

CYCLING THAILAND

Northbound Through the Kingdom

Leana Niemand



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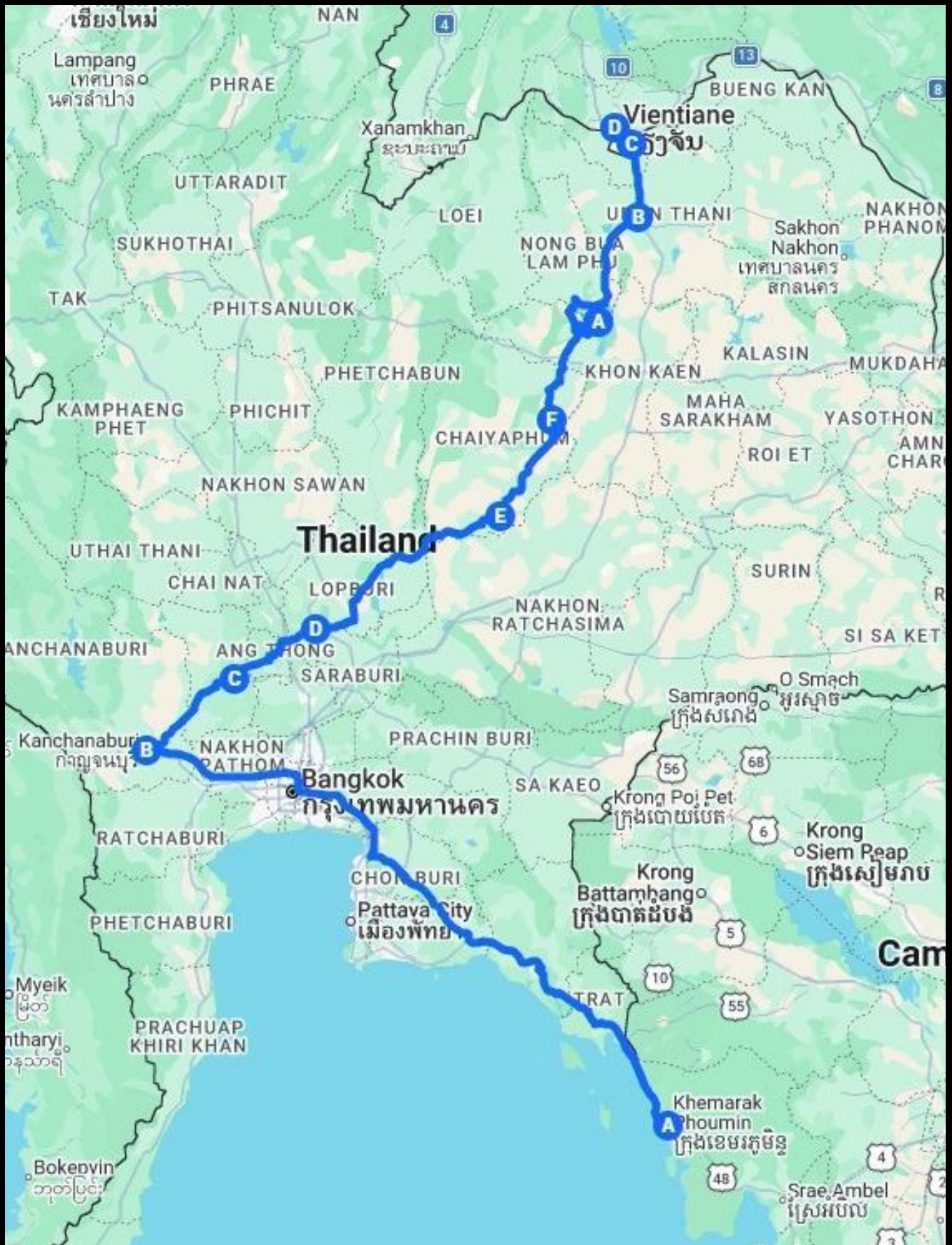
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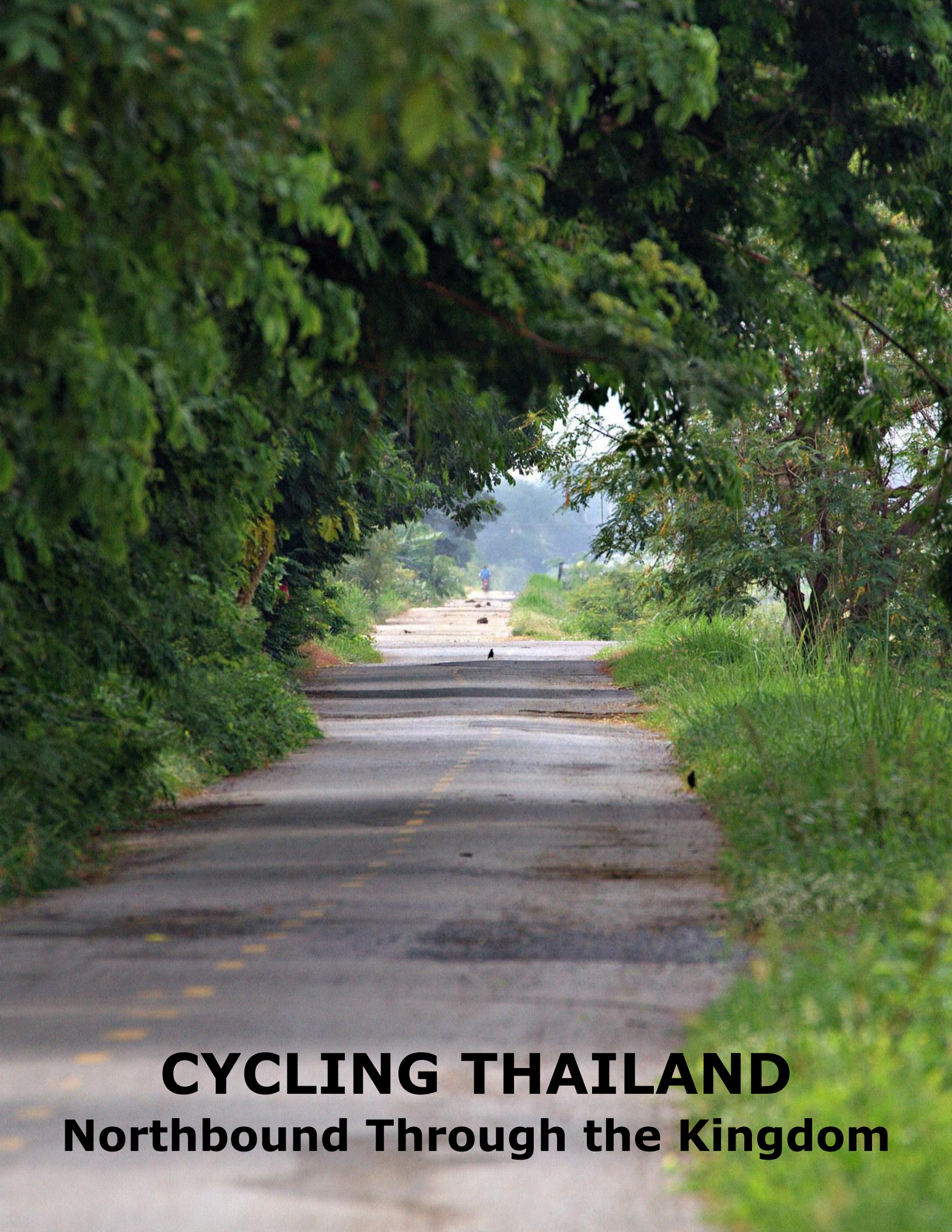


