

the great

A plane ride. A racetrack. Bikes. Beer. Bars... What more is there to life?

Words by Jeff Ware Photography by Jirawat Srikong

“HI JEFF, Graham Knight here mate – Highside Tours in Thailand. Wondering if you’d be keen to head over here and give one of our schools a try.

What do you say?”

“Err. Um. Yeah, sure. Sounds great, what’s involved?”

“It’s quite simple really. Fly to Bangkok on Saturday, I’ll pick you up from the airport, we’ll have a few beers and a game of stick at my pad then we’ll head out to Nakhorn Chaisi the next day. There’s a race meeting on so we’ll take some bikes to play on. After that we’ll head to Pattaya and check-in to the hotel. A big seafood dinner will follow, washed down with a few beers, then you’ll have a good sleep before a full day at Bira International Circuit. We’ll do that for three days – after which you’ll fly home on Thursday. Sound good?”

“Um. Err...”

At this point I pinch myself. Here I am on a killer deadline, stressed to the maximum, no hope in hell of a holiday any time soon and then a friendly Pom living in Thailand calls and saves my skin.

“Mate, I’m in. Send me the paperwork.”

Once I’d convinced Pappy that this trip was completely necessary, a great thing for the mag, part of my duty and role as an editor and blah blah blah – all was finalised. I’d go to Thailand – Pappy would stay and finish the deadline. Everything was under control.

Good deal or what?

I don’t know Thailand well; say for a few stopovers en route to or from Europe and the UK. And for the first time in many years of travelling I feel a little nervous boarding the plane. But once I settle down with a beer and my Highside Tours info pack I soon realised how great the trip is going to be. I’m assured that life is going on strong in Thailand and that all is well – and as it turns out everything is fine...

I haven’t had time to read through the info until now (always prepared as per my usual form – on the plane with no idea at all), but it all looks awesome. The pack has goodies like stickers, a T shirt, maps of the racetracks, a track pass and pass holder, a map of Pattaya, a bike data sheet with all the bikes listed for me to drool over and even directions for Bangkok airport customs and baggage claim.

Eight or so hours later and I’m making my way through Bangkok airport. No sleep on the plane means I’m knackered but the humidity hits me like a punch in the face as I exit the air-conditioned terminal and I soon wake up. Graham greets me – complete with Highside Tours sign, and we jump straight into his mini bus for a short trip into town.

A few games of pool and a beer or two later I’m fully briefed on the coming events and ready to grind some kneesliders!

Sunday dawns and we head out to Nakhorn Chaisi – a small track not too far from Bangkok’s CBD.

Once at the track we unload the bikes and gear up, and after we sign the associated paperwork we hit the track for a few orientation laps behind Graham – who’s done a million laps around here. The circuit is bumpy in places and has a fast back section with a tight infield. It reminds me of Amaroo Park Raceway – very challenging, technical, short but great fun.

I’m on a GSX-R750 for my first stint. This bike is wearing slicks, while the other GSX-R has Rennsport’s and the 916 Ducati wears Michelin’s. The idea is to give you a feel of a variety of rubber and give you experience on slicks and treaded tyres. Great system.

The Gixer is a blast around the tight circuit but my fat arse is working the suspension pretty damn hard and the humidity is much, much wetter than I anticipated it would be.

I pit and take a breather, whinge about the soft suspension, whinge about the race-shift pattern and have a drink of water



escape



FIVE RIDERS, 10 BIKES, AN ENDLESS SUPPLY OF TYRES AND A RACETRACK

(and it's supposed to be the Pom's that whinge!)...

10-minutes later Graham points me in the direction of the other Gixer 750 and I head out on it – street shift, suspension sorted, all good. At least I got my hissy fit out of the way. Come on! Editors are supposed to be whinging bastards/bitches (or both) aren't they?

Anyway the rest of the day is a blast – and I even get to meet and chat with a few of the local Thai riders. The unfortunate reality is that there are only a handful of people wealthy enough to be considered as serious sportsbikers but the classic racers are absolutely legendary. Talk about improvisation. These guys race anything with an engine and rubber tyres – just awesome...

