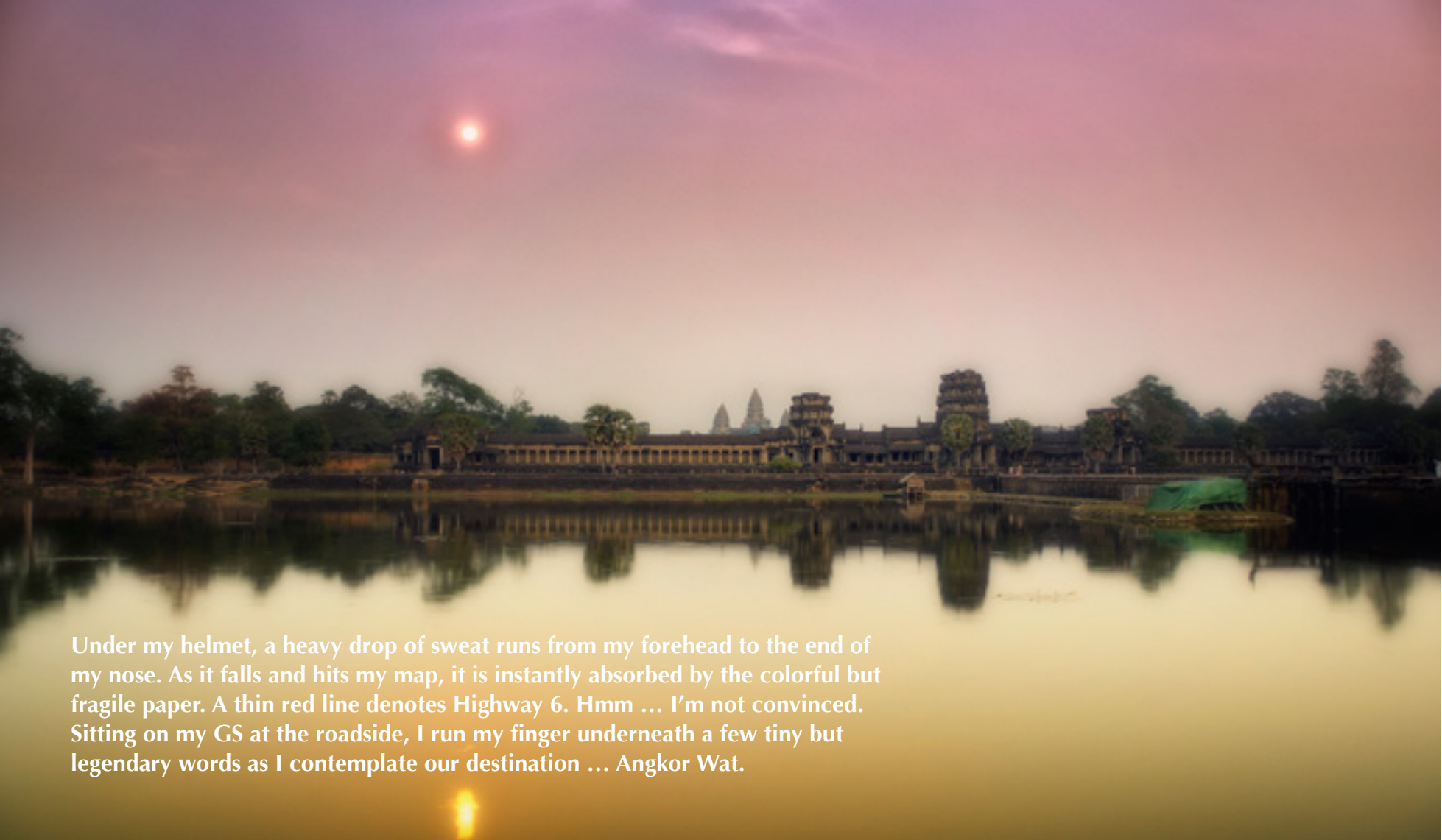




Cambodia and Laos

MEKONG

Meanderings



Under my helmet, a heavy drop of sweat runs from my forehead to the end of my nose. As it falls and hits my map, it is instantly absorbed by the colorful but fragile paper. A thin red line denotes Highway 6. Hmm ... I'm not convinced. Sitting on my GS at the roadside, I run my finger underneath a few tiny but legendary words as I contemplate our destination ... Angkor Wat.

