

**The Big  
Ride**  
Taiwan

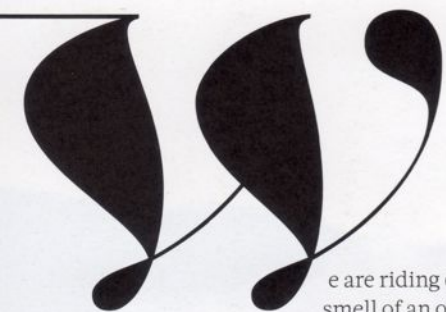




# made in Taiwan

Words **AARON S. LEE**  
Photography **SIMON FRANCIS**

*Cyclist sets sail to explore the 'Heart of Asia' and challenge its King of the Mountain... but along the way **Aaron S. Lee** uncovers a cycling treasure hidden in Taiwan's Sea of Clouds*



e are riding off the  
smell of an oily rag.

Our resources are spent. Toast. For more than four hours, we've traversed a land that time forgot. Every rise, bend and valley bears historic reminders of the long lost Jurassic Period, an era when geologists believe the small island nation of Taiwan rose from the sea.

With more than 90km behind us, passing the 3,200-year-old giant Bilyu Sacred Tree means we've climbed 2,150m in elevation, with only 10km remaining until we reach the summit. Although the finish is figuratively in sight, there is no reprieve; the final kilometres become increasingly difficult as average speeds fall to 10km/h. I'm engaged in my own personal internal hell; my head and legs were already starting to show telltale signs of disdain and discomfort more than 20km back. Both scream simultaneously to 'bloody stop!' and put an end to the suffering being endured on my quest to reach Taiwan's highest point by road - Wuling Peak at Mt Hehuan.


It's a stark contrast to the day before. Following a nine-hour flight from Sydney and a two-hour express train from Taipei City south to the eastern seaside town of Hualien, I was aching to stretch the legs and tackle Taiwan by bike. I was looking forward to a day of solid riding before heading across the island to Taichung and meeting with Giant Bicycles CEO Tony Lo, where we'd discuss the 2014 product range at company headquarters.

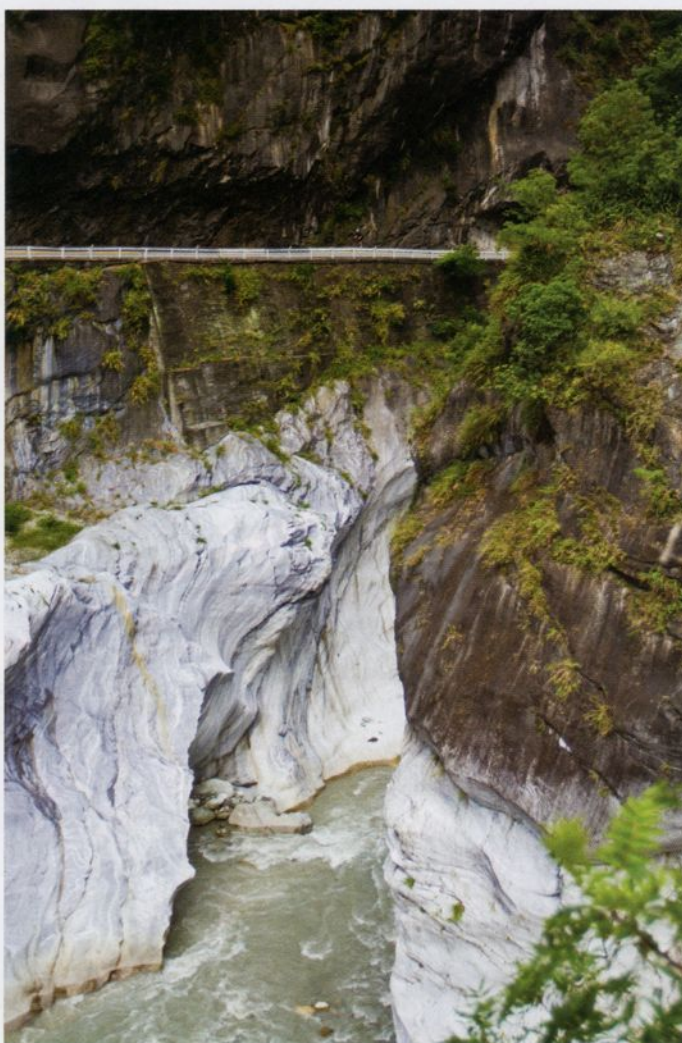
Another reason I was eager to get underway was Tropical Depression Emong, which was picking up speed off the east coast and threatening typhoon status as it set a path of destruction, Taiwan clearly in its cross hairs.

