

THE COAST
CRUISING
ON BIKES

Bangkok & Beyond

At times it's like cycling through old Siam, with fishing villages, cliff-top temples and seafood galore as the distractions. Pedal-powered and satay-fuelled, John Borthwick and friends free-wheel down the western shore of the Gulf of Thailand

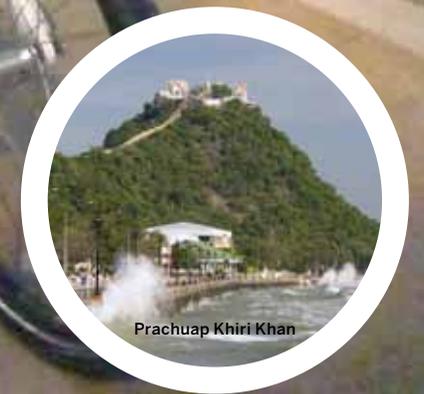
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Soft shell crab



Langur monkeys



Prachuap Khiri Khan

W

e're cranking along on mountain bikes, a five-pack peloton of foreigners, deep in the heart of

Thailand. Fishing villages to the left, limestone mountains to the right and a 5km, she-oak-shaded beach shimmering ahead. We've even got a tailwind.

Of all the things that I love on this four-day cycle ride down the western shore of the Gulf of Thailand – and let me list some: the balmy sea, the beachside eateries, the good roads and lack of traffic – there is one that stands out: no hills. I love them for not being here.

While motoring out of town in preparation for the "No Hills Tour," I had asked the guy next to me what he did for a living. "I'm a dinosaur," he said. "A Tyrannosaurus Rex, actually." "T-Rex" is, in fact, Jeremy, an English actor from the stage spectacular *Walking With Dinosaurs*. Together with three others, we had embarked on a 240km cycle ride from Bangkok down to Chumphon, but first we had to slip the Gordian knot of Bangkok's infamous traffic. Our Thai driver, Wattana – or Woody – pointed his van south-west to Samut Sakhon and

WE'RE PEDALLING ACROSS A LANDSCAPE OF MANGROVES, SALT PANS AND FISH FARMS

an hour later, with bikes unloaded and helmets on, we were ready to roll. Our guide, an Australian named Jason, leads us off the highway and straight into a Thailand untouched by mall sprawl, high-rises or happy hours.

Soon enough, we're pedalling through a landscape of salt pans, fish farms, mangroves and miscellaneous curiosities. "Those are swallow condos," says Jason, pointing towards a collection of multi-storey buildings that could be mistaken for apartment blocks were it not for the fact there aren't any windows. I see small holes in the walls and, indeed, swallows are flying in and out. Inside, thousands of nests are "farmed" commercially for the makings of the Thai delicacy known as swallow's nest soup. ▶



Prachuap
Khiri Khan

CYCLE:

* Grasshopper Adventures' five-day "Cruising the Coast to Samui" excursion, from Bangkok to Chumphon, costs S\$1,100/A\$821. The nine-day option includes Bangkok and Koh Samui. The fully supported tour includes vehicle, guide, meals, bike, helmet and accommodation. The difficulty level is moderate, with few hills and travel mostly on sealed back roads. tel: +66 (0)2 280 0832, www.grasshopperadventures.com

Prachuap
Khiri Khan

The roads are flat and smooth and the riding virtually effortless, but if anyone wants to wimp-out – and no one does – they can just join Woody, who's following in the van. The five of us ride easily and at an equal pace, with no closet Contador or Armstrong wannabe with a "yellow jersey" complex trying to sprint all the way to Koh Samui.

South of Hua Hin we pull in to our first overnight stop, a little beachfront hotel at Pran Buri. Over dinner we get to know one another better. Our passports might say United Kingdom, Thailand, Korea, Canada and Australia, but national identities are soon less relevant than sore butts and commentary on calf muscles. Early the next morning we set out again, this time on a road so close to the ocean that spray bursts across it. The tailwind helps us along

and within a couple of hours we're amid the jungle-clad limestone ramparts of Sam Roi Yot ("Three Hundred Peaks") National Park.

Jason, 41, has spent seven years leading cycle tours in Thailand and knows these back roads like his own handlebars. His route takes us over sealed and occasionally unsealed roads and keeps us off main highways for all but 30km. We're pedalling mostly through the elongated and lyrically named province of Prachuap Khiri Khan.

Pacing one another, we cover 40km easily before pulling into a beachfront restaurant near Kui Buri, where we demolish the first of our memorable lunches – this one consisting of soft-shell crab, *tom yam* soup, *pad Thai* noodles and Chang beer. After that, the afternoon's ride seems slow going. My legs are leaden, the heat bears



Tom yam soup

Sam Roi Yot
National Park

EXPLORE:

*** WAGHOR TROPICAL AQUARIUM** Just south of Prachuap Khiri Khan town is the spectacular but little publicised Waghor Tropical Aquarium. Its displays pulse with tropical fish of just about every description, and rays and sharks prowl overhead in walk-through tunnels. www.hua-hin-travel.com/huahin-attractions-waghor-aquarium

*** ELEPHANT POLO** Host of the annual King's Cup tournament, Hua Hin is the best place in the world to catch the niche sport of elephant polo. Now in its 12th year, the competition has gone jumbo, from the original two-day bash to a week-long extravaganza in September featuring about 12 teams and 40 players from 15 countries. www.anantaraelephantpolo.com

*** DON HOI LORT** The time-warp fishing village of Don Hoi Lort, in Samut Songkhram province north of Petchaburi town, is named for its tiny shellfish speciality. "It's the only place in the world where you'll find *hoi lort*," says a local as we tuck into this tasty crustacean, which is shaped like a bamboo shoot and served stir-fried with garlic and basil. www.thai-tour.com/eng/samutsongkram



down and I seem to be labouring in “catch-up” mode. As we roll through a gallery of irresistible images, the photo stops come thick and fast. Fishing fleets framed by blue dragon islands. Watermelon sellers, meandering cattle, empty waves and half-moon bays. Plus curious place names such as Brassiere Beach, which honours two aptly shaped islands that jut demurely just offshore.