Text and Photography:
Simon and Lisa Thomas

Riding into an Ancient Gateway

The bikes are topped off with good fuel and feel strong as we ride east along new smooth tar. The moving air passing through our Touratech riding suits is a respite from the sweltering temperatures. Entering Cambodia from Thailand had been a breeze; the young, enthusiastic immigration officer had thumped our passports with enough gusto to snap his wooden stamp, and from his low desk he'd looked up at us and beamed a wide, toothless grin.

We stand amid a jumble of modern cars, belching trucks, and mule carts, posing for a photo under a wide ornate archway that spans the road. In its center a bold gilded plaque reads "Kingdom of Cambodia." As we negotiate the narrow streets through Sisophon, the sweet smell of spicy cooked pork hangs heavily in the air, and our bellies rumble at the thought of the clean, simple flavors of Cambodian street food. On the outskirts of Siem Reap, we ride a raised ribbon of tar that splits an immense rice paddy field before delivering us to the center of the Siem Reap Province and the ancient gateway of the Angkor region.

Embroiled in city traffic, we never get above second gear as we crawl along. On a wide boulevard, framed with an enchanting mixture of colonial and Asian architecture, we ease past traffic, ever mindful of the flocks of tuk-tuk drivers who seem oblivious to our presence. It would appear that the old motorcycle adage "They can't see you, and if they can see you, they'll aim for you!" holds truer than ever in these crowded southeast Asian cities where vehicles outnumber humans 3-to-1.

Narrow streets are choked with silk stalls, backpackers, food sellers, and trinket vendors. As I pull up outside The New Bequest Angkor Hotel on Psar Krom Street, Lisa is right on my tail. The deafening tone of her thumping F 650 GS has heads turning until she kills the engine and parks the bike. We check in to our Spartan room before heading back outside to vanquish our hunger.

A View to Remember

As the morning mist still clings to the ground, we cruise just three miles north of the city of Siem Reap. The large water filled moat to our right shim-

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mers with the first light of day as it protectively wraps itself about the largest Hindu complex in the world. Rounding the corner, we are teased as the upper sections of three tall towers appear above the tree line before the main temple is dramatically revealed, and Lisa and I are rewarded with one of the most memorable views in nine years of world travel. We park directly in front of Angkor Wat, situated behind its age-old and resplendent watery barricade. Built in the early 12th century and surviving to become a powerful symbol of Cambodian pride, this structure is nothing short of humbling. UNESCO declared the sprawling 154 square mile site as, "... one of the most important archaeological sites in Southeast Asia." We are both awed and overwhelmed.

We have passed the last hours roaming through a labyrinth of ornately carved hallways and majestic sandstone temples. Sitting in the shade, we are perched half-way up the stairs to the upper gallery. Lisa is reading notes by the French explorer Henri Mouhot; "one of these temples is a rival to that of Solomon and erected by some ancient Michelangelo. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome."

Faces of Serenity

Unusually, we've been granted permission to en-

ter the Angkor Thom (Great City) complex. Rows of stone-carved soldiers line our route as we move toward the famous South Gate before squeezing through the narrow entrance. Above us three giant faces peer out. Sentinels, gods, kings ... who knows?

The Bayon Temple defies belief, and while riding its circumference we count an amazing 54 towers. With the bikes parked in the shade of the trees, we exhaust our bodies and camera batteries as we walk among the 200 plus stone faces. Angkor Wat absorbs the last of the daylight as a blanket of night covers its tallest temples. In Siem Reap, we find a little food vendor who cooks us a feast of sweet pork and noodles. To our right, tourists plunge their feet into water tanks, where hundreds of small fish nibble them clean. The experience is apparently wonderful, although I think we'll pass.

Cradled by the Mighty Mekong

In the early hours, we rush to download the last of the photos before packing away our laptop and squeezing closed our burgeoning panniers. The day's heat builds as we make progress southeast along Highway 6. Four hours of indirect ambling has delivered us to Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. Our bikes rumble in the secure basement of the Golden House International Hotel where we

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park and unload. Thirty minutes later we're weaving through afternoon traffic tuk-tuk style; our driver is pedaling furiously while skimming car mirrors with perfect precision.

