

PLAYING AWAY
TRIATHLETES
ON TOUR

PLAYING AWAY SPORTS TOURS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH INTERNATIONAL



Simply stunning: be sure to take in the views from the bike course



Sampling the street food – cheap, fresh and tasty



You name it, they've copied it! The night markets are a lot of fun

THE BEACH

WHEN IT COMES TO ULTIMATE DESTINATIONS FOR END-OF-SEASON TRIATHLONS, YOU'LL BE HARD PUSHED TO FIND A MORE PERFECT SPOT THAN PHUKET, AS **EMMA-KATE LIBBURY** FOUND OUT

WHAT IRONMAN 70.3 ASIAPACIFIC CHAMPIONSHIPS
WHERE LAGUNA PHUKET, THAILAND
WHEN DECEMBER

F For these second year running, the Ironman 70.3 Asia Pacific Championships took place on this incredibly beautiful island off Thailand's south-west coast.

The island has been popular with tourists for decades and it's not hard to see why: white sandy beaches, turquoise blue seas, balmy temperatures

and locals whose welcome is warmer than the weather. This is paradise and it's damn near impossible not to fall in love with it. On arrival, it's very easy to just slip into holiday mode – and stay there. In fact, it would be wise to travel to the island with a post-it note reading, "remember you are here to race".

The Laguna Phuket resort, with its 1,000 acres of tropical parkland and three kilometres of gorgeous beaches, plays host to the week-long triathlon festival which begins with the Laguna Phuket Triathlon (LPT) and culminates with the 70.3 race.



And they're off! The open water swim event reminds you this is work, not play

Words Emma-Kate Libbury Photos Emma-Kate Libbury Main image courtesy of Laguna Phuket





Come on down if the price is right: bartering for bargains at the markets



The race is great, but the after-party is even better!



Emma-Kate befriends the locals

The LPT has now been running for 18 years and with the likes of Craig Alexander, Greg Bennett and Belinda Granger as past champions, it certainly attracts a high calibre of athlete. The 1.8k swim, 55km bike and 12km run appeals to athletes from all over the world and rightly so—it's a stunning yet challenging course and your vacation begins the moment you cross the finish line.

Obviously, if you're there to race the 70.3, then you've another week before you can hang your tri suit up for the year, but even then, you're spoilt for choice when it comes to things to do. I'd arrived the night before the LPT race so decided against taking part and instead did some 'acclimatising' by the pool. It's a lot like sunbathing, but a fraction more industrious—honestly.

The week between the two races can be as action-packed or as relaxed as you want it to be: take your pick from trips to Phi Phi Island (where scenes from *The Beach* were filmed), elephant rides, night markets in nearby villages or tri festival fun, games and training rides.

Early on in the week I familiarised myself with the swim course a few times as the swim in Phuket is unlike any other I've raced. After a mad dash down the beach into the ocean, it's a 1.2km swim in the warm waters of the Andaman Sea before running back up the beach and across into a freshwater lagoon for the final 700m.

The bike course was just as special with a few 30%+ climbs and some equally hairy descents, as



Tough ascents and thrilling descents make cycling in Phuket a challenge and a joy

well as a footbridge, which means dismounting your bike to cross it twice during the race. A few of us teamed up to ride the course together, stopping off for much-needed fluid when the heat and humidity really started taking its toll on us. The mountainous scenery from the saddle was nothing short of breathtaking.

With familiarisation done—and plenty of pool and beach-side 'acclimatisation' logged too—all that remained was racing.

The pro line-up was stacked to say the least with the likes of Chris Lieto, Michael Raelert, Melissa Rollison and six-time Kona winner Natascha Badmann all on the start line. Unfortunately Lieto crashed in the early stages of the bike which paved the way for Raelert to cruise to a comfortable victory, crossing the line with the now customary elephant in 3:51:36. Aussies Richie Cunningham and Paul Matthews were second and third in 3:57:16 and 3:58:24 respectively.

In the women's race, Rollison dominated as expected and hit the run course with an already sizeable lead. Despite being almost 20 years older than some of the other pro women, Badmann proved she still has what it takes—posting the

fastest bike split to reach T2 in second place. Belinda Granger and I were next to rack our bikes and we went out onto the run course having just as much fun as we had riding the latter miles of the bike. I remained in 3rd place until the second lap of the run when Czech ITU racer Radka Vodickova came through to take the final spot on the podium, which meant 4th place for me and 5th for fellow Brit Tamsin Lewis.

With the racing over, all that remained was the legendary after-party and, like everything else at this race, it certainly didn't fail to deliver. Forget worrying about sore legs after this race, it's the sore head which could present more problems.

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