

Cycling in the heart of the Golden Triangle

Once known for its poppy crops, this remote region of Thailand is transforming.



ough most of the cycle route is on paved roads, it veers off-road from time to time, as it does through this banana field in Chiang Mai, Thailand. (Smiling Albino)

By **BERT ARCHER** Travel
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THAILAND—The mountain we are cycling up, Doi Chang Mub — “the crouching elephant” — doesn’t get steep till near the top, so when Dan and I ride into the Doi Tung paper-making shop, I still have my wits about me.

Or enough of them to realize how remarkable it is that these five men are sitting around this vat, mixing purple stuff with sticks and chatting. Many of their friends faced different fates, being imprisoned or getting killed.

Until the 1990s, they were farmers growing *papaver somniferum*, the sort of poppies from which heroin is made. The remote part of the country at the heart of the Golden Triangle had long been left to its own devices, partly because the problem was too old and too big to handle, and partly because the population was largely ethnic minorities, Akha, Lahu, Chin Haw and others who didn’t factor into mainstream Thai politics.

But beginning in 1972, the king’s mother, known as the Princess Mother, took on the region as a pet project, kind of like Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No,” but not reprehensibly ridiculous. It took a while, but after 40 years, her Mae Fa Lung Foundation and its Doi Tung craft subsidiary actually transformed this northernmost part of Thailand.

“People from Doi Tung would come into our villages and say, ‘How many kids have graduated from school? How many relatives do you have in prison? How many of you have serious health problems?’ ” says Prachan Thipotha, who at 41 is the youngest of the ex-poppy growers sitting around a vat turning locally grown fibre into paper.

“OK, in 10 years, I guarantee everyone will graduate from school, you won’t have these health problems, and no one else will go to prison.’ They went from village to village, almost like missionaries, converting.”

He says working for someone else was a challenge at first. His older vat-mates nod as they stir and pummel the locally grown plant fibre into something you can make paper out of. But he soon saw advantages that balanced what he’d given up.

“You can learn skills here you would never learn on your own,” he says. “You have one bad rice crop and you’re through. Here, you can learn ceramics and textiles, learn management, so it’s no contest.”

If the problem is poverty and crime, the solution is traditional skills and labour. And the market is us, tourists, taking bike trips, hanging out at souvenir shops on the beaches in the south, or just picking up some last-minute stuff at the airport.

Dan and I hop back on our mountain bikes and begin the final assault. I have no idea if I'll be able to do it, and though Dan says not to worry, I know I'll be judged. Daniel Fraser is a remarkable guy.

Born and raised in Calgary, he's been here about 20 years, worked for the royal family, modelled, founded a successful tour company called [Smiling Albino](#), and, in the process, learned Thai well enough to become a celebrity as the only white guy who speaks like a native (and used to be a model). On top of all this he now has his own Thai-language TV show.

As you might expect, this 40-something guy is pretty type-A. The mountain gets steeper; I tell him to go on ahead, which he does. I slow to a moseying pace, taking in the lush vistas as I corkscrew up the increasingly winding road. As the grade goes from 5 per cent to 10 to 15, I go more slowly. This elephant isn't crouching quite enough for me.

There's a follow van that took our two other cyclists on a different tour a couple of hours ago, and it's stalking me like a jackal, and like many a deer before me, I finally give up and consign myself to the belly of the beast. At which point two galling things happen.

No more than 45 seconds after the van starts driving my defeated carcass upwards, Dan doubles back to check on me. Just call me type-B. Then we drive on and reach the summit in three minutes. I'd quit less than a kilometre from the top. Stupid van. Dan arrives five minutes later, raising his bike above his head and shaking it in *Planet of the Apes*-style triumph. We acknowledge his dominance, and sit down for a picnic.

Bert Archer's trip was sponsored by Smiling Albino, which didn't review or approve this story.

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