What a difference a day makes.

Luckily, Emong altered course overnight, and Taiwan is no longer in imminent danger - but now I am the one in trouble. I'd gotten my wish to stretch the legs, but I'm now nearly 100km from the safety of my hotel room in Hualien, deep in the hurt locker and praying to reach the end of the line before my body fails me. I'm not feeling hopeful.

### Heart of Asia

When it comes to cycling, Taiwan, known as the "Heart of Asia", may not be the first destination that pops into mind. Perhaps it should. 



**Above: One of more than two dozen hand-dug tunnels and escarpments along the Central Cross-Island Highway**

**Above left: Coastal views of the Pacific Ocean at the seaside town of Hualien**

**Left: After more than 200 million years, the Liwu River continues to carve Taroko Gorge**



## Taiwan KOM

Do you have what it takes to become the King? Prove it...

Cyclist retraced the exact route of the Taiwan KOM Challenge from Hualien up to the highest point of Taiwan Highway - Mount Wuling. This world-class 100km ride is a true test of strength and character with elevations reaching 3,275m, and gradients of up to 25 per cent. To register, riders must submit a personal riding CV along with their application. Only 300 riders will be selected for the 2013 event.

**What:** Taiwan KOM

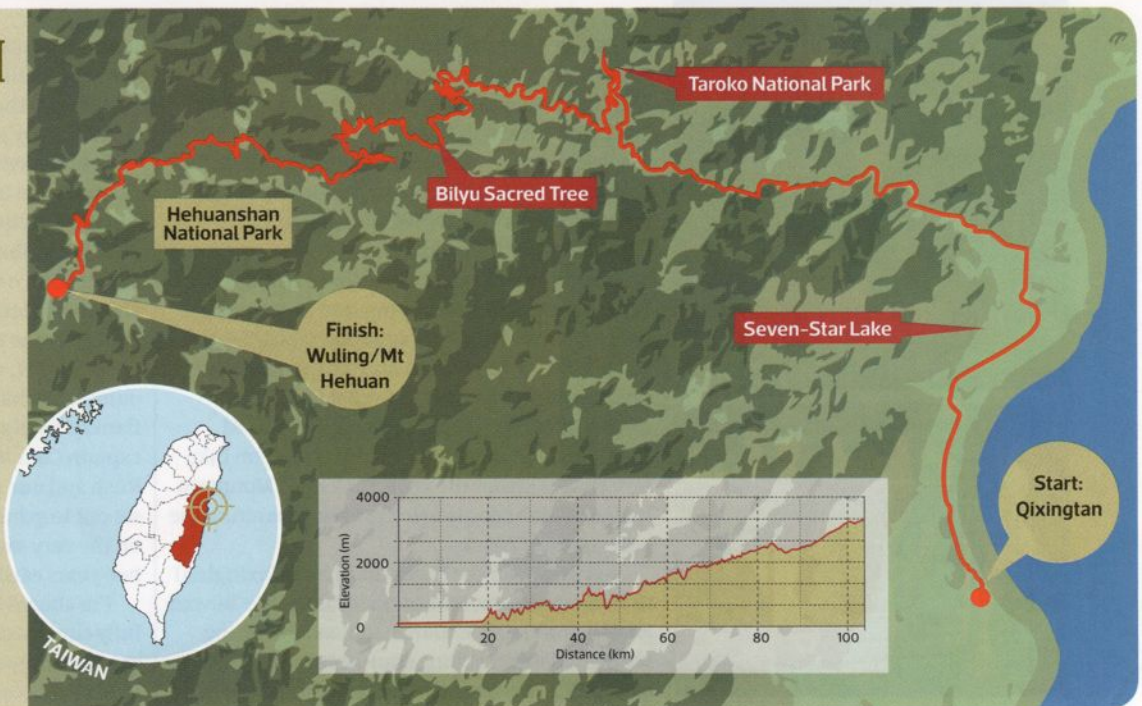
**When:** November 9, 2013

**Distance:** 100km

**Max elevation:** 3,275m

**Entry:** \$75 per rider

**Contact:** taiwankom.org





## 'Taiwan has within its boundary one of the greatest densities of high mountains of any place in the world'

Consider this: the small island has within its boundary one of the greatest densities of high mountains anywhere in the world, with 258 peaks towering 3,000m or more above sea level. To put it in perspective, Australia's highest summit, Mt Kosciuszko, located in the Snowy Mountains of NSW, slouches at just 2,228m. Paltry in comparison.