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Acknowledgements

My journey through Thailand was shaped as much by the road beneath my wheels as by the kindness that met me along the way. To the strangers who offered generosity without hesitation — a cup of water, a place to rest, a moment of shared humanity — your quiet acts of grace humbled me and carried me farther than any map could show.

To my sister, Amanda, whose steady hands and meticulous care kept my scattered journal entries and photographs in order. You turned chaos into a record, and for that I am deeply grateful.

To my dear friend Val Abrahamse, who held the threads of my life back home while I wandered the world: your diligence and trust gave me the freedom to chase this dream without looking over my shoulder. I owe you more than these pages can say.



NORTHBOUND THROUGH THE KINGDOM

Thailand

Where the Journey Circles Back

Prelude

Some journeys return you to the place you began, not to repeat the story but to reveal what it has made of you. In these last days with Tania, the road folds back toward Bangkok—toward familiar streets, familiar chaos, and the quiet truth that travel is measured as much in companionship as in kilometres. What unfolds here is a small circle closing: rain-soaked borders, wooden jetties, long uncomplicated roads, and the gentle ache of a farewell that arrives too soon.



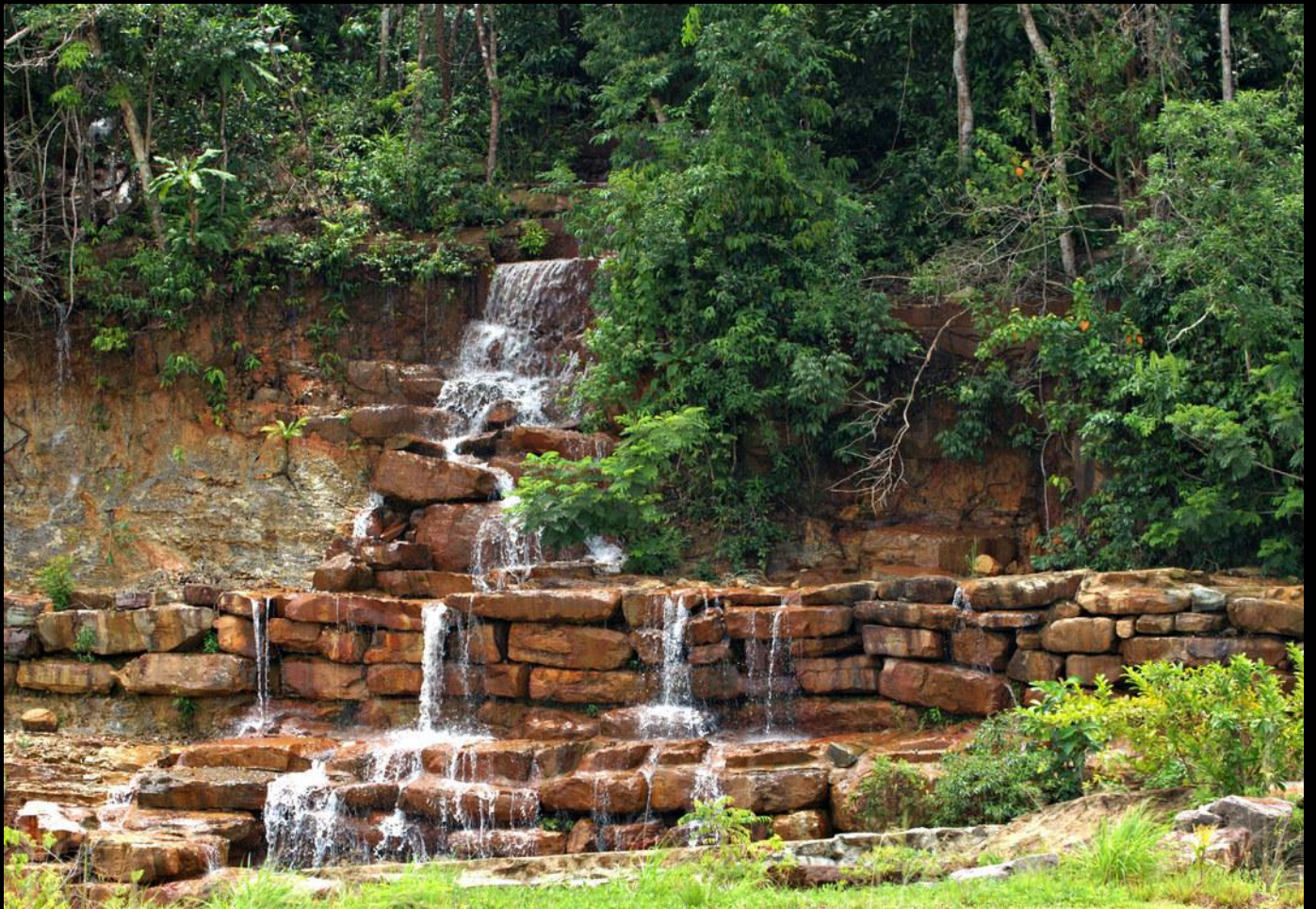
Border & Monastery Rain (110km)

