

Same Same But Different



by Peter Moore

I'M PROBABLY one of the few people in the world who can say that a surly taxi driver got his holiday off to the perfect start.

En route to a new life in London, I had arrived at Ho Chi Minh International Airport with nothing more than a notion of riding around the Mekong Delta on an old Vespa and permission from my long-suffering wife to spend a week doing it. And just moments after a long and unpleasant taxi ride in the company of a totally disagreeable taxi driver, I found myself with the keys to a beautifully restored old Vespa in my hand and *carte blanche* to do what I wanted with it for the next week.

The taxi driver didn't realise he was doing me such a huge favour. Indeed, after I refused to stay in a hotel his friend owned, he was in no mood to help me at all. On top of the voucher I'd bought from the special taxi counter at the airport to take me to the

backpacker district at Pham Ngu Lao, he demanded I pay him another taxi fare. When I refused he got agitated and tried to dump me at each set of traffic lights we came to. He finally lost his temper at the edge of Pham Ngu Lao, stopping the taxi with a screech of brakes and dumping me and my bags unceremoniously on the pavement.

The first thing I noticed when I'd finished dusting myself off was the humidity. It hit me like a soggy blanket. The second thing I noticed was that he'd dumped me right outside the Zoom Café.

I'd like to say that I knew Zoom Café was Saigon's only Vespa-themed bar and that it was top of my list of places to visit. Or that I knew that its American owner, Steve Mueller, restored Vespas immaculately and sold them all around the world. But, in truth, the whole basis of my trip to Vietnam was rather vague. I knew Vespas were exported to Vietnam in the sixties. And I knew that I'd like to ride around the Mekong Delta on one. Whether that was possible, whether there were even any roadworthy Vespas left, I wasn't sure. My research hadn't progressed beyond an impulse.

The café was evocatively Vespa-themed, with a mural above the bar painted in the style of old French Vespa ads from the fifties. The front half of a Vespa VBB was bolted to the wall, giving the impression that it was in the process of magically passing through. And astonishingly, within minutes of walking into the café I had met and befriended Steve and he had handed me the keys to a 1968 150cc Vespa. It was painted a very fetching shade of bronze and had chrome protector bars that sparkled in the sun. I think Steve may have had a touch of heatstroke because he not only said I could ride around the Delta on it, but he wouldn't let me pay him anything, either. The scooter was one of his runabouts, he told me, and he wasn't using it anyway.

After a quick tour of the bike’s idiosyncrasies – a dodgy front brake and a clutch cable with a tendency to work loose – I ventured out onto the roads of Ho Chi Minh City. You know that scene late in *Apocalypse Now* when Marlon Brando mumbles ‘The horror! The horror!’? I used to think he was talking about the futility of war, but after half an hour riding in the traffic in HCMC I realised he was probably just shaken up after a quick trip to the big smoke for supplies. The motor cycle riders of old Saigon make the VC look like pussies.

There are over three million motor scooters in HCMC and I reckon most of them were in the centre of town that morning. They buzzed about like flies around a cow pat, each intent on forcing me off the road and into a noodle stall. Into the mix were thrown wobbling cyclists wearing conical hats, peddle-powered, three-wheeled cyclos with terrified passengers getting a ringside view from the seat in front, and pedestrians forced to scamper along the road by all the hawkers, motorcycles and small businesses that cluttered the footpath. Riding a motor scooter here wasn’t just a way to get between Point A and Point B. It was an extreme sport.

I was the only person on the road riding alone and without encumbrance. Every scooter bore at least four passengers and some sort livestock as well. One family of three – small by Vietnamese standards – had a dozen ducks, still alive, hanging from the handle bar. Others carried less animate objects: one chap had a double mattress strapped precariously to his back as he wove through the traffic. And another brave pillion passenger held a pane of glass across his legs, seemingly oblivious to what an accident would do to his ability to father children. Every single vehicle on the road broke any number of traffic codes, but they were all allowed to continue, chaotic and unhindered.