What's more impressive is that Taiwan is a land of just 36,193km<sup>2</sup>, compared to Australia's 7,692,024. With such topography, it only makes sense that Taiwan should host an international cycling event. The Taiwan Cyclist Federation obviously agreed, and thus the Taiwan KOM Challenge was created in 2011. This 100km bike race snakes across the island's Central Mountain Range, which runs north to south, separating the east and west coast.

Starting from the Seven Star Lake (Qixingtan) in Hualien, the race takes riders along the Taiwan Highway and up Hehuanshan Road to Wuling with gradients reaching soul-destroying pitches of nearly 25 per cent near the summit. While the

tallest mountain in Taiwan is Xiuguluan at 3,860m, Wuling Peak (3,275m) at Mt Hehuan (3,416m) is the highest point on the island accessible by road.

Just two years old, the KOM already attracts cyclists from all over the world. More than 380 riders participated in the inaugural event in 2011, including former pro cyclist Michael Carter (US), a veteran of all three Grand Tours, who said afterwards, "I have never seen anything like this. Just incredible."

At *Cyclist*, we were determined to see for ourselves what the fuss was all about. And so, flanked by photographer Simon Francis, ride captain Cam McLean, domestique Benjamin Rush and our native tour guide Francis Hu, we set out to grind, spin and melt above the tarmac on the very same route Carter had raved about two years earlier.

I'm aboard the latest Giant TCR Advanced, fully equipped with Shimano's topline mechanical groupset – the 11-speed Dura-Ace 9000. I'd already tested the Propel





## By the numbers

Because everyone loves stats

**7,258**

Sydney to Taipei in kilometres

**3,275**

Altitude in metres of the maximum elevation

**104**

Distance travelled in kilometres

**75**

Entry price in dollars per rider

**28**

Tooth rear sprocket recommended

**0**

Lowest elevation in metres



Advanced SL0 for the launch issue of *Cyclist* and had been impressed, and I'd heard more great things about the TCR from the team in Adelaide prior to the Tour Down Under. I was keen to experience Belkin Pro Cycling's weapon of choice for myself.

We sweat buckets from the start, the sultry summer heat taking its toll just 5km into the ride. The temperature is 35 degrees Celsius and feels even hotter over the tacky black asphalt. After 10km we exit the suburban sprawl of Hualien, Taiwan's largest county, and catch our last glimpse of the sparkling Pacific Ocean before entering the gates of Taroko National Park.

One of eight national parks in Taiwan, Taroko was named after Taroko Gorge. One look and we quickly realise we're not in Kansas anymore. This land is vastly different from anything I've encountered in Australia. Established in 1932, when Taiwan was still part of the Empire of Japan, the park spans across Taichung City, Nantou County and Hualien County and features massive stone walls and lush green canopies

We slice our way through the towering cliffs of marble, along the very same Liwu River (River of the Mist) that carved the gorge more than 200

million years ago. It's easy to see why Taroko means "magnificent and beautiful" in the Truku language, which belongs to the tribe of the same name. The Truku people are one of 14 registered indigenous tribes in Taiwan.

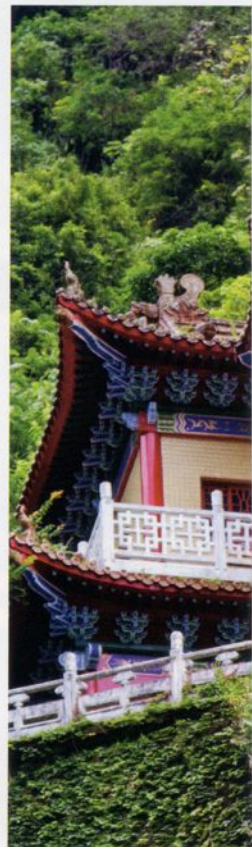
The landscape is prehistoric in terms of scale and atmosphere, with more than 20km of jagged vertical cliffs, some towering more than 1,000m high. There are points where we're literally forced to look straight up to see the sky.

