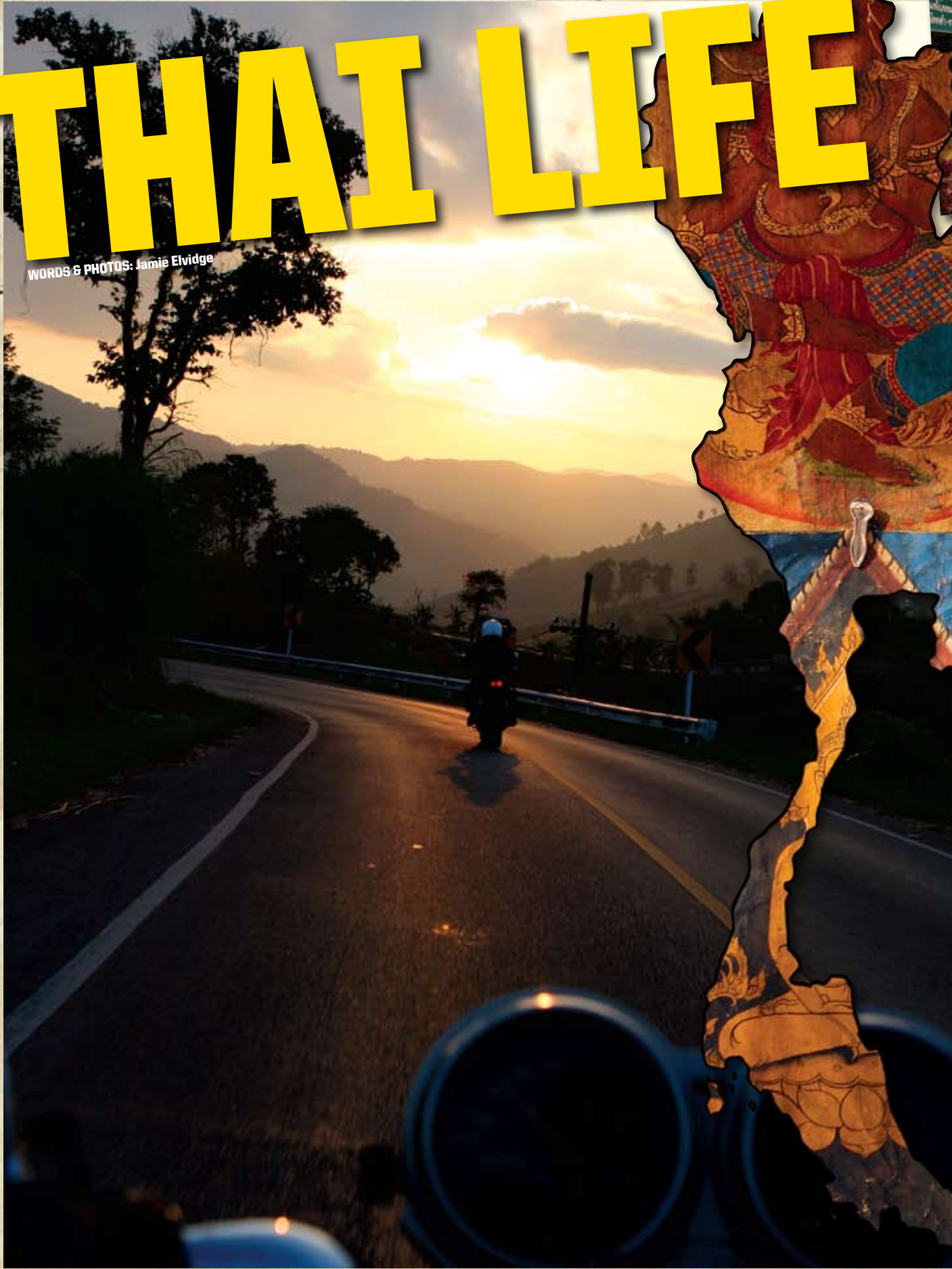


# THAI LIFE

WORDS & PHOTOS: Jamie Elvidge



## Getting Reacquainted with your Inner Adolescent

**I** have found the Path to Enlightenment. It's a two-lane highway in Northern Thailand the locals call "The Road to Mae Hong Son." And with 1864 corners in 90 mountainous miles, it's like riding Deal's Gap all day, but without the clowns. There are plenty of monks, complete with their shaved heads and brilliant orange robes, but they stay out of our way. And I can't blame them. We're about as peaceful as a pack of wolves, dodging cows and gigantic elephant turds on howling Honda CB400s, bouncing tired internals against the rev limiters.



Our rental Hondas came with a full-time mechanic and this high tech bag of tools, which was magically all we needed.

