

# The Tigers of Southeast Asia

*Text&Photos Manuel Marabese*

## **Bangkok's Prelude**

If there is a region on Earth capable to constantly inspire travellers' dreams of adventure and discovery, this must be probably Southeast Asia. Riding across Thailand, Laos and Cambodia sounds fascinating yet too challenging for many riders, as border crossing procedures can be very extenuating even for the most patient and skilled voyager. Navigating with road signs written only in Khmer or Thai alphabet with no one around able to understand English may be a little disorienting.



**Goodbye Bangkok and Triumph factory**

However, Edelweiss Bike Travel headquarter had such a trip in mind for a long time and after a thorough scouting and with some logistic support offered by a local tour operator specialised in adventure tours in the Mekong area, the long awaited travel has seen its pieces put together. A seventeen days tour scheduled between November and December was finally ready. To make things a little bit more interesting, Bangkok's port customhouse decided to let

Edelweiss' managers sweat in the cold alpine autumn as if they were in Thailand, because until the very last moment it was not clear if the bikes could be imported into the kingdom. The Triumph Tigers used for the tour (eight Tiger 800 and three Tiger Explorer 1200) had to be shipped the whole way from Austria to Bangkok. Not your regular DHL parcel as you can easily imagine. Although plenty of time was allowed for the travel, the motorbikes were

released from the customs only two days before the start of the tour, just on time to allow the tour guides preparing them for the customers' arrival.

The Triumph factory, located in Chonburi (in the outskirts of Bangkok) is our temporary 'base camp' and on the first day of the trip Peter Coates, the operations director in Thailand, welcomes us with a guided tour through the production lines. They have just started to assemble the Tiger 800 here as well, while our Tigers have been produced in UK. Knowing that our bikes have undergone such a big intercontinental journey to meet their newborn siblings is a sweet thought. Time for a pre departure group shot that will remind us at the end of the tour how fresh we looked on Day 1 and then off we go.



**The Tigers are waiting for their riders**

### **The customhouse challenge**

The Edelweiss tour guides, Michael from Germany and Manuel from Italy, are in good company, with a well mixed



Waiting at the border in Poipet

group from Brazil (Bueno), England (Andy), United States (Gail, Ed, Jean, Georges), Italy (Marco) and Austria (Heinz), together with Edelweiss managing director as well, Rainer with his wife Gaby. The roster is reinforced by Mr. Bounmy, a skilled driver from Laos that will follow the whole tour on a Ford Ranger 4x4 functioning as support car. Three more local tour guides (Mr. BB, Mr. Bunny and Mr. Phouvanh, one for each of the country visited) are joining the tour, helping us with border crossing formalities and in any other moment where local language is needed.

The first day is a good appetizer for sampling Southeast Asia: some urban traffic, dust on the road, scooters everywhere, a scenic and quiet temple, some pad thai and fried rice chicken. And the heat of course, but still mild compared to what the next days are reserving for us. During the safety session of the welcome briefing Michael stressed the importance of arriving every day at the destination hotel before darkness, which means before 6pm. After dusk there are too many hazards on the already dangerous roads: tractors proceeding at 10kmh after blind

curves with no lights, scooters trying to pass you on the wrong side with no lights, and yes, even dogs, cows and pigs have no lights here. Well, then we will definitely try our best to ride only before the sundown. The first day ends with a refreshing swim followed by a poolside musical dinner in our hotel in Aranyaprathet, just a stone throw from Poipet, the busy border between Thailand and Cambodia.

An early wake up call reminds us that an intense day is awaiting us, crossing into Cambodia and visiting the timeless temples of Angkor Wat in Siem Reap. We need to

reach the customhouse as soon as possible in order to enter Cambodia in a reasonable amount of time, before all the tour busses from Bangkok to Angkor Wat are going to assault it. Jim, our contact man responsible for the bureaucratic issues has worked hard in the past weeks to provide us the necessary carnets and the caravan permit. It looks like we can pass the border with no hassles, but this is Southeast Asia and you never know which 'special paper' is missing according to the officer on duty. The queue is still very short and in just a few minutes we are under the customhouse roof. Unbelievable, but it is not finished yet. We can see the exit gate of the Kingdom of Thailand. So close yet so far, since the officer seems to dislike our dozens of papers and riding permits. Apparently an original stamped document is missing (of course), but after a bit of mediation from our interpreter we can get by without it. Now we only need to make copies. Copies of what? Basically everything. There is obviously no copy machine there, so we need to go back ("Excuse me, back where, Sir?" "Dunno") and just do it. Manuel takes Mr. BB on



