

CYCLING IN CHIANG MAI

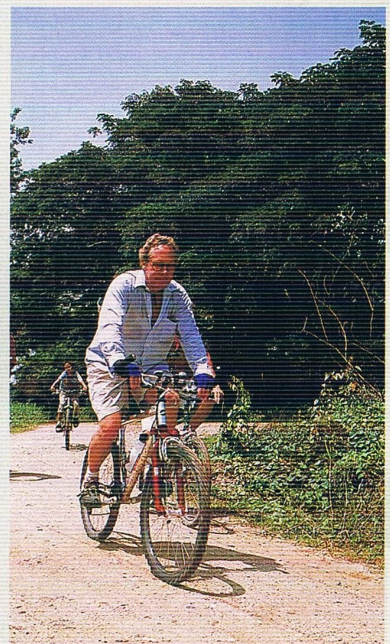


by Peter Holmshaw with photos by Ron Emmons

"I thought of it while riding my bicycle."
Albert Einstein on his Theory of Relativity.

An excellent way of discovering Chiang Mai is on a bicycle. Cycling moves one at an ideal pace, with enough speed to 'fast forward' through any less than interesting patches, but not so fast as

to miss the interesting details of the journey. The reactions of the Thais add pleasure as well; a cyclist is much less imposing than someone peering down on them through the window of a tour bus, or roaring through their villages on a snarling motorcycle. The foreign cyclist is greeted with a thumbs up sign or shouts of *geng maak* (very skilful).



Above: Taking a break during a group tour.

Below left: Biking is fun with a group.

Below right: Exploring country lanes.

Discovering this pleasure, as is the case with many of Chiang Mai's charms, reveals itself best with some orientation. Despite the municipal government's efforts to create bike lanes, the city centre is still best enjoyed on foot. No one is likely to contemplate quantum physics, or enjoy the sights, while inhaling exhaust fumes and fearing for his life in heavy vehicular traffic. However, with an early start and some planning, it is possible to enjoy glimpses of the rural life that continues to sustain much of the population, even within a few kilometres of the urban bustle of the city.

The simplest way out of the city is to pedal south on Chang Klan Road. Three kilometres beyond the Night Bazaar, slip underneath the Super-highway (otherwise known as Om Muang Road), and continue along the west bank of the Ping River. Housing estates soon give way to villages, and by crossing the network of bridges spanning the Ping, it is easy to visit both sides of the river and avoid retracing ones steps, or pedals, as it were. Don't fear heading down any promising path; using the river flowing south and the mountains to the west as navigation points, it's always easy to return to your starting point. The road on the west side of the river (Pa Daet Road) more closely follows the riverbank, but the east side (Koh Klang Road) is more verdant and has less heavy traffic. Village temples, fresh produce markets, orchards, and a variety of human habitats, from the humble to the luxurious, make cycling this route an interesting and informative outing.

Of historical interest is the McKean Institute, originally a leprosarium built by missionaries. With leprosy now eradicated in Thailand, the institute specializes in physical rehabilitation therapy. The gate is always open, and it is a pleasant site with huge trees and colonial-era European architecture.

A more detailed sample itinerary could be as follows: after crossing underneath the Superhighway, and beneath yet another elevated ring road, continue another kilometre where you reach a bridge across the Ping. After crossing, continue east a kilometre until you reach a T-junction and turn right, heading south towards the McKean Institute. If you wish, cruise through this shady respite for the less fortunate, and then continue south an-

other 2.5 kilometres where you should veer right at Wat Tamnak (a large temple with a huge white chedi). Another two kilometres along the river, you enter the manicured gardens tended by the Royal Thai Irrigation Department, where you can cross the Ping via a weir constructed as part of an irrigation project. Head north (right) and continue on the same road until you reach the spot where you initially crossed under the Super Highway. Total round trip distance from the Night Bazaar: 29 kilometres. Should this seem too arduous, cross back at the bridge just south of McKean Institute, and shave 6 kilometres off your ride, although it would be a shame to miss the weir and surrounding gardens.

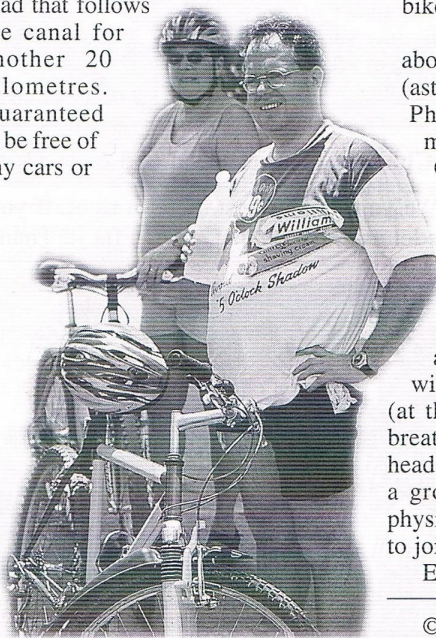
If this ride stimulates your interest, try riding north of the city on the east side of the Ping River. To avoid a longer stretch of busy streets, it's probably best to negotiate with a *songtaew*, the ubiquitous red 'minibuses' which ply the streets of Chiang Mai, to deposit you beyond the northern arc of the Superhighway. It's easy to roll three bicycles in the back of such a vehicle. About four kilometres north of the Superhighway, specifically 100 metres after passing the luxurious Baan Suan Restaurant, look to your right for an irrigation canal. (Note: There are two restaurants bearing this name in Chiang Mai, you want the 'new' one, on the river.) Along this canal runs an unpaved road that follows the canal for another 20 kilometres. Guaranteed to be free of any cars or

motorcycles, (the Holy Grail of the cyclist) this path passes village temples, orchards and rice fields. With vistas of mountain ranges on both horizons, and greenery adjacent, it is easy to forget the bustle of nearby Chiang Mai. For orientation purposes, just remember to keep the irrigation canal to your left. When you've had enough, simply take a left to the paved road and loop back towards town. To avoid the final stretch of traffic into the city, hail another *songtaew* to your final destination.

Both of these rides are accomplished within a few hours. Morning starts are clearly best to avoid the midday heat. Since no climbing is involved, the low quality mountain bikes available for rent throughout Chiang Mai will suffice, although a test ride to verify the functionality of the brakes and gears is mandatory before setting out. Tire pressure should be over 40 psi, and taller riders should adjust seat heights. If you are used to riding a decent mountain bike, it might be worth contacting Velocity (Tel: (053) 410 665), a local bike shop which rents well-maintained quality mountain bikes. If the camaraderie and security of an organized group tour appeals, several local tour agencies can provide this service. Etienne, (Tel: (053) 201 194), an ebullient Belgian, offers tours on either of these routes, also on well-maintained mountain bikes.

As an alternative to any of the above suggestions, present yourself (astride a bicycle, of course) at Tha Phae Gate at 7 a.m. on Sunday morning for the meeting of the Chiang Mai Bicycle Club. Led by Ajaan Nirandon, a Chiang Mai native who has been a dedicated cyclist since before many of us were born, this ride is a great way to meet local cyclists of all ages. The ride, which often attracts over 100 cyclists, starts with a couple of loops of the old city (at this time on a Sunday it's quite breathable), after which some riders head off to further destinations. Find a group who look to be of similar physical condition to your own and ask to join.

Enjoy your ride!



It can be thirsty work.

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