

Xin chào from Viet Nam

II. Surreal Viet Nam

One day in Ha Noi is enough for me. Not because this is not a pleasant city. In fact, it is one of the most charming urban places I have ever encountered. But I want to cycle; that's why I am here. Ha Noi is definitely a place I will revisit. I must, because my return flight is from here. Ha Noi's Old Town is especially enchanting. The blend of old and new finds just the right balance. There are so few cars and busses that it is a great place to meander through on foot or by bike. (The basic rule of survival for pedestrians: cross streets slowly and carefully, give everyone enough time to zoom pass without a direct hit, and especially don't make any sudden moves). I have never been anywhere there are so many cycles, either in relative or absolute numbers. It makes China look cycle-free. And a plethora of motor bikes which, for some reason, seem not to be the horrible polluters that their counterparts are in urban hellholes like Taipei or Manila, for example. When I eventually return to Ha Noi there are some day-tours I want to take, to the Perfume Pagoda, a national treasure, and to Ha Long Bay, a UNESCO heritage landmark. Now, in my single day here, I won't even have time even to visit the several highly recommended museums, one military, another devoted to ethnography, the third located on the grounds of the former prison, so-called the Ha Noi Hilton, where American POWs were incarcerated three decades ago. The most important thing to do today is simply to acclimate myself to the temperature and humidity (both noticeably higher than in Shenzhen). For today's tourism I choose to make the pilgrimage that virtually all Vietnamese try, or at least want, to make: to visit Uncle Ho.

Ho Chi Minh is an interesting phenomenon. The undisputed father of the country. A man who fought most of his life for a Viet Nam to be run by Vietnamese, especially while in exile for thirty years and later while fighting what is called the 'American war.' An apparently humble person, a bachelor who lived a simple life, as opposed to folk in similar positions in other nations. He had no palace, no harem, no foreign bank accounts, no nepotistic relatives, and he built no monuments to himself. Ho died in 1969, before the Viet Nam he envisioned had become a reality. Ho wanted to be cremated and forgotten. Instead, his cadaver was sent to Moscow, embalmed, returned and laid out in a freshly constructed mausoleum for display to an adoring public. His visage is everywhere in Viet Nam, on all its currency, on virtually every political billboard. (And there is a lot of political advertising here). Ho's bust or stature seems to adorn every street corner. Saigon has been renamed Ho Chi Minh City to further honor him. All this for a modest man who wanted little more in life than to see his country run by his countrymen and not foreigners.

Ho is the third of last century's great socialist revolutionaries to whom I have been able to pay my respects by filing by their look-alive corpses. I visited Lenin in 1969 and Mao in 1989. I would like to visit Castro, but I am not sure he will be preserved, or if he will even die. (And I am ignorant about North Korea's Kim, whether he fits this category of socialist hero, whether

or not he in fact lies in state). In any case, each of the three preserved socialist heroes were great visionaries in their time and each deserves credit for advancing his country out of chaos, although the political systems they created leave much to be desired. Their economic systems proved to be quite a mess, too. The great thing about Ho, in contrast to the others, is that he didn't live long enough to ruin his country. He died a revolutionary, still in war mode, with an unblotched administrative record because he never had a stable country to administer. Quite frankly, it is a shame the same cannot be said of the century's other socialist heroes.

After a good night's rest I am off at the crack of dawn, before the air heats up, energized by a breakfast of chicken noodle soup. Over the next few weeks I plan to cycle a loop. Clockwise: west of Ha Noi all the way to Diem Bien Phu, within 30 kms of the border with Laos, then north to Sa Pa and Bac Ha, which hug the Chinese border, and back to Ha Noi. This is about 1,200 kms of roads, of unspecified quality according to what my guidebooks don't say. I mean, how useful is a road atlas that doesn't indicate whether a road is surfaced?

First, getting out of Ha Noi is not as easy as the map suggests for the simple fact that my city map fails to indicate one-way streets, none of which seems going the way I want it to. Somehow I manage to get through the suburbs, heading south and west. The suburbs last for about 30 kms, and then I suddenly find myself shot back in time, in a simple agrarian society. I will not see a single factory or manufacturing structure for the next 1,000 kms. There is much industry in this industrializing tiger of a country, but it is mostly located east of Ha Noi or in the south. I am now in rural, undeveloped Viet Nam. It is a simple way of life. Almost everyone works the land. Little girls work with their mothers in the paddies and fields. Little boys tend to the cattle. The men do the plowing and chopping and slashing and burning. Some of the larger villages have electricity, but most places are without modernity, save for the ubiquitous bicycles. Many of the people here seem to live much as they have for centuries. Even Uncle Ho's picture can be found only in the towns and cities, which are separated by a full day or two's bike ride.