Just 8km into the park, we're stalled by a traffic jam on the narrow, two-lane highway. A brief chat with the traffic controller reveals that a massive landslide a few weeks earlier is the cause of the delay. While road crews work feverishly to clear the debris, traffic is at a standstill. Scooters, cars, buses and even bicycles are only permitted to cross the danger zone in 10-minute bursts every two hours.

It's a hell of a wait, but this was one hell of a landslide. A limestone wall more than 400m high had collapsed after a 6.3 magnitude earthquake shook Taiwan on June 2, killing two and injuring 21. Taiwan is in a seismically active zone located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, the edge of the Philippine Sea Plate to the west and the

**Above: Switchbacks at 3,000m on the west side of Wuling Peak at Mt. Hehuan**

**Right: Traditional Chinese pagodas, shrines and temples are a reminder of the island's rich, spiritual culture and heritage**



**‘Although a favourite route for oversized tourist buses, the traffic is light and relatively well-mannered’**



Eurasian Plate to the east. Geologists have identified 42 active faults on the island.

The first recorded earthquake in Taiwan was in 1624; the most recent major earthquake occurred on September 21, 1999. That quake, known as “921” after the month and day, registered a 7.3 on the Richter Scale and claimed a staggering 2,415 lives.

But while the island has a history of volatility, its volcanic and seismic nature has also helped shape a geographical paradise and allowed for a burgeoning hotspot of international tourism.

#### **Cruising the highway**


Construction of the Central Cross-Island Highway, or Provincial Highway No. 8, began on July 7, 1956 under ousted Chinese military leader Chiang Kai-shek. It opened on May 9, 1960, connecting Hualien with Taichung and running through mostly rugged and unstable terrain. Heavy rain from tropical storms and typhoons, as well as the seismic tremors mentioned, often dislodge soil and rocks onto the highway making it impassable.

At our own impasse, we meet a young American, Emma Wu Watkins, 21, of Baltimore.

She’s in the second week of an eight-week holiday and today is riding 40km from Hualien to the tiny village of Tianxiang on a rented, 20-inch, 18-speed Dahon folding bike – a task we find both gutsy and insane. After a 15-minute wait, we pray for Emma’s survival and give a fond farewell before we set off again.

Although a favourite route for oversized tourist buses, the traffic is light and relatively well-mannered. Words of encouragement are commonplace as drivers shout “jai you!,” which roughly translates to “come on, you can do it!” in our native English.

The road is first rate. It’s newly sealed, so it’s both smooth and fast. As expected, the TCR responds well to both traits. The ride is still relatively flat with rolling undulations that encourage subtle attacks, allowing momentum to gently propel us from one crescent to the next. I’m actually wondering when the meat of the ride begins, because so far it’s been dessert first as we rack up kilometres with ease.

At 27km we pass the Eternal Spring Shrine, or Changchun. It’s a traditional Chinese memorial that pays tribute to the 226 national army veterans who died while constructing the 





**Above:** The final ascent up Hehuanshan Road to the east of Wuling Peak on Mt. Hehuan



**Left:** Peering across the Central Mountain Range within the Sea of Clouds at 1,500m above sea level



◦ highway from 1956–60. As an ironic reminder of the land's instability, we learn that this is the third such shrine constructed, spotting the remnants of the previous two altars, which have succumbed to landslides as well.

The name of the temple derives from the Changchun Falls that never stop flowing through the shrine's centre. The setting's natural beauty and commemorative purpose make this a truly spiritual place that resonates whether you're a native or not. Most people stop to take in the site, and we're no exception.

Back on the bikes we pass Swallow Grotto at Yanzihkou. The main road continues straight into a newly constructed tunnel to the left, while the original hand-dug, 1.5km road to the right allows for perfect viewing of the swallow nests lining the potholes in the gorge's cliff face. The swallows no longer visit Yanzihkou, but remnants of their craftsmanship remain.

