

Cycle Touring Laos (3)

Pedals and Paddy Fields



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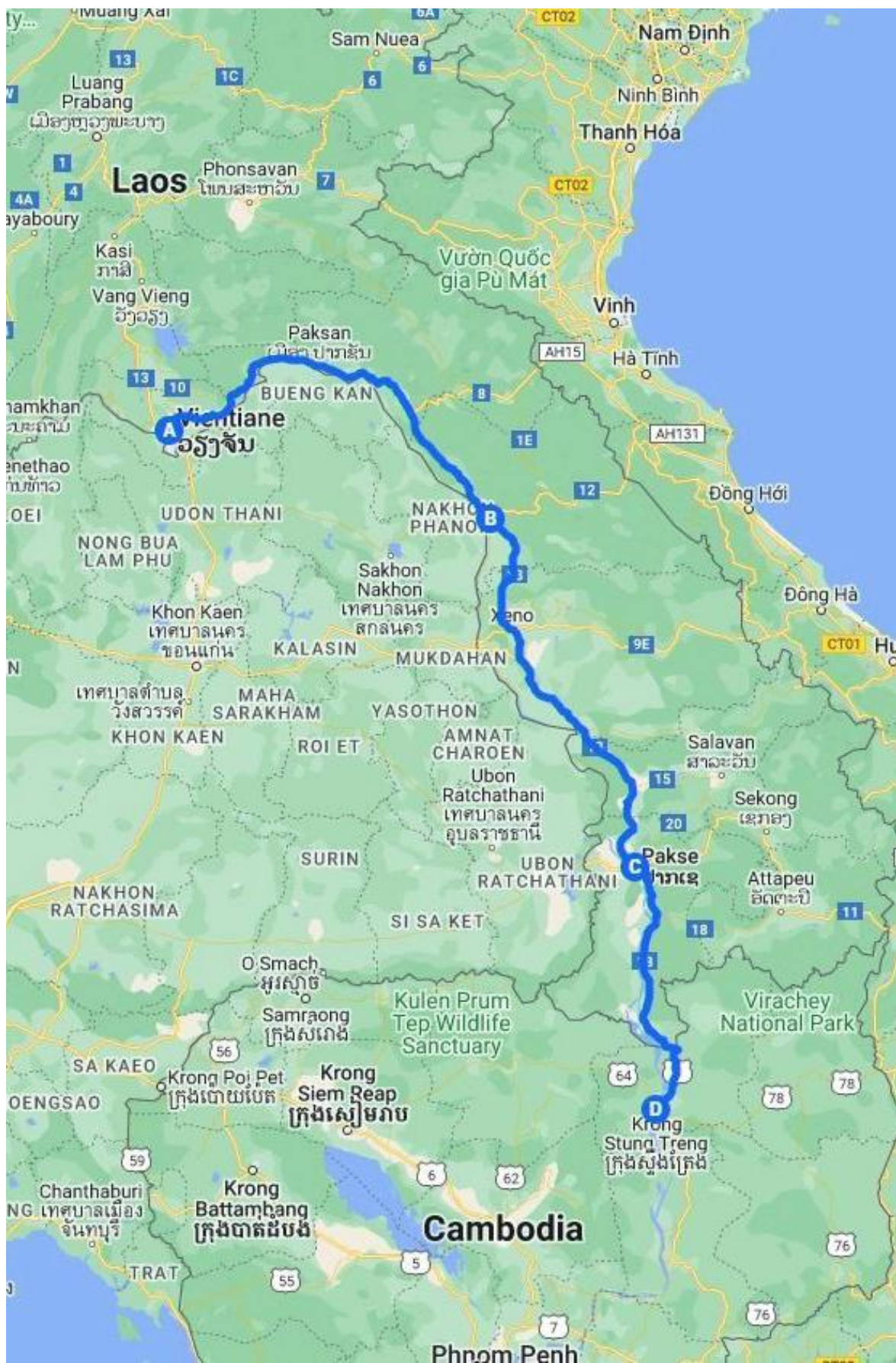
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Thank You

I am immensely grateful for the kindness of strangers and the random acts of generosity we encountered during our cycle ride in Laos. It was truly a humbling experience.

My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her efforts, there would be no record of my journey.

I owe a great deal to my friend Val Abrahamse for managing my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dream.

