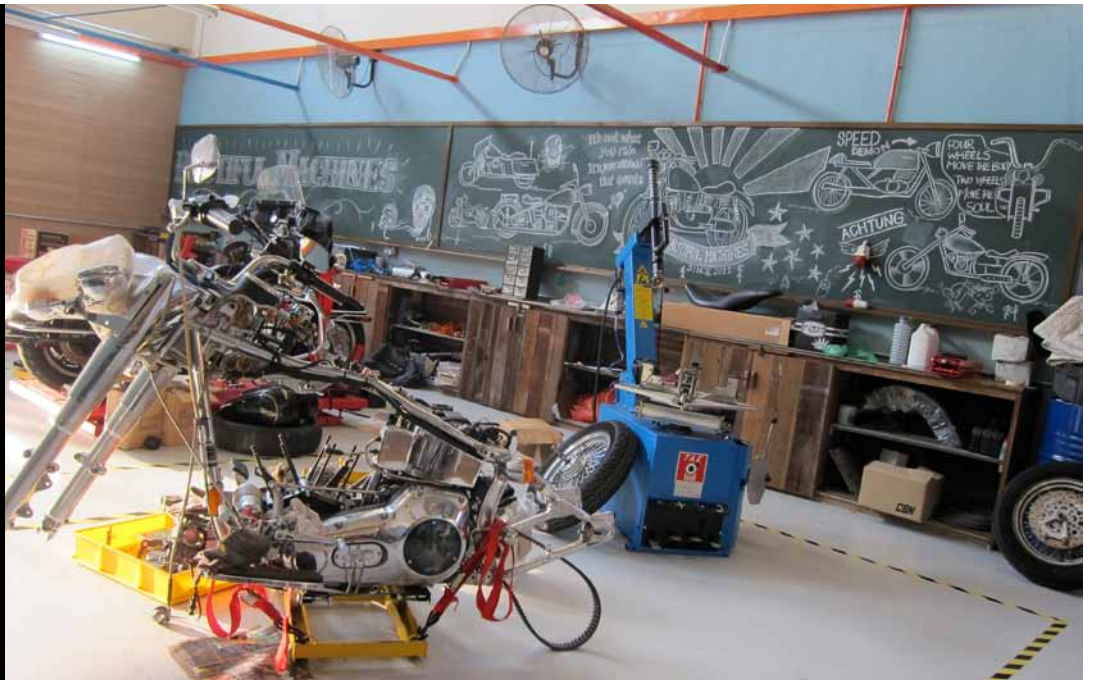


**Cherie Tan**  
stories . visuals  
<http://mrrrmrrr.com>



# KUALA LUMPUR, YOUR EARDRUMS ARE NOT SAFE

A WEEKEND IN THE COMPANY OF GORGEOUSNESS

It's like being swallowed by a whale, motorcycling down the throbbing morass that is Kuala Lumpur's highways, byways and no-bloody-ways. Maniacal scooters that make our taxi drivers look like road-safety poster boys, the city heat that liquidates your eyeballs, that distinct chance of you being shat out a beautiful mess over tarmac – the list of delights goes on.

KL's roguish charms belie hidden treasures, though. The reason why i've winged 4 hours up north to wrangle traffic, on 2 hours' sleep, is this:



“Hey, we’ve just thrown a couple of old containers and awesome bikes together - you should totally come up here and chill!”

My achingly talented friends at creative agency Think Tank really know how to bait a girl. Beautiful Machines is their latest brain egg, a thinly-disguised ploy to marry work and their hearty passion for all things loud, hairy and Harley. The custom bike workshop sees them making a surprising transformation of an industrial hole-in-the-wall, creating a living, organic space buzzing with a cheerily insane vibe - you certainly don’t have to be a lover of motorcycles to appreciate the madcap wall murals, the darling dishevelly of those stacked industrial cases, and cute, tattooed mechanics sweating over tangled metal with a cigarette dripping off their lips.