We woke to a small miracle. Tania's two-dollar prescription—mysterious, potent, and very Cambodian—had worked its quiet magic overnight. Colour had returned to her cheeks, and with it, her spark. We pedalled the short stretch toward the Cambodia–Thailand border, weaving through a chaos of tuk-tuks, trucks, and buses that churned the mud into a restless brown sea.

Crossing out of Cambodia was unexpectedly smooth, and soon we were rolling once more on Thai soil, the air softer, the roads familiar. The route to Trat carried us along a quiet coastline of hidden beaches and gentle bays, the kind of landscape that feels as if it's waiting for someone to notice it. Along the way, four Thai cyclists on a two-day ride hailed us down. We exchanged stories in the universal language of touring—gestures, laughter, admiration—before parting ways.

Rain found us after lunch, a steady curtain that soaked us through by the time we reached Trat. But the town offered a gift: a monastery with a long wooden jetty stretching over a river, sheltered by a canopy and lit by a single warm bulb. With much pointing and smiling, the monks permitted us to camp. They locked the gate behind us, showed us the toilets, and left us with a kindness that lingers long after the moment passes.

We brewed coffee, cooked noodles, and watched the tide rise to swallow the mangroves—an evening wrapped in rain, river light, and quiet gratitude.



Mangroves at Dawn (111 km)

At dawn, the mangroves came alive. Crabs scuttled beneath the jetty in a frantic morning ballet, and the smell of Tania's coffee drifted through the air like an invitation to begin again.

We had a mission: reach Bangkok in three days, leaving enough time to pack Tania's bike, and perhaps—if we were lucky—a sliver of time for shopping before her flight home to South Africa.

That night, we found refuge at a petrol station in Na Yai Am, complete with a 7-Eleven and a lively night market humming beside it. The public restrooms felt like luxury, and we settled in with the contentment of travellers who have learned to love the simplest comforts.





A Quiet, Easy Road to Anata Nakorn (135 km)

The day unfolded without drama, a long ribbon of road beneath a forgiving sky. A mild breeze, soft temperatures, and the steady rhythm of pedalling carried us forward. By late afternoon, fatigue crept in just as the town of Anata Nakorn appeared like a small blessing.

We found a modest hotel offering hot showers and enough electrical outlets to revive our weary devices. The ride may have lacked excitement, but the ease of the day—and the promise of rest—made it feel quietly perfect.

Into the Bangkok Maze (82 km)

We left early, imagining a smooth glide into the capital. Instead, we collided headlong with Bangkok's morning traffic—a dense, honking organism that swallowed us whole. Cars pressed in from every direction, and the city's pulse quickened around us.

Navigating the CBD demanded absolute focus: the map, the traffic, the endless weaving, and always, always keeping Tania in sight. After what felt like hours inside a living maze, we finally emerged into the familiar chaos of Khao San Road—the very place where our journey had begun nearly two months earlier.

We found a ground-floor room with a window, air-conditioning, and space for our bikes—a rare treasure. And just like that, Tania's Southeast Asian odyssey came to its triumphant close. I felt a swell of pride watching her—she had met every challenge with grit and humour, and she had thrived.



Packing & Possibility

The next day buzzed with purpose. Tania began the ritual of packing her bike, while I set off in search of new panniers—my old ones were more hole than fabric by now. I also dropped off my camera and lenses for recalibration, knowing I'd be without them for two weeks.

Bangkok felt alive with possibility, as if the city itself were urging us toward whatever came next.

River, City, Skytrain, Cheesecake

We took the river taxi that morning, drifting past a city of contrasts. Old wooden shacks leaned over the water, their crooked silhouettes framed by gleaming skyscrapers. Barges lumbered upstream, ferries darted between them, and temples—bright, ornate, impossibly intricate—watched from the riverbanks. Vendors sold noodle soup and skewers of grilled chicken asses, the smoke curling into the humid air.

At Taksin jetty we boarded the Skytrain, gliding above the city toward MBK to find the Canon repair centre. Later, we rode to Amarin Plaza, where I finally bought two luminous green Ortlieb panniers—bright enough to be seen from space, and exactly what I needed. We celebrated with coffee and a slab of cheesecake large enough to qualify as a meal.

That evening we ventured to Chinatown for dim sum at Hau Seng Hong. We ate until we could barely move, then half-ran, half-waddled toward a tuk-tuk as the sky cracked open with rain.



The Last Goodbye

The morning arrived too soon. It always does on the last day. Tania packed the final pieces of her gear, and just like that, it was time for her to fly home.

Her departure left a quiet space in the day—a gratitude, a reminder that journeys are shaped not only by landscapes but by the people who ride beside us.





The Art of Wandering Slowly

Prelude

899 Kilometres waited ahead, 26 days unfolding like quiet pages. I didn't know the story yet—only that the road would write it one slow breath at a time. Sometimes the road begins in stillness. In the pause between plans, in the weight of waiting, in the soft pull of a city that holds you just long enough for the next direction to reveal itself.

