

THAILAND

Pedalling the Plains of Siam



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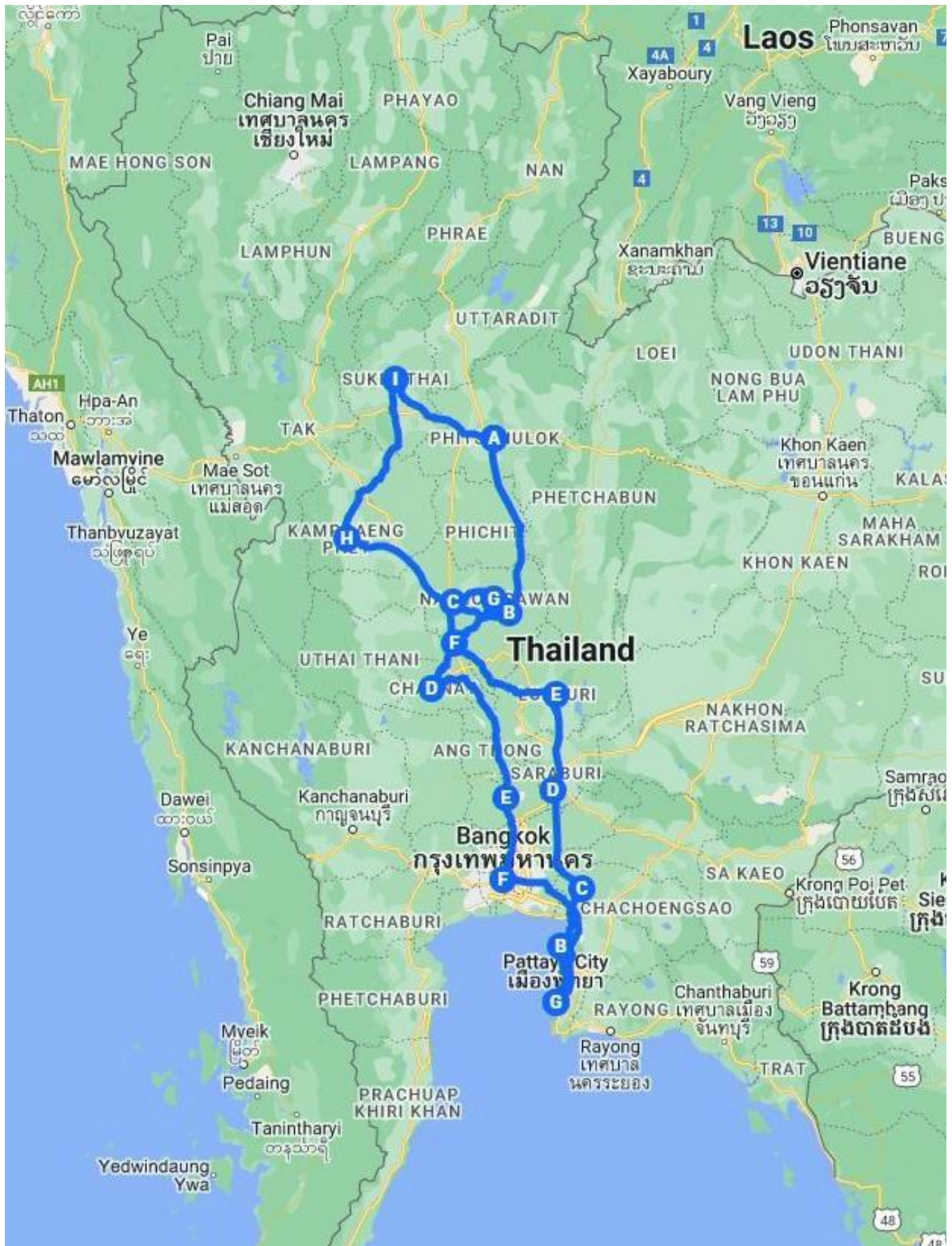
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Acknowledgements

The road through Thailand offered more than miles; it offered moments of unexpected grace. To the strangers who stepped out of their day to offer water, shelter, or simple kindness — your generosity was a soft wind at my back. You reminded me that the world is stitched together by small mercies.

To my sister, Amanda, guardian of my scattered words and keeper of the record. This blog carries your quiet devotion in every page.

To Val Abrahamse, who held the shape of my life while I wandered far from it: your steady care made it possible for me to chase a dream without fear of what might unravel behind me. I travelled lightly because you carried the weight.

This blog is not only a record of where I travelled, but of those who helped me keep moving. My gratitude runs deeper than these words can hold.



Thailand

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Prelude

Before the map is folded open, before the first turn of the pedals, there is a quiet knowing that the road will offer more than passage, more than miles marked and completed.

It begins in stillness, in the space between intention and departure, where the horizon is not yet reached, only imagined.

To travel by bicycle is to surrender to the elements, to the slow unfolding of land and light, to the unhurried language of rivers. Each kilometre is earned, each breath a measure of presence, each encounter a thread in something larger than journey alone.