Lastly, a big shoutout to Gerda Van Der Sandt, who made my writing more coherent and patiently tolerated my use of the Oxford comma.

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Cycle Touring Laos

Pedals and Paddy Fields: Fourteen Days Across Laos

Prologue

There's a unique anticipation that comes with embarking on a bicycle journey—an openness to the unknown, a readiness to embrace discomfort, and a hope that the road will reveal something new about the world and oneself. Our 14-day, 966-kilometre ride through Laos was more than a physical challenge; it was a passage through landscapes, cultures, and moments that would shape our memories and perspectives long after the final kilometre.

Udon Thani, Thailand to Vientiane, Laos (80 km)

The morning air in Udon Thani was thick with the scent of smoky BBQ stands as we pedalled towards the border. Tania's infectious smile mirrored my own anticipation as we pedalled toward the border, pausing only for fresh coconut juice—a simple pleasure that set the tone for the days ahead.

Crossing the Friendship Bridge over the Mekong was a symbolic threshold. The \$30 visa felt like a ticket to adventure, and the shift in atmosphere was immediate. French colonial architecture, the aroma of strong coffee, and the sight of baguettes stacked high in market stalls signalled our arrival in Vientiane.







The city's gentle pace was a balm after the rush of travel; we settled in, savouring green curry and cold Lao beer by the riverside, watching the city's life unfold.

The next day, we wandered through ornate temples and the bustling morning market, absorbing the city's blend of tradition and modernity. As the sun set, the riverside came alive—a communal celebration of food, conversation, and the simple joy of being outdoors.

The border crossing was more than a change of country; it was a reminder of how arbitrary lines shape lives and cultures. The warmth of Vientiane's people and the city's accessibility made me realise how travel by bicycle invites connection—every stop, every meal, every smile is an opportunity to engage.





Vientiane to Pak Ngum (71 km)

As we cycled out of Vientiane, we were drawn to Pha Luang, Laos's most sacred monument. The legend of Buddha's breastbone enclosed within its stupa lent a sense of reverence to our departure. The road soon narrowed, flanked by rice fields and temples peeking from the forest. Children walked to school, their independence a testament to the safety and simplicity of rural life.

We stocked up on baguettes and bananas, noting the prevalence of new cars—a curious contrast to the rustic surroundings. The day's ride was gentle, the scenery lush and welcoming. By early afternoon, we found bungalows nestled among green fields, a peaceful haven that encouraged us to slow down and appreciate the quiet beauty of the countryside.

Rural Laos offered a lesson in contentment. The absence of urgency, the rhythm of daily chores, and the hospitality of strangers reminded me that happiness often resides in simplicity.







Pak Ngum to Paksan (87 km)

Departing Pak Ngum came with a symphony of sights and sounds: mountains looming to the left, the Mekong glinting to the right, and villages where vendors offered dried and smoked fish with generous smiles. Children called “Sabai dee!” from stilted homes, and even the stray dogs seemed at peace.

We biked into Paksan with time to spare, grateful for the chance to shower and explore the riverside. The evening meal was a celebration of local flavours—a ritual that became a cherished part of each day.

The friendliness of the Lao people was striking. Their openness and curiosity made every interaction feel genuine, and I found myself reflecting on the power of small gestures—a wave, a greeting, a shared snack—to bridge cultural divides.









Paksan to Vieng Kham (90 km)

Rain greeted us at dawn, and we waited, hoping for a break in the weather. By mid-morning, the drizzle persisted, but we saddled up for the ride to Vieng Kham. The road grew muddier and more remote, with farmers tending cattle and planting rice in fields that seemed to stretch forever. Stalls sold petrol by the bottle and steamed duck eggs—a testament to resourcefulness.

Tania wasn't feeling well, but refused to let it slow her down. The landscape became increasingly rural, and Google Maps proved useless—reminding us that some places remain untouched by digital mapping. Vieng Kham, though absent from any map, was sizable and welcoming, offering shelter and sustenance.

The day's challenges underscored the unpredictability of travel. Yet, the willingness to adapt—to accept discomfort and uncertainty—became a source of resilience. I learned to trust the journey, even when the path was unclear.







Vieng Kham to Thakhek (108 km)

Thunderstorms were forecast, but the day dawned clear. Misty mountains framed the horizon, and the road wound through forests and villages where innovation thrived—two-wheel tractors transformed into multipurpose machines, and woven baskets carried the day's harvest.