Children everywhere along the roads

the Tiger for the copy machine mission and luckily, not far away, a shop provides copy service. First step done, can we cross now? Not yet, this procedure permits only the rider and the bike to cross via the road, any passenger must queue in line with several hundreds of other travellers just unloaded by a dozen tour busses. This is still Southeast Asia though, and a bit of smiling and some 'extra fee charged for special paper' ensure us a smooth transition all together. Cambodia, we are almost there!



Along Mekong dirt roads

## Into Tomb Raider's Temples

We dismiss Mr. BB and on the other side Mr. Bunny welcomes us with open arms. Getting a couple of visa on arrival takes only the time of a cigarette and the last checkpoint is the Cambodian customhouse, a much more relaxed situation. Waiting without knowing if it will take ten minutes or two hours is tiresome, especially when such a highlight like Angkor Wat is expecting us. The joy of having all our passports and the bikes' documentation back in our

hands brings the group instantly on the seat and the motorbikes are roaring in short order. It took good three hours to cross one of the busiest borders of this corner of the world, and now many happy smiles are riding towards our destination. Angkor Archaeological Park cannot be simply described. It is more than just a temple site. It is THE temple site, where ancient and astonishing edifices arouse feelings of timeless culture. Covering 400 square kilometres, it unveils the remains of six centuries of Khmer empire and it is claimed to have been the seat of the largest pre-industrial city on

earth. Acknowledging the vastness of the area during our guided tour we can surely believe that. The twilight is lowering the curtain on our visit but we reach on time Ta Prohm, the temple featured in Angelina Jolie's Tomb Raider movie. Here the roots of jungle trees are literally strangling the old ruins, depicting a beautifully decadent scene enhanced by the approaching darkness.

## Along the Mighty Mekong trough Cambodia and Laos

In the next days we are leaving the touristy areas behind us. The remoteness of backcountry gravel roads across bamboo huts villages along the Mekong River will give us the long awaited sense of discovery. Whenever we stop our triple cylinders, curious villagers with their children come out in droves. Mr. Bunny tells us that for many of them this is the first face-to-face encounter with *farangs* (foreigners), and especially with foreign riders with motorbikes displaying an Austrian license plate. In these moments you realise how far you are from home, from your



Posing in Angkor Wat

habits and your developed world, and you start to reckon how poor some people are, and how sincere and happy their smiles are.

The transition into Laos is less bustling than the previous border crossing (there was only us in front of the bar separating Cambodia from Laos). Actually, that border crossing is so quiet that sometimes you need to search for the officers, disturbing them during their weekly soccer watching or during their nap. The usual paper checking, some stamps and some dollars and we are into a new country. Green Laos, all the way up to China and then back into Thai mountains. Riding north, we gaze the powerful Khone Falls, the biggest waterfall in Southeast Asia, stretching across the wide Mekong. The day is still long, as our journey today ends in the 4000 Islands, but only after a remarkable ferry ride when the sun is moving under the horizon. The sandy path that



Sincere happiness

must be ridden to embark the rusty vessel spices up even more the already exciting day.

After an overnight on Don Khon island we get on board another old ferry, ready to cruise north again, towards Savannakhet. On the other side of the river we can see the lights of Thailand, so close in many ways to Laos but also very different in terms of development and culture. Same same but different, they would say here.

While Thailand has been boosting often uncontrolled growth (especially in the southern Islands like Phuket, Ko Samui, Ko Phangan, Ko Phi

Phi), Laos is striving to position itself in the niche market of eco adventure tourism. Small local tour operators, mostly family run, are rapidly evolving the green offer for travellers willing to go a bit further, off the beaten track.

