

Village Focus Bike Race 16 Dec 06

Angkor Wat, Cambodia

The chance to race around the famous world heritage temple site of Angkor Wat on bicycles, organized for the very first time, is an opportunity that cannot be missed. I registered a day before only to discover that it was full and kicked myself hard for not doing so earlier. Fortunately, an sms received later in the day by Jess, the attractive organizer, proved the best news ever – I was squeezed in, and my joy was indeed made full.



Arriving at the rather “hard-to-find” starting point in the darkness of the morning at 0600, I discovered I was the only folding bike rider out of about 90 mostly MTBs and several very serious roadies. There was a nice melange of riders from all over the world and the strong support for this charity bike race is a wonderful example of the goodwill that still exists among people. As expected, many looked at my tiny 16” wheeled Brompton and remarked politely how “cute” it was, much to my amusement. That made me more determined than ever to show what we Foldies can do.

At flag off, the “professionals” in their zillion dollar carbon-fiber steeds catapulted ahead of the pack in a tight bunch like fighter jets. The rest of us mere mortals did our best to follow them but it was pointless. I quickly inched my way past the slower riders and found my pace behind an eccentric French rider on an old one-speed bike fully equipped with one basket. He looked like he just awakened and come in his pajamas. No helmet, no shoes but was pedaling furiously like a washing machine at maximum spin cycle. I admired his spirit and rode with Mr Frenchie at about 25-28kmh. The nice paved road soon deteriorated and we were avoiding bumps and pot-holes on mostly sandy and gravelly conditions. This did not seem to deter the cool Monsieur and bigger wheels DO have an advantage here while I was swerving madly hoping to stay on the bike.

A similar one speeder ridden by Mr Frenchman



The road went through a village and soon, traffic started to build up. I was cutting an untidy swathe through cows, chickens, children, cars, motorbikes, ox-carts & trucks that seemed to come out of nowhere. That coupled with the poor road conditions demanded my fullest concentration. My first and only problem started when I was dehydrating. I made a mistake to assume there were water points. These only appeared toward the very end. I brought a bottle of water in my jersey pocket that proved very difficult to drink from and ended up holding the opened and spilling bottle while trying to steer for the rest of race. Sadly, I soon lost sight of my French companion.



20% of race

on these roads !

The road then veered into the serene Angkor grounds and the ride became smooth again. It was magnificent to glide past the ageless temples of Angkor in the cool, crisp and quiet morning air. A quick glance at my watch told me that the end was near and I pushed hard. By this time, all the competitors were pretty spread out and I found myself riding alone until I caught up with a burly American guy on a Trek hybrid.

Drafting him was the cleverest move so far as his big frame shielded the headwind for me. Out of nowhere, a rider zoomed past us and it was none other than the mad Monsieur! His single speed had broken down and lost a pedal, and he was provided with another better bike. Alas, my batteries were pretty spent and I could only watch him disappear into the horizon.

As we entered the main grounds of the Angkor Wat, many tourists who were there earlier to catch the sunrise, cheered us on with claps and shouts of encouragement. But with the tourists came the traffic including coaches, buses, tuk-tuks and elephants - and at one point, we had to come to a full and complete stop. The Tourist Police tried their best to clear the way for us and that was appreciated.

I crossed the finish line earlier than expected, and completed the 35km race in one hour and thirty minutes. It was sweet to know that I finished 9th out of the 30 odd riders for this part of the race and did a respectable average of 23.3 km/h on my trusty Brompton.



I will certainly be in historic Siem Reap again next December for the race and it would be marvelous if more origami riders can fly the flag with me. I cannot think of a better way to spend a weekend of fun, cycling for a charitable cause. Come join me!

Watch out for more details at: <http://www.villagefocus.org/>

Alvin Lee
Singapore

Ps: I learnt later that the good monsieur has a brother who is a professional cyclist. The theory of genes does have some validity indeed!