Markets were a feast for the senses, selling everything from unfamiliar meats to illegal wildlife. Rice planters worked knee-deep in water, their backs bent in silent endurance. Near Thakhek, we encountered the Great Wall of Laos—a geological wonder shrouded in myth.

A riverside hotel offered comfort, and dinner by the Mekong was a reward for the day's effort.

The ingenuity of rural life was inspiring. People made do with what they had, adapting tools and traditions to meet their needs. The landscape, shaped by both nature and human hands, was a reminder of the delicate balance between progress and preservation.







Thakhek to Savannakhet (125 km)

Fatigue lingered from a restless night, but the road called. The terrain was undulating, and a steady breeze tested our resolve. Children filled the roads, enjoying school holidays, and temples stood as silent witnesses to centuries of faith.

A shortcut trimmed the route, but a minor accident left Tania bruised yet undeterred. Her resilience was a source of inspiration. Savannakhet welcomed us with convenient lodging near the night market.

Physical challenges are inevitable on a journey like this, but the true test is mental. The ability to push through discomfort, to find humour in mishaps, and to support each other made every setback a shared victory.









A day of rest in Savannakhet allowed for reflection and exploration. An early jog revealed ancient temples and colonial buildings, their faded grandeur hinting at stories untold. The dinosaur museum, though modest, offered a glimpse into the distant past, and a staff member's guided tour bridged the language gap.

As we wandered the riverfront, I realised that rest days are essential—not just for the body, but for the mind. They offer space to absorb experiences, to notice details, and to appreciate the journey's unfolding narrative.





Savannakhet to Muang Lakhonpheng (131 km)

Anticipating a long ride, we set out from Savannakhet early. The countryside was alive with activity—rice planting, children managing chores, and water buffalo grazing lazily. Villages provided respite, and the landscape was a patchwork of green paddies and colourful temples.

Lakhonpheng, though unmarked on maps, offered guesthouses. Our choice was less than ideal, but the discomfort was temporary—a reminder that not every day ends in luxury. Travel teaches flexibility. Plans change, expectations are challenged, and comfort becomes relative. The ability to adapt—to find joy in imperfection—is a skill honed on the road.







Muang Lakhonpheng to Pakse (112 km)

By morning, rain persisted, and we rode out under grey skies. A torn tyre was patched with duct tape, then replaced at a roadside shop—a stroke of luck that underscored the kindness of strangers. Pink water buffalo and mushroom vendors added colour to the journey, and the scent of wet, smoky wood mingled with damp earth.

By evening, we reached Pakse, hungry and grateful for a hot meal. The road is unpredictable, but generosity is a constant. The willingness of others to help—a spare tyre, a warm meal—reminded me that travel is as much about people as it is about places.









Pakse to Champasak (55 km)

The rain finally relented, and we cycled through vibrant rice fields and misty mountains. In Champasak, we stayed by the river and visited the Vat Phu ruins—a UNESCO World Heritage Site steeped in history. The ancient Khmer temple complex, set against Mount Phu Kao, was a highlight, followed by a sunset meal overlooking the Mekong.

Reflection: History is alive in Laos. The ruins, the temples, the rituals—they are threads in a tapestry that connects past and present. Cycling through these landscapes, I felt a sense of continuity, a reminder that every journey is part of a larger story.













Champasak to Don Khong Island (107 km)

A muddy track led to a ferry crossing and then south toward the Cambodian border. The Four Thousand Islands (Si Phan Don) beckoned, though a chaotic ferry landing nearly ended in disaster. Fortunately, all was well, and a riverside guesthouse provided comfort.

The next morning, we joined villagers at the market, sampling local snacks and enjoying the slow pace of island life. A boat trip upriver revealed riverside villages and fishermen at work—a fitting end to our adventure.

The islands were a place to pause, to savour the journey's end. The rhythm of village life, the beauty of the river, and the camaraderie of shared meals made me grateful for the road travelled and the lessons learned.