### Riding North, Going Remote

Today is Day 6, Bangkok is around a thousand miles behind us and the awe-inspiring Klong Lor caves are filling our afternoon programme. Around four miles long, we explore them sailing through the tunnels on small longtail boats. At the other end of the grotto a picturesque village of bamboo huts in the jungle is the perfect stop for a drink. Shadows are becoming longer and we head back to our bungalows in the lush forest, once again on the longtails.



The sight of mountains all over the horizon

The following day brings us to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. The urban landscape is a peculiar mix of communist buildings and Buddhist influence. On the way there we stop for visiting a quiet temple, where our local guide seems to find his way easily: he has been in fact a monk for seven years, before deciding to go back to private life and start a family. Our previous guide, the smiling Thai Mr. BB, has been monk for only two weeks. Abstinence of alcohol and girls was just too hard for him. Leaving Vientiane we enter northern Laos, where mountains will finally be a constant in the landscape for the rest of the journey.

### **Vang Vieng: river crossing instead of tubing**

Vang Vieng is a famous destination of the 'banana pancake trail', i.e. the mainstream backpacker route along Southeast Asia. Why so? A few years ago a farmer decided to rent out some inner tubes to his workers to float along the river and this has been rapidly transformed into a big backpacker attraction, especially because along the shore of the river some bars started to appear, selling cheap booze to entertain the calm trip on the water. Word of mouth and internet contributed to attract a big crowd, the number of bars increased and the amount of alcohol (and extras) as well. As a result, tubing became just another way to get wasted and indulge in crazy behaviour like head diving into one-foot deep water. An estimated number of thirty to forty casualties per year was the norm and the last months have seen an even bigger figure. The bubble exploded and the government decided to shut down the riverside bars and to



**From top to bottom: Rainer nearly drowning; the view over limestone rocks in Vang Vieng; Tiger transformed into boat for river crossing**



Switchbacks on the way to Pai

put a noise curfew at 11:30pm. The party is over in Laos? Not for us riders... We are going to have plenty of fun in our afternoon dirt loop!

Four river crossings are on the itinerary and approaching the first one the tour leader Michael decides to let the Edelweiss managing director go first. What has not been taken into account is a new little dam that locals have recently built in order to force riders to cross the toll bridge instead of having fun on the wet pebble stones of the riverbed. As a result, Rainer's bike is nearly drowning and four of us are needed to pull him back on the grass. Alright, locals 1 visitors 0. This time we pay the bridge, but the next three river crossings are doable, as you can see in the pictures. At the end of the loop a refreshing swim with sunset orange tones is all that we need to be happy. A cold Lao Beer is now just a few minutes away.

Luang Prabang, a charming town with French colonial touch, is the next destination. The night market is like a magnet for the ladies of our travel group, and a few of the solo men riders have been spotted with shopping bags too. We could surely imagine to stay

one day longer in this place, the surroundings has lots to offer, but a fantastic twisty road towards the border with China is waiting for us tomorrow. We meet heaps of children along the way, each of them smiling and waving at us like if we were the biggest attraction of the week, or perhaps of the month. Whenever we stop we realise how simple their living conditions are, sharing bamboo huts without running water. But still, they seem joyful all the time and their huge smiles are contagious. The plateau near the Chinese border in the pinkish light of the sundown and its melancholic rice

paddies are holding our breath and are letting our minds meditate on this awesome adventure until the lights of Luang Prabang mark the end of the day.

## On the ridge of Thai mountains

Day 12 says our logbook, and we are riding back towards Thailand. The border between Houay Xai (in Laos) and Chiang Khong (in Thailand) has to be passed through a ferry, since the omnipresent Mekong separates the two countries. The usual formalities take about two hours but on the Thai side we find a surprise: the missing original import carnet that was bothering so much the Thai officer in Poipet is bothering even more the officers of this customhouse, which are very keen on making our stay in this town longer than we planned. Fortunately an influential lady married to a friend of Jim helps us to sort things out and with some diplomacy we are free again to bring our Tigers wherever we want.

