



# THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN SPONSORED BY RIDE EXPEDITIONS

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## TRF Head for the Jungle in Cambodia



18 months ago Rupert Jordan caught the trail riding bug after a Simon Pavey off road course in Wales. Since then he has become an active member of the TRF, exploring the green roads around Hertfordshire and the home counties.

This summer he thought he would try riding a little further afield, a lot further afield actually, Cambodia. Here he describes how he found British owned, Cambodia based Ride Expeditions, a trail riding adventure company that is guaranteed to take you off the beaten track, and what it's really like riding in 36 degree heat.

### My experience

I've been riding on an almost daily basis for about 20 years, but I'm still a novice off road. I've done a couple of courses at **Simon Pavey's Off Road Skills** in Wales (very good) and I've been green laning for just over a year - initially on a BMW R1200GS, but more recently on an AJP PR5.

### The company

**Ride Expeditions** is owned and run by a pair of Brits - Toby Jacobs and Anna Giddings. They're charming and likeable, and their standards are high. They're based in Siem Reap, but they also do tours out of Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville.

### Cost

I tacked this trip onto a visit to Singapore for a wedding, so I went for one of their bespoke tours as my timings were fixed. They've changed their pricing structure since I booked, but I went for their Silver package (now called Budget) at \$180 (USD) a day. This meant I would pay for things like accommodation, fuel, food and drink for myself as we went along, but in the end Toby paid for everything and I paid him back when we finished. I had a nice

surprise when I arrived as Toby had managed to find two more customers and this brought the cost down to \$150 a day.

### Quality

Toby and Anna know what they're doing. They've got a clear and informative website, they promptly replied to the barrage of emails I fired at them, and they've found themselves a great guide (and mechanic) in Chea. Toby joined the tour and rode at the back with a Garmin bolted to his bars, but it was Chea leading us along the tracks and trails and I didn't once see him consult a GPS (although he did stop to ask locals for directions a couple of times, but that's understandable when rampant deforestation changes the landscape so dramatically - Cambodia has the third highest rate in the world).

**Their bikes are mostly Honda XR250s and 400s, but they're adding some Yamaha WRFs for the 2015/2016 season. I had a 2005 XR250, which I loved. Their bikes might not be that new, but they're well maintained and they're perfect for this sort of thing. They're gruntly, not fussy about the quality of petrol they get, and thanks to the bits Toby's had Chea remove (clocks, indicators, etc), they're fairly light and very reliable.**

Toby's qualified to provide advanced first aid and they also travel with a satellite phone, two-way radios (although Toby's died on the trip - the dust kills several each season), and plenty of spares (even clutch plates). Everything seems well thought through - they use the second man system for junctions, the rider at the back is the only one with his headlight on (so the leader can see he has a full group), and they do a clear briefing before setting off.

### Flexibility

I didn't need to test them with my booking, but they seem like a reasonable bunch of people and the speed of change in Cambodia means they have to stay quite flexible. We did arrive in one area expecting trails, only to find a new



There are countless remote & deserted temples. Somehow a man will always turn up to sell you a ticket.



Rain is very welcome on a hot day



Doughnut lessons



They have tigers, bears & snakes in Cambodia I saw dogs, cats & chickens

The gang



Toby, Josh, Lewis, Me, Chea. Ready to go



The first night's accommodation - a home stay



The facilities



We headed back to base on a road next to Siem Reap's runway. Berlin's Take My Breath Away may or may not have been playing in my head.



3 days of mud, dust, sweat & fear

road being built. They ask for a \$500 booking deposit, which also serves as a security deposit for the bikes. It's non-refundable if you cancel your booking.

### Dependability

The maximum number of riders they'll take on a tour is 10. At the time of writing they have 11 bikes and a support vehicle to carry the spare (and the spares). The support vehicle is included on the scheduled tours, but it's an optional extra on the bespoke tours. At \$185 a day you need a big-ish group to make it affordable. If there are just 2 or 3 of you, you can expect a single guide. For up to 5 of you, 2 guides. And for up to 10 it's 3 guides. They

have plenty of backup guides in case of illness, and the support vehicle driver is also a qualified medic (in addition to Toby). My only minor complaint (and it really is minor), was the hotel booking for the first and last night. I checked out the hotel they'd suggested (on TripAdvisor) and found a number of complaints about ongoing building works. Anna found me an alternative.

### Conclusion

The main thing I struggled with - which has nothing to do with Ride Expeditions - was the heat. April's usually the hottest month, so June should have been fairly safe (if not a bit wet). The forecast was for 36 degrees for the days I

was there and I found it debilitating. To give you some idea what it felt like, in the 6 hours of riding on the first day I drank 8 litres of water and still managed to become very dehydrated. Towards the end of the day we made quite a few stops so I could cool down and slow my maxed-out heart rate. The others weren't suffering quite so badly, but everyone was worn out by the end of the day.

Day 2 and day 3 were slightly less challenging for me as I picked up new skills, which makes me think experience goes a long way in situations like these.

