

Xin chào from Viet Nam - I

## I. To cycle or not to cycle

I start this Viet Nam trip with the purchase of a guidebook. I select Lonely Planet over Footprint Books or Rough Guides somewhat reluctantly as a simple browse suggests that this is one of LP's most snide presentations. Still, LP has better maps and relatively speaking is the most current, three years more recently published than its competition. I also buy the accompanying Viet Nam Atlas, which shows most (probably 80%) of the country's surfaced roads. (Overall, the guidebook and atlas will prove to be about 80% correct in the information they provide. Given the US dollar's present strength, all the listed prices are at least 10% too high. This is the first time I have ever used a guidebook that inflates prices!) The books talk vaguely about road quality, stating that some roads are atrocious, but implying that there are numerous paved highways to accommodate a cycle, and even suggesting several routes for which cyclists have given good reviews. Should I cycle?

If I am to cycle, I decide that the part of the country I want to visit over 30 days, the maximum amount of time allowed by my visa and air ticket, is northwest Viet Nam, populated by ethnic minorities, the central coastal backpacker alley, and the southern highlands, also populated by indigenous minorities.

Up to now my bicycle touring has been restricted to the planet's developed countries, those with good roads and enough of a travel industry to support me, a Western tourist, with my Western tourist tastes and needs. In today's language of political correctness among the backpacker (and 'bikepacker,' the new-age rubric for me) crowd, I guess I am supposed to call myself a traveler rather than a tourist. But when I visit a country, I rely on the industry which accommodates tourists almost as much as its travel industry, which is set up to serve the needs of locals who travel, mostly on business. The two are sometimes quite different. This is the case for Viet Nam.

The backpacker's guidebooks for developing countries usually identify and indeed popularize if not perpetuate a special network of guesthouses (rarely costing more than US \$10 a room), cafes, transport lines, sight-seeing options and the like to serve the twenty-somethings who travel. At backpackers' hostels, there's hot water, a sit-down toilet rather than the squat alternative, and the bed has a mattress rather than a mat. At affiliated eateries, you can order all sorts of western cuisine, like fruit shakes and pancakes. Local noodles are transformed into what we recognize as spaghetti, with a tomato-based sauce and (if you're really lucky) parmesan cheese. In contrast, the locals in Viet Nam take their noodles in the form of the omnipresent pho, which is an enhanced version of chicken noodle soup. By and large locals who travel stay and eat at local facilities, not backpacker retreats.

I don't remember visiting or reading about a country that is so well set-up for budget tourists as Viet Nam, that is, with a differentiated market (low-end by international standards) from the one

used by the general public. In addition to a collection of hostels and cheap restaurants and cafes, Viet Nam enjoys a backpacker transportation network. For slightly more than the cost of local transportation (more expensive than the bus, cheaper than upper class on the train or long distance taxi), foreigners can hop on or off comfortable, European-made air conditioned busses that stroll down Viet Nam's tourist alley — from Hanoi in the north to Saigon in the south, passing through numerous beach resorts as well as the tourist meccas of Hue and Hoi An. This is something called "Open Tour." You can disembark at various places you think worth visiting, spend as many days as you like, and hop on the next bus. Wherever you are, there seems to be at least one of these busses daily. You don't have to endure the travails of arranging and enduring third-world transportation and are largely isolated from touts. You meet a lot of backpackers like yourself, with common interests and shared experiences. The extent you experience the Viet Nam that the Vietnamese live in is minimized, of course. It's a trade-off: less arduous travel versus missing something of the country, its people and their cultures.

