

Viet Nam 8: QL 14, where are you?

Same delightful day; it is high noon. I am a bit perturbed and getting heated up by the sun -- it is in the upper 20s (mid 80s F). I dig out the sunblock, which I of course have packed in the middle of the panniers, in the middle of a ziplock within a ziplock. I water off and simmer down. Through earlier conversations with locals, I have learned that there's a ferry that crosses the river. It is moored at the dock but won't ford the river until late afternoon (if my interpretation of Vietnamese gesticulation is correct). Still, I find the idea of further backtracking repugnant. I go down to riverside and wave a 10,000 dong note (US 70¢), pointing to the other side. Within minutes I am there, transported by a family fishing boat, its owner eager to earn in several minutes cash it takes hours, maybe even days or weeks, to accumulate.

Now I really am on QL 14, which is paved and pleasant, going through a sandy, pine tree infested forest. No traffic. The kilometers tick off on the roadside posts. The road starts to deteriorate around 3 pm, so I decide to spend the evening in the hamlet of Giang, a small place still worthy of a map dot. There's obviously no hotel here. I stop for a banana and point in my guidebook to the Vietnamese translation for 'I am looking for a cheap room' and the locals who read it are more than willing to oblige. I can sleep the night there, right in the Karaoke room, for 20,000 dong (US 1.50). I fix a broken spoke. I cold water bathe, fertilize the hills (there's no out-house per se) and have a decent feed at the adjacent restaurant/karaoke bar. There are competing karaoke venues in this village of several hundred people. Day's totals: 109 kms, 20 Proust.

(Day 4) Who would think that today might be possibly the worse day of my cycling life? Every day on a bicycle has the potential to be just such a day. Today starts off well enough. Sure, I have to replace a tube which has a slow leak due to a bad patch (but the other six are ok). Sure, it looks like it might rain, but I need to go only 30 kms to get to Phuoc Son. I can walk the bike that far! Sure, the blacktop abruptly ends, and the packed red clay begins to get a bit muddy. Sure, at breakfast I happen to notice my guidebook's warning: 'Looking at a map it might seem feasible to drive between Kon Tum and Danang on Highway 14. Although this is a beautiful drive the road is in extremely poor condition and only motorbikes and 4 WDs can get through.' I would like to think I had never previously read this passage, but then who else would have highlighted 'in poor condition' and jotted 'NB' in the margin? In any case, what does the guidebook know -- the very people who placed QL 14 on the wrong side of the river!?! Sure, 15 kms down the road and I am shin-deep in clay-colored sap when the only vehicle I've seen all morning, as it starts to rain, tries to pass me, an impossible task unless I pull over into mud that's deeper than I am standing in. The truck stops, and the folks inside insist they put the bike in the back of the truck and that I get up into the cab with them. I don't object. This truck is hauling road building materials -- huge forms for casting concrete conduits. We slog up the road a few kilometers until boulders block the path. They honk; in time a bulldozer comes and removes the boulders. This stretch of road is so little used; it seems boulders are removed only on demand. We sludge forward another few hundred meters -- I

now have a reference for what the guidebook means by `extremely poor condition` -- and turn into a workers` camp. That`s as far as this truck is going.

I spend the afternoon and evening at road works regional quarters, home to a crew of 30 engineers and laborers. These folks are here, away from family and civilization, for 3 weeks at a stretch (working during daylight hours) and then taking a week`s home leave. The road building texts are in Russian; the videos that provide night time entertainment are Chinese soap operas, dubbed in Vietnamese that can barely be heard over the hum of the electricity-generating diesel engine. Consensus is: forget the cycle; 4 WDs have problems with this road. Busses going south to Kon Tum? No busses; there`s hardly even a road the next 200 kms. Then the silver lining: we think we can get you a lift with our neighbor who`s going to Kon Tum tomorrow morning. They will check. Meanwhile, I am treated as honored guest - I assume they don`t get many cycling fools this way. The rain is pouring in buckets. I ask if the road is better in the dry season. This is the dry season! Water is so much not a problem here that the hose that runs down the hill from a makeshift reservoir to the camp is never plugged up; the tap is kept on all the time so to speak. The one guy who speaks some English, the accountant, tells me that his neighbor can give me a lift but I`ll have to pay a half a million dong. He says that is too much. I agree. I figure I can get another lift tomorrow, reverse my tracks, get to Da Nang, go south and cross into the highlands somewhere else. The road crew kindly feed and shelter me. I spend an hour cleaning mud off the bike. When I leave I`ll snap their photo, to send them copies later, and give them some South American coins. They would never accept real payment. Today could have ended up a real disaster rather than an interesting adventure; I count my lucky stars and vow to pay closer attention to road conditions described in guidebooks. This day: 16 kms, no Proust.

(Day 5). The price of a lift to Kon Tum drops overnight from half a million dong to 100,000 (US \$7). I was willing to pay twice that at least (but I did not have the occasion to bargain) to avoid backtracking and having to figure out an alternate route. Now, I`m in the neighbor`s jeep, along with 7 others and the bike, traversing what is one of the last remaining jungles in Viet Nam. It is about 200 kms to Kon Tum, over what was a major link of the Ho Chi Minh trail during the American war. I am on a route where I am sure no GPS could locate me. There used to be a road here, now the line marked QL 14 on maps, but it has disintegrated (in reality if not on maps) since the war ended. As part of the Viet Cong supply route to arm its southern forces, the area in the 1960s was largely defoliated with various colored American agents (Agent Orange gets the most attention). Now the swatch that was once road is subject to continued erosion, more mud slide than road as we climb into the highlands. Not much life here -- war has taken care of many plants and animals. For diversion there are skull sized rocks in the road, some as large as a child`s body. The road crews are the only human inhabitants I can see; they maintain what remains of the road or at least try to keep it visible. The jeep I ride in belongs to the rock sorting unit of road maintenance. Twelve hours bumping along in the jeep, we cover the 200 kms, and my stomach feels like it is being sorted like their machines sort the rocks. The driver is remarkable. We stop only twice: once for a meal and once to free ourselves from the meter-deep pothole we fall into; each stop takes an hour. We reach Kon

Tum; I find a hotel. Today: no cycle kms, no Proust. But I am where I want to be, ready to start to cycle the rest of QL 14, where ever it leads.

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