

## Cycling with the elephants from Takengon to Meulaboh

### Summary:

This is a fantastic ride. The downhill is really spectacular and the presence of nearby elephants make this ride really exciting. You are surrounded by the biggest forest of Sumatra, with beautiful peaks and views. The ride can be made in two days. If you depart early from Takengon you can sleep in the village of Beutong Ateuh, 40 km. from Takengon. Ask the village head (pak Geuchik) for assistance. Otherwise there are small wooden houses near a river, 7 km and a big hill before Beutong Ateuh. You can wash in the river. The road is in good condition, only the last part to the peak Singgah Mata (1970m.) is not asphalted yet. This part goes through protected forest. Local transport passes by in case of emergency. Check your brakes. Make sure you are in good physical condition.

### The ride:

At 03:00 a.m. we arrive in Takengon, after a 10 hour ride from Banda in the L300, a local bus. The hostel, Batang Ruan, is dark when we arrive, but after some loud "hello's", the owner of the place welcomes us with her candle. We get a cozy small wooden room and fall asleep.

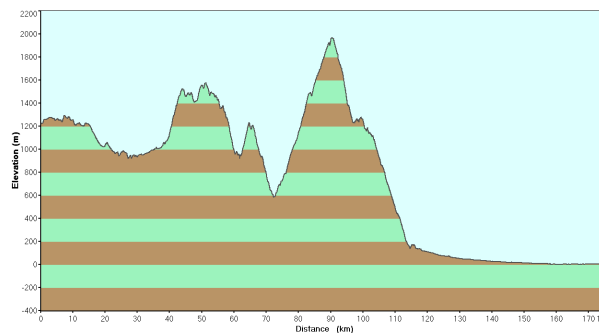


We wake up with the sun shining in our face and the shock of the fresh temperature. On the market we enjoy our kopi Gayo, the local coffee, with nasi goreng (fried rice). Everybody says "Hello Mister" and "goodmorning". We are quite a sensation in this little town. After some last shopping, crackers and water, we cycle out of town around 11:30, into the mountains.....Jiha!

Takengon lays at an altitude of 1200 m. It has a cool climate. Takengon is famous for its coffee production. And indeed, the first part of the day we cycle from one coffee plantation to the other. We are descending past a nice meandering river, the Krueng Pensangan. The villagers have a friendly gaze when we cycle past them. A local bus passes us, and than in the next village we pass it, and this happens several times, the greetings with the driver and the passengers becoming louder and louder.



Rumours go that the first stretch past this river will have a radical change soon. A foreign company plans to build a hydro electricity plant right in this river. 7 villages will disappear under water. The villagers probably will get new land.....from the pristine forest. Damn!

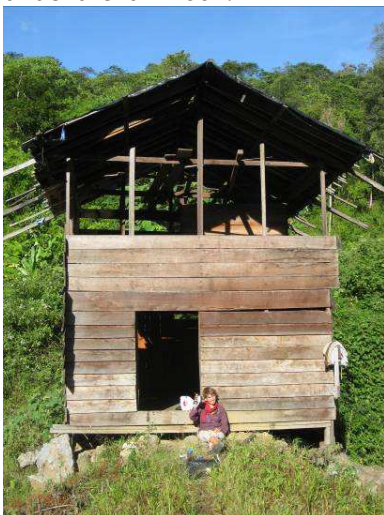


We ask the way in one village and have lunch in the other. Almost all villages sell basic supplies such as water and cookies. The owner of the warung in Brawang Gadeng has moved here from Medan! This area is still so much in development. After this village, the road goes up and the climbing starts. The coffee plantations make place for forest, or what it once used to be. Along the road are really primitive shelters of people who try to start a garden in the burnt down forest. How they survive is hard to imagine. After a peak the shelters stop and we are in pure forest. This is so beautiful. And this is where the elephants are. We smell them. We feel them. You can see their paths

through the bushes beside the road and broken trees. Luckily it's down-hill so I have enough speed to avoid them. But what do I do if I see one on the road? Ring my bell? Luckily (?) we only see their excrements.



Around six o'clock and 40 km's of cycling it's time to make decisions. Cycle on to the next village? Or pin our tent down here, among the tigers and the elephants? Both options are not very tempting. The people we meet near a drilling site for gold tell us that Bateung will only be 7 km's away. But the road goes up and our legs are soar.....Luckily, a nice lady tells us about her primitive wooden house, a little bit up to the river. It's open, and we can sleep in it. GREAT! This is exactly what we want; nature, a safe place to protect us and a fresh river to rinse off all the sweat. We make a fire to chase away the animals and we re-cook our bungkus under the full moon.

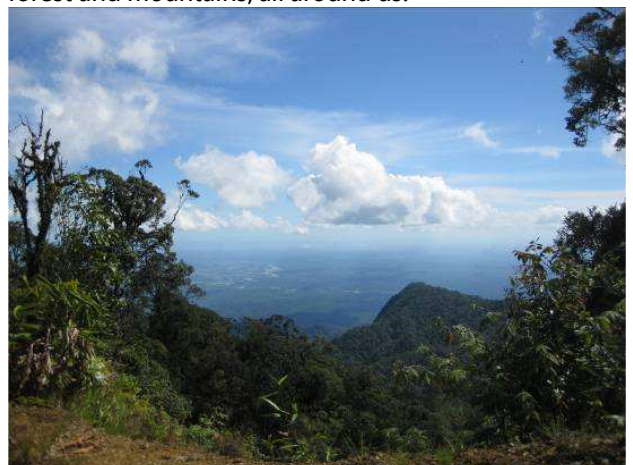


The next day we wake up with the sun rising behind the hills. We wash in the river and enjoy our coffee and breakfast. Than starts the climbing again. 200 meters. At the top we can see the village of Beutong Ateu down in the valley. Now and than we see signs: *Site ini de reklamasi oleh Media Group*, or: this site has been claimed by the Media Group. Media Group owns Metro TV, one of Indonesian biggest TV stations. Besides, it owns a gold company. So they have plans here. Most probably not to make a documentary about illegal logging or gold



excavation.....instead of birds we here the sound of chainsaws. After an hour we arrive at 10 in Beutong. Coffee time! The people are very friendly. It's only later that I learn about a big tragedy that happened here in 1999. The TNI came down and put around 60 men to the wall and shot them all dead. See: <http://www.hraicjk.org/bahasa/tni.html> or <http://www.desaparecidos.org/kontras/news/kill.html>

From 600 m. we start the climb to 1970 m. The road is not as steep as the day before, but, indeed, it's climbing and climbing. I only cycle in the lightest gear. Going down I just relax my legs. We pass a gate saying that we enter a protected area; oh no, will there be any tigers? Over and over again I have to convince myself that tigers hunt at night, not a day light. It almost becomes a mantra. With this mantra and some others that follow the beating of my heart I climb and climb. Up till now the road was well asphalted, but suddenly it becomes rocky. Several hills are so steep I have to get of the bike and start pushing it. Anyways, walking or cycling with this steepness doesn't make a big difference either. We climb, we rest, we eat crackers and we enjoy the beautiful views. Fantastic. So much forest and mountains, all around us.



At 1970 m. we have a great view over the sea and the coast below us. Meulaboh; here we come! The downhill is great, and again, elephant pooh's.....after Jeuram, a small town, the road is less fun, too much traffic. At 21:00, after 120 km's we finally arrive in our hotel