Phnom Penh is a metropolis of 2.2 million inhabitants, where old-world French style rubs shoulders with complex golden tiered palaces. Cambodia's political hub is also its wealthiest city. Nestled at the confluence of the Tonlé Sap, Tonle Bassac, and the mighty Mekong rivers, this city earned its one-time reputation as the "Pearl of Asia," which is now sadly overshadowed by Khmer Rouge's more recent history of genocidal activity. It's impossible (and so it should be) today, to mention Cambodia without some reference to one of the darkest periods in modern history and the rule of the ruthless Khmer Rouge. When Pol Pot rose to power in the late seventies, he embarked on one of the bloodiest killing sprees known to man. By initially targeting the intellectuals, his brutal but effective tactic was to get rid of the thinkers and the rest would not be able to oppose.

Faces of Fear, Words of Survival

It's with mixed emotions that we pull in front of one of Phnom Penh's most notorious locations. In 1979 this one time high school was transformed into Security Prison 21 (S-21) by the Pol Pot regime where an estimated 20,000 people were imprisoned. Today, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is visual proof that what took place here is beyond comprehension.

In her softly spoken English, our guide Maly relates that she was 14 when the Khmer Rouge took

Phnom Penh City and her family (mother, father, brothers, and sisters) fled to the southeast. Later Pol Pot's men entered their village and systematically tortured and killed her entire family, and she was forced to watch. Maly returned alone to the capital in 1983 and has worked in the museum ever since.

The main interrogation cells are still wrapped in barbed wire, and the hardware is still in place. Covering the walls in the main hall are thousands of photos. The face of fear is evident in each painfully faked smile. The scene is ghoulish, and as we struggle to absorb it, Lisa removes herself to the outside. She can look no more. As our time with Maly comes to an end, Lisa and I both feel as moved by her story of determination and survival as we are shocked at the evil that was exacted on a nation. It would not be an overstatement to say we feel honored to share a little of her time.

Once again surrounded by traffic and city life, we hail a tuk-tuk and make our way to the Laos Embassy. Fifty dollars lighter in the wallet and having completed the usual forms, we return in two days to collect our visas. The mountains beckon and we're hard pressed to not heed their calling.

This Doesn't Taste like Chicken

Route 5 wanders into Highway 61, which transitions effortlessly into Route 7. Outside of Skuon Town, the sign reads "Tarantula Town Welcome." With a quick check over our shoulders, we cut across the traffic and swing our bikes into the parking area where 30 or so tables and chairs are set out in the open air. Groups of eager and hungry travelers are crowding the food stalls as steam rises

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this oppressive heat we return a nod of recognition and decline. In the dark lit street, steam and smoke choke the air as food sellers fan their flames. The smell is too intoxicating to resist. Sitting by the Mekong, we order two leathery pieces of dried squid grilled to our liking. For good measure, we order two presumably boiled eggs. As she taps open the thin calcium, Lisa muffles a squeal. Un-hatched chicken fetus (called Balut) is a delicacy, but Lisa isn't enjoying hers as much as a local would. A homeless man can barely believe his luck as I hand him the morsels we're unable to swallow.

Luscious Laos

Two days and nights of torrential rain has forced us to head northward to the border of Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. With our passports stamped, the border guards seem all too happy to lend a hand fixing Lisa's punctured rear tire. While one helps lift the wheel, the other pours us two cold glasses of water.

Laos is lush, ripe, and green. Tumbling torrents of water cascade over rough rock in the Mekong. Fifty-five miles northeast of Pakse, we approach the Bolaven Plateau. The previously good asphalt is gone, and in the mountains we're on gravel track. Ahead is a rough parking cut into the hillside clear-

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from the large metal pans and oil boils in others. Giant creepy crawlies are on the menu, and this town is famous for its fried Tarantula feast. With a piping hot spikey spider leg between my fingers, I crunch down on the morsel expecting it to taste of chicken. It doesn't. Lisa laughs as I struggle to swallow. Over by the bikes, a group of young boys in school uniforms are excitedly checking out our huge machines. We spend 30 minutes laughing and talking with them. We're surprised by their good English, and they are equally delighted by our poor fumbleings in Kampuchean.

