

FITNESS & WELL-BEING



THE WHEEL THING

A cyclist takes in the view during a tour of Taiwan organised by In Motion Asia. Photo: In Motion Asia

Cycling tours in Asia are growing more popular as people ditch the beach holiday and hit the road, writes Rachel Jacqueline

With its narrow and congested roads and heavily polluted air, Hong Kong is not ideal for cyclists. So those who have caught the cycling bug are swapping Asian beach breaks for bike holidays, touring the region for days or weeks at a time – and conquering personal challenges along the way.

“People are well travelled in Hong Kong; they’ve sat on every beach in Asia, and now they’re looking for something different,” says Troy de Haas, manager of the Active, Health & Wellness travel teams at Flight Centre Hong Kong.

He estimates the number of those taking part in cycling tours around the region has “more than tripled” in the past three years. Not only is cycling social –

“you can stop and have a coffee along the way if you feel like it,” says de Haas – it won’t ruin your joints like a week-long running adventure might.

“Plus, you get to see things at a much slower pace than you do on the back of a tour bus or in a van,” he says. “You get a true experience of the destination.”

Though the European Alps may seem a more likely cycling destination, de Haas assures rewarding cycling awaits just a short distance from Hong Kong, “from the mountains of Taiwan, to the hills of Thailand’s north, to meandering through the diverse countryside of Vietnam”.

Hong Kong’s newest cycling company, Mad Dogs, promises the “ultimate long-distance cycling challenge” throughout greater Asia. From Hong Kong to Hanoi, Sapporo to Moscow, Hanoi to Bangkok, Taipei to

Kenting, Singapore to Krabi and Macau to Guilin, cyclists take on such mammoth challenges in shorter daily stages. Over seven days, you can cover as much as 1,420km.

“People want to achieve something major, but for most, it is unrealistic to take more than a week off work,” says founder Humphrey Wilson.

The 31-year-old Brit was inspired to start the company after exploring 22 countries by bike over 10 months in 2009, on a ride from London to Hong Kong. “After my own experience, I realised that if the cycling is planned and supported, you could cycle further in a day or a week. You could really achieve something.”

His tours are supported by mini-vans and mechanics, and even offer a bike share scheme.

“It’s a real challenge, but you’re not going to kill yourself doing it,” says Marc Geddes, who took part in Mad Dogs’ maiden trip from Hong Kong to Hanoi in October last year.

Although he is fit, Geddes had hardly ridden a bike before attempting the challenge and only bought a cheap one the week before.

Cycling adventures may not be for everyone, with early starts, the dreaded cyclist’s seat and perpetually sore muscles being some of the drawbacks, says 28-year-old Geddes.

“But it’s perfect for someone who has a bit of grit about them, and enjoys a few challenges – a few punctured tyres, cycling in the rain. Trust me, the beer at the end of it had to be one of the most well-deserved beers I’ve ever had.” And extra benefits? “You burn a heck of an amount of calories,” says Wilson with a grin. “You can eat anything, seriously.”

For the more experienced cyclist, a customised tour offers a tough but enjoyable break. And according to cyclists in the

know, there’s no better place to train than in Taiwan.

“Taiwan has some of the best road climbs in Asia, including one at 3,272 metres, which is probably one of the highest rideable road climbs in North Asia,” says avid Hong Kong cyclist Paul Smith, who’s cycled Taiwan on many occasions. “It’s also very close to Hong Kong.”

Smith ranks Taiwan adventure company In Motion Asia (IMA) as one of the top choices for tours in Taiwan. Since 2007, the company has gone from offering eight private tours a year to at least one a week, says founder Cam McLean.

“I initially came to Taiwan for one week to catch up with friends, but during my travels around the island I was blown away by what I discovered: a rugged outdoor adventure playground totally off the radar with stunning coastline, massive mountains, lush valleys and beautiful rivers,” says the New Zealander, who’s been living in Taiwan for more than 10 years.

In addition to tours for diehards, In Motion Asia also offers corporate teambuilding programmes on bikes, youth adventure camps and “the occasional stag do”. IMA also puts together cycling tours in Thailand, Japan and other regions of your choice in Asia.

After more of a saunter than a sweat-fest? Flatter destinations such as Cambodia, Vietnam and southeastern Thailand are your best bet, making the adventure more family-friendly.

Valerie Lagarde, 31, chose a three-day expedition from Bangkok to Angkor Wat, in Cambodia, for a family expedition last July, with her four-year-old daughter and husband.

“We had been to Thailand a few times and stayed at beach resorts, so we wanted something different. I thought cycling

It’s perfect for someone who has a bit of grit and enjoys a few challenges

MARC GEDDES, CYCLIST

would be a good option to explore,” says Lagarde.

She chose tour operator SpiceRoads, sharing the tour with one other family. “The whole experience turned out to be stress-free as the logistics were absolutely incredible – we always had a mini van following us, and there were two bike mechanics and two guides with us on the road the whole time.”

“I am not a cyclist yet I found the tour very manageable. There were always times to relax, and we were never forced to move faster or do something we didn’t feel comfortable with,” she says.