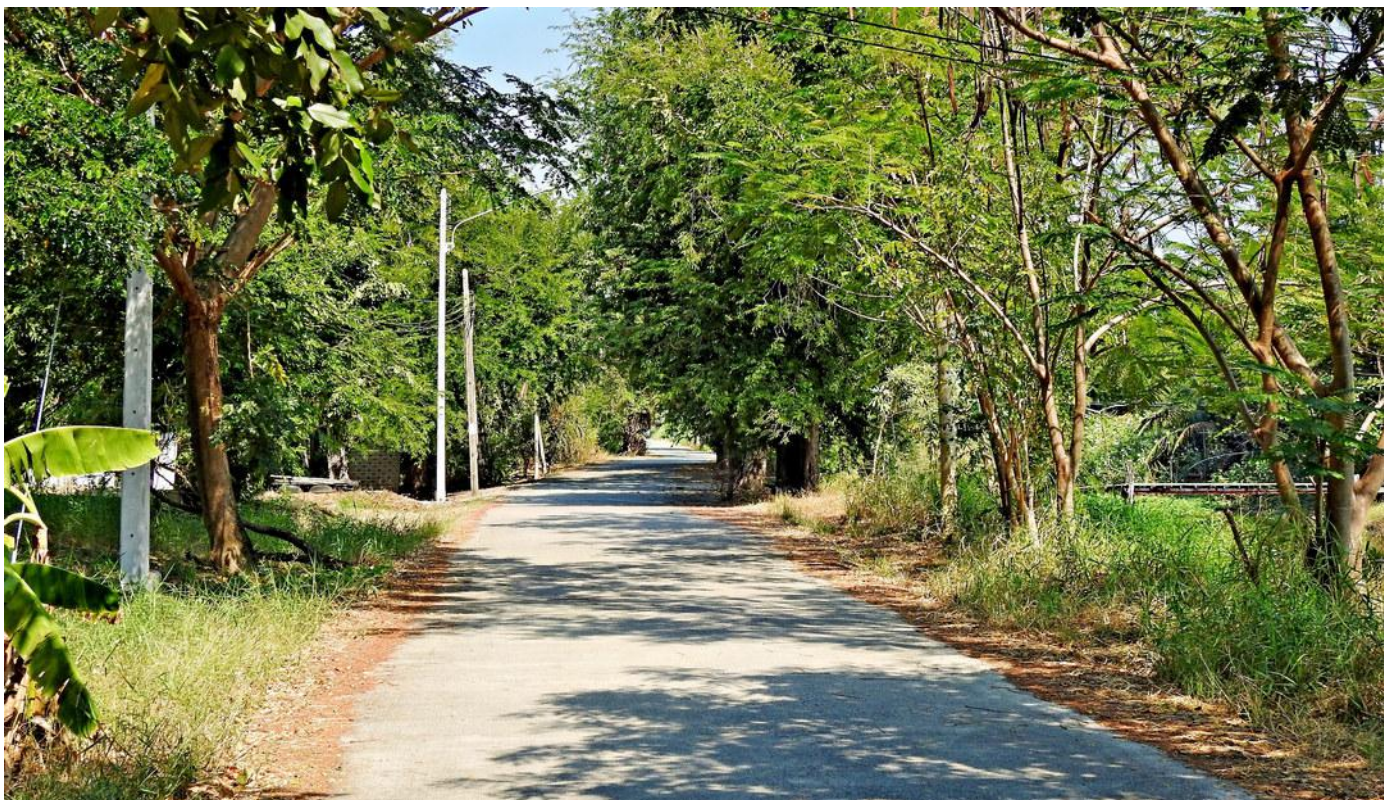
What follows is not simply a crossing of Thailand's plains, but a wandering through time and texture—a drifting between ancient ruins, quiet villages, and endless sky, where movement becomes meditation, and distance dissolves into something softer, more infinite.



Setting Out Beneath a Heavy Sky - Jomtien to Bang Saen Beach (83 km)

It was already well past midday when I finally rolled out of Jomtien. The heat hung heavily in the air, and with it came my determination to avoid the chaotic traffic that clogs the corridor between Pattaya and Bangkok. I threaded my way onto quieter rural roads, where progress was slower but infinitely more pleasant. Eventually, after a testing ride, the calm of Bang Saen Beach came into view. Relief washed over me as I checked into a modest ten-dollar room. It felt like luxury. I was, as the saying goes, as happy as a pig in mud.

As the sun sank towards the horizon, I wandered the short distance—less than two hundred metres—to the beach. I sat barefoot on the sand, warm grains slipping between my toes, a gentle sea breeze brushing my skin. The sky transformed minute by minute, colours deepening and shifting in a spectacle that felt almost theatrical. Sitting there, I felt immensely fortunate—grateful to be back on the road, back in motion, back where I belonged.





