

BICYCLING IN CHINA

Preface from a private investor

I am an investor with Platinum in a portfolio of managed funds. Like you, I read the prospectus and the brokers' recommendations; I look at the returns and indexes and graph them in ways that speak to me. My version of due diligence allows me to do my own investing and still sleep at night... most nights. But how I am investing the fruits of my labour and my success here affects my family's future so I find it a bit scary. Fund metrics are one aspect, but investments in developing countries feels very remote from my experience. Seeing is believing and having been there brings an understanding nothing else can.



Discovering China on a bicycle

I have always loved travel; it occupies the first line on my budget and is the favoured child of bonuses and unexpected windfalls. I am happiest when I am on a trip and have a ticket in the drawer for the next one. In the hall outside my bedroom is the biggest map that would fit and next to it, a series of magnetic strips. Each strip is titled: This Year, Next Year, Before Retirement, After Retirement, and has a number of movable magnets with my dreams - horseback riding in Iceland, the Sahara Music Festival in Mali, Patagonia. They get ordered and reordered and are often studied the last thing in the day as I head to bed. China has been migrating to the top of the tower for some time, my investments know it well, but I've never been there.

I'm not really a good tourist; my tolerance for churches and museums is too low. I'd prefer to wander around, "talk" to people, see what they are doing, and admire the scenery and the architecture. Then there's the question of where to start. China is huge. Do you visit the cities or the country, the Great Wall and the Terra Cotta Warriors or the rice paddies? I love Paris and San Francisco - they are cities on a human scale but a visit of

China's cities I feared, could end up a long string of skyscrapers, construction and Ming vases. So, as my introduction to the country that is driving the world's economy, I chose to avoid big, westernised cities and head for rural China.

BikeAsia, a small company run by a couple of Aussies had made National Geographic Traveller's Top New Trips for 2007. The picture of a couple riding their bikes through unending rice paddies with a village in the distance got my attention. The trip that earned the prize is titled "Riding the Rising Giant", perfectly in tune with my desire both for an introduction to the country and an understanding of the growth and potential of China. It included 14 days of cycling through lush rural southern China. It sounded like biking through a traditional Chinese painting with dramatic karst mountains, wooden Dong minority villages, and bamboo lined rivers. The idea of doing this on a bike where you are really *in* it, not just *seeing* it, had huge appeal. This isn't passive travel looking at sites; you are involved with the people and the place and go home having experienced the country with a real feel for it. This sounded great. I like biking. I go to the shops on my bike most days and enjoy a weekend outing. I'm fit and active and confident that with a little effort I could be in good shape for the 40-80 km days they had planned and if not, there's always the van.

The trip started in Guilin, the only "city" on the itinerary. At 1.3 million it hardly qualifies as a Chinese city but it was busy, and noisy. I was surprised first by how western it was. While not a maze of skyscrapers, the look of the streets could have placed it in Melbourne with kids wearing the same fashions and workers in suits and ties. Retail shops had different signs but the same big brands. I had expected the odd Mao jacket but none was to be seen on day one. My decision to avoid big cities validated, we headed north into the Dong and Miao minorities' autonomous region of south-eastern Guizhou province. On the side of the road, in a village called Pingyong, Scott, our guide and owner of BikeAsia, assisted by Tang, local guide and part-time rice farmer, and Mr Mo, our van driver, assembled the brand new Chinese bikes and we headed out. Our group consisted of five travellers: a fun couple from Seattle, Washington; a well-travelled single fellow from California; and my partner and me from Melbourne. BikeAsia trips have a



maximum of 12 travellers and tend to get a lot of Australians, Americans, and Northern Europeans in the 30-55 zone, but the appeal of fully supported bike travel is wide and rides can get keen 20 somethings and 70 year old bike crazy grey nomads.

Our first afternoon's ride was 40 kms of gently undulating sealed road along the Pingyong River. We passed through villages and towns and were greeted by farmers harvesting in their fields and school children on their way home. That afternoon our first Chinese word, Nee How (hello) was cemented in our brain by frequent repetition as we greeted and were greeted. Not a single child called out hi or hello on that day, or for days to come as we wound our way though back roads and villages. We finished the day in Rongjiang, with dinner in what I would come to refer to as a "food garage". Neither a café nor a restaurant, these were the places chosen most often for our meals. Simple in décor, or lack of, they are open to the street, usually with a garage door façade, a table and wok or two in one corner, and a couple of large, low round tables with a collection of plastic stools and nursery school chairs. Tang and Scott would confer with the chef at length while we made ourselves at home, taking a length of "serviettes" from the decorative toilet roll holder placed on the table. Each meal was a dozen different dishes, local specialties and some that we got to know well - eggs and tomatoes, pork with peanuts, stir fried greens. All of them fresh, delicious, and just what my well-exercised body needed. This was a much appreciated side to cycle tourism - great local cuisine that you can revel in with no danger of coming home a few pounds heavier.

