

2FEATURE

By : Ellen Boonstra

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PEDAL POWER

RELYING SOLELY ON 'PEDAL POWER', LINDA FRAIKIN MADE HER WAY FROM BANGKOK TO BEIJING, A 6-MONTH-LONG ADVENTURE. IT GOES TO SHOW THAT THE PATH OF A SOUL-SEARCHING CYCLIST TRAVELS IN UNEXPECTED WAYS...

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As Albert Einstein – and Linda on her website – put it, “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.”

Sit still Linda didn't. After three years in Thailand teaching graphic design at various universities, the 36-year-old decided it was time for a change. Feeling she was in the throes of a “mid-30s crisis” the idea quickly took shape of taking an extended vacation. Where most of us would head straight for the airport, the Dutch native hopped on her mountain bike and peddled to Beijing. And she recently flew back to Bangkok to say goodbye to friends while en route to her next adventure, working for the World Meteorological Organization in Geneva, Switzerland.



THE BIKE GENE: “I’ve been riding bikes for as long as I can remember – race biking in Holland and bicycle track racing the five years I lived in London. Here I got into mountain biking with the Bangkok Hash House Bikers. A real life changer, joining this group – a nice, mixed crowd of people sharing the same passion, plus it was a great way to get to know the country.

THE BIG DECISION: “After three years in Thailand it was time to move on. A bit of a mid-30s crisis I think – what to do, where to go? With a friend we were joking around about cycling trips to faraway destinations. She wasn’t serious but I thought – why not? Perhaps a journey would give me a different perspective on life and enough time away from the real world to clear my mind. I chose Beijing as the final destination because I hadn’t

seen much of China yet. It would also be my farewell trip through Asia before relocating elsewhere.

PRE-TRIP FAQ: “‘Are you bringing protection along?’ I jokingly answered, ‘You mean condoms?’ But they meant things like knives, guns and sprays.

THE START: “April 1st. I figured I needed a special date. I don’t know which would’ve been the bigger joke – had I gone or not gone. The Bangkok Municipal Authorities organized an official send-off with a podium, speeches, flowers... The Thailand Cycling Team and the Thailand Cycling Club were there, the bike hashers, friends, plus a few people who’d heard about it through the write-up in the Bangkok Post. I was amazed to see about 50 people there at 6 o’clock in the morning to see me off!





TRAVELING LIGHT: “1 mountain bike, 2 pannier bags; a handlebar bag for my camera; 4 roadmaps; 2 riding outfits; 2 sponsored tops; 1 pair of long pants; 1 pair of short pants; 1 pair of shoes; 1 t-shirt that doubled as pajamas; 1 pair of pajama pants that doubled as regular pants; 1 set of thermal underwear (it was cold in China); 1 pink skirt (to cover up my figure-hugging outfit so as not to offend anyone’s cultural sensitivities); and my little black dress (to feel like myself again when I’d had enough of the ‘anonymity’ of the bike clothes). As I discovered when going up mountains: weight is crucial.

BACK TO THE BASICS: “The two main concerns I had everyday were: where do I find food and where do I find shelter. Completely away from the ‘civilized’ world, there were no silly worries. In Cambodia I’d ride from cool box to cool box, in Vietnam from sugarcane juice stall to sugarcane juice stall, and in China from ice cream vendor to ice cream vendor.

“Food was the key ingredient of socializing during the trip. People who didn’t have much would insist on sharing their food with me. The interaction with the locals in rural areas was the great thing about being on a bike rather than on a bus.

FAQ DURING TRIP: “‘What’s your name?’ ‘Where are you from?’ ‘How old are you?’ ‘You married?’ ‘Have children?’ ‘Have you eaten?’ (in Chinese or sign language)

SHOOTING ALONG THE WAY: “I traveled with a relatively large camera – my Canon D20 35mm to ensure quality pictures. Plus a small snapshot camera. All in all I took over 4,000 pictures.





“EVERYDAY I WAS RIDING THROUGH NEW LANDSCAPES, MEETING NEW PEOPLE, SLEEPING IN A NEW PLACE”



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE CYCLING KIND: “A fellow Dutchman on his 2-year trip around the world (he was halfway; we cycled together for three weeks). Thousands of students cycling in white uniforms in Vietnam. A Korean I met in a tiny Chinese village who was heading in the opposite direction. Which must’ve been quite a sight for the locals – no cyclists in sight for years and now two in one day!

THE SCENIC ROUTE: “Everyday I was riding through new landscapes, meeting new people, sleeping in a new place... I rarely stayed in the same place longer than two or three days but I did have rest days. Other days I had to cope with mountains and bad weather. I ended up clocking in at just under 9,500 kilometers instead of the intended 8,000 kilometers because I was enjoying the trip so much. The route took me from Thailand, through Cambodia and Vietnam to China.



WRONG TURNS: “Rarely. I had four English maps, a bilingual one and a Chinese road atlas and I’d buy local Chinese maps along the way. The only 2 or 3 times I got lost was within a big city.





SOME PEOPLE HAVE TOLD ME THAT BY FOLLOWING MY PASSION I'VE INSPIRED THEM TO PURSUE THEIR OWN DREAMS.

FLAT TIRES & OTHER BREAKDOWNS: "Several, but I can change a flat within minutes (I've probably set a record). And I had one broken spoke. Since there was nobody there to hear my cries, it felt kind of useless to complain or wallow in self-pity. I thought okay, the road is full of challenges but that's the adventure that you're looking for.

EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE: "I've become more decisive and more in control of my life. More appreciative of the little things (good food, good company, good weather), and the realization of being so privileged that I'm able to take six months off, get on a bike and do as I please – things that some people can only dream about. Some people have told me that by following my passion I've inspired them to pursue their own dreams.

THE FINISH: "September 30th as planned. I posted messages on my own website and had been corresponding with a few 'MOBsters' (Mountainbikers Of Beijing) to let them know I would be arriving that day on Tiananmen Square. An American couple, Pat and Mark, were there to greet me and I ended up staying in Beijing for a few weeks, even joining the MOBsters on a cycling trip to the Great Wall before flying back to Bangkok.

POST-TRIP FAQ: "'Weren't you lonely?' (no) 'Scared?' (no) 'Is your bum sore?' (not at all) 'Excited?' (very!)"

BACK IN BANGKOK COULDN'T WAIT TO: "1) Eat green curry and chicken, 2) have a massage, and 3) in-depth conversations with friends.

THE NEXT ADVENTURE: "To Geneva, Switzerland, to work for the World Meteorological Organization. I'm flying. I just sold my bike... but I'll be buying another one in Geneva while I dream of my next adventure..."



Linda's website:
www.bangkok-beijingbybike.org

Bangkok Hash House Bikers:
www.bangkokbikehash.com

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