Roadside Aerobics

Our bikes are locked behind the gates of our hastily chosen hotel on the banks of the Mekong. We

walk along the promenade in Kampong Cham. This town pulsates with energy and life. Now dressed in trousers and T-shirts, we're recognized as "farang" (foreigners) and not the "visiting aliens" that we know many Kampuchean had assumed when we'd turned up in our riding suits and helmets. The street is lined with mopeds, each carrying entire families who've come to watch the spectacle of nightly aerobics. Two young men wearing the tightest of black jeans stand on tall plastic crates and call out the energized moves while speakers attached to car batteries pump out dance music at 140 beats per minute. A hundred men and women of all ages, most with bare feet, swing their arms, step, jump, and squat with military precision. The elderly ladies at the back smile and wave at us to join in, but in



ing. Through the thick jungle foliage we can hear the roar of falling water plummeting to the rocks below. Negotiating the narrow and slippery steps in motocross boots is a test in itself, but the cool saturating water at the base of the Tat Fan Waterfall is ample reward. Set in the emerald wilderness, the scene is pure Asian fantasy. Two days later we are riding through Tat Lo village on seldomly used dirt tracks that lead us to deep pools at the base of an unnamed set of wide waterfalls. Young children swim naked and jump into the basin from the tallest rocks. We don't hesitate to join them, and they show their delight with cheers.



A Rhythm of Life, Long Thought Forgotten

We are completely and utterly under Laos' spell. We've skirted the Mekong River for more than 400 of its 2,700-mile length. We've passed the elegant metropolis that is Vientiane, the nation's capital, and ridden through a seemingly detached landscape that is more post-apocalyptic than tropical. We now bask in the relaxed atmosphere that is Luang Prabang, and high above this low-key city, the gilded Wat Chom Si stupa glistens in the early morning light. Between slurps of the delicious locally grown coffee, we watch hundreds of monks draped in elegant orange robes walk the streets collecting alms. Buddhist temples dot every corner, and high

bowed fishing boats buzz the shores of the Mekong as it carves its way around the city. The morning markets come to life, and in the shade of the high walls of the royal palace we rub shoulders with the locals shopping for vegetables and exotic fruits. The temples and French colonial shop-fronts make it easy to forget the troubled history of both Cambodia and Laos. As nations and neighbors they seem resilient, at peace, and above all else, welcoming. To motorcycle here is to find a long-thought forgotten rhythm of life, to be stirred, to be surprised, and to want nothing more than to return. **RR**

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Facts & Information

Cambodia and Laos

Total Mileage
Approximately 1,943 miles

In General

The Mekong River flows through Kampuchea (Kingdom of Cambodia) and Laos (The Lao People's Democratic Republic). Cambodia has a beautiful coastline; Laos is land-locked.

Most major cities have ATMs. Use cash in rural areas. Laos uses a mix of U.S. dollars, Thai baht (THB), and Lao kips (LAK). The kip is not convertible to any currency outside of the Lao. Cambodia uses the Riel (KHR). One U.S. dollar is approximately 4,000 KHR and 8,000 LAK.