Maung Khong, Laos – Stung Treng, Cambodia – 100 km

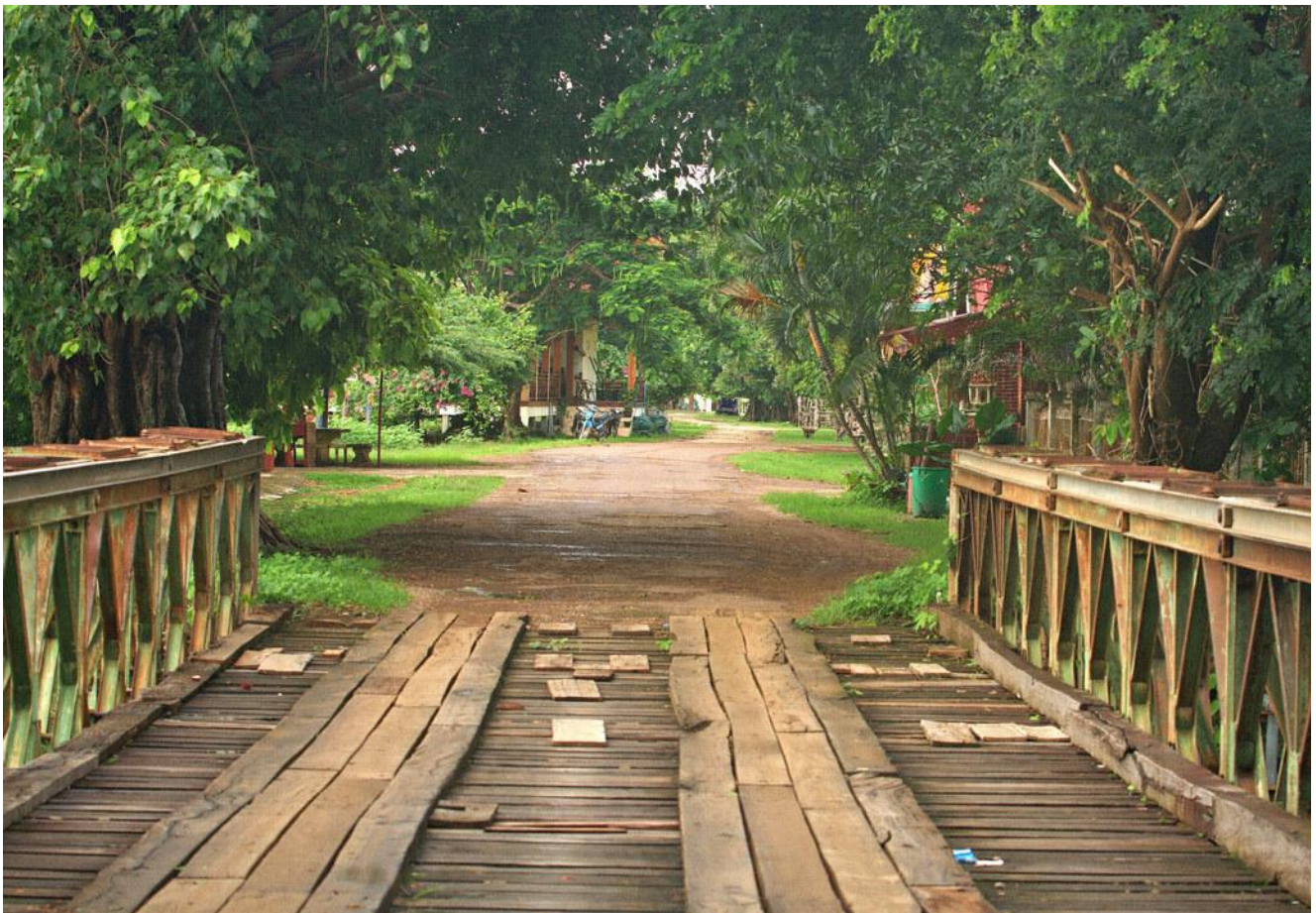
"I feel quite emotional leaving Laos," Tania said as we continued south toward the Laos-Cambodian border. The ride to the Laos checkpoint was short, and all were charged \$2 each to leave Laos, which I assumed went straight into the border official's pockets. We, nevertheless, claimed poverty, and after a long wait, our passports were stamped. This marked the end of our time in Laos and the beginning of our adventure in Cambodia. Next, we hurried off to the Cambodian border, where officials charged \$1 for not having a yellow vaccination card. Then, off to the small blue building where the visa fee was \$35 instead of \$30. Too tired to argue, we paid the money, got the stamp, and made our way to Stung Treng, the next town indicated on the map.



