

Peddalling to city's amazing beat

by MARIAN McGUINNESS

THAILAND'S capital of Bangkok, with its hazy horizon of skyscrapers, 400 wats (temples) and eight million people, sits either side of the Chao Phraya River, the River of Kings.

I have the choice of exploring this megacity's labyrinth by the safety of a three-wheeled tuk-tuk or by partaking in the derring-do of a bicycle safari.

My dilemma is that I'm the couch potato of athletes, but I convince myself it's time to shed my couch potato skin and embrace the thrill and romance of a Bangkok adventure.

My ride begins in a side lane off the main drag of Khao San Road. It would have been hectic enough during its former life as Bangkok's rice market, but in the 21st century, it's a maelstrom of trucks, buses, taxis, cars, tuk-tuks, street carts and pedestrians.

Including my more-sporting husband, there are eight in our group for the "very gentle 20 kilometres; suitable for anyone who can ride a bike" experience, according to the brochure.

I haven't ridden since my teens and eye my two-wheeler suspiciously. Its tyres are more suited to a velodrome than a half-day tour around a frenetic metropolis.

I test it out with a pedal down the quiet lane. After a wobbly start I crash into two barricades and rebound into a corrugated fence. I limp back to the group as the bruises on my legs blossom.

And then it's game on. One guide rides out the front, another follows up the rear. One after the other, we slipstream out of the quiet lane and into the path of hell.

Immediately there's a breakaway, and being the last cyclist in the group (even the guide has abandoned me), I'm the only rider left on the wrong side of the road.

I ride with the rush of wind from a whizzing bus tyre centimetres from my

Bicycle, Bangkok, no bell: what could possibly go wrong?



ear. Its black bristles fan my flushed face. We're a little too intimate for my liking. As the peloton disappears into a lane on the opposite side of the road, my only hope of keeping up is to pinball through the maelstrom.

It takes a lot of playing chicken with the traffic to get to what the brochure describes as "the area of Bangkok that few people know about".

I must have blacked out as the next moment I am pedalling with the group along the leafy sois (lanes) past secluded courtyards, obscure eateries with their flashing woks, and backdoor market-places.

We weave around a line of saffron-robed monks making their way to one of the non-touristy temples. Next, we're bumping our bikes up the stairs and over the cabled Rama VIII Bridge of the Chao Phraya River, with its banks of shimmering temples and flotillas of long-tail boats and barges.



Back in our saddles we cycle into the traditional Noi community where villagers have lived in still houses along the klongs (canals) since their ancestors back in the 1500s.

A maze of narrow wooden paths connects these canal villages. There are no railings to stop me falling into the water.

My bucking bicycle ricochets with every nook and cranny of these uneven walkways. Everything ends up in the coffee-coloured canal and I have no desire to be part of the mix.

Kids playing in their doorways, wave. Adults press their palms together and offer "Sa-wat-dee" (hello). I can't reciprocate their friendliness: my hands are clamped around the handlebars as I wobble past.

My husband is so embarrassed by my lack of cycling skills that he rides ahead. He turns to see if I am still part of the group and unwittingly scoops up a clothes-line attached to a fence. The colourful

bunting of T-shirts flaps behind him followed by the hapless owner.

An elderly man with a bung right leg lurches in front of me. My bicycle is bell-less. No amount of yelling, "ding-ding" can prevent me running over his good left foot like a speed bump.

I turn to apologise, but shamefully keep pedalling. I can't lose sight of my umbilical cord of cyclists lest I be lost in Bangkok.

Most Bangkokians live in these millions of sois. Their narrowness creates an intimacy for the cyclist and you can't help but peer into the pocket-sized homes, gaze into the cooking pots and ride with the waft of spices in your nostrils.

Every part of every animal that flies, walks or swims, is eaten.

Fish, caught in the canals, are left to dry on hot tin roofs. Tiny turtles, the size of 50-cent coins, flap in buckets beside simmering woks. A cooking pot swirls with miniature pipe organs that turn out

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RIDE OF A LIFETIME – Cycling through the Noi community (above).
Opposite page: Thousands of catfish in the klongs waiting to be cooked and eaten;
Marian McGuinness at the start of her cycling adventure with husband Gary.

to be pigs' fallopian tubes.

Our guide turns into another crowded lane. Pandemonium breaks out as a gas bottle fuelling a wok, explodes. People scuttle. All I can think of in this labyrinth is the Great Fire of London.

Sirens scream from every direction. As I ride around a congested back lane trying to keep up with our guide, a tourist dashes in front of me. In the cacophony, he doesn't hear me yelling, "ding-ding ... move away". I slam on my brakes, but can't stop before my front wheel forks him from behind.

After the day's calamities, I'm actually

glad I chose this adventurous Bangkok bike ride. When I later explored the city on foot and by tuk-tuk, I experienced the flip side of Bangkok: the golden temples, exotic palaces and giant Buddhas.

But, by the intimacy of the bicycle, I have been on an extraordinary journey. I have smelt the spices. I have heard the flip of thousands of catfish in the klongs. And I have been melted by the smiles of children.

I have ridden within the pulse of the city.

Marian McGuinness was a guest of the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

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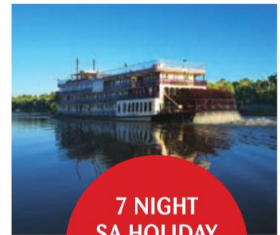
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