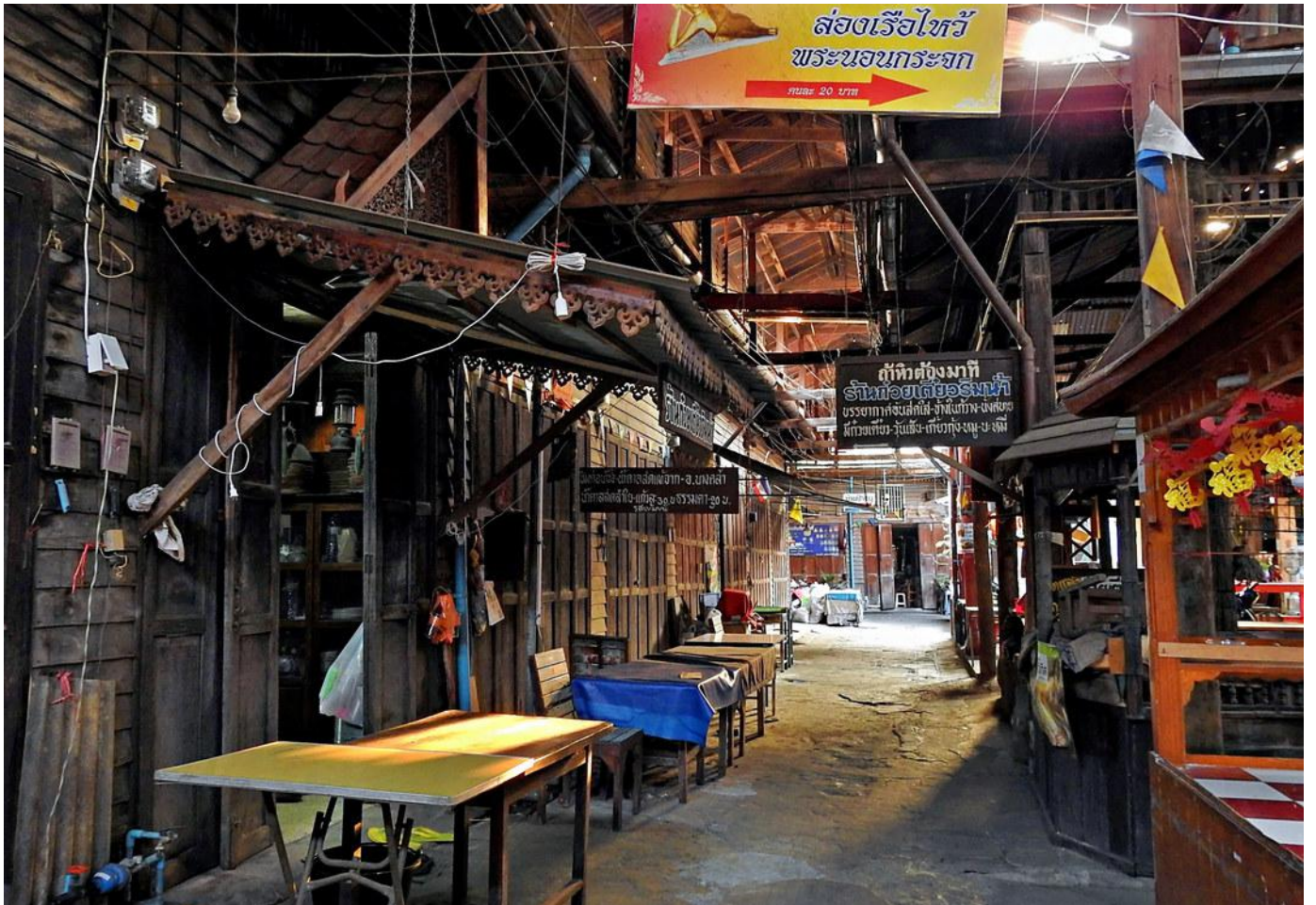
Following the Water's Edge - Bang Saen Beach to Chachoengsao (65 km)

The day began beautifully, with the first thirty kilometres tracing the edge of the Gulf of Thailand, partly along a road built directly over the sea. The northern gulf is shallow and alive with birdlife, fishing boats scattered across the water like punctuation marks. Further inland, I followed the Bang Pakong River, though true country lanes proved elusive—a rarity in Thailand.

Efforts to protect the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins have transformed local livelihoods here, with former shrimp boats repurposed for dolphin-watching tours. I hoped for a quiet riverside track and perhaps a glimpse of the dolphins themselves, but neither materialised. Heavy traffic eventually soured the ride, and I called it a day in Chachoengsao. My early arrival gave me time to explore the atmospheric Banmai Market, more than a hundred years old and now open only on weekends. Traders still live within its weathered wooden buildings, perched above the river. The afternoon light was exquisite. Back in my room, reality intruded in the form of laundry—the least romantic but most necessary ritual of life on the road.







Through Fields and Quiet Villages - Chachoengsao to Amphoe Nong Khae, Saraburi (110 km)

Leaving Chachoengsao, I was rewarded with a far better day of cycling. A maze of rural roads unfolded before me, threading through rice paddies and tiny hamlets. The rhythm of pedalling through such landscapes is deeply soothing.

At one point, I picked up a bright red cloth, intending to fashion it into a safety flag. It proved far too large, so I tied it to my rear rack instead, hoping it would make me more visible. Much of the day unfolded beside a canal, its quiet presence guiding me kilometre after kilometre. After 110 kilometres, the tranquillity ended abruptly at a busy intersection, where I decided to stop. I was delighted to find a surprisingly fancy room for just fourteen dollars—"fancy" being, of course, a relative term.





Among Ruins and Restless Monkeys - Nong Khae to Lopburi (80 km)

I took far too many photographs on the way to Lopburi, unable to resist the beauty of the route. The ride followed railway lines and canals, an effortless glide through a landscape steeped in history. Lopburi itself is an ancient town, its ruins woven seamlessly into everyday Thai life.

The city is also home to its infamous monkey population, complete with a temple of their own. I arrived early, grateful, as the temperature climbed to a sweltering 35°C. My ten-dollar room was basic but equipped with a fan, which was all I needed. Food became my primary occupation—Lopburi offers an endless parade of tempting dishes.

I stayed an extra day to explore. The monkeys were notorious enough that my windows remained permanently shut; even barred windows offer little deterrent to determined primates. The day passed wandering among ruins, history unfolding quietly around me.