The pace is steady as we pass the "Tunnel of Nine Turns" (Jiucyudong), a winding, dark cavern that allows for pedestrian traffic to sightsee along the gorge. Signs warning of "falling rocks" are posted everywhere along the route, but the Taiwanese do a remarkable job of containing the hazards with reinforced barriers and steel safety nets.

As we exit yet another tunnel, we cross Liufang

road ahead is pointed towards the sun and the all-encompassing Sea of Clouds.

### Beyond the clouds

Avid readers of *Cyclist* may recall that I'm not necessarily fond of extreme climbs. My own personal cycling nirvana is straight off the pages of Issue 2's Big Ride Cairns. I'm not – and never will be – someone who might be confused with a 'mountain goat'. I like my chainrings big and my roads flat.

Today is no such ride. Equipped with a 53/39 front and 12-25 rear, I'm probably suffering more than most. In hindsight, I should have opted for a compact (50/34) with an 11-28 ratio on the back end. Everyone's threshold is different when climbing, and I have a tendency to chew up the gears quickly when going uphill.

While taking on Taiwan, I'm reminded of my participation in the annual Sea to Summit Challenge back in 2009. It's a charity ride established by Redkite to support families with children suffering from cancer, and it took me to the very edge of my own physical limits. Sea to Summit is a one-day sportive from the southern NSW coastal town of Merimbula to Charlotte's Pass near Mt. Kosciuszko, with an option to visit Kosciuszko's peak the following day by mountain bike. I vividly recall sitting in my

## 'Signs warning of falling rocks are posted everywhere along the route'

Bridge. Here we encounter the Taroko Gorge's highest cliff, Jhuilu. Standing at more than 1,100m, you have to tilt your head fully upwards to see the top. Next is Cihmu Bridge, and then Frog Rock, a large marble boulder with a green schist top and natural white underbelly that gives it an uncanny resemblance to its amphibian namesake.

We reach Tianxiang and settle in to refuel before continuing the ascent. Cam and Ben have arranged for a hearty banquet with everything under the Taiwanese sun: ripe pineapples, bananas and watermelon with fresh croissants, and hearty rolls go down quickly. The farm-raised ham was tender and savoury, a beautiful complement to the sweet, succulent fruit. As we finish dining under the shade of a traditional Chinese pagoda, we see in the distance what appears to be the young American frantically pedalling her diminutive rented folding bike. Emma had made her way. This was a welcome sight.

With a quick wave we're off with refreshed legs and a full belly. We would need both, as the first 40km proved to be merely a prologue. The

room trembling from exhaustion after the 10-hour, 240km ride, which featured more than 5,000 metres of constant climbing. My roommate on the trip, former NRL interim CEO Shane Mattiske, was unaffected by my trembling. I wish I could have said the same of his snoring.

Nearly four years later, I'm finding myself in familiar territory: extreme discomfort. The highway coils blindly and slants violently for the next 50km. The villages become fewer and farther between. I'm in awe of the landscape. Each passing kilometre brings us closer to the sky until we pierce the ceiling that is the Sea of Clouds – a white ocean of cotton that blankets the sky from 1,500m to 2,500m in elevation. This shroud hides the titans that lie in wait for unsuspecting cyclists that dare journey beyond its veil.

This is rural Taiwan. Outside the mega-cities of Taipei and Taichung, Taiwan has an innocent, simplistic charm that's void of excessive communication and commercialism. It reminds us to slow down and enjoy the ride – so to speak. ◦

**Below: Taiwan's Central Cross-Island Highway features some of the world's most spectacular scenic views and challenging climbs**

Slowing down is no longer an option – it's an ultimatum. The roads are now narrower, people scarcer and air thinner. Legs are weak, core is collapsing and lungs are starving. We're at altitude and each passing minute brings us closer to the summit and utter exhaustion. Altitude sickness is now a concern.

Yet we push forward.

Cam has guided tourists over this climb more than 100 times now and it certainly shows. He doesn't flinch as the road rises, and he attacks each kilometre steadily focused with no wasted motion or effort. With Cam riding point, we continue our gruelling ascent,

the gradients now reaching eight, nine and even 10 per cent.

