

## A TWO-WHEELED Taste of Chiang Mai

**It's 7 a.m. on a Sunday. The air encompassing me is thick and feels neither warm nor cool. It's in-between, where I'm challenged with deciding if I am comfortable.**

As the beaming Thai sun is burning off the fog enshrouding Chiang Mai during this unprecedented, rainy season-like weather, I mount my snazzy, newly purchased, foldable bicycle and begin my trek toward the Thapae Gate, about a 30-minute ride away.

I am feeling weighted, as my creaky body is telling my monkey mind that it should abandon this valiant attempt at a more healthy, meditative lifestyle. I draw a deep, mindful breath through my nostrils, release and begin my journey.

Purplish flowers are popping out from large-leafed trees. Steam is wavering upward from the narrow, curvy road as I zoom past people stoking their charcoal-powered grills and placing breakfast food wrapped in banana leaves onto metal grates. Jungle-bound bugs are singing, birds are soaring overhead and butterflies in fluttering pairs are playfully chasing one another.

The lush-green, mountainous horizon entirely comprising my right-side view is peaked by the Doi Suthep temple, ominously perched amid the clouds like something from a fairy tale (only in this story, the castle's moat is located in the city below).

Weary, mangy dogs, along with local village people setting up their shops, are observing barefoot monks clad in yellow-belted, orange robes sauntering past - each of them complemented with alms bowls as shiny-silver as my two-wheeled vehicle.

We are definitely in Chiang Mai, Thailand. And I am determined to get to know this charming city better - using a bicycle.

Aware that the Chiang Mai Sunday Cycling Club is gathering and gearing up for departure, I am feeling rushed. Diligently pedalling forward, I am obsessively observing the long hand on my watch (the skin darkening underneath it, due to my increasing sweat levels).

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There are many cycling options available in the Chiang Mai area, especially for those wishing to participate in more rigorous cycling activities.

Jatupoom Lekawat is a competition cyclist and sales manager of the Thailand Cycling Alliance (TCA) bike shop in Chiang Mai.

He says a primary difference between Chiang Mai and Bangkok for example is that there are many riding options and routes available in Chiang Mai, with - like the abdomen of a spider whose legs are branching outward - Chiang Mai as a starting point for Doi Suthep, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Doi Saket, Hang Dong, among other objectives. And information about clubs tailored to these different riding activities, such as long distance, road racing or mountain biking can be tracked down at most any of Chiang Mai's bike shops.

As Khun Lekawat says, "You need to know yourself, and what you like."

Slightly disappointed by my seeming inability to make progress with a calm mind, I flag down a red *songtaew* taxi and ask the driver in my lousy Thai if he can promptly deliver me to my intended destination. Upon arriving, I feel a truckload of weight slide off my psyche, and I share this energy by tipping him 60 percent. "*Khob khun na krup!*"

Thapae Gate is Chiang Mai's most prominent entry point into the old, walled city. And while walking through its thick, wooden doors, I feel relief in coming upon a barnyard-like scene of cyclists, many of whom are dressed in neon-colored cycling shirts and black shorts with padded behinds.

I am immediately greeted by the warm smile and friendly yet firm handshake of Dr. Nirandom Potikanond, the leader of this cycling group (and social movement). I feel excited about seeing him again, following our meeting two days previous.

'Dorn' had explained that before the Chiang Mai Sunday Cycling Club was officially established, this effort was part of a 1990s campaign in Chiang Mai

pioneered by Anu Nernhad, a traffic police lieutenant at that time.

Lt. Anu envisioned addressing Chiang Mai's ever-growing pollution and traffic problems by providing residents wanting to remain in touch with the city's former cycling culture with a reinvigorated version.

The slogan was, "For only a short distance, a bicycle is enough." And Lt. Anu was well-supported. Sometimes, several hundred people of all ages would gather at the Thapae Gate on Sunday morning. And they would ride together around the city, escorted by traffic-directing police officers and volunteers. Participants felt safe.

This part of the "City Campaign" took about 1-2 hours and the cyclists moved through Chiang Mai "like a herd of cattle or sheep," which upset motorists trying to navigate the crowded roads. Dorn says the situation could have been better handled by the group because "while making this strong point, we created some weak points."

After two years, this movement went into suspended animation after Lt. Anu transferred to another position, and fewer residents were participating as a result. This is when the Chiang Mai Sunday Cycling Club was officially established. "This bicycle club is a people organization; therefore, nobody can oppose it. This is its real power," said Dorn.

