

THEY PEDAL FOR PEOPLE

The Tour of Hope, an annual charity bike ride, raises heart rates and money for a good cause

STORY: CHIRATAS NIVATPUMIN



Only the strongest riders were able to stay in the saddle at Koh Chang, where the road gradient sometimes exceeded 20%.

Most of the ride was done two-abreast, with only sporadic traffic along the back roads near the coast in Rayong.

It's not a race. It's not a race. It's not a race.

I repeated the mantra over and over to myself as I wondered once again what was I doing here, standing in the hot sun as several dozen lycra-clad bicyclists pumped air into their tyres, filled water bottles or carved lazy figure-eights around the petrol station, all waiting for the ride to begin.

Does everyone else know it's not a race? We had yet to pedal 1km and I was already dripping with sweat.

In a fit of mid-life insanity, I allowed myself to be convinced to join The Tour of Hope (TTOH), an annual charity ride launched in 2006 to raise funds for poor villages across the country. The 2013 edition featured over 40 riders committing to ride 750km from Chon Buri to Aranyaprathet, Sa Kaeo.

"It's not a race, it's fun and for charity," a friend had said months earlier. "We'll have a great time, and the people are all a great bunch!" Nevermind the fact that I hadn't ridden a bicycle with any real conviction in nearly two decades.

Of course, Steve bowed out only days before the start, citing mysterious — convenient? — knee pains. I started looking for the larger cyclists in the group, thinking that if I was to survive this week, I would need someone to break the wind ahead of me. Either that or jump in the support van right after the first rest stop.

One of the oldest charity rides in the country, TTOH was founded by a group of bicycle enthusiasts working for healthcare

giant GlaxoSmithKline. The first ride in 2006 covered an incredible 2,400km, with 15 riders taking nearly one month to bicycle from Singapore to Bangkok.

Stefan Neff, a leader of the TTOH, said Thailand eventually became the focus for the tour and its foundation activities.

"Thailand was the sweet spot on several dimensions. Plenty of need to help the underprivileged in rural regions in the area of health prevention, a good cycling infrastructure with overall good roads and motorists considerate of cyclists much more than in some other Asian countries, great people, nice scenery and great food," he said. "It was a perfect match for enjoying cycling while doing good."

The TTOH in the first several years focused primarily on health issues, with sponsorship from GlaxoSmithKline. From 2006 to 2010, the foundation worked with Johns Hopkins University to help prevent cervical



TTOH leader Stefan Neff, school and district officials and representatives of World Vision dedicate the new library for the Baan Klong Bon School in Pong Nam Ron district, Chanthaburi.



Riders exchange high-fives and handshakes with students at the ceremony in Chanthaburi.

rolling hills of Rayong and Chanthaburi with hardly a gasp, while I clung on for dear life, muscles on fire and lungs starved for air. Vincent in particular was of a different class, especially evident when he spoke earnestly about which world cities offered the best chances for running the fastest marathon times.

This year's group featured an eclectic mix of riders, with the youngest aged 31 and the oldest 76, including 13 women. Amy, a graceful Singaporean in her mid-60s, left me stunned when she told me she had been riding in the tour from the beginning, including the mind-boggling early tours that crossed the entire length of the Malay Peninsula.

Germany and Singapore were the most represented countries, followed by Malaysia, Europe and the UK.

The past four tours have all featured groups of over 40 riders, which Neff said was a good number for logistical reasons as well as for maintaining the tight-knit, collegial atmosphere of the group, which was clearly evident from the start.

The skill levels of the riders ranged considerably, from hardcore riders looking to sprint from the start on their high-end carbon fibre Cannondales, Cervelos or BH race bikes to the more sedate, content to watch the countryside pass by on their hybrid bicycles provided by SpiceRoads, the local tour company responsible for managing the ride and providing support. The SpiceRoads guides perhaps had the toughest jobs, as they not only had to ride the same distance as everyone else, but often many kilometres extra, as they moved back and forth between the various groups on the road to shepherd everyone along the course.

Within 15 minutes after each start, riders naturally split into separate packs depending upon their fitness level or motivation for the day. Scheduled stops were made every hour, to give the riders time to regroup, refuel and recuperate before starting anew. Lunch breaks were lavish buffet-style affairs, where everyone invariably went for seconds — or even thirds — to recoup some of the thousands of calories burned each day from the long rides.