Bangkok in Limbo

After Tania left, Bangkok opened around me like a crossroads—wide, humming, and full of unanswered questions. Canon had thrown my plans into disarray: three weeks to calibrate a lens. Three weeks of waiting, of drifting, of wondering what to do with myself in a city that pulsed with life while I felt strangely still.

I rented a small room to think, but thinking soon dissolved into boredom. A minor injury kept me from jogging; the absence of my camera left my hands oddly empty. I bought a rear rack bag I didn't need, mended clothes, washed laundry, and sat in the thick Bangkok heat feeling suspended between journeys.



Eventually, a decision rose through the haze: China. I imagined the northern autumn waiting for me, imagined cycling toward Laos on a new route, imagined my camera ready just in time to photograph the border crossing at Nong Khai. I imagined a bus ride back to Bangkok to collect the camera, crossing into Laos, a Chinese visa, Kunming—bright ideas sketched on the canvas of possibility. I knew my relationship with plans was tenuous at best, but dreaming felt good.

While waiting, I tended to myself in small ways: a haircut, a pedicure, new sunglasses, a bicycle service. Tiny rituals of care, reminders that even in limbo, life could still feel gentle.

A Walk That Became a Pilgrimage

The Queen's birthday holiday electrified the city, but recent bombings left me wary of crowds. Khaosan Road bristled with police; the tension in the air nudged me away. Instead, I wandered toward the MBK building, letting the city pull me into its quieter folds.

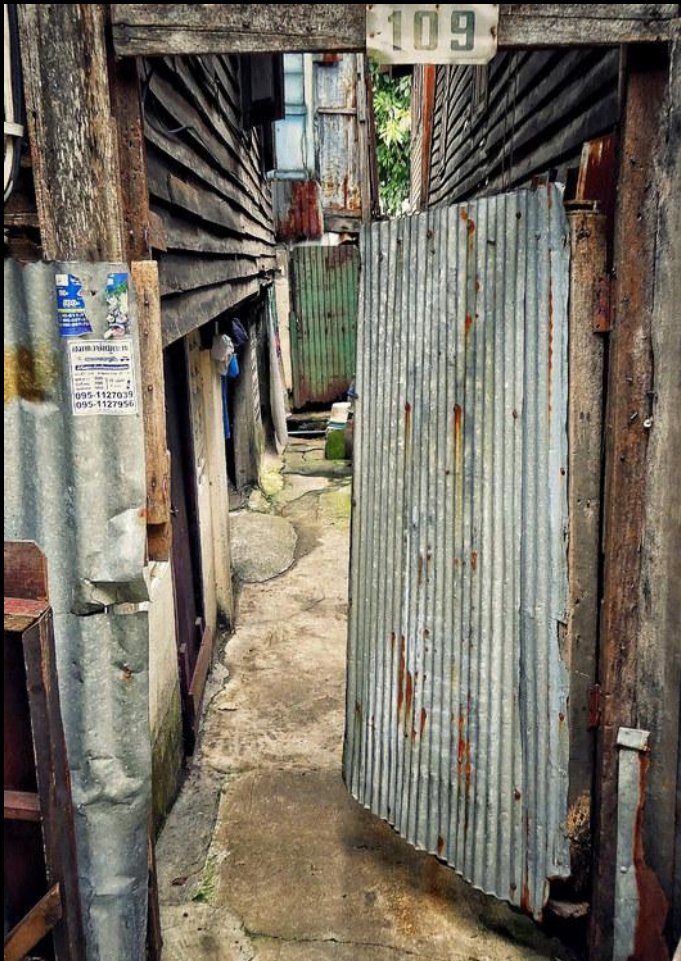
What should have been a short walk became an all-day pilgrimage through garland makers, food vendors, and artisans shaping begging bowls. By the time I reached MBK, I had acquired a new companion—a Panasonic Lumix compact camera, a small spark of joy.

Pom Mahakan's Hidden World

On the way back, I missed a turn and slipped into a hidden neighbourhood pressed against the railway line. Narrow alleys, startled faces, the warmth of people guiding me through their maze. I must have been the first foreigner to wander there; their surprise was almost tender.







Then came Pom Mahakan—a community of fireworks makers, birdcage craftsmen, fighting cocks, and centuries-old homes. Fifty households living under the shadow of eviction, yet full of resilience. A 200-year-old fig tree stood at the centre like a guardian. The oldest house belonged to a gold merchant who once collected gold dust from second-hand clothes by burning them to reclaim the metal. A life's alchemy hidden in plain sight. Years later, the government would evict them to build a park, but on that day, the community breathed with quiet dignity.

Bike Ready, One Last Dim Sum

As my Bangkok days dwindled, I longed for one last bowl of wonton soup from Hong Kong Noodle. The bike shop was still waiting on a part. The next morning, a message arrived: my bicycle was ready. Bok Bok Bike—Bangkok's finest touring shop—had worked its magic. My bike gleamed like new.

Before leaving, I wandered into Chinatown for dim sum. Two blocks from the tourist crush, life unfolded in its own rhythm: boy monks laughing on their way to school, incense curling into the morning air, merchants balancing baskets of produce. A final feast before the road called me onward.