The traffic lights offered no respite. Some bright spark in City Hall had decided to liven the traffic up even more by installing traffic lights with a display that counts down the seconds before the light would turn green again. As the counter approached the final five seconds the scooter riders began revving their engines and jostling for the best position at the head of the queue, sending plumes of blue fumes skyward as they took off with tinny roars that would have made Michael Schumacher feel right at home.

I returned to the café in need of a good lie-down and with a new understanding of why Steve was lending me the Vespa. He wasn't being generous. He was just a very sick individual who got his kicks from watching others suffer.

‘You'll get used to it,’ he said with a laugh when he saw me. I wasn't so sure.

My plan was to head south to the Delta as soon as possible, but when I woke the next morning I was still a little shell-shocked and instead decided to spend the day browsing the pirate CD shops on Bui Vien and De Tham streets. I wanted to have a closer look at the titles offered by the pirate bookseller girls, too. They walked around with 60 books at a time: photocopied, colour-covered and piled one on top of the other, a thin white ribbon holding them together. An English guy had emailed me from Vietnam once to tell me that he'd just bought a pirate copy of my book *No Shitting in the Toilet*. I wanted to see if they still had any.

The first bookseller found me as I was tucking into my breakfast, the obligatory banana pancake. She stood before me, politely pulling the ribbon aside so I could see the titles on offer more clearly.

‘Lone Plan-et . . . good books ...you *buuuuyy!*’ she whined.

I scoured the pile, hoping to find one of my books, but the closest I got was *Stupid WhiteMen* by Michael Moore. I asked the girl if she had anything by Peter Moore and she stared at me blankly. I repeated the name, my name, more slowly this time, and again there wasn't a flicker of recognition. She asked me to write it down and then plonked her books beside my table. 'I ask my boss,' she said, scurrying off down the lane.

She was back within minutes with a trim, muscly woman in her thirties who had more than a touch of the Lucy Lius about her. She was not happy at all about being dragged away from the nerve centre of her pirate publishing enterprise.

'No Peter Moore!' she spat, giving me the sort of withering look Lucy has become famous for. '*Michael Moore. It same!*'

I could have suggested that a quick comparison of Michael's and my royalty cheques would quickly clear up that little misunderstanding, but the iciness of her stare and the muscle that twitched in her neck suggested that it wouldn't have been a good idea. Already a proud owner of the entire Michael Moore oeuvre, I took the diplomatic option of buying a copy of the Lonely Planet *Vietnamese Phrasebook*. It cost the full four dollars even though it was a fraction of the size of all the other books, but I'm not ashamed to admit that, frankly, the woman scared me.

The incident, as terrifying as it was, did give me an idea, though. I decided to spend the rest of the day asking every girl selling books in HCMC if they had any books by Peter Moore. At first I let them approach me, in the streets around Pham Ngu Lao, pretending that something in their pile of wares had caught my eye. But by the afternoon I was seeking them out – at the War Remnants Museum, in the Internet cafés along De Tham and the restaurants and bars along Dong Khoi, the more affluent part of town. My

hope was that when they returned to the warehouse their gang masters would notice a staggering number of requests for books by some bloke called Peter Moore, amongst the usual ones for the latest John Grisham and Joanna Trollope. An illusion that there was a demand for my books would be created and, by the time I got back from the Delta, one of them would be photocopied and have slipped into the Ho Chi Minh City Top 60 as a hot new title. Well, a man can dream.

Before I headed south to the Delta, Steve insisted I joined him for a night on the town with an English spray painter called Daniel. Daniel was in Vietnam to teach Steve's local spray painters how use the latest products and had become quite enamoured with the HCMC scene.

‘He's still thinking with his Johnson,’ said Steve, ‘So we'll have to keep an eye on him.’

