

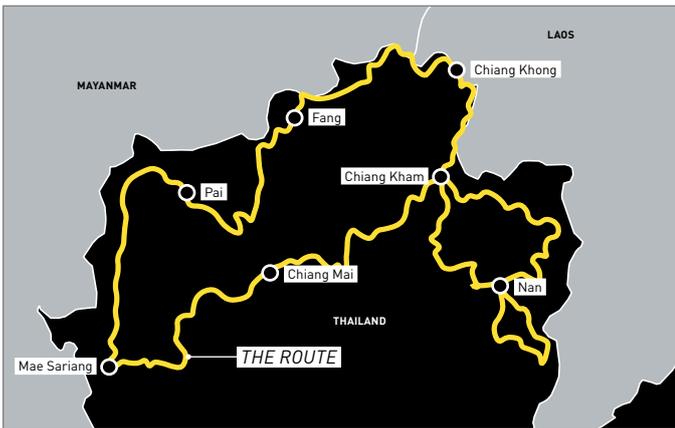
WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

JAMES OXLEY heads to northern Thailand for a 10-day tour through one of the country's most magnificent areas





STOPPING AT THE FASCINATING SAO DIN NA NOI



“S

ometimes we waltz. Sometimes we rock and roll. Tomorrow, we rock and roll.”

The words were said over dinner with a hint of mischief by our German tour guide Michael Obertz. I admit to feeling some trepidation. I’d seen Michael waltz on a motorcycle over the past few days, and boy, it was the fastest waltz I’d ever seen.

This guy could ride. I’d already watched him take hundreds of sweeping curves, tight hairpins and flickable esses at speed, with an effortless ease reserved for those with tremendous skill and experience. If Michael said we were going to rock and roll tomorrow, it meant we were in for the ride of our lives.

His words replayed in my head the next day as I climbed steeply through a remote area of jungle. Huge vegetation that wouldn’t look out of place on a *Jurassic Park* set slapped my body harshly as I negotiated the tight twists and turns of a mountain track. The rough concrete surface was grippy enough, but it had been neglected for years, with the resulting potholes and gravel patches adding to the challenge at each blind switchback.

Wild tigers roamed this part of the jungle, and while the chances of seeing one of these magnificent creatures was remote, the fact I was infiltrating their territory heightened the sense of adventure further.

WHO'S WRITING?



James Oxley is staff writer at *Adventure Bike Rider* and loves nothing more than exploring the world by motorcycle. Initially, his travels were from the saddle of a bicycle in Europe and the USA, before he realised having an engine between his legs was a lot more fun. James thinks there’s nothing better than picking a destination and following the wiggliest road on the map to get there.



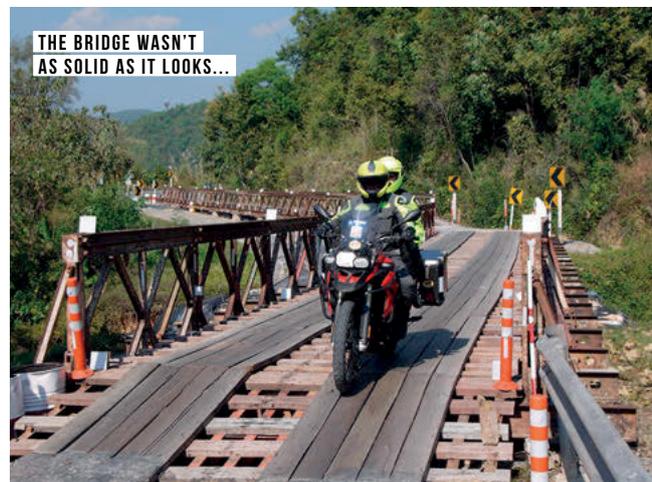
LOCAL ENTERTAINER
AT THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE



RESTING UP AFTER
A MORNING OF CURVES



STATUES AT A
TRADITIONAL THAI TEMPLE



THE BRIDGE WASN'T
AS SOLID AS IT LOOKS...

Swinging my body from left to right, I got into a rhythm, thrusting my Honda Africa Twin slowly upwards until I finally broke through the jungle canopy. Up ahead was Michael and a couple of my fellow riders taking a break by the roadside.

I parked up alongside them and looked out over the expanse of forest as we waited for the rest of the group to catch up. Each rider arrived with a beaming smile on their face. Michael had been right. It had been a rock and roll ride up a mountainside, our very own stairway to heaven.