They’ve made room for seriousness though, by packing the entire creative agency - workstations, directors, producers, assorted minions and all - into windowed containers. No one, not even friends and clients on the other end of the phone, is spared the throaty howls of V-twin engines, rolling out like thunder with a plantation-wide kill radius. You’d be hard-pressed to call this a clandestine operation.

If you ride, and fancy seeing the city and its outskirts amid a cloud of sound and fury, be gladdened to know that these folks need little excuse to take the action out of the garage. Head honcho Rajay keeps weekends sacred for foodie excursions (Genting, Fraser Hill and the like), and

he welcomes tag-alongs - although he’d much prefer that your machine keep up in the style-stakes. “Cherie, when are you gonna ditch that iPod and get a REAL bike?” Verbally reduced to pocket-electronics, my 650cc Versys, which bears battlescars from a 7000km ride through Thailand’s northern wilds, cringes apologetically in the corner. If it aint chrome, it’s going home.

Home? The furthest thing from my mind, when we all piled into our saddles and exploded into the night like pillaging Khans, minus the raping, furry hats and horse shit. Rush-hour traffic parted at the blow of an exhaust, which is the Harley equivalent of a gentle but firm elbow through the crowd. This, you will never see happening on Singaporean roads, where anything on two wheels is automatically scraping the bottom of the vehicular food chain. That evening, rollin’ with the big boys, I felt like we were the whooping, gleeful lords of our own chaos kingdom - the sort of experience that puts proverbial hair on your chest.

But I exaggerate. Roll up to P.J. Selangor and find out for yourself just how beautiful custom motorcycles, and the people who love them, can get. I hear that the folks responsible for this gorgeousness are soon to unveil a cafe just next door. I look forward to the weekend when I can knock back a cold one or two while cheerily deafening myself at the windy end of someone’s shiny 883 Iron.

*Hit them up at <http://beautifulmachines.my>*





## RIDE NORTH 2011

DISCOVERING THAILAND ON 2 WHEELS

4 regular joes and one scruffy jane, getting by in the 9-to-5 trenches with the same brutal bosses as anyone else. No fancy gear, no classy uniforms and no bullshit - just a shared, unreasonable hunger for journeys in the saddle... and maybe some fried tarantulas? Only two of us had ever ridden across onto Thai soil before, but the air in December has a way of smelling like adventure!

It was a mixed bag of bikes - a Yamaha TDM900, Suzuki Vstrom 650, Kawasaki Versys 650, Honda Fireblade 929 and a rented D-Tracker - that chased down the Northern horizons, and we were amazingly fortunate to slip in through a brief window of time when the flood waters lay low.

We took the highways, low-ways and no-ways. For 7000km, and over 20 days, we lived out of our motorcycle panniers, tracing a winding, varied road across the face of Thailand, crossing shortly into Myanmar.

In the spirit of countless travellers before us, who so open-heartedly shared their maps, stories and resources, here's a rundown of practicalities we gleaned along the merry way:



## COSTS

- We each spent SGD1.2k on food, petrol, lodging and some shopping.
- Guest houses in Thailand are cheap, and get even cheaper if you aren't picky. A night in each town cost us 600 - 700 baht total for two rooms or one big room, except for Hat Yai, Cha Am, Krabi, Mae Sai and Phayao, where we forked out 1000 baht.
- Gashol 95 (which is about as good as bikers can find, with big PTT petrol stops every 50 - 100km on major roads) costs slightly more than the equivalent in Singapore.
- We kept our frugal bellies out of restaurants and ate mostly from street hawkers, which were often ridiculously cheap and bloody delicious (20 baht for a bowl of beef noodles!), if you don't think too much about how it's prepared or what sort of living thing the meat used to be. We ate frequently and well, testing the stretch limits of our riding gear.
- A full-body Thai massage will set you back about 250 baht for an hour, and that's fair tax to sore muscles after a punishing ride day. We indulged almost every other night!
- 2500 baht from each of our pockets went right into bungee jumping and go-karting at Chiang Mai's extreme sports park - a roaring treat you shouldn't miss.