We set out along Duong Dong Khoi, the wide boulevard that runs the length of the Dong Khoi district from the river to the cathedral. It is both the commercial centre of HCMC and home to most of its bars and clubs, and that night it felt like a scene from a Vietnamese pirate copy of *La Dolce Vita*. The footpaths were bustling with people eating at outdoor cafés and the street itself was teeming with young Vietnamese cruising on motor scooters. Everyone was wearing their Sunday best; the more affluent rode Honda Dreams and wore designer gear with the labels showing. Those riding the cheaper Chinese Majestys and Victorys made up for a lack of financial liquidity with originality and creativity in their clothing, using army surplus left behind by the Americans in new and unusual ways. And it has to be said that Steve, Daniel and I cut a stylish swathe on

our Vespas. We attracted more than a few admiring glances from the locals, but I suspect that most were directed at our bikes.

‘Vespas used to be regarded as peasant bikes,’ yelled Steve as we rode slowly along the boulevard. ‘But now they see them in ads and magazines and they’re becoming cool.’

Vespas were popular with expats, too, and it certainly didn’t hurt Steve’s cause that the Vespas they saw on the streets of HCMC nearly always had a pretty Vietnamese girl on the back.

‘Now all of the local Vietnamese rich guys want them,’ laughed Steve. ‘They think it’s going to help them pull Miss Vietnam.’

We weaved our way through the traffic on the roundabout in front of Than Binh markets and down an alley to Duong Thi Sach and the Apocalypse Now nightclub. The club is an institution in HCMC – it’s the closest thing the city’s got to the R&R clubs of the Vietnam War – and Daniel was fidgeting like a schoolboy to get in.

‘You can’t walk from the front door to the back without falling in love,’ he said. ‘The girls are gorgeous!’

The girls were indeed gorgeous, in a mini-skirted, tight-topped kind of way. But their taste in men was exceedingly poor. They leant against the fattest and ugliest of the patrons, flirting with them as if they were Brad Pitt. Indeed, there seemed to be some kind of bizarre inverse law at work: the more ugly the bloke, the more stunning the woman.

There are exceptions to every rule, of course. Daniel was a good looking guy who dressed and groomed himself like David Beckham and all the girls loved him. In the time

it took to have our first drink at the bar, at least half a dozen very attractive girls came up and greeted him with a kiss. The last and most attractive girl dragged him onto the dance floor.

‘He’s playing a dangerous game,’ said Steve, watching him dance with three different girls in the space of one song – appropriately, Britney Spear’s ‘Toxic’. ‘He’s either going to get burnt out or caught out.’

I bought a round of 333’s, the local Vietnamese beer, and expressed my surprise that the Vietnamese girls put up with this kind of behaviour. Those who had come up to Daniel were as smart and funny as they were attractive. Daniel had claimed the girls weren’t bothered by the way the Western men acted because Vietnamese guys treat them like dogs. When Daniel was out of earshot on the dance floor, Steve ventured another, more plausible theory. ‘It’s money,’ he said. ‘These girls are hanging out for the one guy who will take them away. And they’re willing to go through all this to get him.’

I asked him if that’s why his wife, Phuong, had married him.

‘She’s keeping me, man!’ he laughed. Phuong had already owned the café and she’d turned it into a Vespa-themed establishment so Steve would have something to do.

At midnight the lights were switched on and everyone was asked to leave. The government was having one of its periodic campaigns against immorality and was cracking down on closing times. The men looked even sadder under the stark glare of the fluorescent lights. Their skin was clammy and greasy and the sweat marks under their arms ate up half their shirts. The girls looked just as pretty, but with the lights on you could see the dullness in their eyes.

The alley outside was gridlocked as everyone got back on their bikes and buzzed off into the night. I headed back to my hotel. The nightwatchman opened the security grille and let me park the bike in the foyer of the hotel, beside the reception desk. I would have to get up early to move it but I wasn't concerned. Tomorrow, at last, I was heading off to the Mekong Delta. And despite my earlier reservations about riding on Vietnamese roads, I was ready and raring to go. Of course, that could have just been the 333's speaking.



The Vietnamese call the Delta *Cuu Long*, ‘Nine Dragons’, after the nine tributaries of the Mekong that crawl across the alluvial plain here like spidery veins. It is the final leg of the Mekong’s 4,000-kilometre journey from the Tibetan Plateau, and the nutrient-rich flats it passes through produce 38 per cent of Vietnam’s annual food crop, despite making up only 10 per cent of the country’s land mass. During the American war, the Delta was a Viet Cong stronghold – they had many well-hidden cells here – and was constantly strafed with bombs and defoliants.