The days and kilometres passed quickly, all too quickly. As the week drew to a close, I found myself at the end of each day thinking less about my sore legs or aching back and more about the desire to set off anew in the morning.

On the seventh day, the group reached the Baan Klong Bon School in Pong Nam Ron district in Chanthaburi, the site of this year's library and community project. Overall, the 2013 ride raised around 1.6 million baht for the library project, 80 bicycles and helmets for four other schools in the area. Corporate sponsors included FBT Sporting Goods, Asia-Pacific Connections, KS Energy and Thai Union Frozen Products.

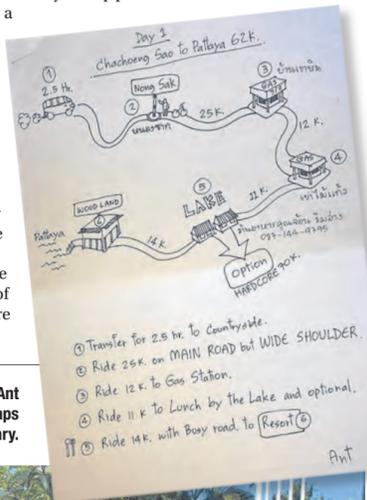
Amazingly, for four riders, the first week was just a warm up ride. This group, which included the indomitable Neff, decided to sign up for an additional 1,000km to head north to Nong Khai.

The 2014 edition, set for early November, sounds to be even more painful, with the first leg covering 750km from Udon Thani to Chiang Mai, followed by a positively leg-busting second week over the Mae Hong Son loop, including a ride up Doi Inthanon, Thailand's highest mountain at 2,565m.

"We plan to go back to our first library north of Chiang Mai," Neff said. "Our dream is to have a network of donated libraries and bicycles all over Thailand. As we are expanding the network of libraries, we also like to go back to them to see that they are fully utilised, see how we can help further and learn how we can do it better."

Visit www.thetourofhope.com, the TTOH Facebook page or contact ttoh2013@gmail.com.

Each morning, SpiceRoads guide Ant would pass out his hand-drawn maps detailing the day's route and itinerary.



cancer in Thailand, raising over 3.2 million baht to train over 1,000 nurses to perform cervical cancer screenings and remove lesions on an estimated 600,000 Thai women.

Later, as the number of riders and sponsors grew, the foundation switched its focus to education, explained Hans Bock, a medical doctor and one of the founders of the TTOH.

"If you provide kids a chance for education and for knowledge acquisition, you invest in the future and can avoid poverty and poor health," he said.

"So you are not working only on symptoms to help the poor but you are working on the root cause of poverty. This has a much bigger multiplier benefit effect."

From 2011 to 2013, the TTOH raised 9.1 million baht in a partnership with the World Vision Foundation of Thailand to donate 430 bicycles and 260 helmets to 25 rural schools and build libraries in Chiang Mai, Ranong and Aranyaprathet.

"The libraries serve as knowledge centres and give access to the world, with a safe and peaceful environment for autonomous learning. It gives the kids a chance to get off the street and close the knowledge gap," Neff said.

"The bicycles are for kids living too far away from school to walk and thus increase significantly the likelihood of the kids attending school."

Neff said World Vision partners with rural schools to ensure that the libraries are used and that the bicycles are maintained and reassigned

“As the week drew to a close, I found myself thinking less about my sore legs and more about the desire to set off anew in the morning

to children in greatest need. Approximately 95% of all donations go directly to each project.

I had no doubt in my mind that the ride was for a good cause and would genuinely bring hope to people. My problem was maintaining my own hope of simply surviving to the end.

Neff, a tall 54-year-old German, turned out to be one of the strongest riders of the entire group, running the lead pack at speeds of 40kph seemingly without effort. Some of the riders whispered with awe that Neff was actually a newcomer to road cycling and had ridden the 2010 tour over the monumentally steep mountain passes in Kanchanaburi on a clunky mountain bike.

The Singaporean and Malaysian riders were equally impressive, with Charles, Rolf, Gary and Vincent all possessing the ability to spin up the



Riders prep their bikes for the start of the tour in Chon Buri.