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## Is it a road or a river?!

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...I keep asking myself, as I'm forcing my bike up some unnamed hill in northern Laos through the soaking rain, navigating the muddy streams of water coming down on what was supposed to be a dirt track. Finally the drizzle of the last few days has given way to heavy rain, and we're absolutely grateful for it. Months of hot, dry weather have left several inches of fine red dust on the dirt roads. After three days of constant drizzle the dust has turned into a slithering, slimy mud which gave us a hard time riding. Driving a piece of soap across a wet bathroom floor would have been easier.

But now the streams of water are washing it all away - I keep the front wheel where the water is deepest and start relaxing a bit. Coming over the top I see a family of diminutive hilltribe people, none of them over five foot tall, staring at me in disbelief. Elbow, chest and knee protectors, airbrushed helmet, rainbow coloured gloves, offroad boots - is this an alien or what? I smile and wave at them, and immediately they wave back and break into wide grins, old grandma showing off her betel nut stained black teeth and red gums.

We started five days ago in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. Eight riders, all decked out in offroad riding gear, a backup vehicle for luggage and spares, the mechanic, a licensed local guide - we're quite a sight. Normally we wouldn't ride that late, almost into the rainy season, but some of our guys couldn't get away from business until now.

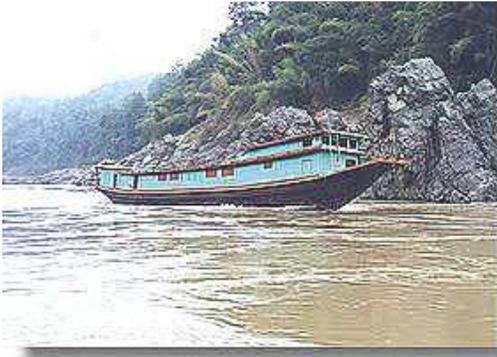
Northern Thailand offers plenty of exciting enduro rides, but we want to get into Laos as quickly as possible to have a bit of leeway with our schedule, in case things turn disastrous.

Northern Laos is no playground for the uninitiated or unprepared: Only three million people in a country the size of England, no phones, electricity just for a few hours in the evening, real jungle, very basic medical care. So far all of the tours have returned - riders, bikes and all, despite roads that got washed down into rivers and bikes that needed a full top-end service after river crossings.

We take the lightest enduro bikes available, fully aware of the looming mud wrestling and the famous Mekong River trip, where we have to lug the bikes sideways into a Mekong riverboat. Six of us ride brand new German Sachs 125s, which have state-of-the-art suspension and excellent brakes. After ripping out the catalysers (no unleaded fuel in Laos) and a couple of other modifications the bikes weigh in at 115 kg and 27 bhp - perfect, especially with the electric starter! The other two guys ride a Honda CRM 250 and a Honda Baja 250. Our mechanic and the local guide enjoy the comfort of the air-conditioned backup car, a Suzuki 4WD. For them it's a job, while we're having fun....

Walter, one of our guides, hands out the *Thor* chest and back protectors. "Against poisoned blow darts from the head hunters", he explains. Two of our guys start looking really concerned, and it takes them a few seconds to realise that head hunters live in Borneo, and not in Laos.

Masochists, start your engines! From Chiang Mai we head off towards Chiang Rai, already drenched in sweat thanks to the blistering hot season, new and El Nino-improved over last year's. The road is sealed and in top condition - while we're nursing our hurting backs on the narrow enduro seats towards Chiang Rai we dream of superbikes and the cool season. We keep to our self-imposed speed limit of 100 kph - Thais drive on the left side of the road, except when cutting through right-hand corners or when seated behind the steering wheel of an 18-ton truck. We realise that motorcycles occupy the bottom slot of the Thai tarmac food chain, and size does matter, no doubt about it.



Zooming through Chiang Rai we drive straight to Chiang Saen, located at the banks of the Mekong River. We can see Laos on the other side! The song about "Running Bear" and his Indian bride comes to mind. Clearly, they wouldn't have made it through this river either. Fast and wide, this is one of the world's greatest waterways.

