

Xin chào from Viet Nam

III. Problems

So far the trip has been uneventful. On my first cycling day (an easy 78 kms, 4 hours) I reach Hoa Binh, a town of 25-50,000 people (I estimate about 100 portraits of Uncle Ho on the streets). This is not a place many foreigners visit, but it is the provincial capital and thus has several state-run hotels. I will come to realize that hotels in Viet Nam are somewhat standardized, seemingly all part of a gigantic national chain. Few are older than 5 years. They all charge foreigners about US \$10 per night for a bedroom with an attached toilet/shower room (The hand held shower inevitably wets the toilet seat). The rooms are fairly clean, have mosquito nets and color TV, provide towels, soap, toilet paper, boiled water and tea, sometimes even shampoo and toothbrush. The tariff is according to room, not number of persons or beds. A typical room has two beds, so I am paying twice what a person who travels in a pair pays. When you least expect it, a hotel staffer will use her passkey to enter without bothering to knock. Just like China. But, unlike in China, there is usually a deadbolt on the door to prevent this, if it really matters. I eat both lunch and dinner in the hotel, venture out only once to survey the town, and take a long nap between meals. I have developed a slight chest cold which will get neither better nor worse the entire month I am in Viet Nam. (It will clear up the day I return to Shenzhen).

I flip on the TV. It doesn't take me long to realize that there's really nothing I want to watch. The two state-run channels often present the same program. I am visiting during the year-long celebration of the 25th anniversary of Viet Nam's reunification. (This is the way the events are usually portrayed, rather than as the victory over the US or foreign imperialism/aggression). There always seems to be a panel discussion on TV, with military men exchanging war stories. Viet Nam was at war for so many years that you can imagine there are a lot of war stories to exchange. Sometimes a children's cartoon dubbed in Vietnamese from the original French or Russian airs. A few American and Chinese TV programs are also in the schedule, all dubbed by a Vietnamese woman who reads the dialogue in a level, undramatized tone. There is a very popular dinner-time costume action/adventure based on a Greek myth, perhaps Ulysses or Hercules, I never catch the title. I can hear American-accented English under the dubbing. Chinese kung fu dramas seem to attract a lot of viewers, too. The news has a 5 minute English summary, but I can never figure out exactly when it airs.

Before breakfast I fill up all my water bottles with filtered water. The routine takes about 10 minutes. Most tourists purchase mineral water, but I figured I would not always be able to find sufficient bottled water to satisfy my needs — about 5 liters a day. Because I was unsure about the quality of tap water in Viet Nam cities, or well water in rural areas, I brought with me a microfilter (brand name Pur, US \$70, or about the cost of a month's mineral water) that is supposed to remove everything harmful (such as heavy metals, protozoa and bacteria sized over 0.3 microns that cause diarrhea or worst). Thus, I carry two liter-and-a-half bottles of filtered

water inside my panniers to supplement my two 750 ml bike bottles that are caged to the bike frame.

At breakfast I am astonished to meet two Dutch women, cyclists even, who stayed the night in the same hotel. They are finishing up an Asia cycling trip, but they have found the roads so difficult that they have ended up taking busses more often than cycling. They mention they have a compatriot cycling in Viet Nam. I never see this Dutch fellow or any other cycle tourists for the remainder of the trip.

Today, I get the taste of the type of terrain I can expect: hills, hills and more hills. I need to go only 70 kms to get to Mai Chau, a hamlet near which are located villages of various hill tribes who accommodate foreigners overnight in their stilt houses. Mai Chau is a steady climb from here. The map suggests not much of a downhill today. These hills are tough, not made any easier by 35 degree (95F) heat and high humidity. I feel my body temperature soaring; at least every half hour I must find a spot of shade, take in water, and cool down. All the water I release comes through the skin. Sometimes, when the sun is high in the sky, the shade is little more than a vertical ray on a cliff at roadside. In this case I snuggle into this darkened strip and wait, vertically, to deheat. I now realize that May is perhaps not the ideal time to be cycling here, in this the tropics. I am a month or two too late. Well, live and learn.

As my water runs out I arrive in Mai Chau and find an ethnic-Tai family willing to house and feed me for the evening (about \$10). Actually, a tout on a motorbike finds me, but I was already planning to stay in the exact village he directs me to. The enterprising people of Lac Village rebuilt their community in 1994 with a sewer and water system to serve the needs of tourists, foreign and domestic. From what I can tell, the village is more or less like any other Tai village, except it has outhouses with hot and cold running water and flush toilets. And the inhabitants, of course, are richer, rich enough to have a stereo and color TV. They don't have many other possessions, though. I notice that ethnic highlanders live uncluttered lives. All their kitchen utensils number no more than a dozen items. There is no furniture, no closets for clothes. The mat they sleep on is the mat they eat on and the mat they play on. They live very non-materialistic lives. I meet some backpackers who are on a two-day excursion from Ha Noi in a 4x4, and I join them for the evening's entertainment—the village troop provides traditional song and dance and rice wine, drunk communally through long reeds from a big clay urn. As much as you can suck down. This being a week day, as tourists we have the village all to ourselves. On the weekends it become satiated with locals who flee Ha Noi for a bit of the exotic.

