

South East Cycle

Peter Marsden explores
Vietnam's mountain
ranges on two wheels



image © Dermot MacWard

■ ABOVE: - Gimme 5

OPPOSITE: - Pigs don't fly... they ride

a "ONLY ANOTHER FIVE MINUTES of downhill to the finish" said Son. Welcome words from one of our guides, having just cycled 15 kilometres uphill in the Hoang Lien Son mountains of northern Vietnam. With these words echoing encouragement in my ears, I decided to push on to that day's destination at Than Thuc village.

An hour later I was still descending, bit-

terly cold and soaked through from the cloud shrouding the mountainside. As a confirmed roadie my limited mountain biking skills were being tested to their full on the sopping wet and uneven surfaces, with both brakes and nerves beginning to fail on the sharp corners. Visibility was down to just a few yards, as drastic evasive action was required to swerve round a sauntering buffalo, displaying the indifference characteristic of its species. From that point on I kept expecting a buffalo around every corner.

As the tour literature had warned of 'a monster climb' and 'lung busting ascents,' my partner Rita and I had trained accordingly, with Rita having toughed out her debut 102 miles across the Lancashire moors (those extra 2 miles make a

world of difference apparently). Even with the extra pre-trip mileage, the cycling was probably the toughest I have ever encountered, particularly in the first days when acclimatising to the knobby tyres, different riding position and gear ratios of a hired mountain bike.

Finally, arriving alongside Ian, one of my cycling companions, we hit Than Thuc, with its atmosphere of a pioneering Wild West border town. That's not to badmouth any of its welcoming inhabitants, particularly the local café owner who took pity on our bedraggled state and who adamantly refused any attempt we made to pay for our warming green tea. Other villagers, particularly the children, stood around gabbling excitedly, we presume about our strange lycra outfits and hi-tech mountain bikes,

and enquiring in broken English 'where you come from?', possibly expecting 'lunatic asylum' as the answer.

A short hobble up the village's single dusty unmade road allowed us to take in its full sights, including two fairly young women tottering purposefully towards us in high heels and other Western-style clothes. They took one brief glance at us – taking in our sopping wet clothes and combined ages – before promptly doing an about turn and immeasurable damage to our egos.

This encounter was soon forgotten as I sat on a tiny wooden stool in a bare floor wooden hut, carbonised pitch black from the flames of its open fires, mesmerised by the preparations for the evening meal. Close by were precious pig sties and a tethered monkey. Two young girls expertly slaughtered and plucked a local 'bluish-black' chicken, which was to be our dinner for the night, along with huge portions of local vegetables and cooked rice, soon ravenously consumed by some grateful (and hungry) cyclists. The day's earlier misdirection from our Vietnamese guides, Son and Lam, was soon forgiven as the convivial atmosphere took on an alcoholic glow.

Rain featured largely and memorably in this late February/early March trip, although the temperatures remained a comfortable 16-20C. Starting and ending in the capital Hanoi, twelve of us rode a 14 day circular route of 450km across Vietnam's highest mountain terrain; through rural areas of exotically dressed hill-tribes, close to the Chinese border, before returning along the spine of a remote mountain range.

Our first week's riding took in stunning mountain and valley views, including banana and green tea plantations, whilst all around immaculately cultivated paddy fields hugged the terraced hillsides. Our route for week one culminated in a hard day's slog up the Tram Ton Pass – the highest mountain pass in Vietnam – to the hill town of Sa Pa. This former French colonial hill town, situated close to Mount Fan Si Pan (SE Asia's highest peak) lay shrouded atmospherically, yet not unexpectedly, in mountain clouds.