I enter a region of hills and dales. Rugged peaks jut out of the landscape, the same type of land formation as in Guilin and Guanxi, China. The whole world out here radiates some shade of green. Rice paddies are layered among the hills, as if trying to rise concentrically to the sky. Crops like beans and corn are grown not on level ground but on hills which have slopes of 20 or more degrees. Water buffaloes, rather than tractors, supplement human labor.

There are indeed ethnic Vietnamese in this region, but the folk whom I notice are the minorities, the so-called hill tribes people. Viet Nam has over 50 ethnic groups, who make up about 10% of the nation's population, and mostly live in the northwest and down the central highlands. These highlanders are distinguishable by their different traditions, religions, languages, and especially attires. The traditional dress of many of the tribeswomen is quite colorful. In the middle of nowhere, I will pedal past a woman walking down the road, appearing to me like she is dressed ready for a wedding banquet or for a costume party. On the farms I see people toil day in and day out, yet when they appear in public their clothes are spotlessly unsoiled. Each day all I do is sit on a small triangular seat and pump my legs, but by day's end, I and everything

that has touched me require a thorough scrubbing. The clothes that the local women wear, bright reds and greens and blues depending on their particular tribe, are immaculately, almost surreally clean. The kids, in contrast, make me look quite unsullied.

I am passing through a region that is not on the backpacker trail. The few foreigners who venture here see the northwest out the windows of their hired 4x4s. Foreigners do cycle here, but for my entire visit in Viet Nam I will not see a single foreign cyclist on the road. Which means I am a bit of a curiosity.

For the same reason, I guess, that people tap on aquariums, the locals along the road will scrutinize me and try to draw my attention. I don't mind being a fish out of water, but this is extreme. I estimate that 75% of the people who notice me will stop whatever they are doing just to stare. Farm implements drop to the ground, mouths go agape with shock. Ten percent of them yell some utterance, usually 'hello' or one of its Vietnamese equivalents: yello, nello, ello and mello. This means that I receive several hundred greetings each cycling day (I get far fewer when I am on foot). More than a few people, usually children, sometimes in unison, will throw me a string of hellos at steadily increasing decibels. The most hellos I got from any single person is 12, from a little girl who certainly became hoarse thereafter. If I ever stop at roadside (e.g., to take in or let out water), a crowd immediately gathers. The most bold will touch me, but generally people just stare. Pedestrians along my route will attract my attention in other ways, too. About every other day I am hit by a pebble, always thrown by a pre-teenage boy. For every stone that hits me, a moving target of 15-20 kilometers per hour, I assume that a dozen are thrown that I fail to notice. (Vietnamese boys are notorious for throwing things at moving objects. That's why the country's train carriages are now equipped with chicken wire screens to protect the windows from rock damage.) I guess a FMO (foreign moving object) is just too challenging a target to ignore. The most hazardous attack comes from two boys who are perched atop a cliff overlooking the highway. They bomb me with a dirt clod the size of a big buddha's belly, which narrowly misses squashing me and bike.

Even when I am virtually in the middle of nowhere — where I can see rice paddies and fields but no huts or people — I will hear a hello or two, emanating from somewhere in the hills. It is surreal. In my so simple daily life in China I receive neither wanted or unwanted attention, but this is a different environment. People here are so different from the Chinese. Here's a story to illustrate the difference. In China, if a Chinese were to fall off his/her bike, no one would take notice. People would cycle past. If the same adversity were to happen to a Vietnamese in Viet Nam, however, a crowd would gather. The Chinese are a more removed, less personal people. They generally leave one another alone. Which is why I like living in China and would not especially like living in Viet Nam..

How do I respond to all this attention? I don't have the energy to verbalize individual replies. (In any case, do you really expect a fish to respond to someone's tapping on the fishbowl?) If I see the helloer at roadside, I will smile and flash a finger wave, usually without raising hand off handlebar. People I don't see, I don't acknowledge unless I am in the middle of nowhere. In

this case I usually wave up to heaven, something that alleviates the boredom (but unfortunately generates even more hellos from the surrounding hills). When I am in a bad mood (after a flat tire, on an empty stomach, facing potholes, when it's pouring, when I am running out of water, when the sun won't give me a break, etc.) I don't respond at all, save for an underbreathed 'yeah, yeah, yeah.' Those who issue hellos don't realize how harassing they can be to me, the helloe, as I drown in such politeness. Yet, helloing is an action that is based on nothing more than racial recognition, in other words by definition a racist act. But, hey, if I saw something weird, like a zebra prancing down the street, I too would be tempted to try to draw its attention by uttering something inane like, 'hey zebra.' Each of my helloers has a genuinely good motive, I think, but all together, they create a surrealism, if not a hell. It is like: one person dropping a piece of rubbish in the forest doesn't really make much difference. The more people, the more problem. For those who say: can't you just ignore them? I tried. I thought that maybe after the 10,000th hello I might stop hearing them. Not the case. Each one comes in loud and clear.

Next: Problems