

Wheels of good fortune

I WAS THE BEST of times – meeting the Dalai Lama – it was the worst of times – spending five miserable days in an Iranian jail. Mum had suggested I fly direct to London but her request fell on deaf ears – I wanted to experience the magic and mystery of life first-hand. And so began my three-year, 15,000-kilometre bicycle ride from Australia to England via Asia and the Middle East.

The first stop in my AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC-sponsored journey was the Indonesian island of Bali, where I climbed to the summit of Mount Batur, the volcano at the island's centre. Dawn greeted me with a spectacular colourwash as I stood cooking eggs and bananas over steam issuing from the fiery mountain.

I taught English in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, for six months; however, I absorbed more than I could ever disseminate – the details of this country's tragic history and the resilience of its people horrified and inspired me beyond measure.

Following this experience I joined 300 monks on the annual *Dhammayeitra*, a 330 km peace walk through mine-riddled provinces formerly occupied by the Khmer Rouge. As we walked, careful not to move off our set path, the monks blessed people; some women cried at the sight of us – under Khmer rule, religion was banned.

Monsoonal rains followed me through Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Bangladesh, before I threw off their wet cape in India. Moved by the majestic Himalaya, I parked my bike and ventured into Nepal to trek along

It was the people adventurer Krista Bernard (right) met during her three-year, 15,000 km cycle trip who truly touched her heart, from the kindly Syrian families who opened their homes – domed houses shaped to combat sweltering desert heat – to the colourfully clad Rajasthani women (below) of northern India.



the challenging Annapurna Circuit for a month.

Back on my trusty steed and heading towards Pakistan, I was cycling 100 km a day, not bad considering my heavily laden panniers stuffed with bike tools and spare parts. Snapped spokes were all too common, I lost count of the punctures, and worn gears and brakes told me I was hammering my bike as hard as I was myself.

I was filled with trepidation on entering Pakistan – travel in Islamic countries can be very difficult for single women. My first night in

Lahore, in the north-east, was my initiation. Lost, I asked a passer-by for help. He looked puzzled, then a wide smile spread across his face. "Sleeping?" he asked. I thought he meant "Are you looking for a hotel?" so I nodded. He took out a wad of cash and offered it to me. Suddenly it dawned on me: he thought I was a prostitute! I never dared ask for directions after that.

In Pakistan's rural areas, however, I was overwhelmed by the generous hospitality I received. The Koran, the sacred scripture of Islam,

teaches that guests and travellers must be treated with the utmost respect. When I tried to pay for something my hosts would shake their heads furiously and say, "No, you are our most honoured guest." Every night, I was invited to stay with villagers who kindly looked after me like a dear, long-lost relative.

In Iran, women are not allowed to ride bicycles, and although this law didn't apply to me, I was obliged to cycle in *purdah* (covered), wearing a *manteau* (long coat) and *hijab* (head scarf).



It didn't take long for me to become frustrated – cycling in this get-up was hot and uncomfortable. And I still managed to fall foul of the law – for walking unchaperoned in the street with two men – hence my five days in jail. Thankfully, I was acquitted, because a guilty verdict would have resulted in 60 lashes with a leather whip.

One month and 800 km later I sped across the border into Turkey and gleefully threw off my robes. Here, I revelled in a relaxed lifestyle: I spent six months working on the south-west coast of the country, on charter yachts sailing the sparkling Mediterranean Sea.

I'd been away from home for more than two years as I

During her journey, Krista visited 15 countries and was befriended by Buddhist monks (below) in Cambodia, pictured shaving off their hair and eyebrows in preparation for a historic peace march through mine-riddled provinces.



pedalled into Syria, a country of spectacular contrasts – colourful caravanserais (inns for the accommodation of caravans), palaces and citadels, crumbling Roman ruins and verdant desert oases. But it was the affable nature of the Syrian people I remember most. Friends often wrote asking if I was lonely and my honest reply was no – how could I possibly be lonely while surrounded by such heartfelt hospitality?

My next stop was Egypt, where I visited the pyramids, the tombs, the temples – all steeped in history and spectacular. After five months in Cairo, I rode 700 km south to Aswan and went to work on a felucca (traditional sailboat) that took tourists cruising on the Nile.

On returning to Cairo, and en route to Libya, I was "relieved" of all my money, most of my possessions and a great slab of my sanity by the

Egyptian family with whom I was staying. I decided to hotfoot it out of there but a dispute at the Libyan border – they thought I was a spy – sent me back to Cairo. I then settled on hitching a ride to Europe on a yacht, but the day before I was due to sail my bike was stolen. Perhaps it was a sign telling me to stop, to rest. I flew to London the next day.

On my second day there I ran into the man who'd inspired my trek. I'd worked with Phil Mulligan in Australia – he was taking a break from cycling around the world – but we'd lost touch after I set off. Things had come full circle. Finally, I felt that my journey was complete; I had accomplished my crazy dream.

*Text and photography by
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