The second week featured back roads (a mixture of unsurfaced and tarmac) along the remote Hoang Lien Son mountain range. This was the kind of virgin cycling that really feels intrepid and adventurous, through a region, as yet, little explored by tourists and made up of villages of Black Thai, H'mong, Dao and Tay hill tribes. This was truly 'off the tourist trail' where a trip to the food markets saw us greeted enthusiastically by the locals. Many wanted to have a good look at us, have their picture taken, or proudly show off their produce, and were as respectfully curious about us as we were of them. Some 54 different groupings of hill tribe people – known by the French as the Montagnards (meaning high-landers or mountain people) populate much of this area. These colourfully dressed village people work the land and are often amongst the poorest, exchanging what they grow for other essentials in the mar-

kets. They wear stunning everyday costumes – the women often a black foundation of skirt and top, festooned with colourful beads, jewellery and make-up – each ethnic group individually distinct. One group we saw did a very passable impression of East End 'Pearly Queens'. Maybe our colourful and exotic lycra struck a chord of familiarity, such was the interest we often received.

One particularly memorable night ended with an impromptu display of drinking and singing with agronomists from the local Communist Party, whose knees-up they had rather imprudently allowed us to gatecrash. One word of advice if you are bound for karaoke mad SE Asia, whether you are a hiker or biker, learn to competently perform a signature song and you'll blend in a treat. Sadly no crooner myself and certainly not one to follow my own advice, I hid behind the efforts of my colleagues and the large amounts of alcohol on offer.

Despite the epic climbs and sketchy weather, my technique began to improve, evidenced particularly on the climbing highlight of the trip, the monster 26 kilometres up the Tram Tom Pass to a height of 1,900 metres (6,230 feet). Although the top, known as 'Heaven's Gate,' was soon rechristened 'Hell's Gate,' due to the entire climb having been through dense mountain cloud and rain. On the worst stretches I consoled myself with a concept worthy of an imaginary Confucius, that 'Without mountain, there can be no downhill.'

Some of these gruelling climbing days were enlivened by a chance meeting with a French cyclist and bicycle shop mechanic named Stanley. This non-Gallic named, nine stone mountain goat paced me up some of the worst sections, while I muttered not so subtly under my breath, that 'I could take him anytime I wanted'. The route, as a whole, was a good mix of long, steep punishing ups, full on adrenaline fuelled downs and a wide variety of pottering along through stunning scenery the rest of the time, giving ample opportunity for a bit of in the saddle sight seeing. Just one word of caution when cycling

in Vietnam; the gradient signs seem to bear little relevance to the climbs they pertain to. Clearly the Government have imported a job lot of 9-11% signs for use anywhere, regardless of the severity of the climbs.

I mentioned that rain had a big part to play in all this. Well it may have made things more 'interesting' and 'challenging', but it also gave some of the most vivid and unique memories, such as when a baker's dozen of us were crowded into a family's small wooden hut, (which doubled as their living and bedrooms), trying to dry ourselves around two hastily made dirt floor fires. Steam rose from our clothes, as we drank their green tea and snacked on local green bananas, hoping to be a little less soggy for the next stretch of cycling. It set me thinking whether I would be capable of showing the same kindness, hospitality and lack of suspicion had the cycling shoes been on the other feet?

Crippling climbs aside, most of the cycling was a pure joy... with the mountainsides often echoing with the cries of village children shouting their 'hellos' and the occasional more formal 'good morning'. It was like a giant game of 'where's Wally' trying to spot them shouting from a hillside terrace, or hidden away in the 'windows' of their wooden stilted huts. Going through any village was a virtual guarantee of such welcomes and any stop would soon attract a group of children and elderly women, smiling, chatting and curious. This was where a digital camera comes into its own... I'd just ask to take a photograph and then watch the reaction – varying from beaming smiles, hysterical laughter, through to bemusement. It was a delight to see such expressions of unadulterated joy – and that was just among us cyclists.

Cycling is central to life in rural Vietnam as around 80% of Vietnam's 73 million people still live in the countryside and most rely on the bicycle as their mode of transport. Among the noteworthy uses I saw for one bike were to carry three massive pigs in bamboo baskets, and another with a tower of



image © Roger Troughton



image © Roger Troughton

hundreds of bricks and vegetable produce piled at least six foot high. It made a short pedal to my local superstore look mundane.

