

RoadRUNNER

Road MOTORCYCLE TOURING & TRAVEL RUNNER®



Pennsylvania
Shamrock Tour®
**ALLEGHENY
MOUNTAINS**

Alabama
**TWISTS
AND TUNES**

UTAH
**VALLEY OF THE
GODS & BEYOND**

REVIEWS:
TRIUMPH ROCKET 3 GT
SUZUKI V-STROM 1050XT



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HOME RUN!

DEAR READER,

I spent the majority of my main riding season exploring new roads close to my home. It helps that we have so many wonderfully curvy and interesting ones to choose from in North Carolina's Piedmont region.

RoadRUNNER's Shamrock Tours®, four rides out of a base location, have been a cornerstone of the magazine, and a much-loved feature, from the beginning. But wouldn't you know it, we've never used our own home, Winston-Salem, NC, as a base. Not only are roads here in the Southeast superb, but Winston-Salem also has so much history and a lot more to offer. Plus, it's a fast-growing city. So we're creating a Shamrock Tour based around Winston-Salem. You can read all about it and follow our recommendations in an upcoming issue. I'm

especially excited because I'll ride this tour with my family. For us, riding is a passion that unites the generations. (And my two grandkids don't miss any opportunity to sit on a new bike with grandma.)

The idea for a hometown tour wasn't just mine. Many of our journalists put together the best routes from their own towns across the country. We've always relied on local knowledge to plan tours. Having the actual journalist plan routes in his or her own backyard? Instant moto gold. Some simply slept at home in between days on the road, while others picked out a campground they've always wanted to try out.

When we do venture farther out, it's nice to know that motorcyclists as a group (I'm looking at all of you) are vital in bringing revenue to small communities. After speaking with lots of visitors centers and hotels across the country, the resounding refrain sounds something like this: "We can't appreciate motorcycle riders enough. They've really saved us this year. Ninety percent of our guests are on bikes!" I don't know about you, but I suspect motorcyclists may have finally lost the bad-boy image for good. Surely the stuffed animals strapped to Gold Wings have helped, as have the many charity rides and fundraisers, but nothing puts us in the good graces like filling up hotel rooms and ordering at restaurants. Motorcycle and accessory sales in North America are up as well, which wasn't a given earlier this year. Life lived on two wheels is just the best. More riders are upgrading to newer bikes, and new riders are entering our sport.

While you're no doubt making your own travel plans, let us inspire you with the stories and routes from this issue. We have a fantastic collection of tours that are perfect for fall. Join John Flores as he explores Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains, and travel with Luke Swab through northern Alabama, where he finds winding, scenic roads and unique attractions. Don't miss Brian Shaney's ride through Utah's awe-inspiring landscapes; it includes some bucket list stops for adventure riders. Farther afield, Jeff Buchanan takes us on a challenging but "magical" ride through the mountains of northern Thailand.

The best thing might be that you can enjoy these trips without leaving home. But when you're ready to hit the road, we've done the legwork for you, with maps, directions, and more all at your fingertips. All you have to do is pack your bags and go.

Ride Safe,

Christa Neuhauser

Christa Neuhauser
Publisher & Editor-in-Chief



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September/October 2020

Volume 20, Number 5



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THAILAND

Road of 2,000 Turns

Text: Jeff Buchanan

Photography: Jeff Buchanan, Alexander Seger,
and Michael Göbel





Northern Thailand offers motorcycle enthusiasts a unique combination of exotic landscapes, friendly people, excellent food, and plenty of sightseeing.

Trading two wheels for a 30-minute longboat trip upriver to visit the village of the “long neck women.”





After 36 trips across the Atlantic for rides in Europe and Africa, it was time for something different. Having never been across the Pacific, I settled on Thailand for a new adventure. I would be taking part in Edelweiss Bike Tours' "Thailand Extreme" tour, an eight-day trip covering 1,465 miles in northern Thailand's stunning mountain ranges. Somewhere in my mind I was conjuring the tour as being a careful navigation of deep ruts and washed-out, broken pavement of narrow third world backroads. What I wasn't expecting was that, for a motorcyclist, northern Thailand



possesses a seemingly endless string of beautifully paved, winding roads that snake over and through dense jungles and tranquil countryside, across stunning vistas, and past small villages. Chalk one up for derailing preconceived notions.