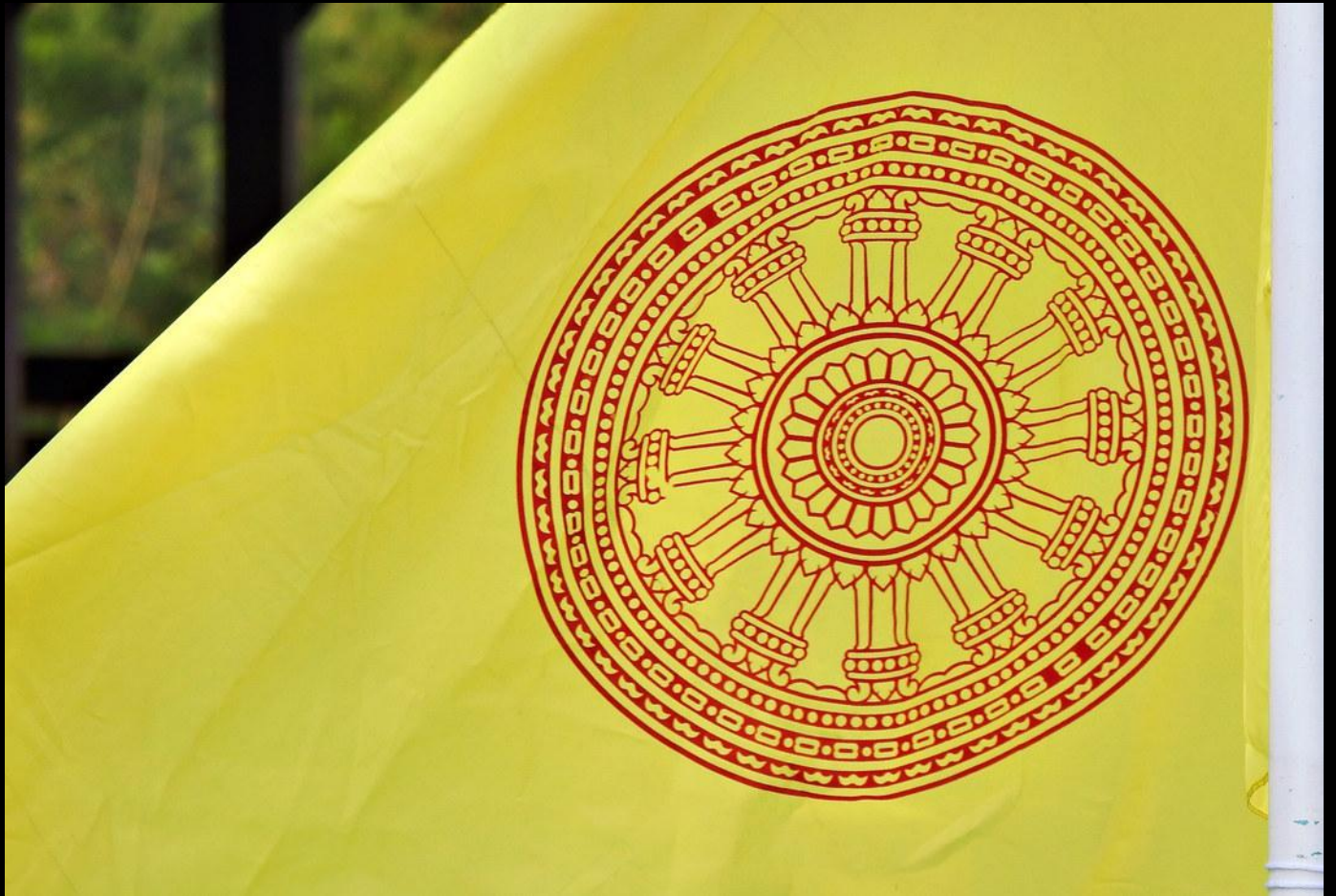


Along the Green Arteries of the Plains - Lopburi to Khok Mai Den (110 km)

The ride to Khok Mai Den was uneventful in the best possible way. I followed water again—a canal or perhaps a river—flanked by luminous green rice paddies and fishermen casting their lines. Villages were few and far between, and I felt delightfully off the beaten track. Energy and contentment carried me forward. What a privilege it is, I thought, to experience the world at this pace.

Bright yellow Dharma flags fluttered outside ever-present Buddhist temples, offering shade and quiet places to rest. After another 110 kilometres, I turned towards the highway in search of food and accommodation.

That evening, I noticed once again that beds in Asia rarely face the door. According to feng shui, this is the “dead man’s position,” resembling the way bodies are carried out. I embraced the Thai way of life completely and ordered takeaway from 7-Eleven—free delivery, even with a generous tip, and no need to venture back into the dark.



A Gift by the Roadside - Khok Mai Den to Nakhon Sawan (53 km)

I lingered over the morning and didn't leave my comfortable bungalow until after nine. Just two kilometres away lay the ruins of Khok Mai Den Ancient City, dating back to the Thawarawadi period. After exploring the hilltop remains, I returned to find a bag hanging from my handlebars—rice and soup, left by a monk, along with a Buddhist talisman. I was deeply touched, though the watery soup, complete with bird-like chunks, proved a challenge to swallow.

I followed the Chao Phraya River upstream to its birthplace at the confluence of the Ping and Nan rivers in Nakhon Sawan. The surrounding farmland felt timeless: fried bananas sold roadside, petrol dispensed from Coca-Cola bottles, farmers tending rice fields—some manually, others deploying drones whose purpose I could only guess.