Even in Hanoi, where scooters are a sign of affluence, and therefore de rigeur, the bicycle is still very much an everyday workhorse. I shall remember to my dying day (almost closer than I'd hoped for), my first bike foray in Hanoi. Normal rules of the road do not apply, with every vehicle claiming its own morsel of space, and evasive manoeuvres being the norm. Thousands of scooters, bikes, cars, buses and pedestrians fought anarchically for space. I felt like a fish in a large shoal, moving instinctively into any available space and co-ordinating my movements with thousands of others doing likewise. Once I learnt to relax it became second nature and paradoxically very safe. Never mind swimming with the dolphins, instead try cycling like a fish in downtown Hanoi.

Hanoi itself is a gem, much like China before capitalist development took hold. It contains Merchants Quarters, with entire streets given over to one trade, whether traditional such as drum making, silks and light shades, or the contrast of black market shops selling pirated music/film cds and imitation Oakley glasses. No prizes for guessing what I bought? Everyday life is played out on the pavements, where food stalls titillate and scintillate the gastric juices of a famished cyclist. Meanwhile, the intense and vibrant clamour of life pulses through the city's narrow Asian thoroughfares, as well as flowing more sedately through the legacy of boulevards and buildings left by French colonials.

The trip was a gastronomic adventure as well. Cycling for long days naturally builds up the appetite and the first stop of the day after breakfast was always Pho, a hearty local noodle soup available everywhere. Local fruits were a constant fuel, including papaya, mango, dragon fruit, petite green bananas and even raw sugar cane. I also sampled many of the local delicacies, including farmed dog (yes farmed, not Fido from next door), deer, eel and many species of delicious, but unidentifiable fish, hopefully not the plentiful Hanoi cycling fish. Dishes were often D.I.Y. in a large boil-



image © Roger Troughton



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■ **TOP: - Terraced hillsides in the Hoang Lien Son**

ABOVE LEFT: - Traditionally dressed village girl

ABOVE RIGHT: - A Vietnamese roadside 'greasy spoon'

ing pan full of vegetables (known as a hotpot), sharing your meal with others in your party, along with the obligatory rice wine to toast the day's riding.

Two weeks of peddling was the perfect way to immerse myself in the cultural and social variations present in an undeveloped tourist destination such as Vietnam, so very alien in comparison with what

we're used to back home. The warmth of the welcomes, the unusual food, the vital and diverse cultural identities of the hill tribes, the punishing yet awe inspiring landscape. All this would have passed by in a flash of exhaust fume choked overheated metal, if buses and cars had been my vehicles of choice. As it was, two wheels were a commonality between two fundamentally very different peoples. ■

Who's Writing?

A desk-bound local government officer by profession, Peter Marsden spent most of his childhood living abroad as a service child, before coming back to England to perform poorly at his 'O' levels. A mediocre polytechnic degree led to putative careers in teaching, journalism, welfare rights and graphic design. Combining his day job as a publications officer in Blackpool, with frequent holidays (usually package), he has since cycled and backpacked through Western Europe and SE Asia.



THINKING OF GOING?

The far North Western region of Vietnam is superb cycling territory. Our 450-kilometre route included the Tram Ton pass and Hoang Lien Son mountain range, including areas with hill-tribe people where tourists are still a rarity.

WHEN TO GO

November, March and April are the best months. The daytime temperatures of between 16-20°C are ideal for cycling and avoid the later months of tropic temperatures that can rise to the high 30's. However, expect rain and persistent mist particularly in the mountains. Night time temperatures drop considerably, particularly in the mountains, so warm clothes are needed.

ORGANISING A TRIP

There are a host of trekking opportunities that can be organised independently in Hanoi. They particularly feature Sa Pa (local hill-tribe villages and their environs) as well as Ha Long Bay (a World Heritage site). A word of caution, while immensely enjoyable, they are more akin to exotic package tours for backpackers than truly independent adventures. Also consider spending at least a couple of days, if not more, in Hanoi and a similar time for a trip sailing on a motorised junk around Ha Long Bay.

Independent cycling is more difficult, but not impossible, to organise. There are many places to stay and eat in towns and villages, but unless you are fully self-sufficient then the language barrier and bike repairs might prove to be a problem. It's not recommended to begin your tour from Hanoi, due to the traffic and lack of scenery, but make travel arrangements for you and your bike to a starting point near Son La (approximately 6 hours travel north west of the capital).