The Delta begins on the outskirts of HCMC, but there it is heavily industrialised. The main road south, Highway 1, is a snarled ribbon of asphalt, lined with makeshift mechanic shacks, shops selling truck parts and grimy factories belching smoke into the grey skies. Eighty-three per cent of Vietnamese enterprises are based in this area, from fish processing plants through to tractor factories and, charmingly, the Ben Luc Taffeta Company. It’s not pretty, but the industry here is the reason more Vietnamese are riding Honda Dreams and talking on Nokia mobile phones.

Highway 1 is also the domain of lumbering trucks and buses, in varying degrees of disintegration, with brakes that don't work but horns that do. They bore down mercilessly on hapless scooter riders who scattered like cockroaches whenever one came near. As I dodged and weaved my way south, it struck me that the chaos on the roads was a metaphor for modern Vietnam. Since the introduction in 1986 of a policy of economic liberalisation called *Doi Moi* (which translates to 'change and newness'), everyone has been rushing madly in different directions, seemingly with no idea of where they are going. Yet, like the traffic, most seem to be getting to their destinations, with plenty of near misses, to be sure, but generally in one piece.

But it wasn't all taffeta factories and maniacal truck drivers. The Delta of tourist brochures could be glimpsed too, usually from one of the many bridges that span the countless rivers, streams and canals that criss-cross the region. Here life hadn't changed much at all. The water's edge was lined with water palms and stilt houses and, out in the middle, hand-hewn wooden cargo boats ploughed along low in the water, loaded with produce from the farms. Small dugout canoes ferried people from one side to the other and occasional ducks floated by on the murky brown water, scattering when young boys jumped in to wash. It was idyllic, really. Well, it was up until the moment when I was shaken from my reverie by the blaring horn of an oncoming truck.

My destination that day was Vinh Long, a major regional centre in the Mekong Delta, 140 kilometres south of HCMC. A brochure produced by the local Cuu Long Tourist Company fancifully claimed that the multitude of rivers that surround the town make it look like a 'flower with many petals'. I'm not sure which angle the guy was looking at the town from when he wrote that copy, but from where I was sitting – on the

back of the Vespa – it looked like just another scrappy town of stilt houses tumbling into a murky brown river.

I had decided on Vinh Long as my mandatory Mekong River Boat Tour town and I was impressed enough by the Cuu Long Tourist Company’s whimsical vision of their town to promptly engage them to organise a tour for me. They suggested I visit An Binh, an island that was ‘a living picture in miniature of the whole Delta’, sliced by canals into tiny jigsaw pieces connected by slight bridges called *arroyos* and dotted with orchards and farms. For a paltry sum I would enjoy a leisurely afternoon boat tour of the canals, an overnight stay on one of the island’s farms, and then a dawn tour of the floating markets at Cai Be. An English-speaking guide was also included in the price.

My guide’s name was Phouc, which he assured me meant ‘lucky’ in Vietnamese but which sounded very much like a popular Western expletive to me. I was tempted to say, ‘So you’re a lucky Phouc’, but his sad, soulful eyes and sincerity told me to keep my crass schoolboy humour to myself. Besides, he obviously took his job seriously – he’d even kindly organised parking for the Vespa in the exclusive Cuu Long Hotel, where it would be watched over by a guy in a white uniform with epaulets and a natty peaked cap while I was away.

My solo afternoon boat tour consisted of chugging up the main canal, which cut the island in two, in a slender vessel designed to seat ten, dodging hulking cargo ships and hiding from them in the tiny rivulets that ran off the canal. The canal was just as busy as the highway, and the rules of the river were the same as on the road. The smaller vessels gave way to the huge sampans loaded high with rice husks that bore down on them. The sampans all had a pair of eyes painted on the front, supposedly to keep an eye

out for the evil spirits of the river, but they were painted at such an angle as to make the boats look like they were getting some kind of crazy pleasure from the distress their wake caused tinier craft.

