

ON TWO WHEELS. NEXT TIME YOU'RE IN NEED OF A GETAWAY, WHY NOT CHOOSE TO PEDAL THERE WITH A SCENIC PART OF ASIA AS THE BACKDROP? **BY CHRISTOPHER KUCWAY**

WITH THE STUNNING backdrop that is Asia and an urge to tackle it on two wheels, where should you go next? Not only will it depend on the usual suspects—time and money—but your own ability on a mountain bike enters the equation. Just remember, the great thing about cycling is that there are trips for every fitness level. Here, three unforgettable biking itineraries in the region.

VIETNAM
EASY DOES IT | TWO DAYS

Even on the simplest of itineraries, you can combine cycling with a beautiful setting. That's where a destination like Vietnam is perfect. A leisurely two-day journey north out of Hanoi with **Marco Polo Travel** (bikingvietnam.com; US\$195 per person) is a good start for any level of cyclist. Covering 110 kilometers through the country's rugged north, the trip may sound intimidating at first, but spread over two days and innumerable stops to eat and drink—this is Vietnam, after all—it's an easier ride than you might expect. The first day takes in 45 kilometers around Mai Chau, capped with dinner and a homestay in a White Thai village. Aside from stilt houses made with palm-leaf roofs and polished bamboo slat floors, this scenic valley is noted for its silk weaving. Day two sees you cycle out through a karst limestone landscape to Kim Boi Hot Springs for lunch before driving back to Hanoi. **T+L TIP** Aim to be in Mai Chau on a Sunday, when minorities from the surrounding mountains visit the market.



PEDAL HAPPY
Clockwise from top left: Bhutan is a dream escape for cyclists; a rest stop in Sabah; exploring Vietnam with Marco Polo Travel; the tour takes in plenty of local encounters.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOCK MONTGOMERY; COURTESY OF CABRENEY JOHNNY/FLICKR.COM; JOCK MONTGOMERY (2)

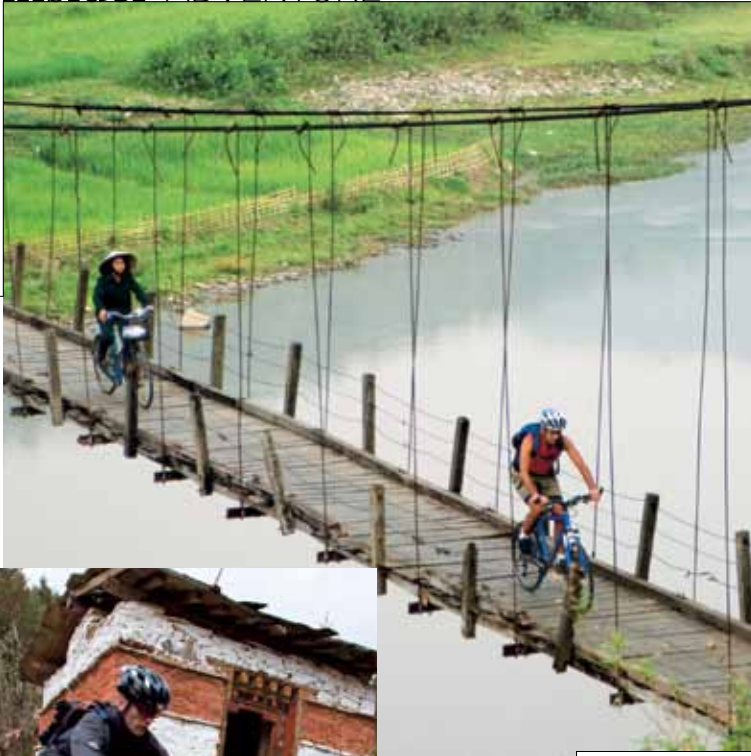
MALAYSIA

POWER UP | SIX DAYS

Within an hour of Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, there's a list of mountain-biking options as long as the East Malaysian coast. The routes are easily adaptable, offering flat rides, more demanding trails into tropical forests and everything in between. The **Travel Trading Company** (borneo-travel.com; US\$756 per person) leads day-long rides as well as six-day excursions, with longer trips aimed at intermediate cyclists. The six-day ride starts in Kota Kinabalu and includes accommodation in longhouses (word to the wise: bring earplugs, for the forest is quiet for no man) and in mountain villages, with daily distances of up to 70 kilometers. The highlight—and high point—is at Kundasang at the end of the fifth day, with a stay at the Kinabalu Rose cabin, which is above 1,500 meters and within sight of Mount Kinabalu. But by the following day, the highlight might just change when you celebrate the end of »



TWISTS AND TURNS Clockwise from above: Biking in Bhutan; a winding trail in north Vietnam; heading uphill in Sabah.



CYCLING ASIA
From top: Bridging Vietnam; rough terrain in Bhutan; a Bhutan bike tour takes in plenty of local color; taking a break in Sabah.



BIKE TOUR BASICS

Questions to ask your tour company

- How difficult is the trip? If an itinerary is beyond your capabilities, the route will be much less fun than you anticipated. Most tour companies will provide guidelines for each package.
- Is insurance included? And what happens if—we're talking worst-case scenario, so don't be alarmed—your trip skids off the trail?
- If you're not bringing your own wheels, what bikes are included in the price and how well are they maintained? Is there a guide who will take care of maintenance?
- Is there a back-up plan in case the weather makes a turn for the worse?
- Aside from cycling, what other activities are available?

the trip with a much-deserved dip into the Poring Hot Springs. The return to Kota Kinabalu is by bus. **T+L TIP** A worthy side trip is to the Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (sabah.gov.my), 23 kilometers from Sandakan.

BHUTAN

FULL GAS | TWO WEEKS

For those with time and money on their hands, not to mention some strong quads, scaling Himalayan heights (though the climbs are gradual) on two wheels is just the thing. And Bhutan is the place, a dream escape on two wheels. Bangkok-based **Spice Roads** ([spice roads.com](http://spiceroads.com); from US\$3,950 per person) offers a 14-day trip to the country with 550 kilometers of biking over those famous peaks. The lack of traffic means you can hear birds singing as you ride through aromatic pine forests. Day six proves the toughest day of the trip as you'll pedal up and over the Black Mountains, a natural barrier between the east and west of the country, one that rises as high as 4,617 meters. Two days later, after a welcome rest day, it's payback time on a 27-kilometer descent into Chendebji. As spectacular as the scenery in Bhutan is, what you'll best remember are encounters with the Bhutanese themselves—think having tea with monks in Bumthang. If you don't have two whole weeks to spare, Spice Roads also offers a seven-day bike journey to Bhutan, but it only covers 190 kilometers. **T+L TIP** Don't miss the chance to hike up to the Tiger's Nest Monastery, which is 900 meters above the floor of the Paro Valley. **+**