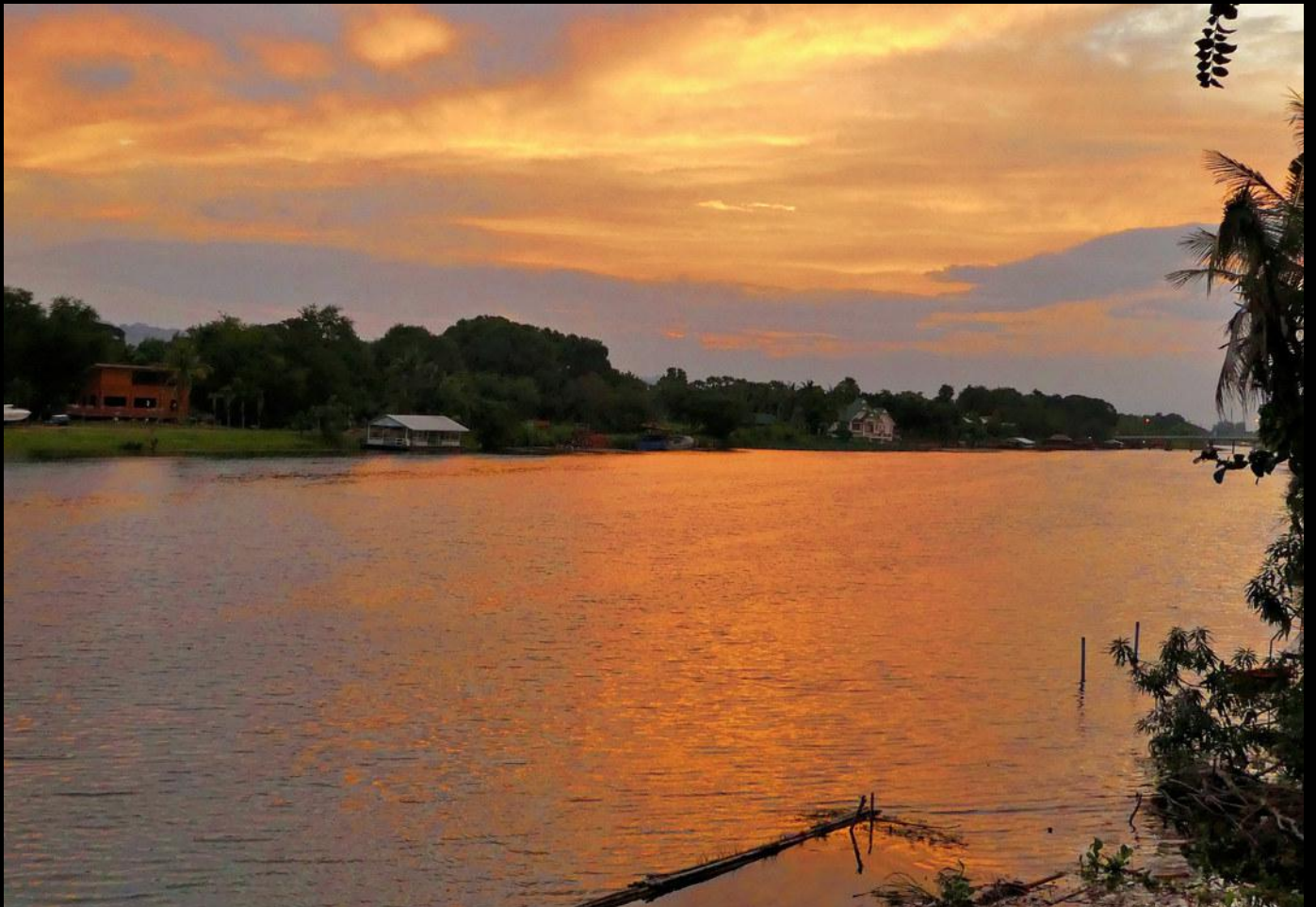
The Quiet Road Out of Bangkok

A taxi carried me out of Bangkok's sprawl—twenty-five kilometres of chaos before I was dropped at the city's frayed edge. I wasn't sure the fare had been worth it.

I followed a narrow path, hoping for rural charm, only to find myself at a vast rubbish dump. The day felt heavy; my body ached, my legs cramped, and exhaustion clung to me like humidity. I feared another virus, but stubbornness kept me moving.

By late afternoon, I reached Kanchanaburi as food carts began to bloom along the streets. I had no appetite—only a longing to lie down. Rainbow Lodge offered a simple A-frame bungalow beside the River Khwae, and I surrendered to rest.





Suphan Buri's Dragon Shrine (100 km)

I visited the famous bridge over the River Kwai—less cinematic than expected, but still carrying its own quiet gravity. A tailwind lifted my spirits, pushing me past rice paddies and Ayutthaya-era ruins.

In U-Thong, relics of the first Ayutthaya king whispered from the earth. By evening, I reached Suphan Buri and admired the Pillar Shrine, its dragon statue coiling in vibrant colour. The Mind Hotel lured me with its façade, but inside, the room sagged with age. The mattress swallowed me whole; even the white bedding felt tired. I half-expected bedbugs to march out in formation.





Three Temples Before the Road (81 km)

Before cycling onward, I visited three temples:

- **Wat Phra Rup**, home to a reclining Buddha said to have the most beautiful face in Thailand.
- **Wat Phra Sri Rattana Mahathat**, a treasure of ancient ruins.
- **Wat Khae**, where a thousand-year-old tamarind tree sheltered serene Buddha statues.

The ride to Sing Buri was radiant—sun blazing, butterflies dancing, dragonflies stitching silver lines through the air. A puncture slowed me briefly, but I fixed it with practised ease. I passed through buffalo villages and the Monument to the Bang Rachan Heroes, reminders of resistance and resilience. These are the details I write down because memory, like the road, can be slippery.