## USEFUL STUFF TO PACK

- Maps, because nothing truly works like old-school ink-on-paper, and because GPS always screws with your mind and tries to lead you into Bangkok city. You can pick up updated and detailed maps of Thailand from major PTTs along the southern and northern highways.
- Black tape & cable ties. These hold a variety of sins together! The expedition rolled home mostly held together by ties & tape - my boot straps, Joshua's improvised gear shifter after a bridge-crossing disaster, Victor's saddlebag after a villager's kupchai t-boned him... and the Fireblade lost a couple of fairing-screws that weren't taped over before we left!
- Handy cleaning essentials from our friends at Motul, which helped make the long roads kinder:
  1. **Chain paste:** this one's thicker, easy enough to apply and stays on even through dusty trails.
  2. **Insect remover and visor cleaner:** mighty useful on the long highways up, where you will unfailingly be face-bombed by anything from bees to big juicy butterflies. We used these to clean our windshields too!
  3. **Hand cleaner:** we got the grime off our fingers easy with this rub-out formula - saves the inside of your gloves too.

## LODGING

We did it in true cowboy style - simply rolled into town and started scouting! Found some real gems, and all of them offer safe parking and free wifi:

### 1. Hat Yai

#### **Winstar Hotel**

Park your bikes behind the lobby, and slip the security guard 50 baht to watch them all night.

### 2. Nakon Sawan

#### **Shanya Guesthouse**

Resort-style decor for budget-inn prices, and free use of their water hoses on your grubby bikes. Keep your mosquito repellent handy though.



### 3. Chiang Mai

#### a) Lanna Discovery Guesthouse

Park your bikes on the slope at the entrance. There are other backpackers here to trade stories with, and the landlady will teach you a handy Thai phrase or two if you'd only ask!

#### b) Rider's Corner

Even if you don't stay the night, at least pop by for a beer and steak! A must-go meeting place for international adventurer bikers, and you'll meet some real inspirational people there. Say hullo to Philip for us, and ask him to show you some good riding routes around the area.

### 4. Pai

#### Pai Klangdoi Resort

After the numbingly cold, rollercoaster turns of Mae Hong Son, there's really nothing, nothing like warming your toes by campfire - I swear, these parts will have you wishing for heated throttle grips! Prepare a set of thermals; temperatures drop to 4 deg at night.

### 5. Doi Ang Kang

A Chiang Mai local told us, "You haven't really experienced Doi Ang Kang until you camp out there for a night." Truer words have never been said. Rent a tent at the mountain's military base, endure the bone-grinding cold with thermal layers and locally-brewed strawberry wine (hardcore stuff, but you've got to make friends to get this!), and be rewarded by a sweepingly poetic sunset and sunrise. Hot showers can be bought at a nearby public toilet for 50 baht, but expect no other amenities.

### 6. Chiang Rai

#### The North Hotel

Charming and cosy enough for its small price tag, and within walking distance to the supremely awesome night market - the main entertainment stage is shared by transvestite dances and bizarre gyrating children; go figure.

### 7. Phayao

Roll into any of the inns facing the lake, prices are competitive and you can park your bike right outside, unmolested.

### 8. Krabi

#### Pak Up Hostel

A designer hostel in main Krabi town that's within walking distance to many little eateries and bars, and much cheaper than staying at Aonang bay, although that's where the action lies. The bay is a good 20min scenic ride away from main Krabi town. The other backpackers had a good chuckle at the sight of us riding back in neon beach shorts and full riding boots...

More adventures at <http://facebook.com/ridenorth>



## BORDERTOWN

HOW A WEEKEND CAN PUT 2000KM AND BUG JUICE ON YOUR ODOMETER

Thursday 8 July, 11pm: two Super Teneres, a GS and a Versys are ready to rumble. For me, it's a case of the same starting line, but with different weaponry.