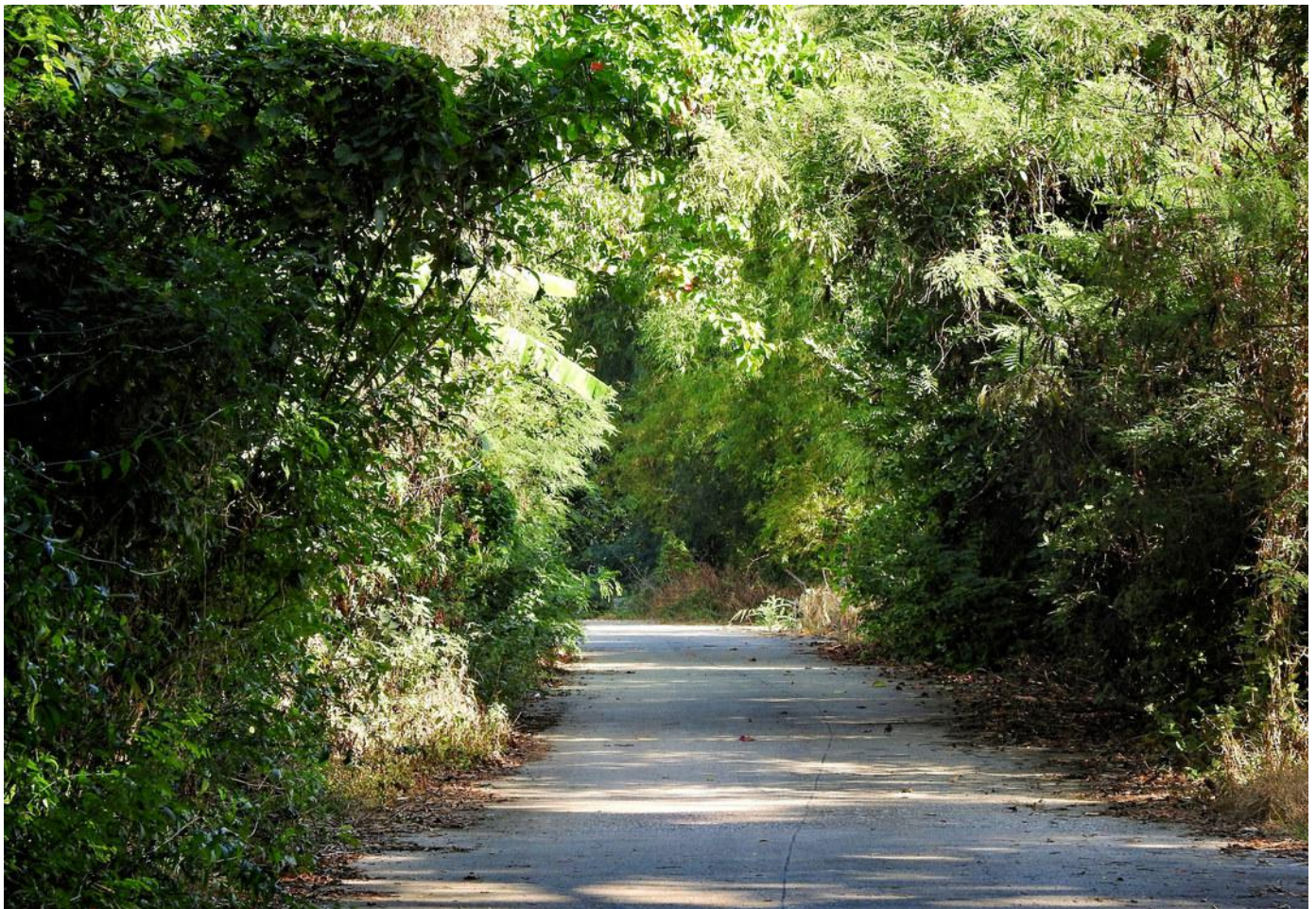




Northward with the River's Rhythm - Nakhon Savan – Tha Makhuea (92 km)

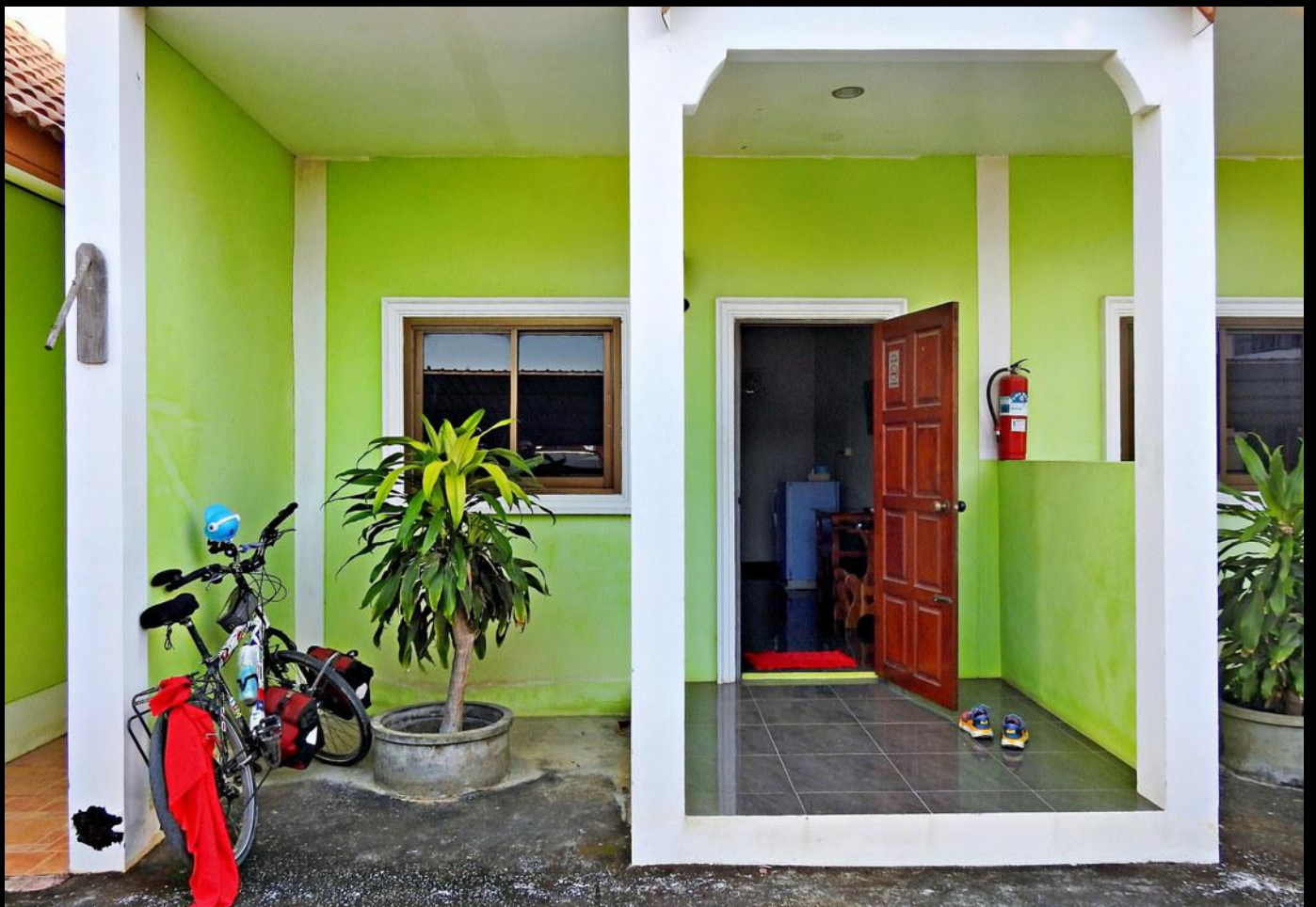
Leaving Nakhon Savan meant navigating heavy traffic and Chinese New Year preparations. Soon, however, a peaceful riverside path led me north past sleeping cats, dogs, and chickens. Women pedalled by with goods for sale, monks chanted at colourful temples, and kilometres slipped by effortlessly.

