

Life *in the* Valley

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Laura Wanker gets some local attention on the ride from Monywa to Pakokku in Myanmar.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROD AND LAURA WANKER

Laura Wanker asks girls at a monastery school in Myanmar about their schooling.



The Wankers eat a lunch of pigeon along the road from Quang Ngai to Tam Ky in Vietnam.

Bicycle touring

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see road conditions, and use www.Booking.com and www.TripAdvisor.com to find hotels.

Planes and trains she books ahead; hotels she usually doesn't. The couple likes to bike about 50 miles per day – give or take 20.

"When I am doing the planning, I absolutely know we'll go off that plan," she says, flashing a wide smile.

If Laura's learned to be spontaneous, Rod was born that way. He once spent six months touring Europe in a Volkswagen van. On bike trips, the first time he sees the map is usually when the couple is preparing to ride.

"When we get to a city – especially an Asian city – it can be very complicated to find where to stay and eat, but Laura's already got it figured out," he says, gesturing with calloused hands toward his wife with obvious pride.

The retired electrician followed his wife into biking many years ago. Perhaps a sign of things to come, they spent their honeymoon in 1984 bicycling around the San Juan Islands in Washington. It was later, though, that Laura discovered long-distance biking. She and their then-10-year-old son, Jamon, trained for and completed the 200-mile Seattle to Portland group ride. She was hooked.

"I realized if I wanted to see my wife more, I'd have to take up cycling," Rod said. "I've been a golfer all my life, but I was happy to make the change."

The couple's first international bike trip came in 1994, when they flew with their bikes to Belize City and toured Belize and the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexi-

co. Now they chuckle at their choice. In Belize City, crime was so rampant that they had to take their bikes with them everywhere – even into restaurants – and they were hassled many times.

Far from discouraging the pair, the experience hardened their resolve. They discovered they liked exploring and problem solving. Together they were pretty darn good at it, and they were willing to undergo discomfort to see far corners of the world through the eyes of the people who live there.

"This puts us in an environment where we're challenged – we like that," Rod said. "I once took a psychology class that taught that, historically, a married couple was a 'survival unit,' that the need to survive kept a man and woman together."

Simple survival has sometimes been a challenge as Rod and Laura have biked through 27 countries and 22 states. In the past 10 years, they've biked in Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Macedonia, Argentina, Guatemala, Belize (again), France, China, British Columbia, Uruguay and Greece and, and, now, Southeast Asia.

Of course, not every tour has brought marital bliss.

"In Spain, we got on each others' nerves, don't you think?" Rod asks, fixing an honest gaze on his wife.

"Duh," Laura shoots back with a gentle laugh.

Nine years ago, in China, and on their most recent trip to Southeast Asia, finding food safe for western digestive tracts was an extra challenge. Laura carries a few snacks to ward off her "homicidal hunger," and has learned not to let desperation get the better of her judgment when ordering local food. Interestingly enough, the worst food poisoning the couple experienced was in British

Columbia.

"We make sure everything we eat is cooked," she said. "Often we just ask to go into the kitchen so we can point out the things we can eat."

Their tricks to travelling light and staying healthy are numerous. One is using whisky as a cheap sanitizer. Another is taking their silk sleeping bag liners everywhere, to use in beds with unwashed linens or lacking a top sheet.

Packing light is a requirement, as their touring bikes, fully loaded, weighed about 60 pounds on this last trip. Once Rod's bike was loaded up to 92 pounds, an experience he'd rather not repeat.

So, for a multi-month trip, each rider typically takes no more than five outfits: one for restaurants, two to three for riding and one for resting/sleeping. Add a few medical supplies, electronic tablets, cell phones, and spare glasses – and their bags are full.

Most important are all the tools and bike-repair supplies loaded onto Rod's bike. He's literally a rolling bike shop, ready to fix flat tires and anything else.

Some emergencies can't be anticipated. While exploring the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia, Rod tore the sole off his 20-year-old bike shoes. Thus began a search for an adhesive strong enough to stick it back together, which he eventually found in a local product known only as "Dog-66."

In Greece, Laura broke a tooth biting into a baguette, and the couple gave up days of touring to get it fixed by an unforgettably volatile mother-son dentist team. While the couple does make purchases along the way, they rarely buy keepsakes. Once Laura found artist she liked in South America and later ordered a painting to be delivered to her home.

Generally, their buying is limited to their basic needs – a place to stay, something to eat and something to drink. And they buy with a specific philosophy.

"We like to keep our money working locally with the people we meet," Laura says. So they avoid hotel chains, eat at local restaurants and food stands, and don't purchase trinkets that are imported or made in sweatshops.

While they once bought with traveler's checks, now they use ATM cards, hiding their cash in their bags or even inside their bike tubes. They're usually able to make pack-down bike trips for about \$50 per day, including airfare.