By late afternoon, with 88km behind us, we’re done for the day. With tender tails and twinging calves, we wheel into a seafront hotel in the province’s capital, Prachuap Khiri Khan town. It’s a friendly place, flanked by two sweeping horseshoe bays and watched over by a headland temple. After a

WE’RE GREETED BY A TROOP OF PUNK-HAIRED LANGUR MONKEYS

massage, snooze or both, we head out with appetites primed for dinner at the town’s busy open-air night market, where the hawker food is spicy and hot and the beer is just the opposite.

The next morning, we pedal across the runway of an air force base to a protected forest. We’re greeted not by flyers but by a troop of langur monkeys. Sporting punk hairdos and white-framed eyes, they swoop from the trees to gently cadge bananas and pose for Jeremy’s ever-rolling helmet camera.

Along with Jason, Jeremy the dinosaur dude and Min the tireless Korean-American businesswoman, our other riding companion is a Canadian, Meagan, the principal of an international school in China. With this trail mix, our rolling conversation never lags. As much as the exhilarating scenery and cycling, it’s the friends and yarns that make the trip memorable. [◁](#)



DINE:
* Hua Hin, Prachuap Khiri Khan and other towns have lively night markets with a wide variety of fresh seafood, satay, *pad Thai*, delicious grills, fruits, juices and other drinks.

Waghor Tropical Aquarium



We take a break from riding to visit Prachuap's spectacular but little-known Waghor Tropical Aquarium. Then, back in the saddle, we cruise on beside the postcard-perfect arc of Ao Manaow – Lime Bay – named after its pale green waters.

"That's Burma over there," says Woody, pointing to low blue ridges rising to the west. We've stopped where Thailand's isthmus pinches down to its narrowest point. Our riding today is steady, sweaty work. With stomachs rumbling we find a beachside shack restaurant and knock over another wondrous country lunch – prawn soup, tempura, salad, tofu and cold beer.

This pristine coast, a favourite of Thai families, strikes me as "Thailand for Thais", because so far it remains mercifully unravaged by developers and little visited by foreigners. Tongue firmly in cheek, Jason identifies one glorious stretch of sand as *Haad Mai Rue* or "Don't-Know Beach".

We reach our last overnight stop, the off-the-map hamlet of Bankrut near Bangsaphan, where we drop our bikes and plunge into the sea. As we sluice off the sweat, grime and sunblock, and soothe weary muscles, Jason says, "You go through all those crappy days in the office, but once you're out here, it's all worthwhile."

Our final day starts with a 15km ride, much of it beneath a grand corridor of fir trees that line an empty beach. The windless sea is almost powder blue, there's little traffic. Cycle touring can't get much better.

We push on, with paddies on one side and jungle on the other. On a stop at a rubber plantation, we're shown how the oozing sap is tapped each morning, with the collected latex then squeezed into sheets. "It's a good business. Always demand for latex," our host says with a grin, surveying a forest of tomorrow's condoms and car tyres.

Back on the road, I look up to see a sign announcing Chumphon, jumping-off point for the island of Koh Samui and the end-point of our journey. It's been an easy, 54km day. Woody packs the bikes into the van and we settle in for our last, 100% Thai feast – Thai seafood, Thai chef, plus Thai beach, beer, table and Thai waiter, and a menu that includes "criticise with vegetable".

We give the criticised vegetables a break and start with chicken satay. The talk is about how best to describe this trip to others. "With great difficulty," I suggest. After all, any account of it starts like a joke: "These cyclists, see, are pedalling down the road – there's a Korean, a Canadian, an Australian ... and a dinosaur." 🐊

STAY:

- **ASARA VILLA AND SUITE**, 53 Hua Hin Soi 5, Hua Hin, Prachuap Khiri Khan, tel: +66 (0)3 254 7555, www.asaravillaandsuite.com
- **GOLDEN PINE BEACH RESORT**, 454/25-26 Moo 2, Tambol Paknampran, Pranburi, Prachuap Khiri Khan, tel: +66 (0)3 263 2401, www.goldenpineresorts.com/pranburi
- **HADTHONG HOTEL**, 21 Susuek Rd, Amphur Muang, Prachuap Khiri Khan, tel: +66 (0)3 260 1050, www.hadthong.com
- **BAANKANGLAOW BEACH RESORT**, 300 Moo 3, Tambol Thongchai, Bangsaphan, Prachuap Khiri Khan, tel: +66 (0)3 269 5123, www.baanklangaow.net
- **CABANA RESORT**, 69 Moo 8, Thung Wua Laen Beach, Chumphon, tel: +66 (0)7 756 0245, www.cabana.co.th

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