At water stops, shy conversations unfolded. "Where are you from?" "Africa Thai," I'd reply, prompting delighted laughter. The inevitable follow-up—"By bicycle?"—always ended with disbelief when I confirmed I was travelling alone.









Echoes of Kingdoms Past - Tha Makhuea to Kamphaeng Phet (56 km)

The road to Kamphaeng Phet was busy, sugarcane trucks rumbling past, stalks littering the tarmac. My reward was the UNESCO World Heritage Site—ruins dating to the 14th century, quieter and more contemplative than Sukhothai.

I stayed at Three J Guesthouse, a charming jumble of wooden bungalows and artistic corners. Laundry delayed my visit to the Heritage Park, and I arrived just before closing, snapping a few hurried photos. The following morning, cycling through the vast ruins beneath towering trees was an absolute joy.













Loss, Kindness, and Ancient Light - Kamphaeng Phet to Sukhothai (85 km)

Rural roads once again guided me past rice, banana, corn, and sugarcane fields. The weather was perfect, and I rode almost without stopping. Central Thailand's fertile plains make for gloriously easy cycling.

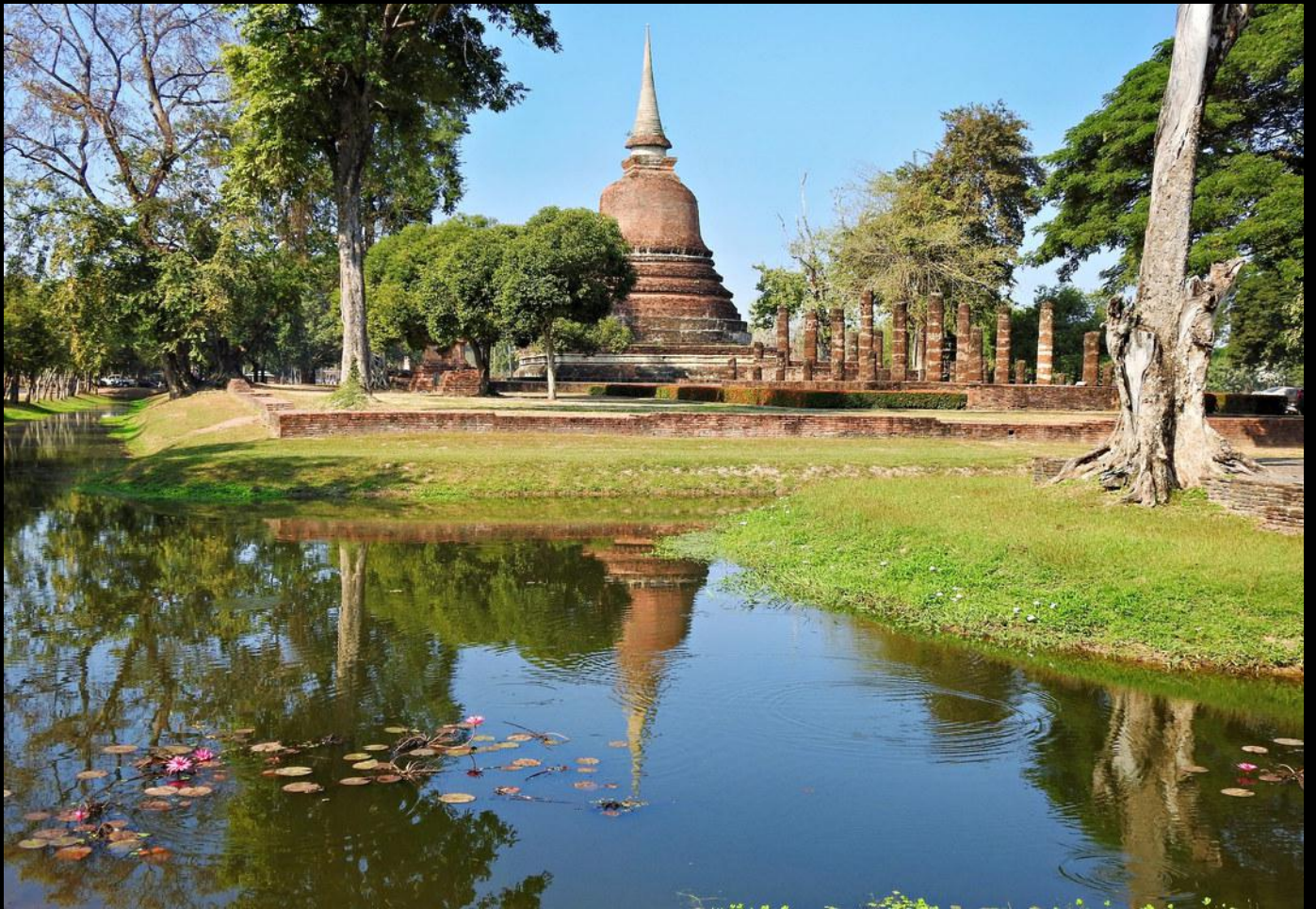
Sukhothai, birthplace of Siam, was predictably touristy. After booking in, disaster struck—my wallet was gone. Panic surged. Without access to money, nothing else mattered. Calls were made, stress levels soared, and eventually relief arrived. The kindness of Vitoonguesthouse2Fanroom, who allowed me to stay without payment, will not be forgotten.