Epilogue

Fourteen days and nearly a thousand kilometres later, Laos had left its mark: landscapes of green, resilient people, and a journey stitched together by the rhythm of cycling and discovery. The road was both a challenge and a gift—a reminder that adventure is not just about reaching a destination, but about embracing every moment along the way.

Cycle touring in Laos was a lesson in humility, gratitude, and wonder. The country's beauty lies not only in its scenery, but in its people, its history, and its ability to reveal the extraordinary in the everyday. As I look back, I realise that the actual journey was inward—a transformation shaped by the road, the rain, and the kindness encountered at every turn.





About this Blog

This blog post documents my cycle ride in Laos, en route from Thailand to Cambodia. At the time, I accompanied Tania Bouwer on a tour of Southeast Asia. There are hundreds of different routes, and the course described is by no means the best. If the intention is to use this book as a cycle touring guide, then please keep the following in mind:

The distances

The daily distances in this book may not be the shortest between the two points, as I tend to deviate occasionally. However, the daily kilometres recorded were accurate according to my odometer. The reading often varied from distance markers and maps, and sometimes over- or under-read. I always noted the kilometres at the end of the day.

Time of year and date

This book accounts for our cycle ride in Laos between June and July 2016. Many things could have changed, and roads may now be better or worse. Places where we stayed may now be upgraded or demolished. The hills may or may not have been as steep as described, but it sure felt like it then.

Insurance

A travel insurance policy is necessary to cover theft, loss and medical problems. Some policies exclude "dangerous activities", including scuba diving, motorcycling, and trekking. I don't think cycling is dangerous but check the small print.

Clothing

We spent most days in the saddle, so ensure you have good-quality padded cycling shorts. I cycle in ordinary sandals, but one can cycle in any comfortable footwear. It is sweltering in the tropics, and I doubt if you will ever need warm clothes, except when visiting areas of higher elevations, where you may need something warmer. Personal toiletries should include insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. I recommend using a cycling helmet even though I don't use one.

The bicycle and equipment

When it comes to choosing a bicycle for your needs, the most important thing is comfort. I use a mountain bike with a Merida frame, Shimano Deore parts, Alex wheel rims, and Schwalbe tyres. To carry my belongings during the ride, I use Tubus bicycle racks and Ortlieb panniers, which can be a bit pricey, but are worth it in the long run. It's essential to know how to fix a punctured tube, and it's also convenient to have a phone holder on the handlebars for navigation purposes. I use Organic Maps or Google Maps for this. A handlebar bag is also a must-have for carrying a camera and other items you may need throughout the day.

Recommended further reading

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.



About Laos (Please refer to the Internet or your favourite travel guide for a more in-depth overview)

Capital City

The capital and largest city of Laos is Vientiane, and it provides all a capital city is expected to offer and more.

Currency

The official national currency in Laos is the Lao kip(K). Although only the kip is legally negotiable in everyday transactions, Thai baht (B) and US dollars (US\$) are occasionally accepted.

Language

The official language of Laos is Lao. Vientiane Lao is the widely understood dialect upon which the Lao vocabulary is based. Several languages used in Laos and Thailand are closely related to Lao, such as Tai Daeng, Phu Thai, Tai Dam, and Nyaw.

Religion

The predominant religion of Laos is Theravada Buddhism. Buddhists account for about half the country's people.

Location and size

Laos is a landlocked country on the Indochina Peninsula near the eastern extremity of mainland Southeast Asia. Laos occupies an area of 236,800 sq km, extending 1,162 km SSE – NNW and 478 km ENE – WSW. It is bordered on the N by China, the E and SE by Vietnam, the S by Cambodia, the W by Thailand, and the NW by Myanmar.

Population

At the time of our visit, the population of Laos was estimated at 7.17 million.

Internet coverage

Internet services are also widely available, particularly in town areas.