On the rivulets, life continued as it always had. People threshed, wove, planted and picked, or simply sat on the verandas of their wooden huts and watched the world go by. Here the waterways were so narrow that the branches of the trees that lined them formed a natural canopy, shielding us from the harsh afternoon sun. Children returning from school walked along narrow paths on the banks and waved excitedly as we passed. A European couple wearing conical hats floated past in a rustic version of a gondola, looking sheepish as they were rowed by a woman standing at the back of the craft. It was exactly how I had imagined the Delta to be and the first time in Vietnam I felt calm and peaceful.

The Cuu Long Tourist Company had organised quite an action-packed itinerary of nursery, orchard and coconut-candy factory tours for me that afternoon, but Phouc soon realised that I wasn't the kind of tourist who enjoyed wandering around bonsai gardens and or sampling exotic tropical fruits. Instead, we hung back in a beautiful teak room overlooking the gardens and knocked back a selection of local moonshine brought to us by a guy with the kind of long grey beard you only see in Kung Fu movies. Most of the drinks were made from rice, some were allowed to ferment with a snake in the bottom of the jar and they all had a kick like a mule. I don't think Phouc had had so much fun on a Mekong River tour before and he wandered back to the boat whistling a jaunty little Vietnamese ditty.

My homestay for the night was a traditional farmhouse with a packed dirt floor and a shrine to family's ancestors above the entrance. The kitchen had a single open fire and my camp bed came with a tattered mosquito net that had more holes in it than the American line of defence at Danang. A family of three generations of farmers lived there, under the watchful eye of the patriarch, Dung, a name that Phouc was quick to point out meant 'heroic' in Vietnamese. Dung was a tiny man of indeterminate age with a wispy grey beard and sparkling eyes and he seemed inordinately pleased when I said I would eat with the family rather than dine alone in my room. Dining solo seemed against the spirit of staying with a family – if I was going to eat alone I may as well have stayed in a hotel. And besides, if I ate in my room I'd be depriving the family of a night of highly anticipated entertainment.

Don't be fooled into thinking that these people open their houses up just for the extra money. Foreigners are allowed in to their family homes for another very important reason: to entertain. Every fumble with a chopstick, every clumsy faux pas and every blundering insensitivity is better than a night out at the movies. The money is essential, but the amusement is priceless.

Each of the dishes presented to me that night were sculpted into a Mekong Delta scene. A cucumber man rowed a cucumber boat through a river of spring rolls. And another cucumber man carrying carrots strode across a mountain of rice. It was all very quaint, but in truth it was just an edible game of Ker-plunk. Instead of pulling out plastic straws and hoping all the trapped marbles didn't come crashing down, I had to eat my food without toppling the cucumber men. I failed miserably, of course. And when one man came crashing down into a bowl of soup, splashing hot liquid over most of the

family, I failed spectacularly. I knew I had fulfilled my duties as the foreign fall guy. The family left the table that evening giggling and wiping tears from their eyes.

I retired with Phouc and Dung to a room where a shrine to the family’s ancestors was kept – the most important room in the house. We sat drinking tea at a beautifully polished teak table, and Dung pointed proudly to a framed certificate hanging on the wall. He had received it from the government for being a soldier.

‘He fought bravely for 25 years,’ Phouc explained. ‘First against the French and then the Americans.’

Dung smiled broadly, his eyes sparkling. This was obviously something he was very proud of. I asked if he had fought Australians. He shook his head.

‘They tried to avoid the Australians,’ interpreted Phouc. ‘They preferred fighting Americans. They were easier.’

I must have looked perplexed because Phouc explained further. Apparently the Australians patrolled their areas with soldiers spread hundreds of metres apart. At best the Viet Cong would be able to pick off one or two men before the rest of the patrol became aware of their presence. The Americans wandered along drinking, smoking and laughing together. They were easy to ambush and regularly were. It made better sense, explained Phouc, to let the Aussies pass.