Earlier that week, a group of strangers thrown together by a love of motorcycling gathered together for dinner at a hotel in Chiang Mai, a bustling city in northern Thailand. It was the start of an eight-day 'extreme' motorcycle tour run by Edelweiss Bike Travel. At that stage, I wasn't sure what 'extreme' meant, but I was looking forward to finding out.

It felt slightly awkward as we all introduced ourselves and made polite conversation, but they were a friendly bunch and Michael helped the conversation flow.

At this point, I should admit that I had never taken part in an organised motorcycle tour before. I've always been a little bewildered by the whole concept. While I understood it was easier to pay someone to organise and lead a bike trip for you, I feared it would negate the sense of adventure and achievement I feel when I explore the world solo.

However, as we plunged into the chaos of Chiang Mai traffic the next morning, I was immediately grateful to have a leader

to guide us through. The group rode in a tight pack as Michael had briefed us to do so.

Despite a seeming lack of any adherence to traffic rules, an order to the chaos began to emerge. The Thai drivers did push their luck, almost cheekily nudging their way into spaces that weren't really there, but they also held back when required, ensuring traffic could flow freely amid the mayhem. Michael had earlier explained that Thai people in general look out for each other, and that morning the drivers were taking care of us.

Soon enough, we left the city behind and reached the open road. We were heading north west at the start a 1,200-mile loop. It would take us anti-clockwise around the north of the country, skirting the Myanmar border, before leading us back to Chiang Mai in just over a week.

Turning off the main road, we experienced our first twists and turns of the trip on a gloriously curvaceous road. The bends did not stop coming for the next eight days.

I quickly learned one aspect of the 'extreme' element to this trip was the speed. I expected an organised motorbike tour to be taken at a sedate pace by older folk past their riding prime. I could not have been more wrong.

The pace was swift. Safe, but fast. I could tell at least two of the group, David from the US and Wael from Qatar, came here to push their riding to the limit. I later discovered that David is a former Baja 1,000 race winner. ►

The two riders jockeyed for position behind Michael who led at the front and it became clear that there was a certain amount of prestige to being the person riding closest to the tour guide. Close behind them was Nathan, also from the US, who was taking the tour with his dad. Nathan used to race sports bikes on track, hence his smooth, flowing riding style. I never once saw him take the wrong line in a corner.

I later learned the spirited pace isn't something found on most Edelweiss motorcycle tours, but was part of the extreme tour experience.

Over the coming days, a riding order appeared which we pretty much stuck to for the whole tour. I settled in behind Nathan, with his dad behind me. He was followed by Fabian and Mariella, a delightful Costa Rican couple riding two-up. Behind them was Jari, also from the US, who seemed happy cruising along at a more sedate pace. Bringing up the rear was Ping, our wonderfully eccentric local fixer, who drove a sweeper car behind the group.

Michael had been clear from the start that everyone should ride at a speed that is comfortable for them, and throughout the tour I could see he was cleverly adjusting his pace to suit the road conditions and ability of the people following him. It was a tough task. He needed to ride fast enough to satisfy the riders who had come to test their skills on some of the world's best roads, while ensuring we were all safe and no-one felt left behind.

As our pack of riders spread out on that first day, I just about kept touch with the leaders, but after an hour or so I realised Thailand had been passing me by in a blur. I eased up and took in my surroundings for the first time. I suddenly felt the thrill of exploring a new country by motorcycle for the first time now I was riding alone and not solely focused on the road.

We made our first lunch stop of the trip next to a beautiful waterfall. The restaurant was simply a wooden hut usually frequented by locals. It's the sort of place you'd be unlikely to stumble upon yourself, but one that Michael had been to many times. The noodle soup was delicious.

I learned this was another benefit of riding as part of an organised tour. Every stop we made for coffee and lunch was in a beautiful location, carefully chosen for us. And it wasn't as if we were following a well-worn tourist trail. Many of these places were well off the beaten track, which helped us connect with local people and get a glimpse into their lives.

That night we pulled up at our hotel, Rico Resort in Chiang Kham, after spending the afternoon riding seemingly endless smooth and twisting roads. Immediately, cold beers were brought out and we all stood around chatting excitedly about the day's ride. It was a special moment of camaraderie and one that would be repeated at the same point every day going forward.

In fact, as we came close to the end of each day's ride, I'd find myself looking forward to these moments, reliving the highlights over a beer or two. The laughter always flowed as we bonded over the brilliant riding we'd experienced.