We squeeze into one of the waiting Thai-style longtail boats, first taking off our heavy offroad boots. No need to follow Running Bear to the bottom of the river in case the tiny speedster hits a drifting tree trunk. The boat driver opens up the throttle of the tuned car engine, which has open exhaust pipes with no mufflers whatsoever, and the plywood shell we're sitting on starts aquaplaning. What a blast! We must be doing at least 70 kph, skipping upriver like a skimming stone.

After the boat stops at a gas station on the Laos side, we continue our wild ride towards the Golden Triangle, where Thailand, Laos and Burma meet. The driver has put on a motorbike helmet against the spray and the noise. We're all enjoying the thrill of the bumpy, speedy ride on the river. In most countries this boat would be highly illegal - not a single life preserver in sight, a vicious looking, unprotected racing propeller on a three-metre shaft that swings in a wide arc from the gimbaled engine, no muffler, no safety inspections, but heaps of fun!

Dutifully we snap our photographs of the Golden Triangle, and the little speedster turns around and takes us back, this time with the added speed of the river. This could be addictive - we watch two boat owners racing each other, just for the heck of it. By now we're all dehydrated and gulp down several bottles of "Sponsor", the local electrolytic beverage, before we suit up and continue. We're nearly there, another hour's worth of riding along the Mekong River and we'll arrive in Chiang Kong, the border town.

## Paperwork

Chiang Kong is a sleepy little place, where we meet up with our agent. He does all the paperwork that comes with taking eight bikes and one car into Laos - they have to be officially imported, a bond has to be put up, and then they have to be re-exported again! Thankfully we have nothing to do with it, and do some last minute shopping - mosquito repellent, sun block, batteries for the flashlights.

We spend the evening in a Thai karaoke bar - our agent drives us there in his Toyota pickup truck. We just pile into the open back of the truck, ten guys sitting on the sides. Nothing unusual about that in Thailand, quite often you can see 20 workers on the back of a pickup, or whole families with three kids on a motorcycle - the kids fast asleep....



The karaoke place is great. While we try various Thai dishes, most of them hotter and spicier than anything we've ever eaten before, the twenty or so pretty "singers" hit the stage in various costumes and take turns at the microphone, enthusiastically strangling the cat. Thai is a tonal language, and unless you are a real good singer you're always off-key. But the Thais don't mind, and after a few beers even our agent has a go at *Duan Pen*, a "full-moon" Thai classic that brings more tears to the eyes of the Thai audience than all the chillis in the food.

In the morning we line up at Thai immigration. "Amazing Thailand" is the current Thai tourism promotion campaign. We are still amazed from last night, especially how the hot food cleaned us out....

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The ferry which will take us across the Mekong is also quite amazing - actually two boats, one a floating platform which holds the payload and the other one a rusty hull to push it, with an engine that looks like it caused the industrial revolution. A single hinge covered with old and new welding seams tries to hold the whole contraption together. We inspect the hinge with some scepticism, but assure each other that if this things can push a sixpack of 18-ton trucks across the Mekong it should hold up for a couple of bikes!

## Arrival in Laos

To the screams and shouts of a whole gang of Laotian kids playing in the water - "Farang! Farang!" which means "Westerners! Westerners!" - we arrive in Hua Xai, the even sleepier counterpart of Chiang Kong where we just left. We drive to the hotel, on the right side of the road for a change. Strange feeling, apart from the different Laotian writing it's the only indication we're not in Thailand anymore. All the products we see in the shops are from Thailand, the language is quite similar, and everywhere you can pay in Thai baht.

We meet our mandatory licensed Laos guide, who is a wizened old schoolteacher. He collects our passports to get them stamped at immigration and we're having a bit of a siesta in our aircon rooms, primarily to escape the scorching heat. Walter tells us stories about how nice and cool it was during winter time. Tough luck we couldn't make it! Turn up the air conditioner just a bit more?

Later that afternoon we drive around and do a bit of exploring in the town. The lack of funds is obvious. Laos is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a yearly per-capita income of just a few hundred dollars. Government offices are set up in wooden houses, most people ride bicycles, and there are not many cars on the road. But everybody is very open and friendly, and we get a glimpse of how Thailand must have been 30 years ago. We change some money for the dinner kitty and come back with bags of money: 30 dollars buy you a one-inch stack of Laotian banknotes!