I spent an extra day exploring Sukhothai's magnificent ruins. Cycling the park at sunset, rather than in the midday heat, revealed its true magic.













Riding the Tailwind of Fortune - Sukhothai to Phitsanulok (78 km)

A straightforward ride delivered me to Phitsanulok, aided by a rare bike lane and a tailwind. The town surprised me, its old quarter and famous Buddha giving off an unexpected Indian vibe.

My accommodation sat improbably between a highway, railway line, and mosque. Anticipating a sleepless night, I bought earplugs—but slept surprisingly well.

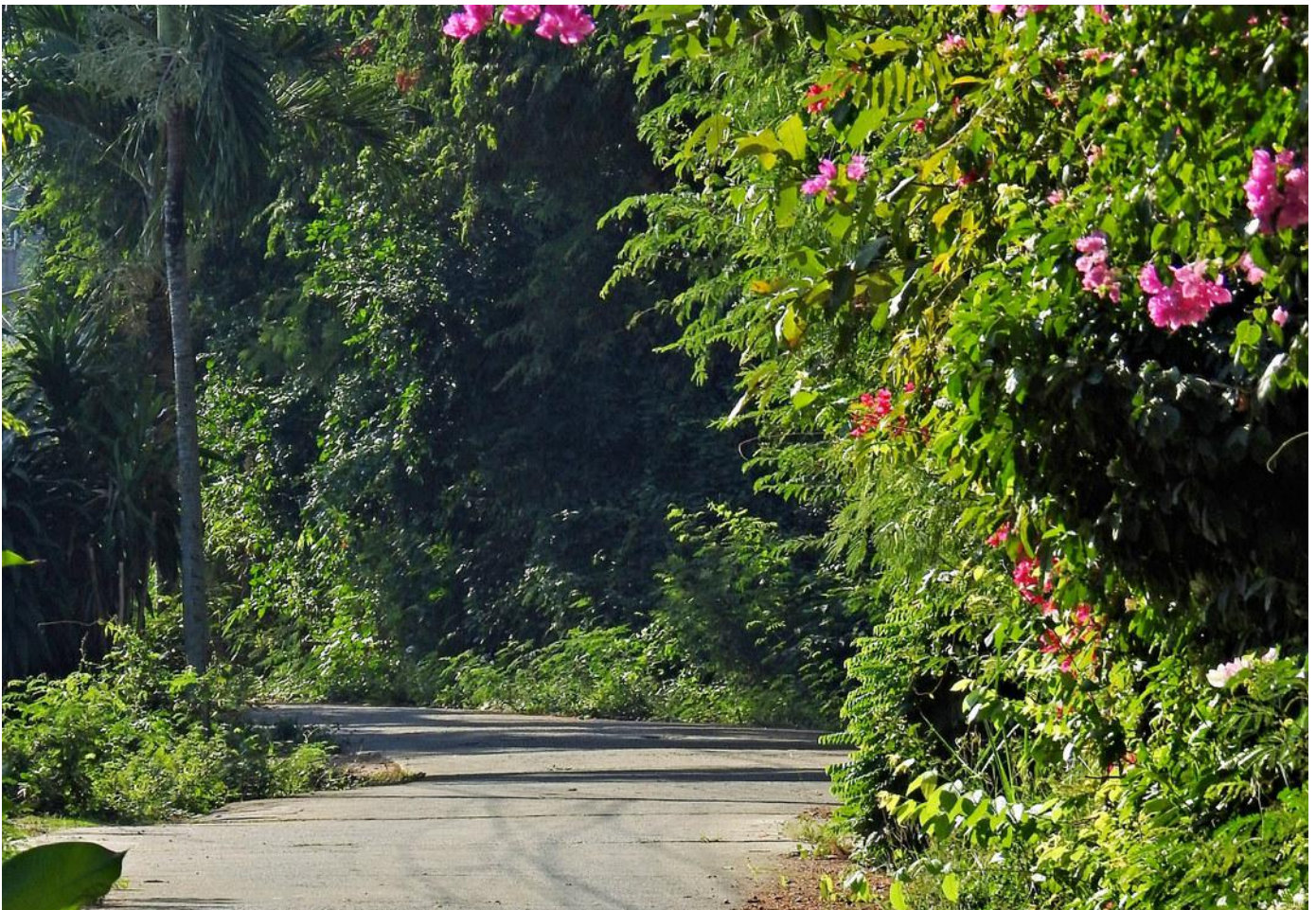




The Long Curve of the Nan River -Phitsanulok to Taphan Hin (100 km)

After breakfast, I nervously crossed the main road, drawing enough attention that cars stopped to let me cross. Riding south along the Nan River was pleasant, with temples, river barges, and green paddies all around.

