

In the SADDLE for charity

A charity cycle ride organised by a Sutton coldfield businessman has raised a huge sum for a worthy cause. Simon Hale caught up with the riders following their impressive feat

Even those striving to emulate Bradley Wiggins and Mark Cavendish found the idea daunting. For local cycling experts and novices alike were being invited by a Sutton Coldfield businessman to saddle up and pedal 300 miles

in six days for charity.

This was no jaunt through the English countryside that Neil Gibbard proposed to his clients and colleagues but a potentially life-changing journey through Vietnam and Cambodia.

Fortunately the regional director for air conditioning installation specialist Coolair Equipment Ltd was able to reassure his team – as he'd already done the trip before.

Neil and Coolair's finance director Helen Sharratt and a couple of customers had raised £13,000 three years ago from a similar ride through the former war-torn countries, organised by the company's supplier and business partner Mitsubishi Electric Air Conditioning Systems.

"It was such a success that we felt we should look at doing the same trip and our management team, including managing director John Otterson, agreed – and as invariably happens I ended up taking responsibility for it," said Neil.

"With the help of Mitsubishi Electric's Midlands account manager Tom Williams, we built up a team of 18, including staff from Coolair's three national offices and our customers."

Not only was the ride to help celebrate Coolair's 35th anniversary, but the aim from the outset was also to raise a bundle of cash for charity.

"From a personal point of view, I'd come to the stage of life at the age of 45 where I'd achieved my career ambitions, had three lovely children – Hannah, Katie and Lily, and wanted to give something back," Neil explained.

"We chose a cancer charity because it's an illness that affects so many people in so many ways, but

the dilemma was in deciding which one.

"So we approached the tour operator Charity Challenge, who introduced us to Challenge Cancer UK. It appealed to us all because the funds it raises are distributed to cancer charities throughout the whole journey of cancer from research to respite care."

Once a contract had been signed between all three parties, Coolair agreed to meet the costs of the trip, leaving every rider happy that every penny raised would go to charity.

In the months leading up to the trip, Neil organised a charity ball at Aston Wood Golf Club that included moving presentations by Mark Roberts, founder of Challenge Cancer UK and two local ladies – Amanda Priddey and Isabella Johnson – who had survived breast cancer.

Two weeks before leaving for South East Asia, Coolair also held a sporting dinner at Moxhull Hall Hotel in Sutton Coldfield with former England footballer Paul Merson as the special guest that raised £10,000 alone.

While money was being raised, riders were getting fit.

"I didn't tell everyone to do a 50-mile ride every Sunday but I did warn them not to just turn up and expect to jump on a bike," said Neil.

"I did plenty of cycling riding around Sutton Park, away from all the traffic, to get some miles into my legs," he added.

A former pupil of Barr Beacon School in Walsall, Neil took up cycling after a knee injury put paid to playing football in his early 30s. He thought his best sporting days were over until he bought a mountain bike.

"I would do 20 miles or so a day up and down the hills around Cannock Chase until Mitsubishi invited me to take part in a charity bike ride. But that meant cycling 40 to 50 miles a day, so I invested in a road bike and have since taken part in a number of 100-mile challenges across the UK."

But the well-maintained tarmacked roads of Britain



Team Coolair get ready for a day in the saddle; and right, the team cross part of the Mekong Delta by ferry, and Neil Gibbard at the finish line.

are a far cry from the conditions that Team Coolair faced as they set off from Saigon in Vietnam on their six-day journey ending at Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Clad in cycling vests branded with their companies, sponsors and individual charities, the group negotiated paths that would have been entirely alien to Bradley Wiggins.

Bouncing past banana plantations, around rice fields and twisty temple-lined tracks, the bikers delved deep into the heart of the lush Mekong Delta in Vietnam and then through the dry lands of ancient Cambodia.

To make things easier, they were accompanied by a support vehicle to carry bags and friendly guides who accompanied them through each country.

"Our guides taught us far more about the country than we had expected, especially on a visit to a Killing Fields site in Cambodia where we were told about the shocking history of invasions, bombing and genocide and showed masses of gruesome human remains."

The guides spoke of their experiences of having their entire families wiped out as the party was shown a glass house containing hundreds of skulls.

Neatly laid out in sections by age and sex, beginning with small children, they were the result of communist leader Pol Pot's 'peasant revolution' that killed 1.7 million people.

Despite their harrowing stories, Neil said the guides could "not have been nicer people" and very quickly became friends for life.

Equally the cyclists were greeted by smiling villagers wherever they went. "Children would

beam and come running up to us yelling greetings as they saw what to them must have been these funny-looking foreigners cycling by," said Neil.