Getting a visa for Viet Nam proves quite easy, \$45 and two trips to the Vietnamese consulate in Guangzhou. I can fly to Ha Noi from Shenzhen (via Nanning) on China Southern Airlines for about \$350, a savings of \$200 compared to flying out of Hong Kong. It is now late April. Summer comes early to Viet Nam; the sooner I get there, the less severe the heat. I arrange the visa and ticket, but I continue to debate over whether to cycle Viet Nam. The backpacker express sounds pretty comfy. Amazingly, after three months of biking in South America, I have not yet had my fill of cycling. Though clearly the bike is worn out. So worn out that I must replace most everything that moves: entire new crank set, gears, chain, tires, etc. After a six-week cycling layoff, I find I have to get back into shape. Amid spring showers and the occasional threat of a typhoon I secure ten days of cycling in Shenzhen (about 70kms daily before lunch). There seem to be strange noises emanating from the bike — a hard-to-hear click, click, click sometimes with pedaling. Then I develop a sore throat, several days before my flight. Maybe someone's trying to tell me to take the backpacker express.

The day of my flight, my throat feels better. I hop on the bike and 50 kms (and one flat tire) later, I am at the Shenzhen airport. I disassemble the bike, duct-tape it together, stuff it into the bike bag. By ten that night I am asleep in a \$5 per night hostel in Ha Noi.

In the decade plus I have lived in China I have often wondered what this country was like before its recent drive toward modernization. The new town of Shenzhen, where I live, presents the China of the future; only on a few outings have I glimpsed the China of the past. Of course, traditions exist, and a cynic might argue that the differences between present and past China are only superficial. Actually, the differences are largely political and economic, rather than cultural. China is a very different economic entity than it was just twelve years ago when I arrived, certainly much different from the time before the world economy and things and people western started squeezing their way through the 'open door.' What was China like, how different was she, back as few decades ago as the 1960s?

To find the answer to that question is one of the reasons I have come to Viet Nam. I want to see a country on the cusp of development. I enjoy visiting countries that are entering times of profound change. Indeed, I grew up in the US of the 1950s, a period of rapid economic growth not all that different from what China is experiencing today and Viet Nam will experience in the coming decades. I matured in the 1960s, a time of significant political development, something that many of us would like to see in China as it ever-so-slowly slithers toward liberal democracy. Economically, if not politically, I suspect that in many ways Viet Nam is where China was several decades ago. Preparing for a rural-to-urban population shift, in the process of upgrading its infrastructure, accommodating new technologies, thinking about democracy, etc. I am not just interested in experiencing pre-development or un-development. I had my fill of that in Africa. Now I want to visit a place which is clearly on a positive economic and political path, where development and modernization are inevitable consequences of an overpowering national desire. Maybe I cannot really see China's past in Viet Nam's present, but the notion is attractive, and that's one reason I am here and not in, say, Cambodia or Laos or Burma. Well, I travel around with a lot of simplistic notions, so I have been told, like the above, which I don't delve too far into (some friends criticize me for my superficial commentaries, not at all 'academic' which, of course, I take as a compliment!), so I will leave well enough alone.

I will write six pieces on Viet Nam. I am not quite sure how many people read through my essays; I know some do, and I'm pretty sure others don't. Let me telegraph the content of the next essays for the impatient. Viet Nam is one of the most pleasant countries I have ever visited. As a piece of geography Viet Nam offered me the most rewarding cycling I have ever endured, for me even more interesting than South America, and almost as enjoyable. As a people the Vietnamese startled me with a hybrid culture, heavily influenced by things Chinese, French and American. I expected to see more Chineseness. In sum Vietnamese are about the nicest people I have ever come across.

Most of my thoughts about this country, however, as I pedal slowly through it, relate to events a generation ago. Those events make me quite angry, angrier today than when they actually occurred. As an expat American I would not trade in my US citizenship and the individual rights and freedoms it grants me for the passport of any country, but traveling in Viet Nam now I find for the first time in my life that I am ashamed of my country. A feeling of not just embarrassment or frustration or annoyance, emotions I experience continually (mixed occasionally with pride). But honest to goodness shame. I don't have much good to say about American foreign policy, past or present; I fear my thoughts may be a bit too provocative for some. But this doesn't worry me too much; e-mail is so easy to ignore or delete. Just scroll and trash. And no trees have to be sacrificed in the process.

Next: II. Surreal Viet Nam