The next morning I leave early, but by 6:30 a.m. it is pouring down rain. It rains for the next 71 kms (5 1/2 hours), until I reach Moc Chau, the next location the tour book says that can accommodate foreigners. As soon as I book into the hotel, it stops raining and blue sky appears. I dry out the bike; the panniers are soaked but the contents have been kept zip-locked dry. The son of the hotel owner and his friends take soap and water to the bike. They ask nothing in return so I give them some foreign coins, which I carry for just such an occasion.

Never given to anyone who asks for them, just to those I wish to show some sort of appreciation.

My plans suddenly change on the third day out of Ha Noi. I have a few hours of rain and then blue skies. By now the clinking noise in the bike has ascended to a loud pinging, like that which submariners hear with sonar. It has steadily been growing louder, but I have failed to notice. I wonder why? Perhaps because in the towns and cities I have started wearing wax earplugs. These help deaden the constant toots from trucks and busses. These big vehicles are driven with one hand on the horn; every cyclist and motor cycle they pass gets a blast of air horn. Also, in the rain, the bike makes so many noises that the mysterious pinging becomes just another sound in the overall symphony. Now the pinging grows really loud, almost with every rotation. It reverberates throughout the bike frame. On one of the numerous uphill, I take a break to refill my water bottles. When I get back in the saddle and start to peddle, I almost fall over. The peddles fail to move. I examine the chain. It is not caught on anything; the rear wheel would be free to move if it could. It is the crank that does not budge. Frozen solid. Here I am in the middle of nowhere, with 35 degree full sun as company, with an expired bike. I do the only thing I can think of. With all my strength I kick the bike in its ball bearings, and this frees up the crank. Quickly I hop back on the bike, as if some evil spirit has a stop-watch to fate the next calamity. I continue peddling up the hill. The big ping-ping, that used to be a little click-click, is now a gigantic BONG-BONG. The problem obviously emanates from the bottom bracket, where there are two sets of ball bearings that do whatever it is that ball bearings do when I turn the crank by peddling. I suspect one of the bearings has cracked apart.

It's a long day, 7 hours and 123 kms, most of it up hill on a crippled bike. Needless to say, I have been in no mood to return any of the hellos directed my way. I find a hotel in Song La, another provincial capital, and seek out a bike shop. The shop owner produces the tools needed to take apart the bottom bracket, but they do not do the job. Either they are not exactly the right tools or he does not know how to use them. I cannot offer much assistance.

The next morning I start out up the hill leading out of town. The racket from the bottom bracket is now so loud, BOOM-BOOM, that I fear I will attract stares, of the non-racial sort, just because of the noise. I am reluctant to risk going further. After several minutes of uphill, I make a U-turn, glide downhill to the bus station. The bike is tossed atop a bus and in a few minutes I am on my way back to Ha Noi. The bus does not go very fast — it takes 9 hours to return to the capital, covering the same route which took me only 21 hours. The next morning I seek out a bike shop. I inquire about the biggest shop in Ha Noi, one that sells and repairs imported cycles. No one is sure whether imported cycles exist in Viet Nam. Instead, I am directed to an alley where bike parts are sold from outdoor stalls. The owners of one such stall figure out what I need and sell me the tools and a baggie of grease. They direct me to the nearest street, where I locate a man who fixes bikes. Such people work from street corners, usually just fixing flats. This man is considered an expert mechanic, which is why he locates near the parts stalls. He carries his tools in a US war-surplus metal box, the type that have a lid that is hinged on from one side of the top. With the tools I provide, he opens up the bottom bracket. His

workspace is the street corner. He lays the various nuts and bolts he extracts right on the sidewalk. He undoes the bottom bracket and out drop the ball bearings. They are loose because their casing has shredded apart. The tiny chards of casing have been causing the aggravating noises and were undoubtedly responsible for freezing the crank. The mechanic puts in a new set of bearings which seems to remedy the problem. I pay him the equivalent of a dollar and he seems pleased. I rush back to the hostel, filter some water, repack the bike and am off, this time through the northern suburbs to attempt my loop from the other direction.

Next: A tale of three tourist towns