Taphan Hin bustled as evening food stalls appeared. A shower, takeaway noodles, and early rest rounded out the day perfectly.









A change of Plans - Taphan Hin to Tha Tako (98 km)

The morning market was already alive when I left. The river guided me again through familiar villages and fields.

Around noon, I impulsively changed my route to avoid Bangkok — only to realise I needed cash. But I had cancelled my Bangkok Bank card, not realising it would also disable the cardless withdrawal feature. No money. The air turned blue with my swearing.

I had just enough for a room and food. The nearest bank was 55 kilometres away. Tomorrow's problem.





The search for a Bank - Tha Tako to Nakhon Sawan (48 km)

I flew the 50 kilometres back to Nakhon Sawan and practically skidded to a halt in front of the bank. Minutes later, I walked out with cash and a new card. Relief washed over me like cool water.

I spent the afternoon wandering the city park, watching preparations for the Year of the Dragon. Lanterns and dragons everywhere — red, bright, celebratory.





The River Runs South - Nakhon Sawan to Chai Nat (92 km)

The main road would have been quicker, but the river tempted me again. It wound through old-world settlements where wooden shophouses leaned toward the water. The Chao Phraya carries centuries in its current; you can feel it.

There was no need to stop in Chai Nat, but it looked pleasant enough with inexpensive accommodation.





Temples, Honey, Flowers and Bees - Chai Nat to Ang Thong (100 km)

I followed Organic Maps for a few kilometres before slipping onto smaller paths. The hamlets were sleepy, animals sprawled across the road like discarded rugs. Even the water monitors barely twitched.

Near Ang Thong, I stopped at Wat Sukkasem Thammikaram, home to the towering 38.9-metre statue of Phra Siwali Mahalap. Villagers brought honey and flowers, hoping for blessings and good fortune. Bees nested beneath the statue's arm — a living omen.

After biking 100 km, a budget hotel was easy to find. The shower felt like salvation. I washed my cycling clothes in the wastepaper bin and rewarded myself with a beer and a plate of vegetarian fried rice from 7-Eleven.





A Ruined Capital - Ang Thong to Ayutthaya (65 km)

I hadn't planned on Ayutthaya, but the road led me there anyway—canals, timber houses on stilts, temples rising like ornate mirages.

At the train station, the next train to Bangkok was two hours away. I abandoned the idea and returned to my favourite Baan Lotus Guesthouse. The old schoolhouse welcomed me like an old friend.









Into the City - Ayutthaya to Bangkok (85 km)

Despite my reluctance, I cycled the 85 kilometres to Bangkok. Sunday traffic was merciful, but entering a city of eleven million still rattles the nerves. I arrived safely and decided to take the train to Pattaya — I'd ridden that road too many times.

I slept deeply, missed the train, and didn't mind at all.

Returning to Pattaya by Train

The following morning, I cycled to the station before dawn, anxious about being seen in the dark. Getting the bike onto the train required awkward manoeuvring; getting off required the same.

Back in Pattaya, I washed everything — clothes, bags, the residue of the road. By evening, I was already wondering where to go next.

There are so many possibilities. But before I could do that, I had a few tasks to complete, as my wallet held not only my Thai bank card but also my South African cards, ID, and other documents.



Epilogue

And then, almost without ceremony, it ends—or perhaps only changes shape.

The wheels come to rest, but the journey lingers, echoing in the body and settling quietly into memory. Roads once travelled do not disappear; they remain—etched in sunlight, in dust, in the rhythm of breath remembered.

There are fragments that endure: the hush of morning over still water, the gold of temples flickering in late light. The kindness of strangers, offered without question or weight.

In the end, it is not the distance that stays, but the slowing—the gentle unravelling of urgency, the rediscovery of enough.

And somewhere, beyond the last page and the final mile, the road continues—unseen, unending—calling not loudly, but patiently, as all true journeys do.



About this Chapter

This chapter documents my cycle ride from Pattaya to Sukhothai and back. There are numerous roads, and the route described in this blog is not necessarily the best.

The distances

Please note that the daily distances recorded may not always be the shortest route, as I occasionally deviate from the main path. However, the daily kilometres recorded were accurate according to my odometer. The readings on my odometer sometimes varied from markers and maps and occasionally over- or under-read. At the end of each day, I always noted the kilometres travelled, which might have included detours such as going to the market or searching for accommodation.

Time of year and date

This chapter is an account of my visit to Central Thailand in January 2024.

Insurance

A travel insurance policy is essential to cover loss, theft, and medical expenses. However, some policies might not cover certain activities such as scuba diving, motorcycling, and trekking. It's important to carefully read the policy to make sure it covers the activities you plan to do.

Clothing

During a cycling holiday, we spend most of our time riding, so having high-quality padded cycling shorts is essential. You can wear any comfortable footwear while cycling, but I suggest hiking sandals or lightweight hiking shoes for more casual riders. Thailand is hot year-round, and even though January is considered "cool", I doubt that you will ever need warm clothing unless visiting areas of higher elevation. Don't forget to include personal toiletries such as insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. Lastly, I strongly recommend wearing a cycling helmet for safety purposes.

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 components, Alex 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 definitely 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 handlebar 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.



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.









It's a journey in which neither the distance cycled, nor the destination is of any importance.