Laos beer, as we find out later on our trip, can even be drunk warm. This is a definite sign of quality, and we hear stories about the German brewmaster who heads the Beerlao brewery. But tonight, in Hua Xai, the Lao beer is ice cold and just excellent. We have a nice dinner and quite a few of our guys use Walter's cellular phone to call home. Who would have thought that you could stroll down the main street in Hua Xai, Laos, with a mobile pressed against your ear, connecting you through the nearest Thai transponder to your old lady in Santiago, Chile, or in Vienna, Austria?

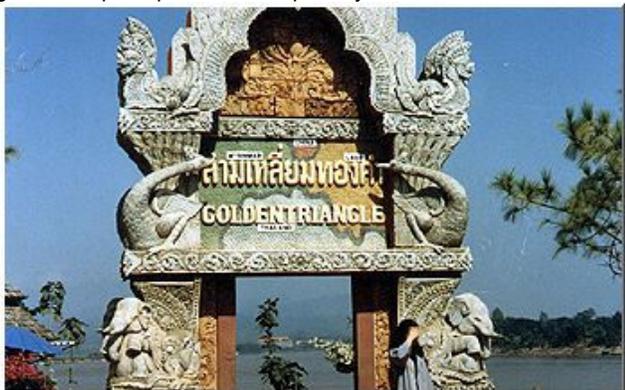
Everybody is having lots of fun telling their folks of how they are going to enjoy a good adventure just this side of civilisation. "My wife is really worried, but when I come home we'll have another honeymoon" smiles Mike, a successful businessman who has not had a holiday in four years.

## Let's Go!

Next morning we suit up and sweet-talk our itchy right hands to be patient for just a few more kilometres. 90 km of finest dirt road to Viang Pukha are waiting for us, just take it easy while we're still in town. In single file we parade down Hua Xai main street and say good-bye to electricity, cold beer, hot showers and the Thai transponder which linked us to the rest of the world through Walter's mobile phone. Now he's carrying just a pretty assembly of plastic, silicon, lithium and a couple of ions - there are still limits to all this great technology. Wait till *Iridium* gets here.....

Just out of town we get moving, the wide dirt road and good visibility allowing speeds between 50 and 90 kph. We are well aware that a single accident will be quite a slowdown for the whole group - the backup car has to collect the poor bugger, drive him back to Hua Xai, which means that we're without one of the guides, and, what's worse, without the backup car which carries our luggage - no fresh clothes. Don't race, fellows. This is the wrong place.

Walter has made it quite clear that everybody has to ride well within his personal safety limits and, above all, within visibility. "Always expect a water buffalo around the next corner!". Our guides have been in this business for years and they are no dills - they checked us out on the first day riding in the hills around Chiang Mai, and they know how to coach inexperienced riders within the first few days to get them up to speed and keep an eye on them.



But this group is quite experienced, and we do 15-20-minute bursts of extremely fine riding. Basically it's from village to village - you have to slow down anyway to go through a sleepy village, and once the first rider has entered the village, all the kids come round

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screaming, laughing and shouting, the village elders come to see what's going on, and then the rest of the village follows.

We've never experienced anything like this - you are a totally alien creature to these people. Decked out in full offroad gear, sitting on bikes as tall as they've ever seen before, we are just out of this world for them. But a few smiles, gestures and friendly words get conversations going. They all hunt and proudly present their muzzle loaders, which are usually 6 or 7 foot tall, looking funny when they belong to hunters measuring barely 5 feet tall. The whole village gathers around our group, inviting us to stay or at least to have a few rice whiskeys with them. Walter tells us that sometimes a group had to take them up on their offers for bed and breakfast, when a bike needed repairs after a river crossing or when the weather was extremely bad.

They admire our offroad gear, nod their heads checking out the elbow and knee protectors, but absolutely love the plastic chest protectors. One guy points at his ancient muzzle loader, then knocks at my chest protector and says something in Lao. "He wants to know if it's bullet proof, too", Walter translates. I'm tempted to say "Yes", but then the little hunter might just try it out....