And as I walk around Nakhorn Chaisi pits, camera in hand, looking for photo opportunities, it soon becomes clear to me that Thai riders are pretty much the proudest bunch of motorcycle owners I've ever come across. Remember when you were a kid and you got your first BMX? Same deal. These guys and girls are as proud as punch. Reminds me of me and my trusty RZ actually (which happens to be the only running bike I own)...

Our day of fun on two wheels ends mid-afternoon when we decide to make heads for Pattaya – our home for the next three days and, according to my map of Thailand, 'A holiday destination by the beach.'

Pattaya turns out to be Kings Cross by the sea so I guess it isn't the kind of holiday destination that I was thinking about – at least I gave the guys a laugh when I asked if it is OK to swim at the beach. Apparently it isn't. Let's leave it at that...

The hotel is smack-bang in the centre of Go Go Bar central but is comfortable and well isolated from the party atmosphere outside.

We check-in and agree to meet downstairs 30-minutes later. Once we hook up we head out for an absolutely awesome seafood meal on the deck of a waterfront restaurant – we also share a few bottles of Aussie's finest from the Barossa and then we hit the bars. I honestly can't remember how many bars we actually hit but it was a great night – cheap too.

After breakfast we head out to Bira International Circuit for the first of three days on track. I'm pumped just talking about it and as we drive through the pineapple farms and get closer to the track my adrenaline levels start to rise. I love riding new tracks, particularly in different countries, and I also love Fireblades – my ride for the day...

We arrive at the track and unload the bus. Each of us have a locker and a place to store our leathers, which means we don't need to cart our gear bags around for the next three days. Graham has organised security at the track so the gear will be safe and sound. Once we sort our bits and pieces out Graham sits us all down for a briefing. Our group consists of Steve, Jochen, John, Graham and myself. So five riders, 10 bikes, an endless supply of tyres and a racetrack. Could be disastrous. Could be a blast. Could be both...

Graham takes us for a spin around the track in the bus while all the marshals and medics get in place. There is a manned flag point on every corner, including pit exit, and an ambo is on site should I decide to make a dickhead of myself. Well I didn't, but apparently Thai hospitals are rated as some of the best in the world so there's no need to be afraid of crashing here...

As we cruise around in the Hiace van, Graham points out all the best turn-in points, bumps, braking markers and any variations in camber/track surface/grip levels.

It's time to throw the leathers on and hit the track. My first few laps are tentative ones but I soon get a flow happening. I sit behind Graham for a dozen or so laps then put my head down. The circuit is quite challenging and I soon discover that there are more than a few tricks to finding the best traction and drive. I'm having a ball finding that grip, though, and I love the layout of the track. The track has a fairly fast straight with a crest halfway along it. It then drops-off into turn one, an absolutely awesome decreasing-radius left-hander that starts downhill/positive camber and exits negative camber/uphill! Then comes the unavoidable wheelstand as you crest another hill before hard braking for turn two, a 180-degree dead-flat right-hander with buggie-all grip. There's a short downhill straight next, with a really fast turn-in for the turn-three right-hander and then you're on the side of the tyre and feeding the power on in third through turns four and five, which you need to make into one corner before grabbing fourth up hill (and laying a huge blackie) then braking hard for the first of two challenging but deceptively fast downhill chicanes. The penultimate corner is a tricky off-camber second-gear hairpin that leads to the final, full-throttle turn leading onto the chute.

It's an exciting lap to say the least – but it really isn't that tiring. There are only three hard braking areas and the rest is very flowing once you get in the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Track inspection; Testing the 'Blades brakes; More kneeliders please; Steve on his 1000th lap; Bikes are checked between rides; Jochen hard at it; "This way to the Go Go bar"; Graham giving John some tips; A lap of the track in the bus!







WHAT'S IT COST?