Over the coming days, we followed the same routine. We met for breakfast at 7am, received a rider briefing for the day ahead at 8am, and then rode around 200 miles together on arguably the best roads in the world. We'd end each day at a beautiful hotel resort, usually with a swimming pool, and share stories over a group dinner.

For someone who usually travels independently, it took me a couple of days to accept I didn't need to make any decisions. There was no need to figure out any directions, I didn't need to think about where to eat or sleep, and there was no need to oil



A BUDDHIST TEMPLE
IN CHIANG SAEN

my chain at night as this was done for me.

Even my rather manic fuel anxiety disappeared when I realised the daily distances ridden had been carefully calculated to ensure I never ran out of petrol. Once I surrendered my mind to the organised tour experience, I found myself having a brilliant time.

The strict routine turned out to be essential, because I soon learned another 'extreme' aspect of the tour was the amount of time spent in the saddle. This wasn't a lazy cruise through South East Asia, stopping every hour or so to relax and soak up the surroundings.

Despite the relatively low mileage each day, we would spend six or seven hours on the bikes. This was due to the technical difficulty of the riding on obscenely twisty roads, which kept the average speed lower than a blast along a French motorway for example, where you can easily notch up 400 miles a day. If we had needed to stop and figure out directions, or wander off route to find places to eat, we wouldn't have arrived at our hotels until late into the night, if at all.

The amount of time spent in the saddle proved to be a blessing, because it was the motorcycling roads that were the real star of the Thailand Extreme tour. They were quite simply magnificent. Thailand's road builders seem to have taken inspiration from every great highway in the world and crammed the northern part of their country full of them. ►



**THE ADVENTURE BIKES
WERE PERFECT FOR THAI ROADS**



COFFEE WITH A VIEW



**THE CAFE
ON ROUTE 1148**

Combine this with breathtaking scenery at every turn, and you have what could well be the best place on earth to ride a motorcycle. I felt incredibly spoilt in the fact I didn't even need to look at a map to find them. Michael simply led us from world class road to world class road, in an orgy of curves, sweeping bends and hairpin turns.

Despite the intensity of the riding, I felt my mind relaxing. The only care I had in the world was carving the right line through each turn this beautiful country had to offer. It felt a little like meditation.

Unconsciously, my speed picked up and I found myself pushing my riding and the grip levels of the Africa Twin's knobby tyres to the limit. I was loving every second on the bike to the point where I would become a little disappointed whenever we stopped. It was completely different to my usual independent touring experience, but boy, it was a lot of fun.

Throughout the tour we ticked off many of the famous motorcycling roads in northern Thailand, including the 1148. This beautifully twisting ribbon of tarmac is often hailed as the best riding experience the country has to offer, and it more than lived up to its reputation. The route crosses the Phayao and Nan provinces over jungle covered mountains and rolling hills so lushly green, they betray the fact this area receives a deluge of rain in the monsoon season.

Handily for bikers, there is a Route 66-style café, called Route 1148, that sits next to one of the most spectacular views I

have ever seen. Sipping an espresso looking out at this beautiful land is a moment I'll treasure forever.

We also rode the Road of 1,000 Corners in the far north west of Thailand, perhaps the most famous road in the country. Despite being a wonderfully winding highway, it was extremely busy with tourist traffic and local lorries

The surface was slick and I felt my rear tyre slide out on a number of occasions as it scrambled for grip in tight turns. Michael later explained this was due to poor maintenance of lorries that use the road and leak oil onto the surface.

There were also a multitude of western tourists wobbling all over the road on scooters wearing nothing but flip-flops, shorts, T-shirts and no helmets. I had my heart in my mouth every time I passed by one. Last year a friend of mine died riding a scooter in Vietnam and I wanted to stop and tell them about the risks they were taking.

The fact the Road of 1,000 Corners was the one and only disappointment of the trip didn't matter at all, mainly because the next road we took had nearly 2,000 corners, and we had it almost exclusively to ourselves. It is testament to the quality of the route Michael led us on that this came as no surprise.

But no matter how well the trip was planned, it was the impromptu moments that brought the tour to life. As we rode through one small town, I could see the riders in front get swamped by a crowd in the street. Had we stumbled upon some sort of civil unrest about to lynch a group of foreigners?



TRYING TO GET SOME
SHADE IN THE 36C HEAT



A BRIEF
DETOUR OFF-ROAD

No, it was a wedding party in full swing with scores of drunk Thai people desperate for us to join the fun. We danced and posed for photos before riding off.