Most villagers have never seen a "farang", a westerner, before. One of our guys has a bit of a beard, and the women come and take a look at this strange man with hair on his face. Like most Asians, Lao hilltribe men don't have facial hair. Accompanied by giggles and laughter from the other women, one little old lady even touches it to tell them how it feels!

Every few kilometres we have to cross a small river. Sometimes the water is clear and you can look out for boulders lurking beneath the surface, but sometimes you just have to take your chances. After every couple of river crossings we stop to wait for our backup car to catch up, and have a chat with the locals.

One by one we have to cross a river over a hanging bridge, which starts swaying by the time you're in the middle. Sitting on a motorbike on a swaying bridge is definitely a weird feeling, and everybody has to stop in the middle to wait until the bridge goes quiet before he can continue. Walter doesn't supply a "snack sack" like they have on commercial airlines for people turning green, but then there's the whole river to bless with the remains of your breakfast....

Sometimes the bridges are just a few tree trunks, and most of us get stuck at least once when the front or rear wheel simply disappears in a gap all the way to the axle. Even with our lightweight bikes it usually takes two or three of us to get them out. There's not much space to stand on, and the tree trunks are muddy and very slippery.



There are plenty of mud holes, and we stop at a very deep one to help a group of men who are trying to drive an ancient truck full of timber through it. These mud holes can be real traps - usually a trickle of water is constantly filling them up, and they have a lot of soft deep mud beneath the surface. Walter crosses one on the wrong side and gets so stuck that the bike stands up by itself! While we wait for our 4WD backup car which can help pull the truck, we're having fun with the mud hole, driving through it again and again. Three days later we will be much too tired for such antics, but now we are still bursting with energy.

Late afternoon we arrive in Viang Pukha, our destination for today. It is a tiny village with a stream running through it, and like the villagers we take our bath in the river. The "guest house" has a small electricity generator, but they only turn it on at seven in the evening for one or two hours. After the river bath we head straight for the fridge, only to find it empty. Right, no electricity. This is where we find out that Lao beer is drinkable even when it's warm! The women prepare our dinner - chicken, eggs and rice. Food is a bit of a problem in rural Laos, it's mostly chicken and eggs or eggs and chicken.

Cassius, our Thai mechanic, has serviced all eight bikes, and it is getting dark. We've been watching village life down at the river - the women carrying water in buckets up to the road, the men driving herds of buffaloes home, and kids playing in the water. After dinner most of our guys have an early night, it has been a hard day. Walter, Cassius and I chat with the locals. Laotian is quite similar to Thai, Walter tells me. It is a monosyllabic, tonal language, which means that each word has only one syllable, but up to five meanings, depending on the tone. I try to get some words right, but earn nothing but laughs from the others. Wrong tone, different meaning, and I have no idea of what I just said!



Next morning we head towards Luang Namtha, the provincial capital. 140 km more of the same - except it has started to drizzle. We don't mind, it's cooling down a bit. I am feeling sore just about everywhere, my body is not used to this kind of exercise. That's the nice thing about adventure holidays: When you come back, you're fit!

A group of Akha hilltribe people has a problem with their transportation: Too much weight, road too steep, vehicle dug itself a hole. We help them getting it out and moving again. Walter speaks a bit of Akha, and we learn that they are a group of students on their way home. They all wear the traditional Akha dress - you won't find a pair of jeans here!

Luang Namtha is bigger than I expected, but is also without electricity until 7.30 pm. We check into the best hotel in town, must be a 1.5-star. We don't care, we're happy, slightly wet and tired. After a shower and rest we're ready for dinner. As it is getting dark, somebody fires up the town generator, and a bit of electricity finds its way to our hotel. Dinner is great, which means: No chicken, no eggs, but steamed fish, fried vegetables and fresh fruit. The second round of beers is definitely cooler than the first, electricity made it to the refrigerator!

During the night I wake up to the sound of heavy rain. In the morning it is still raining a bit, and black clouds cover the sky. Over breakfast we debate the next leg of our tour. If the rain continues and gets heavier, we may have problems. We decide to go through with the original plan and continue to Muang Sing, from where we drive up to the Chinese border to take a look.

Walter has taken several groups into China, but for our tour he recommended not to go - too much bureaucracy, and even if you get all the necessary permits and visas it's never certain that you can actually get the bikes across the border.