He says that cyclists nowadays often want to embark on excursions rather than directly support a social movement. Therefore, this club implements these sentiments into its program.

However, Dorn feels it would greatly help Chiang Mai if resources were available for teaching people how to use bicycles in their daily lives more, and if city bike routes were established and enforced. This is now a component of the Club's agenda.

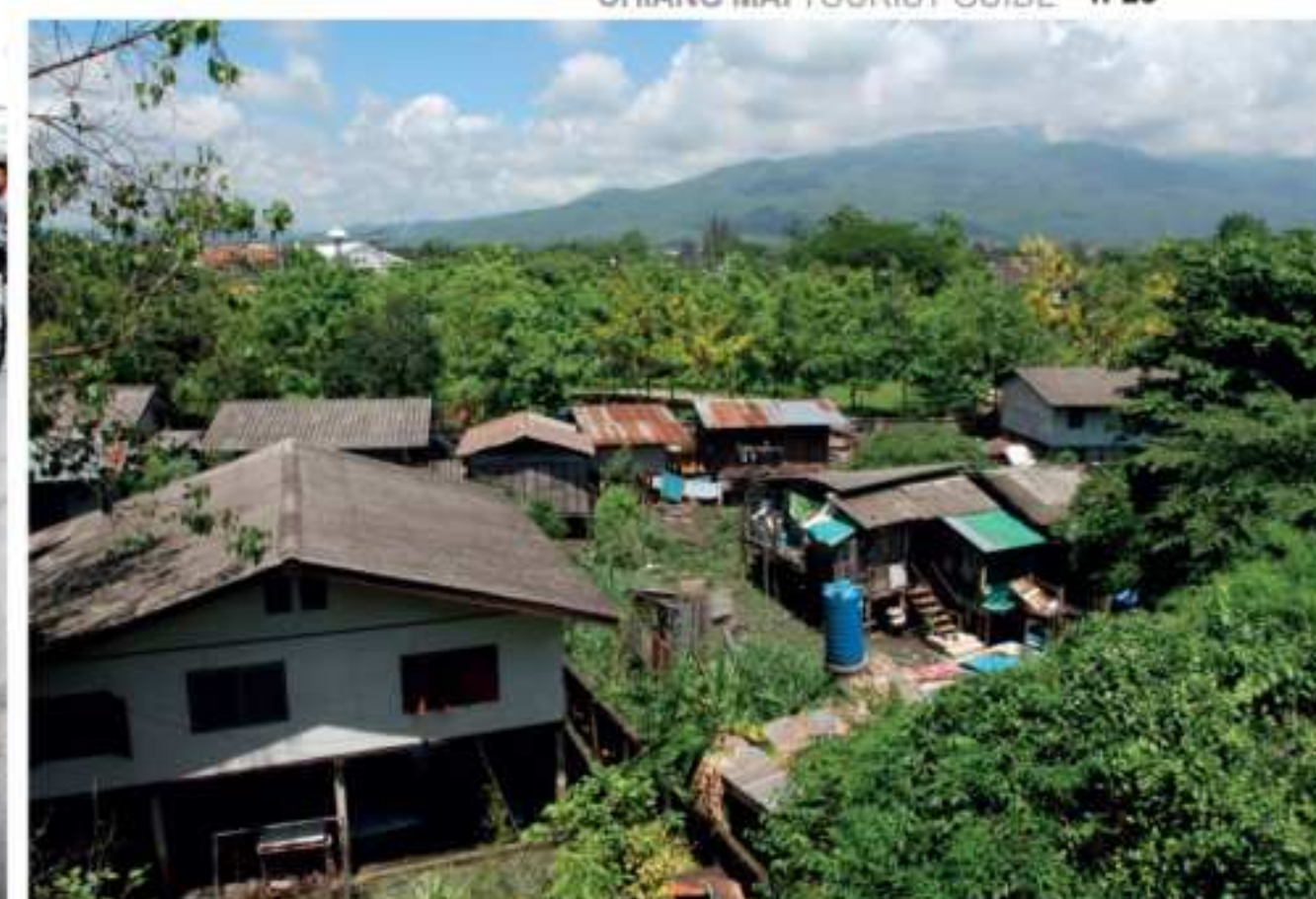
Cycling is good for people; good for society; and good for Chiang



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Dr. Dorn rallies the cycle club.



Mai. And beyond being a wonderful way to see the world, it is a fundamental component of the local culture that is readily available for people wanting to experience the real Thailand.

