

Xin chào from Viet Nam

IV. A tale of three tourist towns - Luc Yen, Bac Ha & Sa Pa

The ride out of Ha Noi is not too exciting, nothing more than obligatory. The suburbs thin into towns, then into hamlets. At one point I acquire several dozen teenagers who ride along with me. It is not unusual for me to attract riders-on, but it seems like in a particular village I have gathered every school child on his or her way to afternoon classes. They speed past me, sort of showing off, and then on an ever-so-slight uphill, I leave them in my dust, not even needing to downshift more than a gear or two. Praise the Lord for 21 gears.

From Ha Noi the road is mostly flat, and I ride 4 1/2 hours, 84 kms to Viet Tri, a provincial capital. For such a small country, Viet Nam sure seems to have a lot of provinces, sixty-some at last count. I don't think it is a county that lacks bureaucracy. Fewer people seem to wear uniforms than in China, but perhaps that's because the country is just too poor for every minor -crat to be provided state-issued apparel. I have heard travelers comment that they cannot tell Viet Nam is communist. I suspect that they don't know how to look. The numerous billboards with political slogans attached to Ho Chi Minh's portrait offer a pretty good indication that the media is strictly controlled here. Banners demanding patriotism and exhorting the public on morality are unfurled across streets. Viet Nam is no totalitarian state, but even with no knowledge of the language it is obvious to me that it is authoritarian in the best Leninist tradition. The area that I am heading back toward, the hill country of ethnic minority tribes, is actually reported to be under the least political control of any part of Viet Nam. Indeed, as I move along, the political slogans thin out and appear only in towns and cities, and occasionally on public buildings in villages. Clearly there is one and only one political party in Viet Nam, and it seems fairly expressive.

This provincial capital has a state-run hotel, which is equipped with cable TV, doubling usual station availability, with Australian Network 7 and MTV, something which requires the shortest of attention spans, makes a lot of noise and offers a look at the world's strangest hairdos. I learn that there has been some sort of race-related coup in Fiji and that the US Congress in its seldom-realized collective wisdom has actually approved normal trade relations for China, an action that is only 51 years late in coming. Dinner in the restaurant across the street involves fish and rice. The two best things that can be said about Vietnamese cuisine are: it is dirt cheap, not much more than a dollar for a three-course meal; and it is influenced by Chinese and French cookery. Unfortunately, it is not influenced enough, in my opinion, by the French or the Chinese. The more times I go out for a meal in Viet Nam, the less hungry I am becoming. No doubt, I am expending far more calories than I am taking in; I don't seem to have much of an appetite, and I expect to lose a few pounds over these four weeks. I am certainly not enjoying the same type of eat-bike-eat-bike holiday I had in South America. Of course, I am biking in the poorest, most remote section of Viet Nam; at the moment I should not expect five-star cuisine at no-star prices.

After a dose of small-town Australia (through TV dramas and soap operas), I am up, nourished on chicken noodle soup and faux baguettes, and on the road by 6 a.m. Today will be mostly flat, but there will be no hotel for about 250 kms. I have brought along a tent for just this type of situation. I have no idea how much of this distance I can cover today. It is not raining. It is not as hot or humid as on previous days. And it will be flat. Sometime in the afternoon I will have to find a village and then procure some place to sleep. I am on a secondary road for which bicyclists give good reviews, according to my guide books. Up to now I have ridden on national highways. This road, Rt. 70 or Rt. 7, depending on which guidebook you consult, is either a regional or secondary road, also depending on which book you choose to believe (both published by Lonely Planet, an organization not renowned for internal consistency). In any case, the road is a cyclist's delight. It curves along rivers and around hills. No uphill that require huffing and puffing. No wonder cyclists love this road. No need for ear plugs. I encounter only about one vehicle per minute, so few because I am heading to the middle of nowhere, through the middle of nowhere. I am in fact heading north toward China, which is not a destination for many vehicles (there's a train for those interested). This is how I remember the Wye River Valley off season in 1975, how I remember bits of Idaho, Montana and Oregon in 1983, or the South Island of New Zealand and the west coast of Tasmania in 1988. This is what makes you forget all the bad cycling days you have ever had. Actually, I have never had really bad cycling, but certainly lots of mediocre cycling over some 30,000 kms the past 25 years.