They're really not looking to buy anyway; they're looking to live in the moment and make personal connections. As it turns out, arriving by bike makes this easier. Especially in remote areas, locals shout greetings, and readily approach when they stop to rest.

With fondness, Rod remembers once making a difficult climb to the hill tribes in northern Thailand. The road was so steep, the couple had to stop and push

their bikes. But when they arrived, they were the only foreigners around, and the villagers were so surprised that they all came out of their houses, welcoming them, touching their bikes, and trying to communicate.

"We aren't so much interested in the sights, museums and things," he says. "We are interested in the people who live there. On a bike, you put yourself in a position to meet them."

They've met so many different people in faraway places that it's hard to keep the memories straight. Rod predicts that, someday, he'll be "that guy in a nursing home," who accidentally blends all his adventures together when telling stories about his past.

Fortunately, since 2007, Laura has documented every day of every adventure on the blog www.CrazyGuyOnABike.com/lwanker. Photos, text and maps tell their stories to friends and family, as well other bike tourists seeking tips. On March 1, they returned from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. All 51 days of travel – and 1,200 miles of biking – are already online, as Laura posts as she goes. Her entries are sprinkled with humor (a monkey climbing her husband's leg, her chagrin over making a baby cry, and more) and travel insights (folks in Myanmar won't accept folded dollar bills, bike bags are better than boxes on the airlines, etc.).

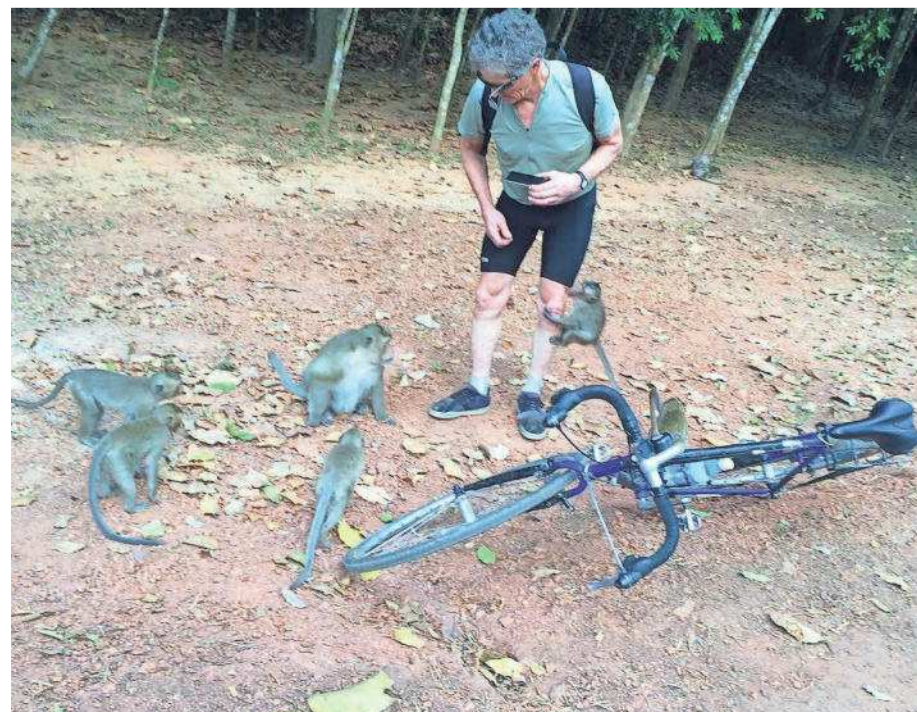
Because the couple takes planes, trains and buses between ride segments, "some people would not consider us purists," Laura says. She doesn't mind. They've been bike touring for years, and they know what works and what doesn't.

"We have a general rule that we have to spend at least a day in country for every hour we spend getting there," she explains. "A 20-hour trip requires at least three weeks on the ground."

Where would they suggest new bike tourists go first? Right here in Oregon, a ride down Highway 101 from Astoria to Gold Beach makes the most of a southward wind and features some of the world's best camping. Overseas, they recommend Thailand and Vietnam's Mekong Delta. Regardless of the location, tourists on bikes always get an eye-ful – and sometimes an earful and nose-ful too – of real life. Rod says it's stunning to see how difficult life is for many people on Earth. "It's one thing to know about poverty; it's another to see it for yourself," he says.

Laura agrees, adding she's grateful for how bike touring has stripped away her fear of the unknown and replaced it with confidence. Even far from the comforts of home, off-plan and off-schedule, she's learned to embrace the moment she's living in.

"People tell us, 'Be safe,' when we're going on a trip. We just say, 'Yeah,' but now we feel almost as comfortable and safe in those places as we do at home."



On the road to Angkor Wat, Cambodia, curious Macaques climb on Rod and his bike.