I knew I was in trouble when I met the guys who organize this business; all big smiles and stitches. Partners in an athletics company called Total Body Fitness, they organize a mountain bike race series near my home in Northern California. The moment I signed the



"Big Bike" in Thailand is 400cc and only quasi legal. At Tony's you can get a Thai massage before and after your ride.

## "I knew I was in trouble when I met these guys... all big smiles and stitches."

waiver, my regression began. I don't think it had much to do with the fact that ringleader Bill Driskill and partner/best friend Mark Shaw attended my high school's arch rival, or even that my MTB trainer, Dan Foster, showed me how to bunny hop small buildings with my bicycle. It was their 12-year-olds-with-chest-hair charm that sucked me in, and the company's whole "play to live" philosophy.

The trio created TBF Travel to round out their training and racing endeavors, guiding adventurous clients on spirited journeys through Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia. My first trip with these guys was an off-road bicycle tour, and now I'm back, only this time traveling the right way: by motorcycle.

Our plan was to run up and across the opium-infused Golden Triangle to scout a potential 11-day tour, except we're doing it in six days. Good thing there's just one real traffic rule in Thailand. As Driskill says, "Just stay left, and don't hit anything." Right. Let's get out on the road and see how that works.

When we stop for lunch in Pai, we're giddy from all the switchback action. The Hondas we picked up in Chiang Mai are totally hammered, which makes riding them so much more fun in a twisted sort of way. We rented the steeds from a burly expat named Tony who threw in a couple of 400cc Honda Phantom cruisers, one for our token two-uppers, Driskill and his adorable Thai wife, Khun Eat, and the other for our guide, Khun O. There's no telling how much mileage has rolled across these old analog odometers, but

judging by the scars, these babies have covered a fair amount of highway on parts other than their tires. We're here to have some fun—or *sanook* as they say in Thai—and two wheels under any reasonably functional, multi-cylinder engine ought to do. But, just to ease our minds, Tony also sends us off with a full-time mechanic and a plastic grocery sack full of tools. Both will come in handy soon enough.

Most of us can only smile at our Thai wrench, but Khun O and Eat translate effectively. Sometimes words aren't necessary. Just dangle what's left of the part that snapped in half or vibrated off. Each of our bikes has a uniquely dysfunctional personality. One has constant clutch issues. Another has brakes like a 1921 Harley; which means essentially none. Mine is directionally challenged, thanks to a re-sculpted fork and handlebar. The mechanic is amazing

though, and somehow keeps our fleet of dog-tired Hondas rolling, even if that means rebuilding a clutch assembly in the time it takes us to inhale a pot of spicy noodles at lunch.

## Land Of The Eternal Smile

Thai people are some of the friendliest in the world. They smile at everybody, gentle and sincere. Festering iniquity oozes from big Thai cities and in the shadows of tourist beach resorts to the south. But here in the northwest, life appears pretty simple and openhanded.

Even if you can't see it in the Thai people, that philosophy is obvious in Thai dogs. They're laying anywhere and everywhere, apparently deep in some Zazen state, secure in the knowledge that no one will step on them or run them down. In the Buddhist sphere, it's against the first, most basic principle to harm any living thing, even a bug or blade of grass. It's impossible not to feel softened by this moral calm, and to return it in kind. This was fortunate for the gibbon.

These long-armed fuzzy things look like extras from *The Muppet Movie*; something your kids might curl up with at night. They're apes, and infamous for their cunning. When we stop to enjoy a small, out-of-the-way Buddhist temple, I see one of the furry beasts at the end of a long leash. She can move freely between a few trees and bats her lashes as soon as she sees us. Working me like



Beware the mean-ass Gibbons. This one was cute as a button until it tried to rip me to shreds.

any good con, she cozies up for a few snapshots, sits on my shoulders, plays with my hair... and then makes off with my Canon EOS 1. A minute-long bitch-fight ensues, and as we uncouple, I've got the camera, but she rips the Oakley sunglasses off my head as a consolation prize and vaults up the nearest tree. A lady appears and scolds the gibbon in Thai. Suitably chastised, Ms. Gibbon hurls the shades 20 feet to the ground. So *there!*

Fortunately for me, the elephants in Thailand are more amicable—and there's a guy with a



sharp stick—since no trip to Southeast Asia would be complete without a ride on one. Standing next to one provides a sense of scale for those giant cones of dung on the road to the Muang District, a favorite spot among trekkers. And elephants aren't the only attraction here. This is an area of Hill Tribe settlements, and we're hoping to be lucky enough to find an encampment of Padaung, a Long Neck tribe from bordering Myanmar that occasionally seeks refuge in the Thai jungle. Part of the lure for these migrants is Thailand's free-ranging tourists, who stalk the tribes in order to ogle their giraffe-like ladies.