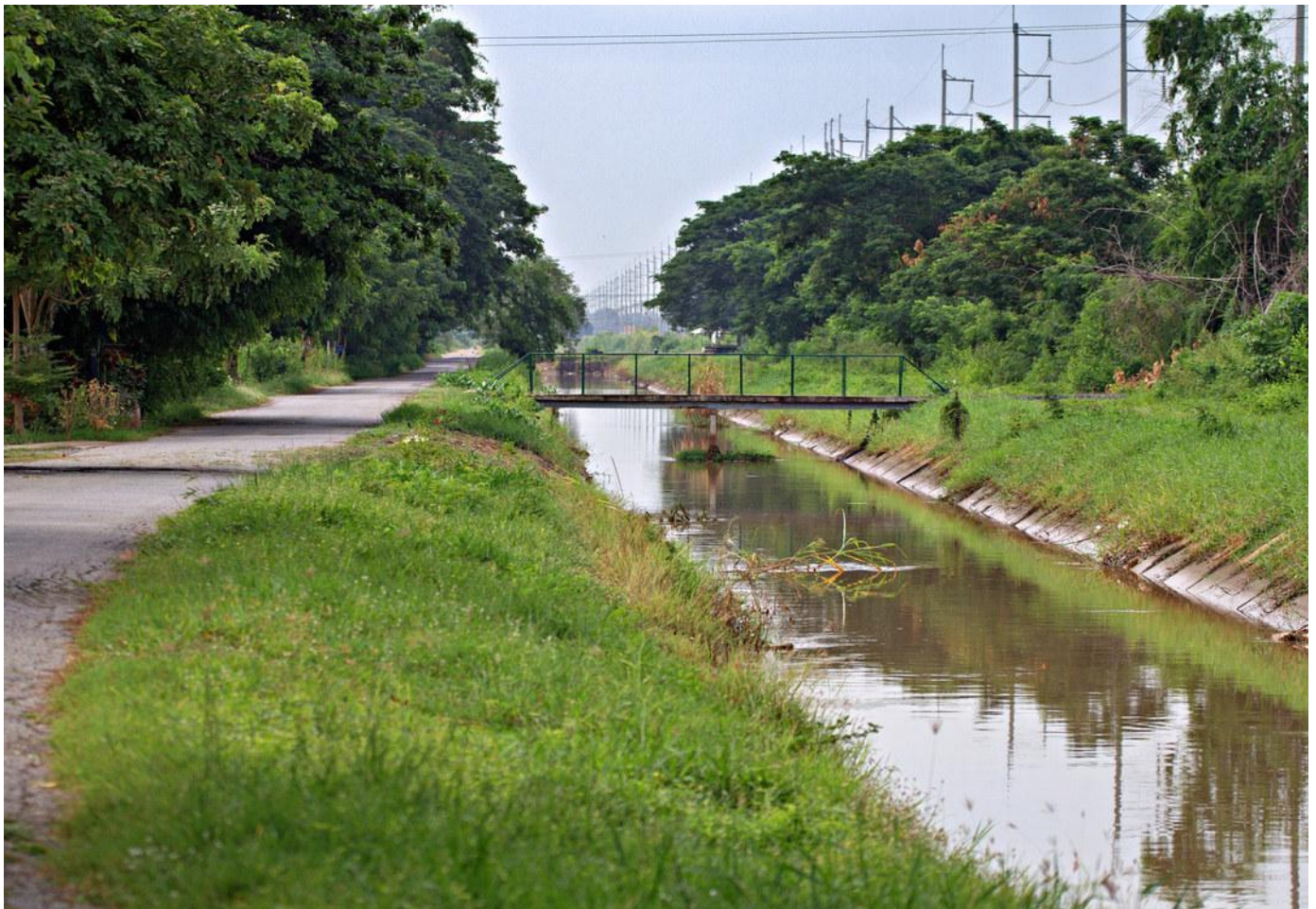




Lop Buri's Monkey Kingdom (30 km)

I set off toward the Lao border, 560 kilometres away, but a canal-side road led me into daydreams of NooM Guest House's food. Hunger won. I turned toward Lop Buri.

The town is a living museum—Khmer and Ayutthaya ruins woven into everyday life, monkeys ruling a 600-year-old temple, ancient stones peeking from behind modern buildings. I ate, did laundry, repaired tubes, and let the slow rhythm of Lop Buri settle into my bones. One more day felt right.









Canals, Thunder & Roadside Kindness (96 km)

A beautiful day of canals, farmland, and small communities. By afternoon, thunder rolled in, and rain fell in heavy, deliberate drops. I sheltered in an empty police booth—clean, dry, and miraculously equipped with electricity.

Across the road, a small eatery welcomed me. The owner and her daughter invited me to dinner: green bean and bamboo shoot salad, pork with cassava, an omelette, rice, and a chilli sauce that could wake the dead. Their kindness warmed me more than the food.





Rain, Markets & Curious Eyes (106 km)

Sleep was elusive beside the highway, but the morning felt fresh. Mist clung to the hills; the road stretched like a promise. A Thai couple recognised me from the day before and offered their phone numbers “just in case.” Such generosity always catches me off guard.

Rain found me again, forcing me under a bridge. By the time I reached Ban Kok, I was soaked and shivering. I found a guesthouse and wandered the market, feeling like the town’s unofficial attraction. I wondered if any farang had ever stayed there before.





Route 201's Rolling Hills (108 km)

The following day unfolded slowly—too many stops, too many temptations. Markets, photographs, adjustments. Canon had delayed my camera another week, so there was no need to rush.

I chose Route 201 over 202, and it rewarded me with rolling hills, rocky outcrops, and sun-bleached landscapes. Mushroom stalls lined the road, hinting at nearby forests. A sign for a thousand-year-old cycad grove tempted me, but the detour was long.

Storm clouds gathered as I approached Kaeng Khro. Rain hammered down, and I found refuge at SK Place, tucked behind a school. A cosy room, a bowl of noodle soup, a cold beer, and the curious eyes of villagers—small comforts on a stormy night.





