

CYCLING AROUND MALAYSIA

By Theodore A. Wyne





The east coast of Malaysia lies somewhat off the well trodden traveler's path that arcs through Southeast Asia. Traveling with a lightweight yet sturdy aluminum mountain bike I set out to cycle this coast en route to Singapore from Thailand. Starting from the Thai border town of Rantau Panjang, I spent the first few days of my journey acclimatizing myself not so much to the heat as to the prospect of enduring extended periods of exercise in it. My cardinal rule quickly became to limit my cycling to mornings and late afternoons, reserving high noon for the peace of a shady siesta wherever it might be found. On the few occasions that I broke this rule I ended up with what felt like a hangover, but was probably closer to sun stroke.

The first day of cycling found me panting on the outskirts of Kota Bahru. This small

city's claim to fame is that it served as the entry point for the Japanese invasion of Peninsular Malaya in 1940. Moving down the city's palm lined streets I felt myself transported to another era as I marveled at the many beautiful old Victorian and art deco buildings that the city has to offer. The vagaries of Mother Nature have taken their toll, however, and many of these irreplaceable structures seem destined for the wrecker's ball.

Leaving Kota Bahru I made my way to the first of countless villages to come. The tiny coastal town of Kuala Besut is unremarkable in all respects except for the occasional crocodile or tiger that's sighted in its vicinity. Having little to offer beside a meandering river most foreigners are drawn here by the string of islands that lie off the coast. As with most small islands in Southeast Asia, transportation to and fro is afforded by old



fishing boats outfitted to carry tourists as their cargo. With my anticipation of good snorkeling whetted by glowing guide book accounts, I set off early one morning to the island of Pulau Perhentian. Unfortunately the underwater scene to greet my eyes was one of panoramic desolation rather than beauty. Snorkeling for hundreds of meters along the island's beaches the scene was the same: a ghostly spectra of coral skeletons draped in algae and covered with urchins. Here and there darted the odd Angelfish but missing were all of the multicolored Trigger and Parrot fish so indicative of a healthy reef environment. At first I guessed that this underwater devastation might be due to the nefarious exploits of the Crown of Thorns Starfish. Throughout the day, however, a steady stream of tourist boats arrived from the mainland so perhaps the reef is simply showing the wear of too many human visitors. I remember a local Malay ruefully telling



The east coast of Malaysia is a breathtaking sight (above). Young children smile and proudly hold their traditional kites in Kota Bahru (right).

me that too often the tourist boats weigh anchor directly atop the coral reef. This was a scene I was to witness many times on my journey and I can only hope that the Malay people realize how delicate their precious marine resource is before its too late. In all fairness to the Malay government, I noticed that steps have been taken to halt this senseless damage at Pulau Perhentian through the installation of fixed moorings for boats to tie up to. Perhaps this measure in conjunction with the reef's natural resiliency will allow the coral to eventually make a comeback.

Trying to leave depressing thoughts of environmental degradation behind me, I left Kuala Besut to continue cycling down the coast. From then on an average day found





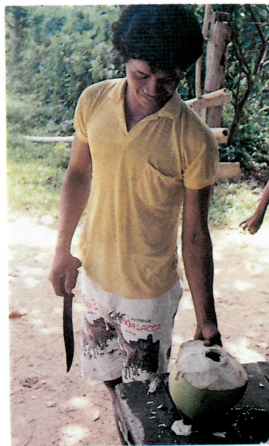
me waking up to the first colors and sounds of a tropical dawn. This was quickly followed by a futile race against the sun that would always end after a couple of hours by some small roadside restaurant. It was at these tiny eateries that I had some really memorable breakfast encounters. If I was in or near a small town I invariably became a center of attention. Practicing my Malay to humorous effect, I quickly learned to bridge the cultural gap through any means at my disposal. Balloons and candy were always a hit with the kids while the Malay men enjoyed poking or prodding my bike. The women always seemed too busy working to take much notice of my foreign presence. Occasionally I took photographs of entire families noting addresses and promising through gesticulation, to send copies of the prints in the future. I have long since fulfilled this promise but can't help wondering whether letters addressed with often no more than a name and a town ever find their mark.

