

leisure & wellness

Phnom Penh: From Behind the Handlebars

Every Saturday morning, the **Easy Riders** gather at one of their predetermined rendezvous points around the city and prepare to get a little muddy. **Andrew Turco** put on his bicycle clips and joined them.



Bike trips invariably involve some form of river crossing

A SMALL GROUP OF REGULAR cyclists the Easy Riders have, over the course of a few years, mapped out a variety of interesting routes to the outskirts of the city. Each Saturday morning they stretch their legs, clear their minds, and maybe even tone a calf muscle or two. Most of the group's regulars started riding around Phnom Penh on their own – exploring the dirt roads that meander out of the city – before happening upon like-minded individuals.

The group began when two Kiwi couples started the informal Saturday trips. One early member – part of the Hash House Harriers – knew the areas around Phnom Penh well, which helped plan the initial routes. A fluid group, upon the Kiwis' departure earlier this year, leadership changed to another committed group of regular rid-

ers. "Pretty much by attrition," Sheila Robinson laughs when asked how she ended up as the leader. "I became the longest surviving member."

■ BREAKING OUT OF THE PENH

The group is very democratic. Everyone has access to the email mailing list. Routes are generally done on a rotating basis – with members free to give input on preference. Like many of the other riders, Sheila had an interest in cycling during her pre-Cambodia life in Calgary, Canada before joining the group. She and her husband originally started exploring trails around Phnom Penh on their own before learning of the group. Most of the members remember riding either solo or in pairs around the outskirts of the city before finding the rest of the Easy Riders.

Most come for the same reason – just to get out of the city. Nor does the weather put them off. "It's great to get a little muddy every week," says Sheila.

Although Phnom Penh is a hectic city, just cross the Japanese Bridge and take a left or right along the Tonle Sap and you enter a different world. Whether it's the vegetables growing along the exposed banks of the Mekong or the quiet dirt roads of the small villages that still remain so close to the city centre, a peaceful Saturday morning isn't that hard to find if you're willing to look.

■ ALWAYS MORE ROUTES TO FIND

The routes the group takes are the result of trial and error and a willingness to explore. Although the rides have all been given established names, like

"the Cabbage Patch" or "Bassac Islands", they are done purely from memory. Two members of the group are currently putting their routes down on a map. As a result, the knowledge that's been acquired over the past few years will be passed on, even if the legs that found them have moved on to other parts of the world.

The group regularly rides eight main routes, but this is by no means an exhaustive list. "There are more routes to be found," says Sheila. "It's just a matter of someone exploring a bit." When riding, it's amazing how many picturesque roads sit an easy turn off from the main highways leading out of Phnom Penh.

Bumpy roads with views of stilted houses and flowing rivers line most of the routes, which invariably involve a ferry of some kind. The Cabbage Patch Ride



It's great to get a little muddy every week

seems to be a favourite of many group members partly due to the number of ferry crossings involved in it.

During the rainy season, the water is not just in the rivers. The rain's effect on road conditions often determines which route the group takes. Some routes rely on being able to cut along riverbanks when the rivers are low, others are nearly impossible when the dirt roads are deluged with water. For the most part, the group leaves every Saturday regardless.

Not that the group is afraid of the mud. It's pretty much guaranteed that you'll need a shower after returning midday, and the Easy Riders are not the only things that get wet. "We know all the best bike washing places in town," says Sheila.

Easy Riders: rowena.eastrick@yahoo.com

RECOMMENDED ROUTES

One of the easiest routes out of the city, and one that the group often does with new riders, is to take the public ferry across the Tonle Sap and the Mekong. Ferries leave every half hour. There's no need to ride on Phnom Penh's roads, and you're already in rural countryside by the time you step off the ferry. Simply take a right or a left when you disembark, and ride around.

Another recommended trip is to cross the Japanese Bridge. Take a right on the other side, go around the peninsula and take the ferry to Silk Island, where you can also cycle in rural bliss.

CYCLING CAMBODIA

One rider that occasionally joins the Easy Riders is Smey, an enthusiastic Cambodian cyclist who heads one of the two biggest cycling clubs in Cambodia. Although originally a Cambodian 100-metre runner, he started cycling in 2001 and has been obsessed ever since.

Through the Cambodia Cyclist Club, he finds time to work with the next generation of Cambodian cyclists. He wants to build a group of Cambodians who can use their skills to become cycling guides. Two of the group's forty-two members are on the national team, and one member competed for Cambodia in last year's SEA Games in Thailand.

According to Smey, the south of Cambodia is the most popular place to cycle because of the infrastructure, but the north is his favourite – as long as you can tolerate the long distances and lack of regular comforts. However, you don't have to go that far. "You only need 10km to get outside of the business of Phnom Penh," he says.

Smey's enthusiasm for Cambodian cycling is unparalleled, and his group often works with Cambodians who would not otherwise have access to the equipment or races that members participate in. Mountain bike rentals, bike repairs, and cycling tours are all available through Cycling Cambodia, which also goes by the name Khmer Biker.

A cycling guide costs US\$45 per day and mountain bike rental is US\$8 per day, plus a US\$2 delivery charge.

Cycling Cambodia, Tel: 012 555 123, info@khmerbiker.com



Discovering hidden gems



Phnom Penh's busy streets seem a million miles away