Cattle with Long Ears, the Ubol Ratana Dam & a Swimming Pool (109km)

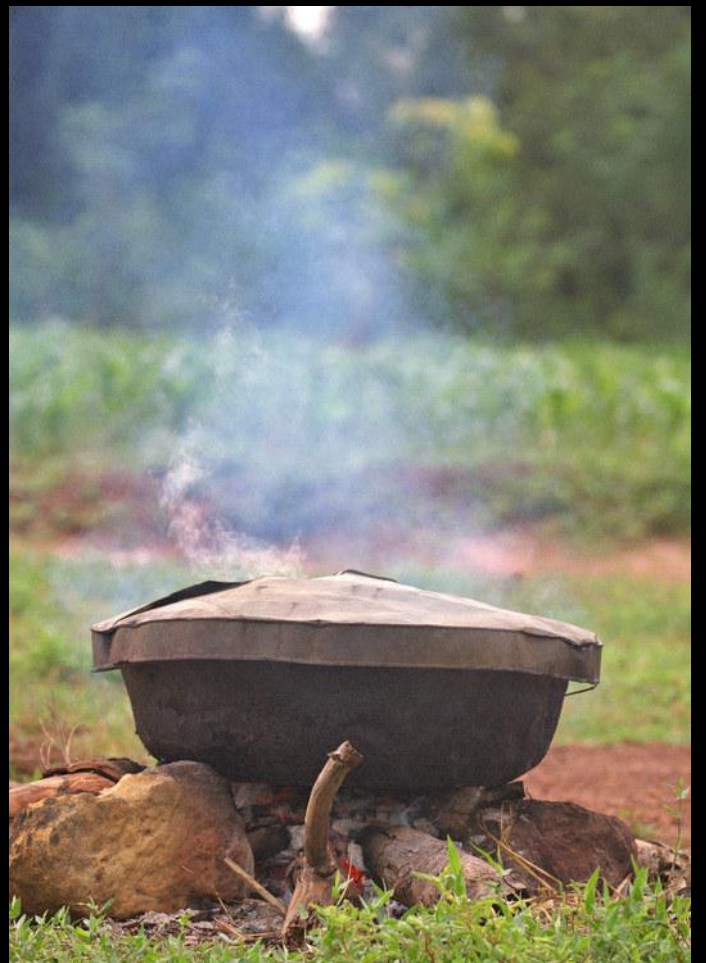
Rice fields shimmered in morning light; sugarcane rustled like silk. Temples rose from the landscape, serene and watchful. White cattle with impossibly long ears wandered the roadside.

I cycled toward Ubol Ratana Dam, with water on one side and a national park on the other. I had hoped for a scenic guesthouse overlooking the dam, but instead found the Reaun Araya Spa—an unexpected luxury with a swimming pool that felt like a gift.









Storms into Udon Thani (115 km)

A complimentary breakfast sent me off in high spirits. The weather, however, had other plans—three downpours before noon, and a final deluge as I entered Udon Thani. My orange poncho billowed behind me like a superhero cape battling the storm.

Floodwaters rose quickly. Traffic stalled. Shopkeepers fought the invading water with brooms and buckets. I pushed my bike through the chaos, wary of open drains and hidden canals. Eventually, I found the King's Hotel—worn but spacious, and blessedly dry.

The next day became a feast: green curry, doughnuts, brownies, pastries. By sunset, I was determined to finish the last of my fruit—a small, silly victory.



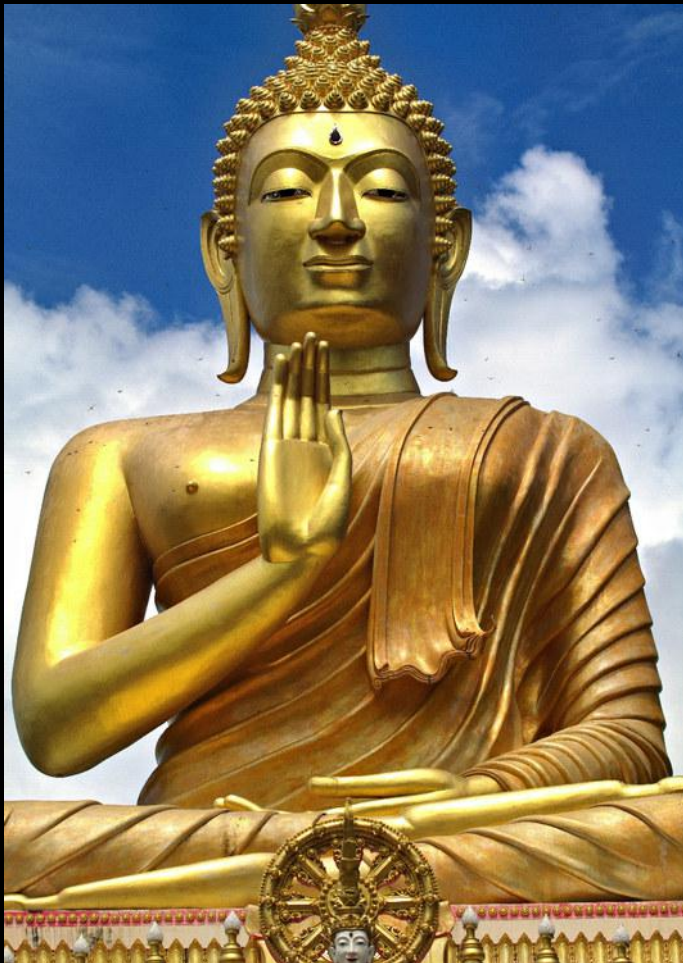


Nong Khai & the Mekong (54 km)

Still full from yesterday, I set off late toward Nong Khai, following the Mekong's gentle curve. I rehearsed the speech I planned to deliver to Canon after their month-long delay.

Vendors sold feather dusters, brooms, and roasted coconuts so sweet they felt like dessert. At Mut Mee Guesthouse, overlooking the river, I received the long-awaited email: my lens was ready. I booked the night train to Bangkok immediately.





Night Train to Bangkok - Lens Collected, Bodies Revealed

The train arrived at dawn. With hours to spare before MBK opened, I wandered the waking city, coffee in hand. After collecting the lens, a visit to the Human Body Museum followed—fourteen dissected bodies, skinless and strangely peaceful. Fascinating, unsettling, unforgettable.

