

Taking the Long Road Home

Instead of taking the normal route for an overseas corporate relocation – a plane – Susanna Thornton decided to make the 8,000 mile journey from Hong Kong to London...on a bicycle.

Changing jobs can offer exciting opportunities – new posting, new country, new adventures. Take Susanna Thornton, head of Reuters equities products, Asia, based in Hong Kong for the last three years. When offered the chance to be part of a new exchange-traded products team based in London, Thornton planned her relocation – but not by taking a flight back as many would do. On April 9, Thornton left Hong Kong and began an 8,000-mile cycle ride to London for charity, due to arrive in late August.

“I wanted to see what the places are like that I’ve been flying over back and forth! I wanted to see how the landscapes and people of Asia and Europe connect,” said Thornton when asked why she was undertaking such a challenging ride. “You meet hundreds of interesting people – people are very curious when you pedal up hot and tired and dusty past their fields or into their village.”

By completing the four-month adventure which she calls “The Long Road Home” Thornton, who joined Reuters in 2000, hopes to raise \$140,000 to build a simple sports center for street children in Cambodia and to set up sports facilities in earthquake-affected areas in Pakistan. Thornton’s journey is being documented in words, pod casts, videos and photos on her website www.thelongroadhome.org.

The start of Thornton’s journey took her from Hong Kong and into mainland China via the Wanchai Ferry. Although she left with a small group of friends and colleagues, she was soon alone on her journey. Did being a lone woman traveler worry her? “It’s not been a problem, so far,” said Thornton. “Being female (and a bit grey) has in fact probably been an advantage. Men along the road have almost all been very nicely respectful of me, and helpful. Once men hear I’ve cycled from Hong Kong, they get excited about how courageous and strong they think that is, they shout it to their friends, and everyone offers me food. Kind friends at Reuters Hong Kong are operating a heart-beat system so that if they don’t hear from me they’ll call out the police in the last place they knew I was.”

Her regular blogs track the highs and lows of the journey east to west and tell of the many adventures, including some early map reading mistakes. “Yesterday I rode from Yangshuo over the mountains,” Thornton wrote in April. “I didn’t really plan to do that, but my map has no contours, so you don’t know what’s



coming until you’re already doing it. Actually it was absolutely fabulous!”

However other parts of the journey were less successful. “I slogged it all the way to the village of Ping’an up a ludicrously steep 6km of hairpins, only to find the last 1km into the village was a flight of rough stone steps, which I couldn’t do on the bike. Arghhh. So I rode 6km down again!”

Other challenges were more rewarding such as the arrival in Sichuan. After a two-day journey across mountains, Thornton reported: “I finally crossed into Sichuan at a bend of the river and climbed steadily up. It was the most lovely climb – long but not too steep. I put it in my list of most enjoyable climbs.”

Thornton continued to advance to higher altitude with a four-day journey climbing to 2,500 meters (2735 yards) into Songpan, in the mountains of North Sichuan. However Thornton succumbed

to altitude sickness having reached 3,500 meters (3827 yards). For two days she had battled the final 140km (87 miles) into Zoige in the Sichuan Province. “But I can’t manage it,” Thornton wrote. “I’m completely done in and have had to retrace down to a town and rest.” After recuperating, Thornton took a bus to Langmusi via Zoige. “I went up the same track that I’d struggled up on the bike in the cold and rain. Now of course it was glorious sunshine. Ha!” Disappointed, Thornton continues, “I watched to see how close to the top I’d got before flaking out...Really close! Only a couple of miles before a last set of hairpins, and then I would have made it. How frustrating.”

Fortified with endless supplies of pancakes and boiled eggs, Thornton’s journey continued towards the coast of China reaching the China-Kyrgyzstan border on 17 June. Through a number of checkpoints and barriers Thornton eventually handed in her Chinese departure form. “I had ticked the box ‘going home’,” Thornton wrote. “Good bye China! Felt awfully sad suddenly, after all this long time in Hong Kong and then long weeks cycling to get here.”

Thornton took a short break from her ride, returning to the UK briefly to check in with her family and backup team and to try and resolve visa problems. However Thornton was unable to secure an Uzbekistan visa and had to change her route to go around Uzbekistan, aiming for the Caspian Sea. At the time of writing, Thornton was in Kazakhstan. “All along the road people

cheer as if I was in the Tour de France,” she says. “Shepherds far out on the plain wave, people on horses herding goats wave and shout, lorry drivers toot and wave, teenage boys give me thumbs up. Children going to the village pump put down their buckets and wave and grannies with headscarves make babies on their laps wave.”

Thornton has recorded several podcasts as part of her travel diary. “Traveling by bike means you see, hear and smell everything much more vividly than when traveling by car or train.”

These are now available via iTunes: simply search “Susanna Thornton” as the artist or “The Long Road Home” as the title.

The journey has taken its toll on Thornton with her lips cut and bleeding from the wind, her hands rough and sore, a striped sun tan and white circles around her eyes where her goggles have been. Her bike has suffered numerous punctures and, at 4,100 meters (4483 yards) above sea level, Thornton reported frozen brake levers. But what motivates Thornton to get on the bike at the start of each day? “Always having new landscapes, lovely people, interesting places to discover. And coffee and tea, and toast with strawberry jam and chocolate, and pancakes and cream and honey for breakfast. Also especially looking forward to see my Nana back in Manchester as soon as I get back. She is 93 and is very cross with me for going madly off doing things like this!”

However the challenge is worth it considering the target of \$140,000 that she has to aim for. Corporate sponsors have already pledged in excess of \$55,000 and public donors have contributed another \$8,500.

She has two websites set up – www.justgiving.com/thelongroadhomepakistan and www.justgiving.com/thelongroadhomecambodia

Just as *Shattered* was going to press, we learned that the M’Lop Tapang charity has been able to secure the land for a playground. The land that M’Lop Tapang has purchased is at a site a few hundred yards from Sihanoukville’s central market in the very center of town. The location is five minutes from the slums and five minutes from M’Lop Tapang’s drop-in center for older, mostly drug-abusing children.

“This area is an ideal location, as there are many bored youth using drugs nearby,” said Thouch Seth, M’Lop Tapang’s Outreach Manager. The playground will have a small information

point, where all children can meet social workers if needed. “The families of many children do not allow their kids to attend our centers,” said Touch. “But this playground allows those children to meet outreach social workers, and at the same time have fun and be safe.”

In the late-July rainy season, conditions are particularly hard for Cambodia’s poor. Slum areas become a river of garbage, water borne diseases and mud. The M’Lop Tapang education center is full with up to 100 children at any time. M’Lop Tapang

tries to help street-children to build stable lives and reintegrate into their families and communities. This summer, Map, an 18 year old ex-drug user, has just been reintegrated with his family after eight years of no contact. The M’Lop Tapang drop-in center and outreach team encouraged him to leave the streets, stop using drugs, learn new skills and seek out his family. Now he has his own small business with pony and cart in his home province. His family is delighted to have him back having thought they would never see him again. The M’Lop Tapang Outreach team does regular follow up visits and Map is extremely happy to be both back with his family and making his own income.

M’Lop Tapang expects that more than 300 kids a day will use the sports center, making a terrific difference, not just to M’Lop Tapang but to the whole community. Maggie Eno, who runs M’Lop Tapang, writes “The sports centre will be one of the most effective programs yet. Sports can help enormously when working with kids, for building self-esteem, making friends, keeping fit and replacing boredom. The space will be open to all children, from every background. It will be their place. It will be unique.”

