

Viet Nam 10. Just days in the office

(Day 7) This leg of the trip, 600 kms down through the Central Highlands, will eventually take me to Sai Gon. It's almost 200 kms to the next locale with hotels, services and any tourists to speak of, but there are hamlets every dozen kms where I can break the journey, if necessary. I am taking a tent with me, but this turns out to be a few kgs of unnecessary weight since finding informal lodging is so easy in this country. The Central Highlands is populated by ethnic minority hill tribes people, like the area in the North I cycled through in May, but this part of the South seems much more Vietnamized, apparently due to an effort after the American war to populate the area with ethnic Vietnamese. Also, the hill tribes people must not wear the flash attire of their northern counterparts, nor do they live in stilt houses. This area, what I see from the highway, is much less quaint, much less photo op. If there are minorities here, they are quite invisible to me.

This is beautiful country, super cycling. Coffee and rubber are the major crops. Buckets collect sap dripping from the latter's trees; beans of the former dry on the shoulder of QL 14. They sometimes crunch under my tires. It will be a quick ride today, a bit of tail wind, cloud cover, overall downhill.

As I pass through the village of Phu Nhon, I come across the day's local festivity. It is the wedding, as it happens, of the oldest son, the first wedding in this family this generation and the first hope for a male offspring. Downshifting to the lowest gear, I cycle by very slowly, make a U-turn and cycle by again. It's 10 am, the day's event is just beginning. The festivities started yesterday as neighbors came around to decorate the house and to build a wedding tent in the front yard. They also then began preparing food for today's luncheon, which is already set out and looks scrumptious, a sit-down affair for 200 under the tent. Perhaps in my earlier essays I was a bit harsh on Vietnamese food. It can be good, even in remote areas, but you must know what to ask for. On the previous trip, I was good at asking for noodle soup and not much else. Now, I don't dine without my food glossary which translates food dishes. Most eateries lack menus so I do like the Vietnamese do, order what I want, not what they are trying to push on me. I point in the glossary to what I desire; usually the cook can prepare it. The wedding banquet is on a whole other plane, the nation's best culinary offerings, items I have seen only in Vietnamese restaurants in Hong Kong or the US. I am witnessing all this as I straddle the bicycle. There's a receiving line, as guests enter, and one of the receivers looks at me suggestingly, motioning with his fingers whether I want to snap some photos. Seems like a good photo op. I walk around the house, snapping away, getting myself videotaped by the wedding photographer. At the moment the bride and groom, both in white, are making an offering at the family's ancestral shrine. I am approached by a young woman who teaches English in the local high school, a former grade school classmate of the groom, who has taken the day off work to celebrate the marriage. So lucky to have a personal interpreter for the next two hours as I attend the wedding. I even change into my long trousers and dressier shirt to look a bit less unpresentable.

Really, I hadn't planned to dine here. I was just curious and wanted a few pictures (which I will have developed and send back to the happy couple). But then I became a hit when I gave the couple two South American coins as 'lucky wedding money' to celebrate their big event. I give a little speech, deny requests to sing a song -- I figure that the only one I know, *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall*, would not catch on. My comments mostly don't survive the translation, but I do generate some chuckles when I remark on how well the Vietnamese like to eat. In several hours I am back on the bike to the evening's hamlet, a crossroads named Ea H'leo. Behind the café there's a corridor with rooms, where I spend the night. At the table next to me at dinner I meet a guy who is a rubber farming engineer, who studied in Malaysia, which explains his English. But, then, just about everywhere I go, someone speaks fluent English. No Proust today. During my entire visit, this town experiences an electrical blackout.

(Day 8) Today starts off poorly. Not only is it raining, but a few hundred meters down the road I discover that the Cateye (a replacement [and upgrade to cordless] for the one lost last trip) is not recording speed and distance. There's supposed to be a little gadget -- a magnet -- attached to one of my spokes that, when the wheel moves forward, registers on a frame-attached gadget that sends a signal to the computer on the handlebar. The magnet has disappeared, apparently loosened and fallen off. I go back to using pen and paper and paying closer attention to roadside km posts. The trip to Buon Ma Thuot is pleasant enough, but by the time I arrive (5 hrs, 78 kms) I am not so much wet as encased in mud and grit. At the hotel I run the bike and myself under the shower. Mud has soaked all the way through my shorts and my long johns right down to the swim trunks (I have found swim trunks to be the only form of underwear that doesn't chafe me). My gear, protected by garbage bags and ziplocks, remains dry. While the clothes and panniers are drying out, I catch up on Proust. Buon Ma Thuot is the coffee capital of Viet Nam. It is very good coffee, very distinctive, very thick and strong, and perhaps not for all tastes. In bed it's a battle between the caffeine keeping me awake and the Frenchman trying to lull me to sleep. When I wake up the book is on page 200, and it is 5 am. I am ready for another day at the office.

I love getting an early start. It gets light enough to cycle at around 6 am. By that time the school kids are already biking to classes. Viet Nam is one early rising country, possibly to avoid the heat of midday; but at this time of year on the Central Highlands, noon is not warmly unpleasant. Once in the habit of rising early, however, one acquires the habit for an entire lifetime. These next three days (9, 10, 11) offer pleasant rural cycling. Undulating hills, never over 7% grade (compared to 10% in the North), solidly paved road. The jungle is steadily disappearing, and there are churches every town of any size. In this regard, and in many other regards, the South of Viet Nam is very different from the North. The place is less politicized (fewer banners and billboards). The people are richer, the land is richer, the climate is less severe; and religions, mostly Catholicism and Buddhism, play greater roles in people's lives. The North, longer subdued by communism, is a more somber place. Viet Nam seems to me to be two somewhat separate, somewhat unequal countries, sort of two countries, one system, to rearrange the favorite Hong Kong phrase. The South is quite Proust conducive. By the end of day 11, I am half through the book.

Next: Sai Gon, the Paris of Asia