Our accommodation for the night, and the 13 nights to come comprised clean, simple rooms with ensuite toilets, sinks and showers (hot water intended, not always available). Some had the infamous squat toilet, and on more than one occasion the shower was hand held over the toilet - squat or otherwise. A couple of nights were in a true western style hotel and the most memorable in a beautiful wooden Chinese hotel.

The next morning's breakfast of noodles, hot doughnuts, and sweet warm soymilk, was in the Rongjiang markets, a minute from the hotel. Every week, traders from surrounding villages converge on Rongjiang dressed in traditional clothes, to sell wares ranging from hand-made brooms and sickle blades to unrecognisable fruits and spices and yellow ducklings squeaking in a basket. We sat in the middle of it between the farmer and the mechanic making quite a sight in our biking lycra, but comfortably welcome as everyone went about their business.

And so the trip continued, cool, sunny days of biking on sealed and some unsealed roads and one remarkable section through the rice paddies on tracks tended for





hundreds of years by the farmers who owned the field. The people were friendly and open; the towns were quiet as energy went into finishing the harvest, drying the rice, or enjoying a game of cards. Factories along the way manufactured their products in the way they had for years - laying the machined wooden pieces for car seat covers out to dry in the sun on huge tarpaulins along the road, or stacking the wood strips that would be exported as flooring veneers, and the drainage pipes that would go into a construction project.

Building activity was evident in every town and city but road building was the thing that struck me the hardest. We rode on huge highway projects in various states of completion, not one but a dozen, all over the countryside and the construction went on for miles. At other points, we used brand new highways, ready for the traffic that they don't quite have yet, but will.

Our ride took us from Roagjiang along the Dulu River to Congjiang, then to the charming village of Zhoa Xing. This is a perfect wooden village which will, one day, be a major tourist destination. But until the road is improved it is a working town based on rice and chillies with few foreigners or Chinese tourists. The local specialty is a deep blue dyed fabric that is beaten with bamboo mallets until it shines, then draped along the front of houses to dry. A river meanders through the town and we wandered the back streets on our rest day watching the life of the Dong minority people who live here. A woman at her barrel of blue cloth and plant material explained the dying process to a couple of visitors. The visitors were two women who, it became clear, were travelling button sales people. It was obvious from the conversation, the gestures, and the few words we could pick up that they were as impressed with the natural dying and pounding process as we were.

A word on language and cultural challenges - this is one of the fabulous aspects of our bike tour - there were none. Scott has lived in China for five years and speaks good, workable Chinese. Tang, is amazingly self taught in quietly charming English. Both are knowledgeable and able to explain points of interest and cultural differences, often with historical perspective. In the pre-trip mailing we received a two page Chinese word/phrase list and part of the daily fun for our group was finding opportunities to place our limited vocabulary. The surprise and delight of a shop owner when we started a negotiation with an appropriately dramatic 'Tie Guila' (too expensive!) made shopping so much fun. On the last day of our trip, one particularly spirited negotiation attracted a crowd of a dozen locals and Chinese tourists to watch the foreigner with two phrases, and a pencil and paper for the pricing, drive a hard bargain. There was much laughter and a look of respect from the crowd. One fellow at the back confided in me, "She very good".

Our journey ended in Yangshuo - by far the most touristy town of the trip but by then I felt I had seen a slice of the China I was looking for and we could enjoy the advantages of this beautiful place in the karst mountains. We had cooking lessons and lunch at a Chinese cooking school, a painting lesson in a private studio where I attempted cherry blossoms and bamboo boats, a much needed therapeutic massage and TaiChi taught by an 80 year old master.

After two weeks and 600 kms in southern China I left with a desire to return and a sense of the road this rising giant is travelling that makes me feel happier about life there and more comfortable about my investments.

Anita Legacy

www.BikeAsia.com organise bike trips in China, Mongolia, Japan, Laos and Tibet.