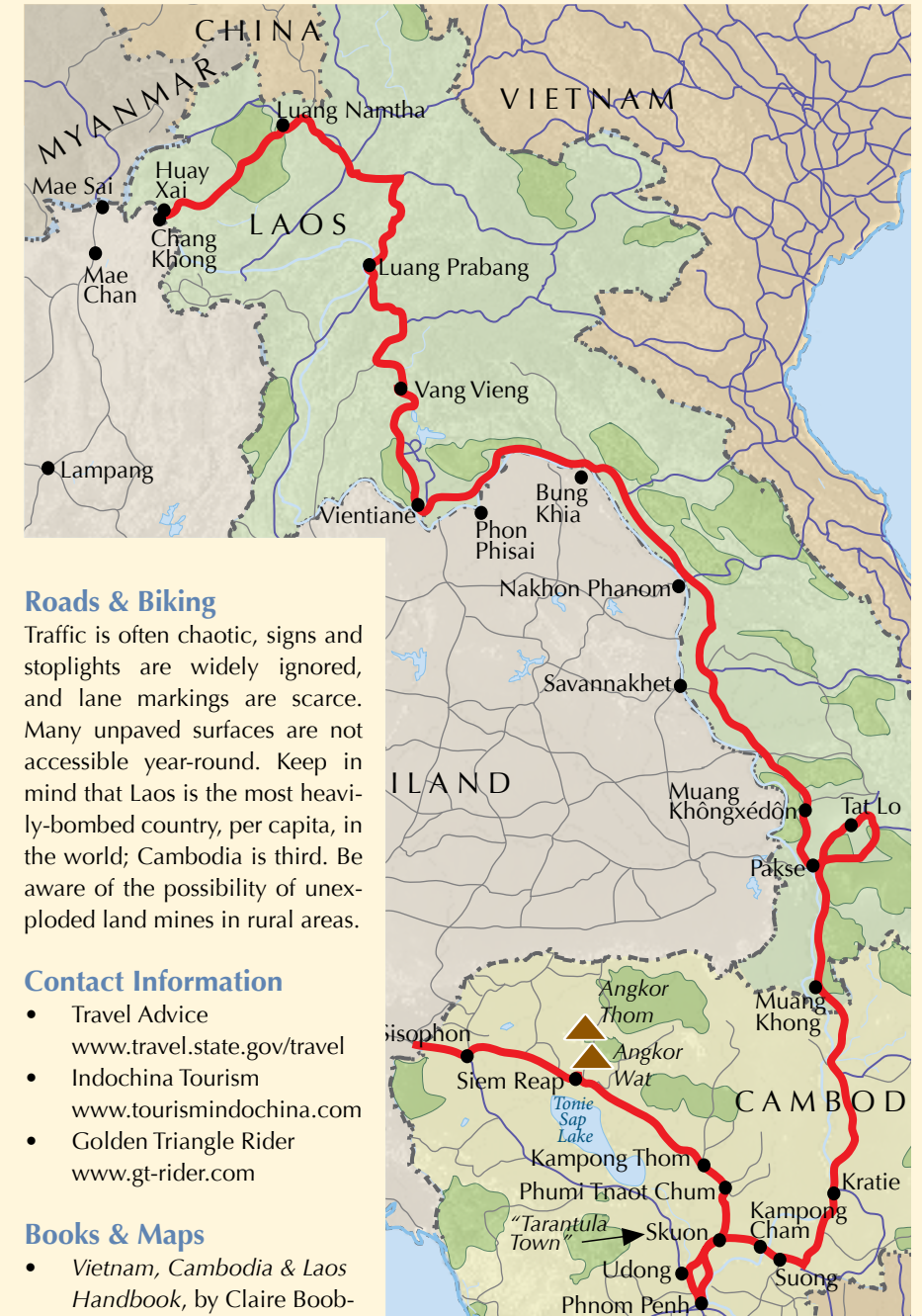
Genocide wreaked on the nation by the Khmer Rouge has left Cambodia with 50 percent of its population being younger than 22 years old. The official religion is Buddhism, and Lao is the official language of Laos, but French is commonly used. Cambodians speak Khmer, but English is widely spoken in the major cities.

The ideal months to visit are November and February. The monsoon season is May to October. Cambodia suffers flooding almost every year.

Visas are required and can be obtained in advance, upon arrival at the international airports, or at land borders. Have at least two passport-sized photos when applying. Ensure you have your vehicle registration papers, liability insurance, and an International Driving Permit (IDP). Both Cambodia and Laos accept the Carnet de Passage. Occasionally guards will request an "additional" immigration fee, particularly upon entry or exit via the Laos borders.

Food & Lodging

Street food is \$2 to \$3 for a meal. More upscale restaurants providing Khmer, Asian, and falang (Western) foods cost around \$10. The staple diet is fish with rice, tropical fruits, soups, and noodles. Sticky rice is popular in Laos. Try the local Beerlao! Basic accommodations cost between \$2 and \$5. Ten to \$20 will get you A/C, TV, a fridge, and hot water.



Roads & Biking

Traffic is often chaotic, signs and stoplights are widely ignored, and lane markings are scarce. Many unpaved surfaces are not accessible year-round. Keep in mind that Laos is the most heavily-bombed country, per capita, in the world; Cambodia is third. Be aware of the possibility of unexploded land mines in rural areas.

Contact Information

- Travel Advice www.travel.state.gov/travel
- Indochina Tourism www.tourismindochina.com
- Golden Triangle Rider www.gt-rider.com

Books & Maps

- *Vietnam, Cambodia & Laos Handbook*, by Claire Boobyer and Andrew Spooner, Footprint, ISBN 13 978-1907263163, \$25.95
- *Laos Travel Map*, Periplus Maps, ISBN 978-0794606114, \$8.95
- *Cambodia Travel Map*, Periplus Maps, ISBN 978-0794606565, \$8.95

Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

Motorcycles & Gear

- 1999 BMW R 1150 GSA
- 2002 BMW F 650 GS
- Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega
- Jacket and Pants: Touratech Companero
- Helmets: Airoh Aviator- Shift
- Boots: MX boots Alpine Star Tech 6 and Gearne SG-10