Throw your leg over the saddle of a good, solid machine, be weighed down by nothing heavier than star shine, and the road will carry you along like a benevolent wave. We fling our headlights around familiar mountain curves, occasionally beset by fog so sudden and thick that it startles the throttle wrist.

The Bell helmet's banshee acoustics all but swallow my iPod's pounding beats, an unhappy thing when I need all I can get to keep fatigue at bay. Malaysia may not be big on its highway lighting systems but luckily she keeps her gas stations well stocked with Livita - the energy drink that destroys your liver but confuses the hell out of your sleep valves.

A little north of Perak, dawn swells at 150kmh. We are greeted by a verdant horizon that somewhere becomes Thailand.

8am - at the border crossing I am hustled into some sort of interrogation room, yelled at, and told that my passport wasn't stamped on my last exit from Thailand. My tormentor speaks in exclamation marks. *Criminal overstayer!* Surely I must have performed some insidious hotfooting under the authorities' noses, when last I was here!

Graciously, I am offered options:

- a) Go to jail
- b) Pay a fine- 2000 ringgit
- c) Ride back to Singapore and make a new passport to erase my crimes (as urgently whispered by a grumpily helpful Chinese local, obviously a frequent witness to such proceedings)

After massive confusion on my part, which is swiftly transferred to my ride companions via giggly hysteria, I escape to my bike where I prepare to flee alone to Penang. My friends, far wiser in the ways of the world, calmly intervene and settle the matter with a negotiated SGD300 payout.

Banditry overcome, we ninja it to the Crown Prince Hotel, Hat Yai. Truthfully, ninja-ing is impeded by about ten thousand traffic lights crammed within meters of each other, as well as ponderous city traffic that is a bitch for any tourer bike outfitted with side panniers to filter through.

## Hat Yai

After securing the bikes and a good shower each, we swiftly apply ourselves first to gluttony and then sloth.

It is well into night when we ride out again to the Municipal City Park for the opening festivities of the 2011 Hat Yai Bike Fest. At the entrance they try to confuse all the bikers with screaming, pimped up trucks and madly gyrating girls. Breasts, neon lights and throbbing sternums - why, surely this must be the way to the party!

Senses already brutalized, I may as well eat some fried grubs - tasty with spices! Yes, the food chain does get a little tricky here in Thailand, with maggots on the menu.

## The Road Home

On Sunday morning there happens a slight GPS miscalculation that takes us on a detour towards Yala, but the border crossing is uneventful this time. By afternoon we are hurtling south on the NS highway. At Perak I part company with the boys and wing it solo back to Singapore; about another 800km that will take me through rush hour at KL and into dusk, evening and onto the same unlit, pitted roads.

The night side of the world is a remarkably intimate and vulnerable space to travel in. Early humans lived in caves and rubbed their eyes until they saw lighted shapes dancing in the blackness; from these they fashioned gods. The absence of light creates an empty space to populate; it makes blackness the color of freedom. Other creatures from the twisted corridors of my imagination keep me company on the journey home.

I am what I am best: just a speck of glitter happy to be free, happy to be careening about in the true spirit of a loose cannon. Happy to feel my lungs inflate with scenery, passing cars, terror and confidence, the occasional dull bite of loneliness. Happy that the long road pares it all down to a mental terrain of simple absolutes - this cold is so abject, it swings my thoughts to a loved-one's warm shoulder. Cause and consequence, conquest or collision, arrive or die. The simplicity is gripping.

Can you safely love anything? Yes, your bike, when you are holding each other in a brutal dependency, on a mad stride to do white-knuckled combat with the careless vagaries of highway trucks.

Zeppelin and I, we keep our own time. There are pitstops whenever I feel like it. We chase the horizon and nobody else. One problem with travelling alone, though - who watches your stuff while you pee?