The rain has stopped. We decide to continue to Chiang Kok and do the Mekong riverboat trip. Walter tells us that we could get into trouble if the weather gets really bad, but we all love trouble, don't we? We send our backup car through Viang Pukha back to Hua Xai, where it will wait for us. The next two or three days we are on our own, and everybody packs a few things in a plastic bag and straps it on his bike. We ride a beautiful jungle trail for another 140 km to Chiang Kok, which is a tiny bamboo hut village at the Mekong. Despite the drizzle the road is still dry, and we really enjoy the ride.

### River of no return



In Chiang Kok we have another river bath - this time in the mighty Mekong. The water is surprisingly warm, and I try to swim upriver, but get dragged downstream at alarming speed. I swim back to the shore - on the other side is Burma, and I definitely don't want to get washed up there with nothing but my speedos.

Exploring the village is a matter of five minutes, and we're back to the "guest house", which also serves as the village convenience store. They don't even have a generator here - back to warm Lao beer! A little girl comes with her mother, she has a couple of catfish for sale. One of them has a leathery look about it, she must have been carrying it around for a few days. But the others look good and the neighbour's wife buys them for dinner. Bad luck we ordered our dinner already - chicken, rice and eggs, what else!

Early next morning we load our bikes into one of the boats. We have to heave them in sideways, making sure that we don't break any gear levers or other important things. We have only two complete sets of spares! The mirrors of all bikes except Walter's are already in

the backup car - Cassius will put them back on when we meet in Hua Xai. The boat gets under way. To have any kind of steering, the boat has to go quicker than the river, which is flowing quite fast already. Let's hope the engine doesn't pack it up!

Two mechanics constantly check the oversized diesel in the bilge, topping up oil when necessary. The noise and heat are incredible. We move to bow and stern of the boat and enjoy the eerie scenery. Our captain - who is Burmese - swings the boat expertly around the vicious-looking rocks. He's been navigating this section of the Mekong for six years. The river is already higher than in the cool season, and some rocks that were visible a month ago are now hidden beneath the surface. After ten minutes it starts raining steadily. As long as we're in the boat, we don't mind. But we worry about the 130 km back to Hua Xai: The road may be impassable in some places.

Jimmy, Walter's partner, did a tour in January, and 40 kilometres of road were simply missing, having been washed into the Mekong river. One of his group was not very fit, so they put him and his bike in a boat back to Hua Xai, and the rest of the group continued. It took them three days to get to Hua Xai, two days just to make the 40 kilometres of missing road. But when they arrived back in Chiang Mai, they couldn't stop grinning and talking about their "adventure of the year". As we speed downriver we discuss what to do, and everybody wants to ride. Walter has to make the final decision, and after another 30 minutes we drop anchor at a tiny village.

After nearly one hour we've unloaded the bikes and our gear. Hard work! Two of our guys get some rice bags and cut holes in them to make rain jackets. We get going, after Walter tells the boat captain to wait for a few hours just in case. We may have to come back! It takes us 90 minutes for the first 17 kilometres. The fine dust on the roads has turned into extremely slippery mud, and the slightest lack of concentration means you go over the side.

After these 17 kilometres we're exhausted, covered in mud, with not a single dry thread on us. Should we go back and take the boat? No way. One look at the other guys and I know: We'll keep going, no matter what. And we get lucky - after another half hour it starts raining heavily. Small streams form on the roads and wash the slimy mud away. The driving gets easier by the minute, I love this rain! We can drive faster again, and if the conditions don't get any worse we'll enjoy a hot shower and cold beer tonight in Hua Xai. If we don't make it, we'll just have to stay in a village overnight and continue tomorrow.

What a feeling! We're bone tired, but feel incredibly good and alive. After a long hot shower we meet to have dinner and take turns of Walter's cellular phone, to tell our folks on the other side of the globe that we made it!

## Back to Thailand

The next day we get on the ferry and cross the Mekong again, back to Chiang Kong, Thailand. We all need a bit of a rest, and we drive the bikes to a garage where they get cleaned up. While Cassius puts the mirrors back on and services each bike, we have lunch in a restaurant overlooking the Mekong and enjoy the Thai food