's hard to buy shoe laces in a country where everyone wears sandals so you can't be too picky with the colour when you do find some



A number one or a number two?