The day offered markets, watching musicians, and observing the city's endless theatre. A ten-baht shower at the station revived me before I boarded the night train north again.





Crossing into Laos

Arriving in Nong Khai was at sunrise – I walked to Mut Mee, savouring the quiet. With my final tasks in Thailand complete, I packed my bike and pedalled toward the border.

Crossing the Friendship Bridge into Laos felt like stepping into a new chapter. Vientiane greeted me with heat, colour, and the promise of possibility. At the Chinese Embassy, I learned the visa would take two weeks—an unexpected pause.

I checked into the Dhaka Hotel, armed with insecticide and determination. Later, wandering the streets, I heard my name called through the evening air.

Ernest. An old cycling friend, appearing as if summoned by the road itself. We laughed, embraced, and fell easily into stories. In that moment, Vientiane felt less like a waiting room and more like a reunion with the unpredictable magic of travel.

Epilogue - The Road Shifts

By the time I crossed into Laos, I understood that long-term travel isn't only about movement. It's the moments that stop you, the detours that reshape you, the unexpected voices that call you back to the simple truth that the journey continues wherever you choose to stand still.







About this Blog

Welcome to My Cycle Ride in Thailand

Join me on my ride through Thailand's captivating landscapes! This blog is your peek into my cycling adventure, sharing the roads, experiences, and stories I've gathered along the way. While this route might not be the ultimate path for every cyclist, it certainly offers a glimpse into what Thailand has to offer!

Here's What to Keep in Mind:

Distances:

These daily odometer readings may not always follow the shortest route; after all, sometimes it's the detours that lead to the most incredible discoveries. You'll find plenty of twists and turns in my daily distances, but rest assured, every kilometre is accurately logged.

Time of Year:

This bike ride took place between August and September 2016. Just a heads-up: the scenery might look different now. Roads could have been improved, charming stops might have changed, and places I once loved could be upgraded or gone.

Insurance:

Don't hit the road without a travel insurance policy! It's your safety net against loss, theft, and medical emergencies. Just make sure to scrutinise the fine print—some policies may not cover activities like scuba diving, motorcycling, or trekking.

Clothing:

As the sun beats down in Thailand (especially in lower elevations), packing smart is essential! Comfortable, high-quality padded cycling shorts will be your best friends on long rides. I recommend lightweight hiking shoes or breathable sandals. And don't forget those personal essentials—bring insect repellent and anti-chafe cream to ensure a smooth ride. Most importantly, strap on a cycling helmet for safety—your future self will thank you!

The Bicycle & Gear:

Choosing the right bike is crucial for comfort during your adventures. I ride a mountain bike equipped with a sturdy Merida frame, reliable Shimano Deore components, strong Alex wheel rims, and tough Schwalbe tyres. My secret for smooth travels? Tubus racks and Ortlieb panniers—they may cost a bit more, but they're built to last. And before you hit the trails, brush up on how to fix a puncture. A phone holder on your handlebars will keep your map handy (I personally rely on Organic Maps or Google Maps). Plus, don't forget a handlebar bag for your camera and any must-have items throughout the day!



About Thailand

Capital City: The Big Mango

Welcome to Bangkok, affectionately dubbed the Big Mango! This dazzling capital is a perfect blend of ancient traditions and modern innovation. Picture bustling streets, gleaming skyscrapers, and vibrant markets—all pulsating with life. Whether you're exploring the serene temples or diving into the city's electric nightlife, Bangkok has something for everyone!

Currency: The Thai Baht

When you're in Thailand, you'll be dealing with the Thai Baht, symbolised as ฿ and coded as TBH. Make sure to fill your wallet with these colourful banknotes as you shop for unique souvenirs or savour delicious street food—because enjoying the local culture is a must!

Language: Siamese Thai

The heart of communication in Thailand is the melodious Siamese Thai, the official language spoken by more than 80% of the nation's 63 million people. Learning a few basic phrases can go a long way in connecting with the friendly locals and enhancing your travel experience.

Religion: A Tapestry of Beliefs

While Buddhism is the cornerstone of Thai culture—embraced by around 95% of the population—there's an atmosphere of religious freedom that embraces diversity. This fascinating blend allows visitors to experience a multitude of traditions and customs across the country.

Location and Size: A Southeast Asian Gem

Thailand spans an impressive 514,000 sq. km in Southeast Asia. Formerly known as Siam, it stretches almost two-thirds of the way down the Malay Peninsula. With a length of 1,648 km from North to South and a width of 780 km from East to West, the country is bordered by Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and the stunning Andaman Sea. Each border tells a story, inviting exploration and adventure.

Population: A Melting Pot

In 2019, Thailand's population was estimated at 69,297,372, creating a lively atmosphere with a density of 136 people per square kilometre. With such a vibrant mix of cultures and backgrounds, every corner of Thailand brims with unique experiences waiting to be discovered.

Internet Coverage: Staying Connected

In this modern age, Internet services are widely accessible, especially in urban areas. So, whether you're sharing your incredible journey through social media or simply planning your next adventure, staying connected in Thailand is a breeze!

Get ready to immerse yourself in the sights, sounds, and flavours of this captivating country—Thailand is waiting for you!



About the Author

Hailing from the city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.





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**When travelling by bicycle, even the most mundane trip becomes
an adventure.**



Northbound through Thailand, the road bends toward endings and beginnings all at once. What starts as a final ride with a friend becomes a journey of rain-soaked kindness, quiet monasteries, chaotic cities, and the strange stillness of waiting in Bangkok. From coastline to capital, from storms to small miracles, the chapter traces shared travel and unexpected encounters. When the wheels finally turn toward Laos, the road delivers one last surprise, reminding us that the world has a way of stitching people and places back into our lives.