And that leads me to my only significant grumble. Toby and Chea are both experienced and talented riders, the two other customers -

though inexperienced - were young and utterly fearless and they seemed very happy with the pace. I had to work hard to keep up, and the more tired I got, the more mistakes I made. I guess this will always be a problem when you have a group of mixed abilities, and I'm not sure what the answer is. Do you go at the pace of the slowest (and choose a less challenging route), and frustrate the faster riders? Or do the opposite and wait for the plodders to catch up? I certainly felt I was slowing them down, which made me push myself more than I should have. I think if I went again I'd choose the coolest month (November), I'd go with a bit more experience under my belt (I've already booked an enduro practice day), and I'd definitely choose Ride Expeditions again.



Rupert booked his Cambodia trip with **Ride Expeditions**. Founded by **Toby Jacobs and Anna Gildings**, these intrepid Brits have set up a thriving trail riding business that has become part of the Cambodian community.

We caught up with them to find out a little more...

**TRF:** So Toby & Anna, how did Ride Expeditions come about? Are you seasoned trail riders and why Cambodia?

**Toby:** I first visited southeast Asia at the back end of an around the world trip in 2007 and instantly fell in love with the place. I did a lot of riding out here, but it was the off-road riding in Cambodia that really got me hooked. I grew up in East Anglia and used to do a lot of green laning with my friends, but riding the trails in Cambodia was just a completely new experience. The terrain was like nothing I had ever ridden before... one single day of trail riding can see you riding single track through thick jungle, sandy trails, rocky climbs through the hills and some crazy river crossings.

Anna was not a trail rider when we first met (or even remotely interested in bikes!). We met at university when I was already in the planning stages of bringing Ride Expeditions to life (or 'Ride Cambodia' as it was back then). Cutting a long story short, things got serious and she jumped straight on board with the idea and here we are! She has now taken to riding one of our TTR 230's.

**TRF:** For someone who has mostly been trail riding in the UK, what can they expect out in Cambodia? Are there any aspects of the riding that are similar or should they prepare for a whole new experience?

**Toby:** Whilst some of the trails might look similar to the terrain that you ride back home, they will all feel completely different out here. The culture, tropical heat and sense of remoteness all add to that feeling of adventure. Expect variety in the riding... as I've already mentioned, the trails can change so much through the course of a day or a week.

Also (as I'm sure Rupert will tell you!), it's hot. For Brits that are not used to the heat and humidity, it is probably best to avoid April & May... those are the hottest months

of the year and nothing can really prepare you for riding in those conditions.

**TRF:** What makes Cambodia such a unique place for trail riding? Why not Spain or somewhere closer to home?

**Toby:** I have heard good things about the riding in Spain, but to be honest, that is a little too close to home for me. What I love most about Cambodia is the people and the culture - the way it is such a contrast to western society. We say to our customers at the start of every tour: "It is not just about the riding - there is so much more to it than that". The things you see and the experiences you'll have whilst riding around the country are entirely unique... The people out here are incredibly friendly and welcoming, and you come across tiny little communities in the middle of nowhere. We can roll into any small village and we'll be greeted with smiles and the kids will run out waving. If we pull up outside a wedding party we'll always be ushered inside and offered drinks... that's never happened to me in England when I've been out on my dirt bike!

The ancient and recent history of the country also makes it a fascinating place to travel. From witnessing the present-day affects of Pol Pot's brutal regime to exploring ancient temples lost deep in the jungle, you will be left both saddened and awe-inspired by the Cambodian people.

**TRF:** Can you just ride anywhere you like?

**Toby:** No. We have to obtain tickets for some of the National Parks or historic sights... but they're not the issue. Land mines left by the

Khmer Rouge still exist in the country. Whilst huge clearance efforts have significantly reduced the number of land mines in existence, they have not cleared them all and it will take many years more until this is achieved. It isn't at all dangerous though as long as we don't wander off into unknown territory... we know where the uncleared high risk areas are and only ever ride on trails that are frequently used by the locals... we do not go carving our own routes through the bush. If we are riding in areas where there is any risk of landmines we will tell you very clearly "never leave the paths. If you need to pee, pee ON the track"!

**TRF:** Do you have any advice or tips for anyone who is planning on booking their next holiday with Ride Expeditions?

**Toby:** Be honest about your riding experience and fitness level when looking at our off-road adventures. We offer tours of varying difficulty levels and we can help recommend the route that is most suited to you. It is very hard for us to gauge via email/the phone someone's experience pre-tour - a certain amount of this responsibility lies with yourself... you know your skills as a rider and you are the best person to assess whether or not you can ride in sand / mud/rocky hills etc. Fitness is definitely an important factor, especially when you are not used to the heat... if people are struggling on the trails, 9 times out of 10 it is their fitness that will let them down before their ability. Saying that, do not be put off if you think your fitness / skills are not up to scratch - get in touch with us and we'll happily advise on the most suitable tour for you.