Zeppelin's tyres touch Singapore soil at 11.11pm, slightly over 12 hours since we left the Crown Prince in Hat Yai. I am hungrier than a sack of sharks. It will be another 2 hours before my system purges the Livita and I can go to sleep for tomorrow's workgrind.



**ARTWORK**  
INFOGRAPHICS  
TRAVEL SKETCHES



**Catch A Slice of ACTION**

**SCAPE**

**360 WITHOUT BORDERS**  
CREATE. COLLABORATE. SHOWCASE

**\*SCAPE CONFESSIONS: THE SERIES**

Friday, 8pm Youth Centre: Lab (113 Somerset Road) \$10 at the door	24 Sept Asian Gambus Sassy Sassy Word Mule, Mule	1 Oct Faded Project Lan Dance Punkrock Audiobus
--	--	---

**NETBALL at \*SCAPE**  
Tuesdays, 7pm - 9pm  
\*SCAPE Warehouse

**\*SCAPE JUMPSHOT BASKETBALL ACADEMY**  
Thursdays, 4:30pm - 8pm  
(3 x 90min sessions per day)  
Workshop at home

**\*SCAPE CONFESSIONS: MELTG SNOW ALBUM LAUNCH**

25 Sept / 7:30pm Youth Centre: Lab (113 Somerset Road) \$18 at the door	Guest host: David Meltg Special guest: Mark Proulx - with special guests: Aye of Jinn, Aye of Jinn and Lunan
---	---

**Other Highlights**

**LINKIN PARK "A THOUSAND SUNS" PARTY**  
3 Oct / Doors open 12pm  
\*SCAPE Warehouse

Love and all kind compliments to DJ Chantrel  
Party passes & retail vouchers up for grabs! Present this page at \*SCAPE reception counter for tickets.

**Reach Border Then How? M'SIA - THAI**

**SADAO**

**YOU'LL NEED:**

- 1 The motorcycle you rode in on, cowboy. (if not registered in your name, you'll need a written letter of authorization from the registered owner)
- 2 A copy of your vehicle insurance cover letter
- 3 A copy of your vehicle log card (get a printout from onemotoring.com.sg)
- 4 Passport
- 5 2 ringgit

**A. Park one corner**  
Either beyond the immigration booths or in the open carpark to the left. Take your valuables + documents.

**B. Fill in Thai Immigration Card**  
Get this from counter near the toilet and Passport Control

**C. Join the Passport Control queue**  
Same ones that the screaming aunties and children off the tour buses do. Hand the officer Thai Immigration Card + Passport. Slip the 2 ringgit into your passport for hassle-free immigration wrangling.

**D. Vehicle Import booth**  
Last one at the end, usually staffed by lady with menopausal angst. Hand her log card + SG vehicle insurance papers + passport. She'll print an import document - take this to the booth on the left.

**E. Vehicle Import booth Part 2**  
Hand over the same bike documents + dragonlady's import docu printout. Put your signature in where required. Keep your copy of this import docu VERY SAFE. You must return this on your way out of Thailand - or face hefty fines and various horrors.

**F. Buy Thai riding insurance**  
At a low-hanging counter just after immigrations you can buy insurance for about 250 baht. Hand them your import docu + passport. Don't skip this unless you want to land in jail after hitting a local on the road, or police at a road block.

OR, you can buy insurance at most Malaysian R&R petrol stations from Gurun onwards.

**FIRST, IMPORT THE HUMAN**

**SIMPLE? NEXT, THE BIKE**

**DONE! STEADY BOM PI PI**

**RIDE NORTH**  
facebook.com/ridenorth

**CHERIE TAN**  
FREELANCE WRITING / GRAPHICS

<http://mrrrmrrr.com>  
wunderlamb@gmail.com  
+65 9652 8982

\*Always check that your passport has been exit-stamped & all documents are in order, before leaving any border. The above info is valid only for the Sadao border & Singapore-registered motorcycles, as of Oct 2012.