The next morning we ride around the Golden Triangle region, where these two countries and Burma meet. From now on we are going to



Night market in Luang Prabang



Some villages are extremely basic

explore narrow one-lane roads just on the ridge of the mountain. Lots of military checkpoints wave us through, they do not seem particularly interested in us. This area used to be one of the world's biggest opium producers and even though governments have recently put lots of effort in contrasting it, drug smuggling over the forest is still frequent. A contrast in the vegetation is noticeable: tropical flora leaves space to pine trees and the night in Ang Khan forces us to turn on the heated blankets of the hotel. In the morning the thermometer tells us a mere 9°C. What a difference from the heat of the 35/38°C of the first days! The riders enjoy some refreshing breeze and even the motorbikes seem to run smoother, surely thanks to the better fuel as well. In Laos it was very hard to find petrol with enough octanes and the poor Tigers kept coughing all the time.

The tour is slowly coming to an end, but some more highlights delights us: the over 700 curves on the road towards Pai are a blast and the overnight there is a reinvigorating stopover. The resort chosen features several

villas amidst a verdant garden and a pool. There is still the possibility for some gravel&hairpins fun, but choosing between this and the pool can be hard after some tiring days. The group splits and everyone is happy with his choice.

The road on the next day, from the relaxed backpacking atmosphere of Pai to the even quieter Mae Sariang, is astonishing. Great surface, over a thousands curves and switchbacks, and virtually no traffic at all. It has been over two weeks since the group met and a sense of cosiness

pervades the evening. We try to find a pool table, without luck, and we end up instead in the only pub open. Live music on the menu, and when Michael borrows the guitar and jumps on the stage it is sudden excitement, both for us and for the surprised locals. On the notes of "I'm leaving on a Jetplane..." we go to rest before the last riding day.

Chiang Mai is the final port of call and today two routes are offered: Manuel leads the shorter route for those desiring to check-in early in the boutique hotel and spend some time for sightseeing the town, while Michael goes for the last offroad track with the dirt-loving ones.

After such a trip it is hard to contain some commotion on the last night; it has been intense, sometimes tough and very tiring, but always extremely rewarding. Each night the sumptuous meals and the cold beers have been the perfect setting for gathering and laughing on the daily anecdotes. Exploring Southeast Asia on a motorbike is surely a marvellous life experience, where astounding sceneries blend into a fascinating culture, often still poor but able to present us lots of happiness.



See you soon fabulous Southeast Asia

## The Interview with the Brit Rider



Andy Pidden is a British expat living and working most of the time in Singapore. His quote of the day is "Missing the sun. Heavy snow here".

**Hi Andrew, can you tell us something about you and how you ended up in this adventure tour?**

*After living in Singapore for many years I had always wanted to explore Cambodia and Laos but somehow could not bring myself to trade my Daytona 675 in for a Tiger. Suddenly I had moved back to England and whilst building my new Street Triple on the Triumph website came on the link to the Adventure tours. There it was, a trip back to SE Asia and on a Tiger as well. Starting from the amazing Triumph factory was just a big bonus.*

**Throughout the trip we have seen much and choosing 'the best day' is perhaps impossible, but can you tell us which of the days has been for you the most enjoyable?**

*Every day was great but one that still lasts in the memory was Luang Prabang to Luang Namtha with the windy rough road, the better road with broken down truck and fallen tree and the great lunch stop. Finishing with the amazing sun set across the fields we ended up in the little bar across the street from the hotel still in our riding clothes reluctant to let the moment pass.*

**We rode quite a few roads far from being 'well paved'; how did the bike cope with potholes, gravel and long hot days?**

*Bikes coped well considering the punishment they took. Some rough running from poor fuel. What was particularly impressive was the ability to handle like a sports bike on good roads and then cope with the hidden huge potholes that sometimes were just unavoidable.*

**Have you ever had a moment where you have thought "I want to give up, this is wearing me out"?**

*No although it was physically tough. My over riding feeling was "I don't want this trip to end"*

**If you have to choose just one of the memories you brought home, what would be the "unforgettable one" or the one that has impressed you most?**

*Crossing the Mekong on a delapidated ferry in the dark to reach the hotel on the island in the middle of the river.*

**Thank you very much for your time! See you soon :)**

*See you for the scouting tour in Indonesia.*



### PRACTICAL INFO

Tour Operator: Edelweiss Bike Travel  
 Next tour date: Nov 28 – Dec 14 2013  
 Prices: see on [www.edelweissbike.com](http://www.edelweissbike.com)