

The Bike Guru of Farrer Road

By Heather Clark

At the ripe old ages of six and four, neither of our children could ride a bicycle. There aren't many car-free stretches in our neighborhood where Margo and Theo can practise, and anyway scooters are so much *easier*... Whatever the reason, be it lack of ambition or parental fretting, this ruled out long rides along the East Coast Park, rambles through Bukit Brown and all the other two-wheeled hallmarks of a Singaporean childhood. But help was on the way, courtesy of a friend who passed me the phone number of the Singapore bike guru.

From his bicycle shop in a Housing and Development Board (HDB) block off Farrer Road, Edmund Lee teaches the fundamentals of bike-riding and guarantees you'll be riding after four hours of classes. Patient, kind and enthusiastic, Uncle Edmund has taught hundreds of people how to ride – from preschool children to their up-for-anything grandmothers – and he's got it down to a science. With bikes, helmets, knee and elbow pads provided, it was easy to book a lesson and head over there the next day.

Margo and Theo agreed the first lesson was a lot of fun. First of all there was Boy-Boy, a friendly dust-mop of a dog that kept them entertained before being sequestered in the Lees' living quarters. Uncle Edmund showed them every step of riding a bike, from kicking the kickstand to the correct way to get on and off. Then, with arms of steel, he held on to their bikes while pedalling alongside. They looped around the huge void deck, one after the other, with big grins and no training wheels. Margo and Theo came back convinced that bicycling was a cinch.



The second lesson brought them down to earth as Uncle relaxed his hold on their bikes and let them wobble around a bit on their own. The third lesson was uphill again – their first real solo ride. The next few lessons saw a few missteps, stumbles, glitches and spills, but also steady progress and a huge increase in their confidence. It was somewhat humbling to see how much better a

pro was at explaining the whole business than we parents were. Although we had been a bit reluctant to farm out this classic childhood milestone, the truth was we weren't making much progress ourselves. Both children were riding well by the end of their lessons and now the world's roads are theirs to explore.



An added perk was exploring the estate, getting a sense of the vibrant HDB community that expats rarely experience. As time passed we began to recognise familiar faces, including the two boys who expertly navigated their RipStiks through benches and pedestrians, never once losing their place in tightly-held books. The grey-haired matron who worked in the seafood restaurant once smilingly joined our ball game and Margo was

delighted to see her Mandarin teacher making her way home. Theo had a bargain-rate haircut at the Malay Barber Gent's Salon. One evening a memorial service was held for a resident who had died two years before. There were tents festooned with coloured lights, smoking joss sticks and intricately crafted funerary items – even a paper Mercedes. And of course it was fun having dinner at the HDB restaurants (admittedly opting for pizza over frog porridge) and the nearby Empress Market, where the children wolfed down greasy *pratas* and sat spellbound by a Chinese-language hospital drama. Like learning how to ride a bike, it was altogether unforgettable.



Heather Clark works with the PASSAGE team.

All photos by the author