- Full Package – three days, four nights – approx \$1880.00
- Sampler Day – approx \$500.00
- Prices in AUD 24/6/2005

WHAT YOU GET

- Four nights accommodation at a good hotel
- Three full unlimited days on either Bira International Circuit or Nakhorn Chaisi Circuit
- Use of a choice of GSX-R750, R6, Fireblade or 916 – plus the use of the Kwaka stuntbike just for fun
- Airport transfers and all transportation to and from venues
- Tyres, fuel, brakes and all running expenses covered
- Lunch provided each day at the track
- T Shirt
- Map of circuit
- Bike data sheet
- Personalised pit pass
- Option for photography

WHAT YOU NEED

- Riding gear (or organize a hire set with Graham)
- Credit cards
- Mobile phone and charger
- Plug adaptor (check with Graham first as he has a range of adaptors at the track)
- Spare glasses or contacts if required
- Thongs/sandals
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent
- Passport and copies
- Travel insurance recommended
- Plane ticket
- Clothes for four days

THE BIKES

Highside Tours own a range of track prepared bikes including GSX-R750s, R6, Fireblades and a 916. They also have a Kawasaki stunt bike. All bikes have braided lines, race cans pads, race rubber and raceglass. They also have 520 chain conversions.

WHO TO CALL

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groove. So it's easy to reel off 12-15 laps at a time, come in for a break, and then head out again.

It's only lunchtime but as we sit and munch on some very tasty local Thai cuisine our mechanic is busy fitting new hoops to my 'Blade. I've cooked and blistered an already half-worn RennSport, and Steve has done the same.

We chow down our food and compare exaggerated slides and wheelstands. John is busy getting some hot tips off Graham in a pursuit to get his knee on the deck and Jochen is looking pretty satisfied already.

Keeping the fluids up is vital in these humid conditions and Highside Tours provides plenty of cold water, sports drinks and salt/magnesium tablets to avoid cramps and muscle fatigue. We've got three days of action so pacing ourselves is also important...

The afternoon sessions start with a bike changeover. We all get to have a good ride on the R6, a variety of GSX-R750s, the two Fireblades and the Kwaka stunt bike if so desired. It's good to sample tyres, suspension, brakes, gearing and engine characteristics back-to-back and it makes for an interesting arvo and plenty of chit chat...Kinda gives the guys an insight into testing bikes as a journo and does me no harm either...

We head back to Pattaya, wash up and meet in the hotel foyer. Tonight we're off to a German restaurant that, of all things, apparently does a great pizza! To top it off the Head Chef is a famous Italian opera singer who's retired to Thailand and the place also brews its own beer which, brew master and fellow tour member Jochen tells me, is a bloody fine drop. Incidentally – Jochen is the brew master at a huge German Restaurant in Bangkok called Tawandang German Brewery (he brews 2000-litres per day!) and loves beer as much as bikes. Needless to say he's a good bloke to be around and would drink anyone under the table – in fact as part of his contract he gets to drink 100-litres of beer per month!

We make our way to the restaurant through the packed neon-lit streets of Pattaya and find a big table. Jochen orders me a huge beer and

we get the pizzas happening. Peter, an ex-pat Kiwi who owns a bike shop in Thailand called Siam Superbike, along with his wife and young'n, joins us. I should explain at this point that Steve is an ex-pat Aussie and so is John! So at least I'm not getting too homesick!

We leave the German joint a few hours later and head to party central for a few more beers and a bit of fun. Pattaya wouldn't be Pattaya without Go Go bars so we check out some local entertainment and have a top night on the town. I have no idea what time we finally make it back to the hotel but it's pretty late – or early!

Day two on the track is relaxed and we all ride our own sessions and do our own thing. There are only five of us so the track is never going to get crowded. A short rain shower stops the action for an hour or two but apart from that it is another great day. I manage to con Steve into letting me cut some laps on his immaculate street GSX-R1000 and I help him set-up the suspension. We also get the Tuk Tuk going and cut a lap in it. What a hoot! Let me tell you – there's nothing like sitting in the back of a three-wheeler piloted by a psychotic British motorcyclist!

Our final night as a group is spent at another fine seafood restaurant, where we have a great meal and an even bigger night on the town than last night. And the last day at the track is the best of the three. Everyone is sharp and confident after countless laps, and we all push harder as a result. In the end each of us come away better riders and we all achieve the goals that we set ourselves on the first day. And to top it off none of us crash!

As the others head home straight from Bira, Graham and I still have another 24-hours to kill before my flight back to Sydney. We head back to Pattaya for a bit of walk around the place – eventually stumbling across a live band venue and kicking back to Thailand's version of Grinspoon!

In the end I use up three sets of Joe Rocket kneesliders, three sets of tyres – but only spend \$350.00 in four days!

What a week. What a trip. What a bargain... ■