At 5 p.m. my Catseye odometer — perish the thought I will ever be without this faithful companion — reports I have covered 145 kms (90 miles). I have been cycling fifteen minutes short of nine hours, almost the longest day I have ever had (96 miles in Oregon, with downhill and tailwind was in fact the longest, in my youth). For the past hour I have been searching for the center of Luc Yen village, population <10,000. I passed Luc Yen Secondary School, which marked the far end of the village, some 20 kms ago. I gather that Luc Yen is a rather long and narrow village. Still searching for a population center, low and behold, I come across a communist party building and a military building and a few com-pho (rice-noodle) joints. And a group of white people speaking French. Indeed, French men and women who have rented two 4x4s with drivers and guide. They offer me a beer, which I graciously accept. I demonstrate my water filter, which intrigues them. They admire my madness; I admire their Frenchness. They delight in being tourists here, love talking with the locals, and are game to try just about anything (except for drinking the water). The French, who seem to make up the largest number of tourists in Viet Nam, tend to travel in small groups in hired vehicles, rather than on the backpacker express, where English is the international language. I have encountered several French groups; they seem to think I am crazy to cycle here. The French hold a special kindred for Viet Nam, a former colony who fiercely rebelled during its nine-year struggle for independence (1945-54). The group I meet over beers are middle-aged, enjoy exploring remote areas of the highland, and spend their nights in local village homes. No people seem to enjoy the basics of life (eating, drinking and sex) so much as the French (well, come to think of it, maybe the Spanish and Italians and South Americans). This group is having an immensely enjoyable time. Wine with every meal, something I am envious of, for I must settle for a beer with dinner. I have also found the French (outside France, that is) to be exceedingly

kind. In that spirit they voluntarily arrange for me to stay in the stilt house next to the one they occupy.

Perhaps I should not really call Luc Yen village a tourist town or even a tourist village for that matter. But the French and I are tourists and we are in Luc Yen. This is as authentic a hill village as I can expect to encounter. I am not sure the family accommodating me has ever had a foreigner in their home. They live more or less like the family in the stilt house in Mai Chau, where I previously stayed. Different ethno/linguistic group and clothing, though. They serve me dinner, but apologize for having only vegetables and rice, embarrassed that I will not like peasant cuisine. What they don't realize is that after nine hours in the saddle, the saddle itself looks good enough to eat. Actually, all things considered, it is the most enjoyable Vietnamese meal I have had thus far. Some sort of dark-colored distilled spirits, made from who knows what, helps the meal along. For all other meals I have dined alone; it's good to have company, if not conversation. It is on occasions like this that I am quite envious of the French group with their full-time interpreter. I have loads of questions to ask the locals, about how they live and work and what they think concerning loads of things. Alas, I can only sit and observe. I eat with the men (ages 20, 25, 35, and 45). It's hard to sort out all the family members, but the extended family includes, I think, a great-grandmother (the 60 year old), some in-laws (30 and 35) and about ten people with someone at every age at five year intervals. There are about a half dozen children; one is nursing; it is not clear who the rest belong to. This house is rather basic, but there is a color TV, so I guess the family farm is doing OK. When I inquire about toilet facilities (squatting on the floor to get my message across) I am waved up into the hills. If there is an outhouse, I never find, although next morning I picked up some leaches in the process of looking.

I am about ten minutes into REM sleep, around 9:30 p.m., when I am awakened. The village public security representative wants to examine my documentation. I struggle to stay awake during the interview; the family seems quite interested with the thickness of my passport. They should have seen my previous one, with an additional 11 inserts of 26 pages each. I am permitted to resume my sleep, and the next morning I am off to the next tourist town. I give the teenagers some foreign coins as I depart.

Next: A tale of three tourist towns - Bac Ha & Sa Pa (cont'd)