

Happy new millennium from Viet Nam

I hope this new (according to the Julian calendar) millennium, as opposed to last year`s arithmetically inaccurate, media-induced Y2K imitator, finds you and yours safe, happy and well. Below is the first of my second batch of 7 essays from my December 2000 Viet Nam trip.

7. Viet Nam, bicycle and Proust

(Day 1, 30 November 2000) I`m back in Viet Nam for my second tour, picking up where I ran out of time, if not steam, this past May, on the same bike with a replacement part, this time a `sealed` bottom bracket -- sealed against outside elements but I hope not sealing in self-contained problems -- hoping to accomplish the rest of the best cycling this country has to offer and, if you haven`t already guessed, going through my next author, bringing with me his hefty (1 kg.) second volume (of six) titled *Within a Budding Grove*, part of the *In Search of Lost Time* saga, in which he, the author, whose style influences this first and you might by now figure, indeed desperately long against, never-to-end sentence, but you would be wrong, for even Proustian, or pale imitation Proustian, sentences must die, just as all living creatures great and small (and a sentence in one ray of light can be seen as vibrant, full of life force, and if M Proust has his way, convoluted if not altogether so meanderingly meaningful as to become meaningless in the full light of day) pass away, and give birth to new life, new sentences, but smaller, juvenile, more manageable sentences, so you, the reader who may choose not to commit your mind, or be committed in mind, to M Proust, can survive the rest of my essay.

A creature of habit, I get to Viet Nam just as last time -- bike to Shenzhen airport, fly to Ha Noi via Nanning and am in bed by 10 pm, bike reassembled, pleasantly surprised I have been well fed a real meal on a Chinese airline! Since I had a few minutes to kill at airports and on planes, I devoured my requisite 20 pages of M Proust -- at this daily pace I can finish the volume within my planned 30-day trip, time set both by visa and cheap air ticket.

(Day 2) I want to leave Ha Noi as quickly as possible -- to return here at the end of my trip to take a boat tour of Ha Long Bay. So I book on the morning's Reunification Express train south and find a Vietcombank to exchange dollars for dong. At 14,500 to the dollar, I become an instant millionaire. The train provides a lot of time to drift through M Proust before I arrive in Da Nang Saturday morning. Cumulative kms this trip: 60 (including 50 to the Shenzhen airport); cumulative Proust pages, 75.

(Day 3) The train arrives punctually at 6 am, and at this hour Da Nang is as lively as it gets. I may have suggested in one of my 6 essays on the earlier Viet trip that Da Nang is a Vietnamese city that can well be missed by the casual tourist, for whom it has little to offer save for the nation's finest museum on Cham ethnology and sculpture. From the train station I go to check out a vegetarian breakfast shop highly recommended in the guidebook, only to discover that no such shop currently exists. My guidebook is now a half year more out of date than it was on my previous visit and is especially inaccurate when it comes to eateries. I find a substitute pho-com (noodle-rice), a hole in the wall (literally), slurp down breakfast, and then join the masses cycling south. I want to reach Dai Loc where I can pick up National Highway 14 (Quoc Lo /QL 14), which heads west, then south, through the Central Highlands, ending up around Sai Gon (politically correctly renamed Ho Chi Minh City).

At this hour before actual sunrise my new compass proves quite valuable. I am now heading south; I cannot go wrong. I find Dai Loc and get onto QL 14 -- nice cycling along a river, little traffic, a lot of bucolicity, but the strange thing is: those endearing roadside posts that mark off the kilometers for QL 14 have disappeared. No worries; I can't be wrong. The map shows QL 14 to be the only road in the area that goes south-west (or south or west, or any direction since it is the only road in the area) I go through the hamlet of Ha Tan, a map dot on QL 14. So it is a bit of a rude shock to learn that this road is not QL 14. You see, when this road, this QL 14 pretender, began to morf into a muddy quagmire, I got worried and asked some locals if this were the way to Phuoc Son (a town further down QL 14, a place with hotels and my destination for the evening). The locals pointed back to the direction from which I came! Could my

compass mistake east for west? I take a reading of the sun, now in full shine, which must be in the east, an assumption I am not yet prepared to question. So I backtrack, 5 kms, 10 kms, through countryside that minutes ago had been bucolic but which has become now only annoyingly rural. Along the way, I ask people to point me to Phuoc Son and QL 14, and I eventually learn that the road is on the other side of the river, which is several dozen meters wide, with no bridges. In fact, on that road I see a goods vehicle, the type of truck that travels on a QL. I realize that my map is wrong; the road has moved! I feel Kafkized. How to get across to QL 14? It appears that I have to backtrack more or less to Da Nang, where I can pick up the legitimate QL 14.

Next: QL 14, where are you?