#### The summit

Arrival at the Bilyu Sacred Tree means we have about an hour of hard riding still ahead of us. A plaque tells the history of this ancient Lunta Fir standing 50m high with a diameter of 3.5m. Situated between the towns of Ci'en and Bilyu, it's the largest tree along the highway.

Even the tallest tree is left below us as we push above the tree line. The legs are gone and I'm now riding on instinct as gradients increase to an outrageous 15, 18 and 21 per cent.

## 'The legs are gone and I'm now riding on instinct as gradients increase to an outrageous 15, 18 and 21 per cent'

The weather is becoming a concern with temperatures dropping rapidly the further we climb, and we're losing daylight fast. What was a hot, humid summer day at sea level has given way to cold, blustery conditions near the summit. It's now 8 degrees and falling. Luckily, we came prepared with insulated vests and arm warmers.

Climbing is an art form. It requires more mental strength than pure leg power. Climbers see each ascent as yet another opportunity to test their mettle and build their resolve. For me, each climb is mental warfare with bouts of self-doubt and despair. The last 10km would have been tough to manage as a standalone ride, much less tacked at the end of an already brutal 90km ascent.

The last 1,000m is madness as we close on Mt Hehuan. We pass an abandoned ski resort once frequented by Taiwan's elite – the unreliability of snowfall in the region meant the resort was closed years ago. Each kilometre registered on my Garmin seems destined to be my last. I'm digging deep for every revolution to push the TCR onward. I struggle as the altitude restricts my chest and suffocates my lungs.

With a few final words of encouragement from Cam, I surge desperately to reach the top. We make it. After more than 3,800m of climbing in one day, we're physically on top of Taiwan and emotionally on top of the world.

The setting sun bathes the Central Taiwan Mountains in beautiful pastels of pink, purple, red and gold. Gold is a colour that symbolises "freedom of worldly cares" in Chinese culture, and at this very moment we are indeed free. On this day, we are kings of the mountain.

Now we descend, but that's another story... ❁

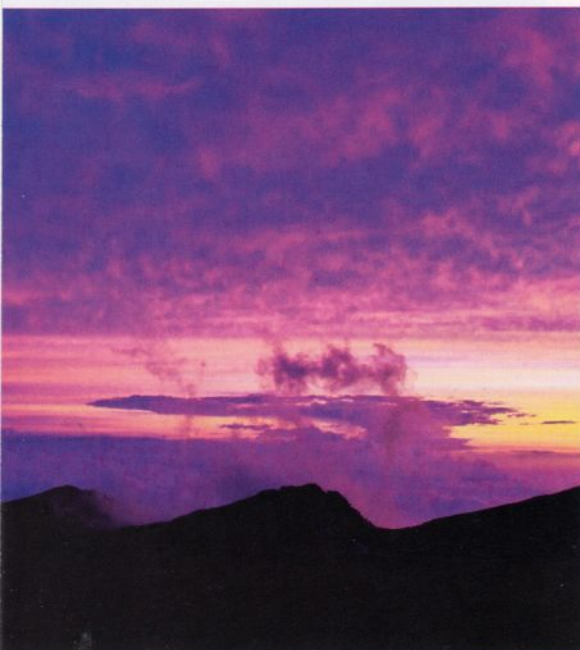




**Left: The Sea of Clouds envelops Taiwan's Central Mountain Range**

**Below left: Enjoying a pastel sunset at 3,275m after a very long day in the saddle**

**Below right: The sign and the smiles say it all. Cyclist takes a moment to commemorate a job well done**



## How to book...

### FOLLOW IN OUR WHEELTRACKS

In Motion Asia, founded by New Zealand expat Cam McLean in 2005, specialises in rock climbing, canyoning, adventure trekking, mountain bike and, of course, road cycling. In Motion Asia offers fully supported trips that are specifically designed to take cyclists on only the best adventure destinations.

Visit the imposing Taroko Gorge along the same route as the Taiwan KOM Challenge, discover glistening Sun Moon Lake or explore the tranquil East Coast Rift Valley.

If spectacular, continuous 3,000m downhills, monster climbs and miles upon miles of fast undulating coastline terrain is your thing then In Motion Asia is your ticket. Combine this with amazing landscapes, warm hospitality, fascinating culture and ample wildlife, and you have one of the best road cycling destinations in the world.

For more information check out [visitinmotionasia.com](http://visitinmotionasia.com).