ARRIVING IN THE LAND OF SMILES

Landing in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand's largest city, I settled in a few days ahead of the start of the tour to acclimate to the time difference and begin to immerse myself in the culture. The rumored chaos of the city, with its three-wheeled tuk-tuks, taxis, buses, and whizzing scooters (often with three people aboard), proved less overwhelming for someone from Los Angeles, where traffic has surpassed insanity—good

Dragon motifs are a recurring theme in Thailand; representing supernatural powers, dragon figures are used to protect temples.



One of the many secluded hillside homes in northern Thailand, where life slows to an almost imperceptible pace, rendering a somewhat sublime calm.

training for riding in foreign lands. And yes, there is the somewhat surreal, salacious nightlife that Thailand's larger cities are famous for—if one is interested—although it doesn't carry the stigma or danger of similar areas in America.

On the eve of departure from Chiang Mai, we had our official welcome meeting; it was an opportunity to meet fellow riders and our tour guide and to get briefed on the first day's ride/route. We'd taken possession of our motorcycles earlier in the day. I would be aboard a Suzuki V-Strom 650, which would prove to be a near perfect mount for all that was to follow.

The first morning of the tour was a somewhat challenging calamity of trying to get nine riders—all busy familiarizing themselves with new bikes amidst the morning Chiang Mai commute—to the outskirts while learning to keep left. First note to self (and readers): Thailand drives on the left side of the road, or as Americans like to say, the “wrong side.” (Ask the Thais and they'll say it's the other way around.)

The great advantage to adjusting to riding on the left is that a motorcycle's controls are the same, you just have to acclimate to staying left—as opposed to adapting to a right-side-drive car, shifting with the left hand, etc. (Hence, another advantage of participating in a tour when in a foreign place, especially where they drive on the left, is simply that you can follow your group leader). In relatively short order the congestion of the frenetic city fell away, disappearing in our rearview mirrors as our group ascended into the mountains, unaware just how fortunate we happy motorcyclists were to be.

Immediately any notion of dirty, unmaintained thoroughfares was supplanted by the reward of clean, beautifully paved two-lane roads that meandered the undulating landscape in a weaving, rising, and falling roller-coaster ride of superbly banked turns and sweepers. Adding to the joy was the road being bordered by dense forest and lush jungle that frequently opened onto rich farmland where the pages of *National Geographic* unfolded with scenes of workers in

rice fields and grazing water buffaloes, all serving to satisfy the heart's desire for the exotic.

THE HAPPY REVELATION

It quickly became apparent that the “Extreme” tour series was created for serious motorcycle enthusiasts with a decent amount of riding experience. Thus, it is recommended you check your ego when considering one of the tours in this category, as the days are long and filled with a steady diet of fast-paced, no-nonsense riding on roads that will fatigue the uninitiated. Of course it isn't all hooliganism and backroad thrashing; the tour balances the fun of motorcycling with sightseeing, numerous stops in small villages, and plenty of history and culture.

Perhaps the single biggest take-away for me was learning that some phenomenal food is available at many of the remote, makeshift bamboo and corrugated steel roadside eateries. Locals crank out a steady stream of delicious Thai dishes—often rivaling finer restaurants back home pushing a Thai theme—all created on single burners and delivered with that infectious Thai smile. However, unlike the American establishments that pass along their inherently high overhead to the customer, these authentic roadside eateries do

it for so little Thai baht (local currency) it almost makes you think you're getting the exchange-rate math wrong.

Another activity that quickly became a welcome ritual was the frequent afternoon stops in villages to have a chilled canned coffee. As a self-professed coffee snob, I was hesitant to try one of these factory-processed drinks, but they quickly became an anticipated treat after traversing mile after mile of demanding road in temperatures that routinely hit the mid-to-upper 90s. They're available in everything from black coffee to mocha to latte, so you will find a favorite. Each day's engaging riding concluded with a stay in a nice hotel, chosen for its charm and native feel. One tradition indulged by participants at the end of each day of riding, after the bikes are safely parked but before quests head off for showers and dips in pools, was to get to the hotel's bar, still in riding gear, to savor a cold beer—appropriately referred to as a “boot beer.” Evenings were reserved for relaxation and eating, with plenty of variations of the cuisine of Thailand to satiate the most discerning food critic.

As the days unfolded, the routes became a collage of wonderfully twisted roads, from graceful

Each day presented us with a colorful palette of open sky, lush vegetation, and meandering rivers.