One of my more memorable encounters occurred one day along a winding dirt road about two thirds of the way down the coast. I had been riding for hours that afternoon, being too obstinate to stop for rest as often as I should have. Rounding a bend I suddenly found myself in the midst of a vast coconut grove. Sitting by the side of the road was an old Malay man who hailed me to stop with a wave of his hand and a toothless grin. As I got off my bike to sit down beside him he called out to a machete wielding youth who was working in a nearby field. The next thing I knew I was offered a number of freshly opened coconuts to drink from. No sooner would I finish drinking from one than another would be opened and passed to me. Rifling through my bicycle panniers in search of something to offer in return, I came across some Thai peanuts and an old butane lighter. I gave these to the old man and he seemed quite happy to have received a gift when he really hadn't expected to. After a long period of contemplative nodding, I motioned that I would be on my way. By the time that I actually got going again my bike was at least ten kg. heavier as the old man had insisted that I take as many coconuts as he could find a way for me to carry.

About the time that I finished the last of the old man's coconuts I found myself on the shores of Tioman Island. Of all the places that I came across during my short stay in Malaysia, none can really compare with the



natural beauty that I found here. As the vendors hawking tourist paraphanelia love to boast, Tioman Island served as the site for the mythical "Bali Hai" in the movie South Pacific. One look at the island's mist shrouded mountains, turquoise waters and emerald forests makes it easy to see why the island was cast for this role. Lying about fifteen miles off the coast from the mainland, Tioman Island is an easily accessible paradise. Indeed, some people might even find it to be "too" accessible — during my stay there I encountered a number of tour groups from Japan and Singapore milling about the most popular beaches. Thankfully, it's possible to get away from the crowds if one doesn't mind the physical strain of a strenuous climb and the annoyance of a few mosquito bites. A jungle highway of sorts criss-crosses through the island and allows one to access less frequented beaches and snorkeling sites. Following the main path through the heart



Greetings from the countryside (above). A Malay youth hacked open coconut after coconut, until I could drink no longer (below).

of the island brings one to a cool waterfall halfway up a mountainside. After a quick swim one can either continue on the main trail to the other side of the island or follow any one of the many trails that branch out into the jungle. Following these lesser trails is the best way to come into contact with the indigenous inhabitants of the island. During these encounters the locals seem to regard the foreign traveler as being something of a novelty. Needless to say, most Westerners would regard the unhurried and relaxed lifestyle enjoyed by the islanders as being the same.

After a week of frolicking about Tioman Island I returned to the coastal town of Mersing. From here I was less than a day's cycling away from the urban hygiene that embodies Singapore. This last day proved to be my most trying, however, as both the traffic and geography combined in such a way as to provide cycling conditions which



were anything but conducive to my survival. I faced the many hills en route with a sense of resolve since I had already faced quite a few before. Similarly, I had long since learned to cope with the rigors of cycling in a tropical clime. What proved the most vexing for me was the traffic which grew heavier as I approached the Malay city of Johor Bahru. Time after time I was forced onto the gravel shoulders of the highway by massive logging trucks which blew by me at breakneck speeds. Having seen at least a hundred squashed iguanas and cattle during my journey, however, I was well aware that the inconvenience of cycling on gravel was a small price to pay to stay alive.

After cycling for over twelve hours (during which time I drank over thirteen litres of water), I finally crossed the Malaysian border into Singapore. Pulling alongside a stalled truck on the highway I shared my achievement with an old Malay man who had come

Old fishing boats contrast with the backdrop of urban architecture.

to Singapore to sell fruit. As I was in the midst of eating a pineapple a Singapore motorcycle patrolman rolled up beside me to provide me with the useful information that cycling on highways is prohibited in Singapore. With a shrug of my shoulders I asked him what I should do only to be told that I might consider returning to wherever I had just come from. When I told him that this meant a ten day journey north it was the policeman's turn to shrug his shoulders. After I promised not to repeat the offence, however, the policeman sped away and I was left to cover the last few kilometers to Singapore city in peace...

On arrival at a local guest house I met an Englishman who had just bought a bike and was intent on riding it through parts of Indonesia. Giving him my water bottles and salt tablets brought my journey to its close, for from that point on I was to be a pedestrian again. ♪