For the ultimate adventure, how about DIY?

Richard Hunt created his own itinerary, cycling from Singapore to Hong Kong over five months last year, travelling through Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam and China at his

leisure. Although Hunt’s adventure took a lot of preparation, most of the planning occurred on the road, and the approach gave him the flexibility to enjoy his travels.

“I had a basic idea on where I wanted to go, but once on the road I would take it week by week and, more often than not, day by day. After spending enough time in one town, I would mark out the next key town I was interested in and set on my way,” says the 27-year-old Australian.

“I would never set a firm schedule on where I was going to be because you never knew what you’d find or see on the road that could be interesting.”

Despite feeling homesick during Christmas in Malaysia, enduring many dog attacks in Thailand, suffering from dehydration in Cambodia and getting a virus in Vietnam, his five months on the road taught him valuable life lessons.

“The trip taught me anything is possible if you set your mind to it,” says Hunt.

“The hardest part is taking the steps to start the journey. It’s very easy to say it’s crazy, dangerous or too far, but once you’re on the road, you set yourself a task for that day and go out to achieve it.”

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Cyclists in Perlis, Malaysia, as part of a trip by Hong Kong-based Mad Dogs. Photo: Mad Dogs

On your bike

<p>gomaddogs.com Tour group biking challenges up to a week at a time throughout greater Asia.</p> <p>inmotionasia.com Bespoke tours, corporate packages and youth adventure based in Taiwan.</p> <p>spiceroads.com Bespoke and group tours through Southeast Asia.</p>	<p>grasshopperadventures.com Bicycle and photography guided tours throughout Asia, from half days to two-week plus expeditions.</p> <p>veloasia.com Family groups and custom tours by bike out of Vietnam.</p> <p>bikeasia.com Group tours throughout China, Tibet, Mongolia, Japan, Sri Lanka and Nepal.</p>
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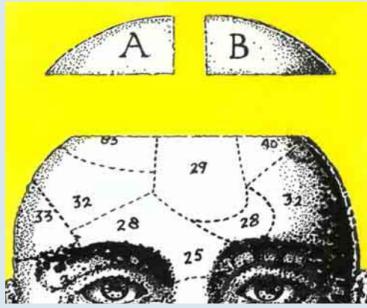
HEALTH BITES

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Habit worse for smokers with depression
People diagnosed with depression need to step out for a cigarette twice as often as smokers who are not dealing with a mood disorder. And those who have the hardest time shaking off the habit may have more mental health issues than they are aware of. Those insights were among the collective findings published in the journal *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* by researchers based in part at Concordia University. While nearly one in five North American adults are regular smokers, a figure that continues to decline, about 40 per cent of depressed people are in need of a regular drag. The statistic motivated the researchers to investigate what was behind that higher percentage.



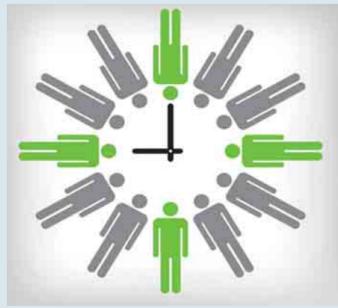
The findings revealed those who struggle with mental illness have a tougher time quitting. The anxiety, cravings or lack of sleep that accompany typical attempts to quit cold turkey will have them scrambling for the smokes they might have sworn off earlier that evening.



Study points to schizophrenia risk
More than 100 locations on the human genome may play a role in a person’s risk of developing schizophrenia, according to a new study. While the results do not have an immediate effect on those living with the psychiatric disorder, one of the study’s authors said they open areas of research that had not seen advances in recent years. “The exciting thing about having little openings is it gives you a place to dig and make big openings,” says Steve McCarroll, director of genetics for the Stanley Centre for Psychiatric Research at the Broad Institute in Massachusetts. McCarroll is part of the schizophrenia working group of the Psychiatric Genomics Consortium, which published the study in the journal *Nature*.

Shift work linked to diabetes
Shift work is linked to a heightened risk of developing type 2 diabetes, with the risk seemingly greatest among men and those working rotating shift patterns, indicates an analysis of the available evidence published online in *Occupational & Environmental Medicine*. Previous research suggested links between working shifts and a heightened risk of health problems, including certain cancers, and cardiovascular disease.

The authors based their study on 12 international studies out of a potential total of 448, involving more than 226,500 participants, 14,600 of whom had diabetes.



Exercise after menopause helps brain and body
Women who exercise regularly after menopause tend to maintain their physical strength and mental acuity longer than those who don’t, according to a new review of past studies that found exercise that gets the heart rate up is best. “We found that all the studies showed that physical activity was associated with decreased rates of cognitive decline and that even becoming active in later life as opposed to a lifetime of physical activity still lowered the risk compared to those who were inactive,” says Debra Anderson, who worked on the study at the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation of the Queensland University of Technology in Australia. She and her team reviewed 21 studies published between 2009 and 2014 assessing exercise or leisure time physical activity among women aged 65 and older.