Brightly adorned temples abound in Thailand, ranging from small to gigantic, and reflect the country's strong links to Buddhism.

Thailand's motorcycle culture is like any other, with favorite mountaintop coffee stops where locals relax after their Sunday ride.

The fast and constant pace of the riding day is broken up with peaceful moments at relaxing stops at places such as this.

sweepers to tight, technical passages, often with dramatic climbs and heavy-braking descents, requiring continual inputs of throttle, brake, clutch, and gears. Hands, arms, legs, and feet—not to mention the eyes and brain—will get a workout as you trek the multiple mountain ranges of the north, each rewarding with its own particular character of road. All fun and fast, they're set against constantly changing scenery that becomes more enthralling with each passing day. The one thing the tour lacks, thankfully, is any significant straight sections. It's as if motorcycle enthusiasts clandestinely installed themselves in public works and then surreptitiously set to designing roads to suit motorcyclists—then hired some two-wheel cohorts into the department to pave them with smooth asphalt offering plenty of traction. The joy of riding these roads is furthered by a virtual absence of road-governing law enforcement. These elements, lusted after by motorcyclists, are revealing northern Thailand

to be a motorcyclist's dream, quickly earning the country status as a major enthusiast destination.

The elements of Thailand that seemed odd or unusual upon arrival will soon become acceptable norms. Among these is the abundance of dogs in the villages. They lay about, napping in the middle of the road and often will not budge even at the threat of being run over. Their usual response to our passing was a lazy wag of the tail. The other thing that is extremely enchanting is the traditional Thai greeting and parting gesture, which entails pressing the hands together, as if in prayer, and then graciously bowing. It's endearing, whether it be elders or youngsters, the act always performed with reverence and gracefulness, especially when you reciprocate.

Although here to ride motorcycles, we couldn't avoid the magic of Thailand. The landscape, the many prodigious golden temples, the serene

pace of life (even the cities have a kind of hidden rhythm that belies the chaos) speaks to the traveler, reminding that the world is a big place, with myriad cultures and fascinating people long held to established rituals—all strangely defiant yet gradually succumbing to the influx and influence of modernity in the form of cell phones. This omnipresent icon of the modern age is always on full display, with moped and scooter riders—their old and tired machines often stacked high with goods for market—a cigarette in the lips, one hand on the throttle, the other holding a cell phone. That said, get far enough into the jungles and mountain ranges of northern Thailand and those influences become less intrusive.

ROAD OF A THOUSAND TURNS

On Day 7 it was as if the preceding six days had been merely a gradual work-up to the “Road of a Thousand Turns.” As the name implies, a winding masterpiece of curving roadwork our partners in crime in the public works department created presented itself in undulating delight—a seemingly endless series of turns, switching continually from right to left, left to right in a syncopated ballet of mechanical maneuvering. Beneath the helmets were ear-to-ear grins as the road doled out mile after mile of challenging, thoroughly engaging, laugh-inducing riding. At the end of the day, after recuperating with a much deserved “boot beer,” dinner, and a massage, we were informed of the next day’s agenda: the “Road of Two Thousand Turns.” Wondering perhaps if this were a tease, we couldn’t quite grasp there would be a stretch twice as long as what was experienced earlier in the day.

And so it came to pass: a day navigating the “Road of Two Thousand Turns.” For the very first time in a life of riding motorcycles, I found myself asking when this was going to end. It’s a good thing that the tour works its way up to this crescendo of motorcycling magic, because it thoroughly defines what touring and riding is all about. During the drop down from the northern regions and back into civilization in the form of a return to Chiang Mai, our minds and hearts were filled with a newfound love of Thailand.

AN ENCHANTING CULTURE

The “Thailand Extreme” tour is not all riding. There are plenty of stops to take in the classic tourist essentials of Thailand. A rest day in Nan





The roads go on like this for days with virtually no other traffic to contend with. In fact, the biggest obstacles are dogs that like to sleep in the middle of the road.

provides an opportunity to go for a loop ride, go shopping, or go swimming. The tour stops at several Buddhist temples, which present their inherent tranquility in homage to the country's predominant faith. The route skirts the border with Cambodia and Myanmar, with the mighty Mekong Delta, the river of life for Southeast Asia, edging long portions of the ride. There are rides through mountain coffee plantations and a visit to an elephant training center.