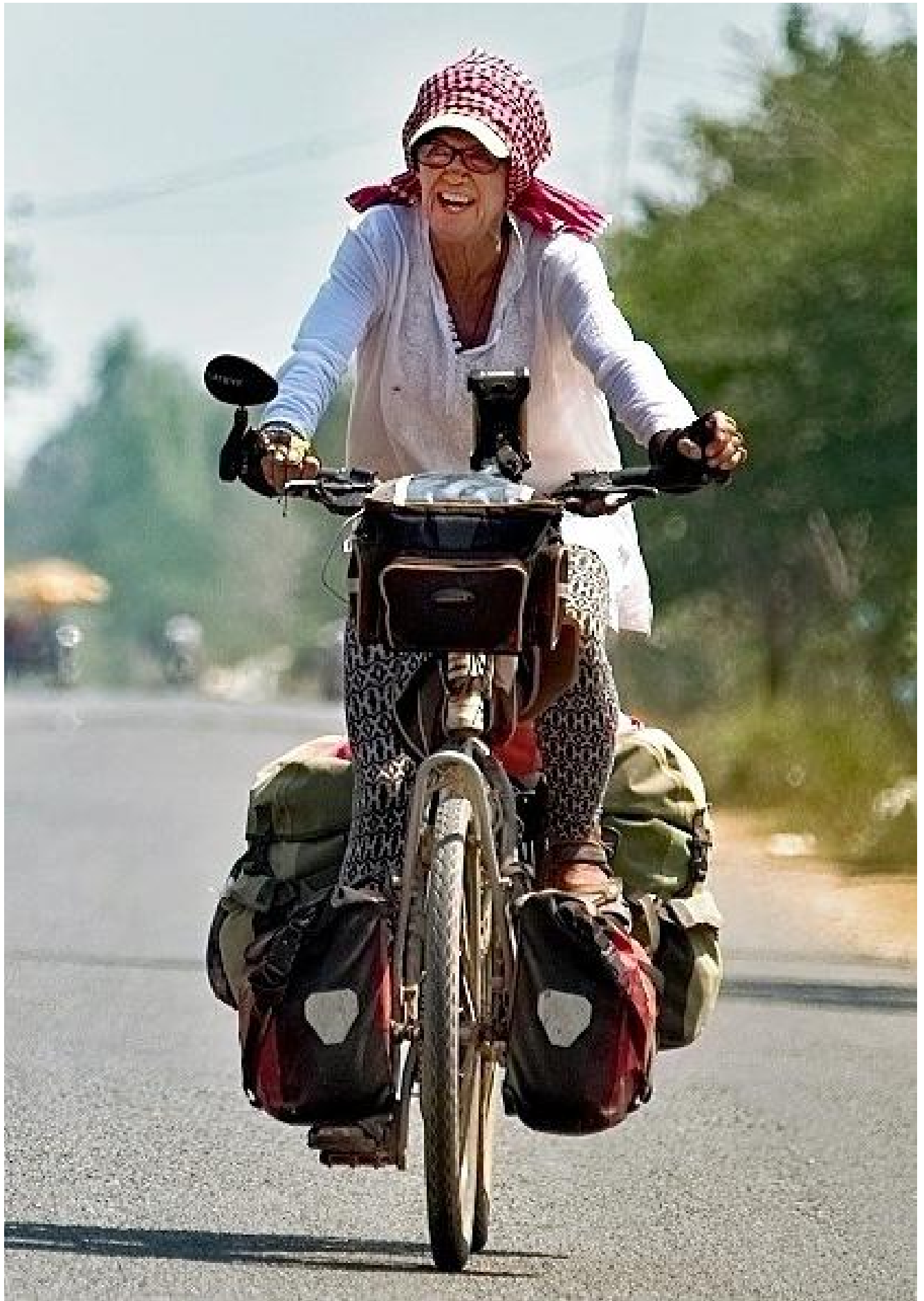
About the Author

Originally from Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist. Her passion for cycle touring started in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique - a MTB race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo and embarked on a journey that took her all the way to Cape Town. Upon returning, she found adjusting to her regular life surprisingly difficult and decided to continue her travels on two wheels.

In March 2007, Leana and her companion Ernest Markwood began a bike ride that turned into an around-the-world cycle ride. They started cycling together but eventually found their own pace and direction in life and on the road.

Leana has cycled across Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe, the UK, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. After Australia, she flew to Ushuaia, Argentina, and spent several years cycling through South, Central, and North America. She then visited many larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

As of now, Leana finds herself back in Southeast Asia.









The beauty of living on a bicycle is the uncertainty of what the day holds, who you'll meet, or where you'll end up.