Dorn was willing to provide further insight into Chiang Mai's diluted cycling culture by dispelling myths regarding the safety and convenience of riding a bicycle versus using motorized transport.

He says that although Chiang Mai is the second capital of Thailand, navigating the city is easily managed. And although walking is not part of the local culture, cycling "used to be part of our way of life here, but we lost it many years ago."

Dorn recapped his 1968 Chiang Mai arrival for furthering his academic studies, after which he noticed how people from areas such as Doi Saket, Mae Rim and Hang Dong were funnelling into the city for work and school - using bicycles.

He said the eventual introduction and growing popularity of the motorbike in particular altered the perception of younger people in judging each other, based on their mode of transport. Riding a motorbike meant "a higher social status," at the price of increasing the number of traffic jams and raising the pollution level and an eventual decrease in bicycle usage. "To their way of thinking, bicycling was old-fashioned."

Dorn referred to this scenario of being viewed as attractive or "looking more smart" if using a motorbike, as a social syndrome. He said people in neighboring countries also are afraid of being seen as poor, as globalization encroaches on Asian culture.

Dorn estimates there were once 100 times more bicycles being used in Chiang Mai than nowadays. And he feels people conjuring up thoughts related to the potential dangers or rigors of bicycle-riding has additionally played a role in this cultural shift.

He says people fabricate reasons for not using bicycles in their daily lives, such as that it's more dangerous than using a motorbike or because of the warm climate. Neither reason is valid, in his educated opinion.

Dorn says that local people generally travel to and from work during the coolest parts of the day. As for tourists, cycling offers more opportunities for pioneering Chiang Mai's seemingly endless labyrinth of winding *sois* in search of area highlights, such as Buddhist temples - which locating using a car or motorbike would be far more challenging.

Although more distance can be covered using a motorized vehicle, adventurers end up overlooking what they are setting out to experience.

"You can see many more things on a bicycle. It's slow. You can greet people. You can be friendly and experience their friendliness.

"And for commuting in the city, you can make many shortcuts by pushing your bike across the road or moat, whereas you can't do this with a car or motorbike."

Dorn says Chiang Mai has changed badly over recent years, such as with modern development pandering to tourists by providing shopping centers and clubs which stay open until the wee hours of the morning - like "a sin city." And exploring the city using a bicycle, beyond thoroughly seeing more sights, is a great way for countering this phenomenon.



"Tourists should learn about our culture and visit our historical sites so they get to know more about Lanna and Thai wisdom. To have a good city, we need to create it."

And Westernising Chiang Mai through commercialization is not the best way.

With this information rattling around in my mind and heart, I once again mount my bicycle and join my new-found cycling crew.

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Thai-style, a bicycle converted into both an intercom and stereo system is blaring songs, *nok wheed* (signifying a whistle urging people to "get up and exercise for your health"), and *sue pakkao* (meaning, "mountain-biking around the green earth and through the countryside").

In a haphazard yet organized line, we are rolling along the east side of Chiang Mai's moat. Slightly disoriented amid my new environment, I gain my bearings by realizing that while on this bicycle, people zooming past me in cars and on motorbikes are seemingly highly mindful of my whereabouts. They are being very polite.

However, I am also aware of being in a protective bubble, as part of our dozens-large cycling group, and I am crossing the road (and traffic) without properly signalling to motorists. I adjust. And with the rally's call echoing off the watery moat's stacked brick wall, I accept that I am part of something special.

After a short while, we veer off the moat road into a world of sub-communities strewn with small shops and people offering warm smiles and enquiring gazes.

Turning into and traveling down a narrow, muddy *soi* lined by a crumbling brick wall topped with old trees and shack-like buildings, I later learn these are the ruins of a second fortification system that wrapped around Chiang Mai centuries ago. "Absolutely fascinating," I say to myself.

Later, I notice that others are also seemingly having a soul-nourishing experience. The Manceaus, for example: Joe originally from the United States and his partner, Jira, from Thailand, have lived in Chiang Mai for about two months and finally ventured out this early morn for exercise and social reasons. "It was bound to happen," said Joe. And they were both pleased about their newfound adventure.

As though venturing into different worlds while being greeted within each unique community by head nods and *sawadee krups*, our troupe arrives back at the Thapae Gate. This was the nine kilometer warm-up part of the day's cycling activities, and a second battalion of bikers will soon set off for an excursion with a destination.

Slightly winded though I am, but feeling invigorated and accomplished, I'm hooked and can hardly wait for my next ride...