Perhaps the single most memorable experience of the trip, outside the riding, was our visit to a Burmese village, accessible only by long riverboat, where the famous Kayan "long neck" women live. Some female members of the Padaung tribe invoke an ancient tradition of placing brass rings to elongate their necks. The ritual begins when a girl is 5 years old and ends at age 35. (In fact, the rings do not actually elongate the neck, but rather dislocate the shoulder blades, pressing them down to give the women the appearance of a long neck.) There are various explanations about the practice, one being that it was begun centuries ago to protect villagers against tiger attacks, but in general it is regarded as a symbol of prestige and wealth, as well as beauty. At the village school, we met two young girls who had begun the practice. After careful approach we exchanged names and they allowed me to take their picture. I showed them

the result and they smiled, each performing that gracious bow. It was quite magical, wondering about these young girls, far removed from the world, engaged in a practice slowly being eclipsed by time.

Travel never fails to surprise by realigning and reshaping preconceived notions about a new place. One can't help but imagine and anticipate certain things based on pictures and research. But until you actually take the plunge and find out for yourself, the realities arrived at will almost certainly always upstage what was expected—providing you keep an open mind. As motorcyclists we're especially fortunate to be able to combine our passion for two wheels with travel, riding through new landscapes, through different cultures—as opposed to being restricted to the claustrophobic environs of a tour bus.

And so we wrapped eight exquisite days of adrenaline-induced riding through northern Thailand. Strangely, what has stayed with me in the intervening days since the tour concluded is the gracious bow, with hands pressed together, of the two Kayan girls, their necks wrapped with brass rings, dressed in their hand-woven clothes, with all the history, culture, and fading ritual against modernity they represent. And to think that experience came to me because of my love of motorcycles. **RR**



Elephants are a popular symbol of majesty in Thailand, adorning much of their art. However, today they are used primarily for tourism attractions.

At the village of the “long necks,” where women are known for the ancient tradition of elongating their necks with brass rings.



The prospect of dropping out of society and taking up in a remote Thai village outpost has a definite appeal.



THAILAND

APPROXIMATELY 1,465 MILES

OVERVIEW

Although there is plenty of sight-seeing throughout this area, make no mistake: This trip is about riding. You'll get the most enjoyment out of it if you can honestly evaluate your skills as advanced. The tour was undertaken the last week of November, when the temperatures in Thailand are relatively mild and monsoons are absent. Temperatures can range from early morning starts of 50 degrees, with some days hitting the mid-90s, but the overall average is a very appealing 75 degrees.

Hotels are plentiful in Thailand, except for the remote regions. Comfortable, clean lodging can be found at low rates (as low as \$16) for decent accommodations, transitioning to an average of \$100, which will get you a very nice resort-style room in an upscale establishment. Regarding food: Be open-minded and try the roadside stands; they are clean and create exquisite dishes for a very modest price (\$2-\$6). In small towns and cities you can find pizza, and in the finer restaurants menus often have familiar dishes for travelers. Naturally, being in Thailand, it's suggested to enjoy the vast array of dishes the culture offers, usually for surprisingly low prices. Tipping is appreciated but not expected. If you do tip, 10% is the maximum.

Travel to Thailand is, for the most part, trouble-free. As a U.S. passport holder (with six months available beyond stay) you are granted a visa-free 30 days. A night flight makes adjusting to the time difference and



Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes. For map legend, see page 113.

residual jetlag a great deal more manageable—which is especially important given that you'll be piloting a motorcycle in a foreign country.

ROADS & BIKING

Without question, the biggest surprise of the trip was the quality of the roads: superb pavement with plenty of traction and relatively clean surfaces. We enjoyed an absolute smorgasbord of tight, twisting two-lane roads, blissfully absent of traffic, weaving in and over the densely foliated mountains of northern Thailand. The people of Thailand are friendly and welcome riders into their villages with a wave, a smile, and often the traditional Thai bow.

RESOURCES

- Edelweiss Bike Travel
www.edelweissbike.com
- Amazing Thailand/Tourism Authority of Thailand
www.tourismthailand.org
- Lonely Planet
www.lonelyplanet.com/thailand

MOTORCYCLE & GEAR

2019 Suzuki V-Strom 650

Helmet: AGV AX-9

Jacket/pants: Dainese Tempest D-Dry

Boots: Sidi Aria GORE-TEX

Gloves: Racer Soul Glove

Luggage: Givi Rear Top Box