I booked my trip with Red Spokes Adventure Tours, a small London-based specialist company with a motto of 'Cycling with Altitude'. Prices include full support, transfers, most accommodation and meals. Also included is a support vehicle with driver and two guides. Check them out on www.red-spokes.co.uk - in itself a superb website which provides some vicarious holiday thrills, and also info on their charity.

Mountain bikes or rugged touring bikes are required to tackle some of the stretches of unmade road. Red Spokes may be able to organise self-led or customised tours, making the necessary logistical arrangements and back-up support in an emergency.

ON THE RIDES

- Day time temperatures are comfortable enough for riding with shorts and a t-shirt/cycling top. For long days in the saddle cycling-specific shorts are recommended, with ordinary shorts over to avoid frightening your fellow cyclists or locals. Take along a waterproof over jacket for the mountain descents and the rain showers, which can be uncomfortable.
- Night time temperatures are cold so a fleece/warm jacket and jumper are recommended, as well as trousers.



FITNESS LEVELS

While it is possible to cycle the route with limited biking skills, as with most things in life, some practice will make the whole event more enjoyable. The route is not overly technically demanding, although some nerve is required on the downhill sections, and good fitness levels are required to tackle the up-hills. Putting in the mileage before the holiday will allow you to enjoy more of the scenery.

ARRANGEMENTS

A visa is needed to visit Vietnam and you will need to pay airport departure taxes. Some vaccinations may be required – see www.travax.scot.nhs.uk

Most airlines are ok with boxed bikes, or even partially packaged, as part of your baggage; although be aware of weight restrictions on some of the budget flights.

The currency in Vietnam is the Dong (the average exchange rate being 15,900 VND to the \$1 US dollar). US dollars can also be used in Hanoi or Sa Pa (but not elsewhere).

FOOD AND ACCOMMODATION

Northern Vietnamese cuisine is not as spicy as its southern counterpart. Most towns offer a range of venues, from street food best tasted fresh, to cafes and restaurants, all at very affordable prices. Hanoi naturally offers the widest range of local and international restaurants and a café culture, complete with Vietnamese coffee, which rivals a lot of British cities. Vietnam is actually the world's fourth largest exporter of coffee.

Alcohol is widely available, including locally brewed beers and very drinkable Vietnamese wine. More exotic drinks included rice wine (powerful stuff) and bottles of alcohol complete with lizards and snakes

– which are meant to be aphrodisiacs.

Accommodation is widespread and as electricity is commonplace so are hot showers – welcome after a day's exertion in the saddle. Outside of Hanoi and Sa Pa, which boast Western-style standards, hotels are more basic, but usually clean and the owners helpful. A fine touch is that they all provide free toothbrushes and paste, plus slippers. Memorable stays included a local Communist Party hostel, complete with Ho Chi Minh posters, and another with a view from the bedroom onto an indoor badminton court.

GUIDES

If you are not travelling independently a map or guide is not strictly necessary, but will increase your enjoyment. Maps that display essential information for cyclists, such as gradients do not exist, but most specialist map shops will supply road maps.

Also recommended for advice, photographs and maps is www.globalwanderings.co.uk set up by designer, author and photographer Richard Cain, who has motorbiked the area extensively. Richard was fascinated by the hilltribe costumes and, frustrated by a lack of a information, decided to set up his own website, an eclectic mixture of pictures and travel information, which has expanded out from Vietnam to include other SE Asia countries and Africa.

The usual guides are recommended, particularly "The Rough Guide to Vietnam". Pre-tour reading about the Vietnam War should be obligatory and may include "The American War. Vietnam 1960-1975" (Jonathan Neale - Bookmarks); "The Sorrow of War (Bao Ninh - Minerva) and "When Heaven and Earth Changed Places" (Le Ly Hayslip – A Plume Book). The latter can be picked up cheaply from street sellers in Hanoi, but note these are photocopies and not print quality.