"When we would stop in a village, we were told not to give money. Instead one or two of the guys would share out little crayons, bouncy balls or Haribos among the children – to their great delight.

"We were struck by how the villagers we met came across as such a happy and contented people while appearing to lead their lives without any of the trappings of modern life like iPhones and iPads that we take for granted in the West."

After nights spent sharing un-air conditioned hotel rooms, the team would be up at 7am for breakfast before being taken to the spot where they would start the day's cycling.

"This was normally on the outskirts of towns and cities so that we could avoid dicing with death among the millions of scooters that locals use to get to work.

"Each day we would cycle between 40 and 55 miles and spend the evening reviving ourselves with a couple of beers or laughing at the events of the day," said Neil.

These included stopping off at a street market where a number of riders were able to conquer a fear or two by having a tarantula placed on their tops – and being invited to taste snake.

"A few chose a snake from a tank, which was then bagged up and carried in our support vehicle so that our hotel could put it in a soup. Not all of us tried it."

There was also the five-a-side football match to which the guides challenged the cyclists at the end



The team on their way through the Vietnamese countryside.

"The finish was a very emotional moment for all the team members who embraced each other with love and respect having supported each other for all six days in hot, humid and punishing conditions."

Team Coolair cyclist Neil Gibbard.



A beautiful Buddhist temple.

of one of the day's rides, which resulted in a victory for England at the price of severe cramp for some that night.

So what was the biggest challenge for the riders? "The 40-degree heat and high humidity levels, without doubt," admitted Neil. "We knew that dehydration could be a problem so at the start of the journey Coolair presented a gift to each rider of a three-litre CamelBak hydration backpack so that people could drink and ride and keep fully hydrated.

"There were also drink stops along the route but there was little need for toilet stops because we were sweating out what we were drinking.

"What was almost as important was having a comfortable saddle. Some took their own while others were going to bed feeling very sore.

"After what he called 'a gruesome day in the saddle', one rider had to give up on his own personal attempts at treating himself and called on his room-mate to fit a plaster on a blister on his bottom," said Neil.

The first day's ride of 45 miles alongside the waterways and through the villages of the Mekong Delta took four hours and seven minutes at an average speed of 11 mph as a team camaraderie was created.

The following day, the riders headed out from their hotel in Tra Vinh to visit their first Buddhist temple. "The views of the beautiful green countryside as we cycled through rice paddy fields convinced us that cycling was the best way to experience any country and its culture," said Neil.

That was reinforced on day three when an early morning visit to a floating market to watch local

tradespeople selling fruit and vegetables to others on boats provided the prelude to a long 54-mile ride.

The fourth day involved visits to a brick kiln factory and a frog farm before the group ended up at the harrowing Killing Fields site.

A one-hour boat transfer across the Bassac River led to the team making their way through border control into Cambodia. This was followed by a further sailing to Phnom Penh in time for lunch at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, the base used by the foreign press to file news stories during the

Vietnam War.

New bikes were then collected for the final two days of cycling in Cambodia where a dust bowl provided a major contrast to Vietnam.

With their average speed raised to 13.3mph, the riders made the 44-mile stretch from Phnom Penh to Kampong Thum in three hours and 19 minutes.

"During the midday sun we shared the motorway with children on mopeds, carts pulled by oxen and vehicles of all shapes and sizes with passengers holding on for dear life," said Neil.

The final day's cycling took Team Coolair 40 miles to Siem Reap with a saddle time of three hours and 24 minutes, bringing the total mileage over all six days to 295 miles.

"After cycling the final ten miles after lunch, we regrouped for the final mile and cycled the last leg together to the finish line at Angkor Wat, the largest temple complex in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage site," Neil continued.

"This was a very emotional moment for all the team members who embraced each other with love and respect having supported each other for all six days in hot, humid and punishing conditions."

Neil said the journey had created lifetime memories and friendships. "It was no easy feat but every team member successfully completed every mile of the journey."

In fact the team's endeavours went well beyond expectations as Coolair found that the money raised for charity totted up to a cool £90,000.

The record-breaking sum was commended by Challenge Cancer UK with the presentation of its Outstanding Contribution Award to Neil Gibbard at the company's head office in Manchester.

Neil was also proud to accept an invitation to become a Corporate Ambassador for Challenge Cancer UK and has said he is looking forward to continuing to represent, support and raise funds for the deserving charity.

"The ride was definitely a 'win-win' situation for all concerned in terms of customer relationship building, fundraising and widening horizons. and we are already planning to repeat the exercise next year – and it won't be just for those who want to be the next Bradley Wiggins."



Neil Gibbard, left, and Tom Williams meet a Buddhist monk.