We park our bikes at a remote outdoor market—a place where you can buy mysterious herbs and animal parts you've never heard of—and we're told we're in luck; there is a Padaung tribe a short hike away. In the village, the Long Neck women make themselves available for photos, hoping the tourist photographers will feel obliged and buy some of their handicrafts afterward. There's no quid pro quo or hard sell on the trinkets though, which is something I've grown to love about this part of Thailand.

We make no attempt to resist. I'm astonished at the strange and lovely sight of these women and even more astonished to find out how the length of their necks is accomplished. It turns out the necks aren't actually elongated, but after years of adding the thick brass rings (some wear over 20), they've managed to compress their collarbones so much it makes their necks appear stretched. They can't remove the rings because their heads would flop around like Raggedy Ann.



Elephants abound in Thailand, and so do their traffic cone sized poops.

## Food Can Only Make You Feel Pregnant

During my previous visits, Thailand had revealed itself to be extraordinary in many ways. The positive energy is especially pleasant for Americans traveling abroad in turbulent times. It's also gorgeous enough to blow your little North American mind. The ocean, jungles, mountains, and rivers are all irresistibly seductive. To stop on the side of the road just to watch the farmers tend the rice paddies, or listen to the hollow notes of bamboo clicking in the breeze is a tremendous pleasure.

And then there's the food. Fair warning: Authentic Thai food is orgasmically yummy. Some Tom Yum soup, a fiery plate of Red Curry, then sticky rice and mango for dessert: In that moment, it feels like the meaning of life.

Still, there's a more shocking realization. Thailand is a street rider's paradise. When the

TBF guys first asked me to help them scout a motorcycle tour of Thailand, I was thinking dirtbike, maybe dual-sport. When they said they wanted to do a street-only tour, I thought they were whacked—especially considering the displacement limitations in this part of Asia. I laughed out loud the day they e-mailed a picture of the CB400s they were lining up through Big Tony.

But here I am having the ride of my life, tearing it up like I'm back in high school on roads riddled with empty corners. The pavement isn't exactly smooth, but it doesn't chew you up either. People drive with awareness, but you *must* keep your head in the game at all times. Thai locals—people and animals—don't expect vehicles, especially the two-wheeled kind, to be carrying much speed. This world is conditioned to the easy ebb and flow of scooter traffic, not fast-moving motorcycles



The Long Neck people we encountered were refugees of Burma. Each year the girls add a ring to their odd adornments.

**“The energy is especially pleasant for Americans traveling abroad. It's also gorgeous enough to blow your little North American mind.”**



Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, Thai style.



## Not That Kind Of Happy Ending

In Chiang Rai we visit the night market, another staple of the Thailand tourist experience. The smells, sounds and booming colors are dazzling as we peruse boiled chicken feet, rare silks and bootleg DVDs. The U.S. dollar still goes a long way here, so we load up on baubles, eat, drink and lodge like royalty. The TBF experience is especially pleasant since these guys have the details pre-dialed from their other land tours. In Chiang Rai, for example, our smelly motorcycle boots are left to air in a lavish five-star hotel, while a phalanx of pedicab drivers whisks us to an authentic local dinner followed by another late-night dip in the marketplace.

Back at the hotel, some of us sign up for a Thai massage, available around the clock; \$12 buys two hours. But don't get confused. There is nothing sexy about a Thai-style massage—you don't even take your clothes off. But surrender to the stretches and deep tissue prodding and you'll feel 18 years old again on



Cobbled together moto taxis come in every variation imaginable, and are definitely the scariest way to get around town.

that retro crotch rocket the next morning.

What else do you get out of it? "Joining us on a trip to Thailand gives people a chance to relax and get out of their normal routine," says Shaw. "They can let their hair down and play." Plus, there aren't a lot of rules to get in the way of having fun. On our way back to Chiang Mai we spend a morning touring Sukhothai

Historical Park, a grid of ancient temples the size of New York's Central Park. There's no need to get off the bikes and take some goofy shuttle. We ride right in there on our CBs, close enough to park in the one of the tallest Buddha statues in Thailand.

"We are such kids," admits Driskill, "but not everyone gets to live like we do. We turn that on in people when we bring them to Thailand." And it's true, *sanoook* is contagious, and these guys, with the 11-day Motorcycle Adventure ([TBFtravel.com](http://TBFtravel.com)), offer an easy, affordable jolt. Be warned, however, that riding a Tony's Big Beater across Thailand with world-class Iron Man competitors as guides isn't for the faint of heart. Like Viagra, you need to make sure you're healthy enough for a second childhood.

If you are ready for the Path to Enlightenment, the "Road to Mae Hong Son" waits. Just try not to buzz too many Thai monks along the way. It's fun...but I'm pretty sure fluttering their orange robes is bad for your karma. **MC**