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Four months after her husband died of a heart attack, she pedals through a land full of guardian spirits. It seemed natural that his spirit would follow her there.

By Stephanie Ager Kirz  
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One single strand of string bound us together: 17 travelers, 32 guardian spirits, four guides, and a Buddhist monk. We all sat on mats in front of the monk waiting for something to happen.

“The Ageb and his helpers will put jasmine leis around your necks and unwrap a ball of twine to encircle the group like a spirit corral, as he chants his prayers to call in the entities who have strayed,” said Piak, one of our soulful Thai bike guides, who had been doing this for 20 years.

Before starting any important journey in Thailand, a master ageb, or retired monk, is invited to call the wayward spirits together, reuniting them in a ceremony called Bai Sii for safeguarding the traveler.

“After he is satisfied that the spirits are assembled, he will take the string and rewind it to make your bracelets, tied on the left wrist for women, placed on the right for the men in our group. You must wear the bracelet at least three days for protection. Don’t ever cut it, or it will bring you bad luck,” Piak said.

Our ceremony was for protection during our bicycle tour through the tropical farmlands and jungle forests of northern Thailand from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai — seven days and 210 miles of mountain biking over the Golden Triangle. The term applies to the opium-growing region where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos converge, but our group would stay safely on the Thai side.

It was my first solo bike trip in 36 years without my husband, Howard, who died of a heart attack four months before. Perfectly healthy, he left the house at 7 a.m. to go biking with friends. I called from the bedroom, “Goodbye, honey. See you for happy hour. I love you.” He never came home.

We had planned to take this trip together. I mustered up the courage to go in celebration of his life. It looked good on paper. Jennifer Lampshire from Backroads helped me book the trip.

“I don’t want to go with a bunch a guys or too many couples,” I blubbered over the phone, and she searched the upcoming trips and found me the right combination. My husband and I had toured Bali, China, Costa Rica and many other countries over the years with Backroads so I knew I’d be in good company even if I wasn’t very good company myself.

That night, assembled around the pool at our first hotel, we lighted fire balloons to send away bad luck. Rice paper domes heated with bees wax candles silently floated up, disappearing into the moonlight.

“This is always done for the king’s birthday,” said Ghing, another Thai guide, “and for many other celebrations.”

We hadn’t even really started biking yet, but the trip was bound to be blessed in many ways unimaginable.

Bike to shop or shop to bike?

We were 12 women and five men on this bike adventure, and I didn’t know a soul. Several of the women were hard-chargers, racing the guys up every hill, never missing a chance to extend the maximum mileage for the day. One of the women, a Brazilian beauty, had started riding only six months before the trip. I was somewhere in the upper middle, meaning that I was strong but lazy. We were a varied lot of cyclists. But, besides biking, we had one thing in common: shopping.

“There’s a great custom silk shop back in Chiang Rai,” said Lynny, our American guide, who had discovered the shop on her last group tour. Lynny was direct from San Francisco and was quite the natty dresser, even in bike clothes, which can be pretty grim.

“We’ll have a van available to take you and your bikes back to the Legend Resort after lunch. You’ll have time for a quick shower, and then our driver will escort you to the shop and wait for you to bring you back. Who wants to go?”

Hello?

Those of us with two X chromosomes raised our hands, along with one gentleman who was a professional shopper for a chain of family-owned clothing stores. He fit right in. No one minded missing the technically challenging second half of the day, which included 20 or so miles in the sweltering afternoon sun.

A sunset of colors greeted us as we entered the tiny shop stuffed with racks of jackets, blouses, scarves and shelves bulging with bolts of exotic silk. Who knew that we could be such savvy personal shoppers, aiding one another in selections, fit and color choices, and even some bargaining?

Two and a half hours later, we jumped in the van and headed back for happy hour with our purchases. I proudly carried my bags to the hotel and pondered how it was possible that all these perfectly lovely strangers had such a talent for helping me happily spend my money.

## **Back on the bike**

Before each morning ride, I placed a red heart-shaped “cremulate” around my neck under my bike shirt. I had never heard the word before, but the funeral home had suggested having one made. There was something very comforting about having my husband’s ashes melted into a little piece of glass to keep me company on this trip.