Another evening we arrived in Pai, a town popular with young western backpackers looking to escape the main tourist hotspots. We wandered the streets and gathered together in a bar, laughing, joking and swapping stories about our lives and the day's ride.

It was here I realised an organised bike tour is just as much about the people you ride with, as it is about the roads you travel. You have people with a shared love of motorbikes and travel to share the experience with, and if anything bad were to happen, you've got a group of new friends ready to help you without hesitation.

Back on the bike, I was taking the fact I was riding the best roads of my life very much for granted. Perversely, it was the worst roads of the trip that were my highlight though, and these were the ones I would have struggled to find riding independently. Our rock and roll twisting jungle trail through tiger country wasn't even drawn on the map.

It was these roads, discovered by Michael when he originally scouted the route, that turned a challenging motorbike tour into a proper adventure. It didn't matter that I was part of an organised tour. I was riding an Africa Twin on a steep, twisting, single-lane mountain track through a remote area of Thai jungle. If that isn't adventure riding, I don't know what is. **ABR**

WANT TO EXPLORE NORTHERN THAILAND? HERE'S HOW YOU CAN...

GETTING THERE

Thailand has long been a popular destination for tourists and backpackers, so getting there is a simple affair with plenty of flight options from the UK. I flew to Chiang Mai from London Heathrow Airport with Qatar Airways, stopping in Doha for a couple of hours to switch flights. The cost of a return flight was £542. To find the best deals, it's worth checking out www.skyscanner.net. If you can, schedule in a few days at the end of the tour to explore more of Thailand. It's a beautiful country and accommodation is cheap.

RIDE THIS ROUTE

I rode with Edelweiss Bike Travel on its 10-day Thailand Extreme tour. The trip included eight riding days during which we covered more than 1,200 miles.

The joy of an organised tour is that everything is done for you before you arrive. My bike was delivered to my hotel, and all my accommodation had been booked in advance. All I needed to do was put the key in the ignition and ride.

The tour was led by an experienced guide in Michael Obertz who originally scouted this tour for Edelweiss Bike Travel. He's an extremely likeable guy who knows northern Thailand well and has an infectious passion for the country which enhanced the experience.

The price of the tour starts at £2,196 for two people riding one bike, sharing a room each night. It rises to £3,319 for a solo rider staying in a single room, riding the Honda Africa Twin as I did. The cost includes all accommodation, motorcycle rental with unlimited mileage, and breakfast and dinner each day. It does not include fuel or lunch.

ITINERARY

- Day 1: Arrival in Chiang Mai
- Day 2: Chiang Mai - Chiang Kham (174 miles)
- Day 3: Chiang Kham - Nan (186 miles)
- Day 4: Nan, rest day with the option to ride (180 miles)
- Day 5: Nan - Chiang Khong (205 miles)
- Day 6: Chiang Khong - Fang (174 miles)
- Day 7: Fang - Pai (186 miles)
- Day 8: Pai - Mae Sariang (180 miles)
- Day 9: Mae Sariang - Chiang Mai (180 miles)
- Day 10: Departure from Chiang Mai

SHOULD I BOOK AN EXTREME TOUR?

This depends on how much experience you have on a motorbike, and the type of riding you like to do. Edelweiss Bike Travel rates this tour as four out of five for difficulty, and four out of five for riding time, using its own scale.

The roads are challenging and you'll be spending most of the day on the bike. If you like nothing better than riding endlessly twisting roads all day, and you're comfortable carving through hairpin turns, then an extreme tour would be perfect. If you haven't ever ridden a mountain pass, you may be better off booking one of Edelweiss Bike Travels' more relaxing tours. The trip is fine for riding two-up, as long as both rider and pillion have some experience of bike travel.

WHAT GEAR TO TAKE

You'll need to take your own riding trousers, jacket, helmet, boots and gloves. When I rode the tour in February, the weather was gloriously hot, so ensure your gear has plenty of vents. I didn't experience any rain, but Thailand is covered in lush green vegetation for a reason, so make sure you take a full set of waterproofs. I always take a spare pair of gloves when I travel in case of rain.

Each bike came with either a top box or side cases, but I would recommend taking a waterproof bag and straps for any gear you can't fit into these. And make sure you take swimwear and a towel, especially if you like swimming under waterfalls!

ACCOMMODATION

Throughout the tour we stayed in simply stunning accommodation, bordering on lavish. The rooms were huge, the settings were beautiful, and the service was superb. We ate at the hotels most nights and the Thai food was delicious.