We rode our mountain bikes the next day through the Mae Suai Valley. Dirt roads led us beside just-planted rice and garlic fields up to the hill tribe community of Lahu Village. Along the way, the farmers worked the muddy ponds dredging up the soil to plant the rice for the next harvest. Thais eat an average of 300 pounds of rice a year, and Thailand is the largest exporter of rice in the world.

Children followed us through the small village while we learned and listened.

“His Majesty King Bhumibol of Thailand launched a successful crop substitution program to encourage the farmers to stop growing opium like the neighboring countries and begin to grow sustainable produce,” Ghing said. “Every farmer keeps his own money for rice, corn, beans, and coffee. A family may only earn 40,000 baht, roughly \$1,136 US dollars, for the whole year, but a motorbike here costs 35,000 baht. Since the language and the lifestyle are unique to the farm they might leave to go to the big city, but they always come back.”

## **Meeting the monk**

We sat silently as the monk, dressed in a saffron orange robe, stroked the stray cat at his feet.

Before going into the temple, Ghing instructed us on temple etiquette. Our group of bikers was clad in sweaty spandex and tank tops. We covered our legs and arms with shawls and sarongs so as not to offend the spirits inside.

“It’s disrespectful to point the bottoms of your feet toward the buddha or monk because the feet are the lowest part of the body and unclean. When you approach the altar, you will light three incense sticks and put them above your heart: one for yourself, one for religion and one for the earth. Make a wish, bow three times, and put them in the sand in front of the Buddha’s statue. We believe that the smoke from the incense carries your wish.”

“You can ask any questions that you want,” said Ghing, who volunteered to translate into English.

“Why are you a vegetarian?” asked one member of the group.

The monk replied, "Buddhists are vegetarians to have less energy for sex, which is stimulated by eating red meat." I wondered if my vegan friends back home had heard about this.

"Why do the temples face east?"

"Our temples always face east to greet the rising sun so that our ceremonies can take place in the morning, thus granting everyone a nice day."

"What is the most important concept of Buddhism?"

He smiled. "Be in the moment, live in the now. Be happy and do good."

Before we left, the monk said he had one question for us.

"What good thing have you done for the world?" The room was silent. Even now, I am still working on an answer.

### **Thai spirit houses**

As we rode through the countryside and small villages, we noticed that there were odd, miniature dwellings perched on poles at the corner of each property. Some looked like ornate dollhouses or Victorian birdhouses, painted beautiful colors.

"No Thai home would be without a spirit house," said Piak, the guide. "Spirit houses are erected to guard the home and property, and the entities must be given offerings of flowers and food to placate their needs. But if bad luck falls upon a family, the house is removed and placed in a spirit house graveyard."

There were so many guardian spirits in Thailand that it seemed only natural that my husband's spirit might follow me there as well. He had been so full of life, packing each day to the brim with adventures, with a love of teaching and learning. No matter what country we rode in, my husband had a way of getting the locals to tell us memorable stories. He spoke five languages and could make himself understood in many more. Because he was such a good mimic of accents, with a few perfectly pronounced words, people always thought he was a native wherever we went.

One my favorite sayings of his is, "We're too old to drink bad wine," and another, "You don't know if you're going to get tomorrow." He was right about that one. He had a way of empowering me and others to do things that we never thought we could do. And so I went to Thailand encouraged by his spirit.

There were many mornings when I pedaled through the rice fields and I thought I heard him laughing with joy at being there with me.

## **Land of 35,000 temples**

Three-hundred-sixty-five steps, one for each day of the year, led to the top of a temple where a happy Buddha sat. Our bike route took us to a famous wat — an enclosure encompassing a temple, Buddhist monastery and community center. In a land of 35,000 Buddhist temples, we quickly learned that if you steer your bike under a temple entry gate and ride out under the opposite one it brings good luck. I made a habit of doing this often.

While trudging down the temple stairs in my slippery bike shoes, I looked down and saw a silver shimmer of something in the sand. It was directly in my path, but many others had walked over it. I reached down to pick it up and discovered a little heart about the size of a quarter with the word “Love,” inscribed on the back.

“It’s got to be a lucky sign meant for you,” said one of the women cyclists.

It wasn’t until I got home from the trip that I found a pair of heart-shaped earrings forgotten in the back of my jewelry drawer. They were an exact match to the charm that I found in Thailand. In my heart I knew that my late husband had put it in my path to let me know he was protecting and loving me on my first solo journey.