It was a sobering experience to be able to talk to someone who had fought in the war and was willing to talk about it. Seventy-five per cent of Vietnam’s population has been born since the end of the conflict and has had no direct experience of the sacrifices that were made. And because Vietnam is such a verdant country, particularly the Delta, any scars left by bombing and defoliants were quickly hidden and the land reclaimed by

the lush growth. I asked Dung if he was proud of how Vietnam had turned out and whether it had all been worth fighting for. He nodded his head slowly.

‘Very proud,’ interpreted Phouc. ‘If they hadn’t won he would still be fighting and his farm would be in ruins.’

We drank a toast to Vietnam and to a quick end to the troubles in Iraq, which Dung saw as America’s new Vietnam. Then I retired to my room where every mosquito in the Delta was waiting to gorge on my sweet Western flesh.



It was still dark when breakfast was served the next morning. The men of the household sat around a long wooden table, lit by a hurricane lamp, eating rice and discussing what needed to be done in the orchard that day. The women had risen earlier still to prepare the meal, and after laying the food on the table they disappeared to a back room. They would wait there until the men had finished, Phouc explained, eating what the men had left and only after they were gone. The lot of women, it seemed, had not been served well by the communist victory. Their prowess as exceptional soldiers had been rewarded with lots more hard work and very few rights.

With the farmyard tasks planned, the men drained the last of tea from their cups and set off for the orchards. Then, just as the orange streaks of dawn appeared in the sky, the boat arrived to take Phouc and I to the floating markets at Cai Be.

The floating markets were very disappointing. I’d been expecting a colourful spectacle of jostling canoes full of tropical fruit being artfully manoeuvred by locals

wearing conical hats. What I got was a sad collection of faded sampans with a couple of sweet potatoes strung up a pole to indicate that was what they were selling.

‘The harvest has passed,’ explained Phouc, sensing my disappointment. ‘Now is the time for planting.’

The obligatory tour of a rice pancake workshop and a rice crisp factory didn’t do much to lift the excitement factor either, but luckily Phouc realised that I wasn’t interested in watching girls sort and pack snackfoods and we only stayed for moments. The most entertaining moment came at the rice crisp factory where the female manager told Phouc the latest gossip. She’d given a particular guide everyone’s commissions for the month to distribute and he’d run off with the money. Phouc pressed her for details, laughing at the audacity of the guy and saying that he’d never trusted him anyway, so it was lunchtime before we were back in Vinh Long.

The white-uniformed chap at the Cuu Long Hotel rolled out the Vespa, wiping off the chalk mark that proved it was mine. After shaking Phouc’s hand I kick-started the bike and set off again on Highway 1. My plan was to head west to Chau Doc, a town close to the Cambodian border, but when I reached Cantho just over an hour later I found a hotel and decided to stop. It wasn’t because I was tired from getting up so early; rather, I’d made a snap decision to visit a place sixty kilometres in the opposite direction.

That place was the Bat Pagoda, or Chua Doi as the locals call it, and it was near the sleepy town of Soc Trang. My guidebook described it as ‘one of the Mekong Delta’s most unusual sights’, which was quite a rap considering the extraordinary things I’d seen so far. Not least of which was the calendar I’d just seen on the wall at the Hien Guesthouse, the establishment in Cantho where I was bedding down for the evening. It

featured a photo of the manager’s husband, bare-chested and superimposed next to a mobile missile launcher in a green field. The Bat Pagoda would have to be pretty amazing to beat that.

Having grown up watching Adam West swanning about as the caped crusader in ‘Batman’, my imagination immediately constructed a Bat Cave within this pagoda, complete with Bat Buddha and other Bat-worshipping gear. Even though I told myself there could not possibly be a Batman theme park at Chua Doi, it still didn’t cross my mind that I might just find a Pagoda with some bats hanging in a nearby tree.

The road east to Soc Trang is a secondary road, but that afternoon it seemed to be carrying as much traffic as Highway 1. It was badly potholed, with some of the holes so big that people had filled them with sandbags, and the sport here for truck drivers seemed to be herding motorcycles into them.

Once I got past the towns of Cai Rang and Phung Hiep, however, the road ran parallel with a river and the scenery became distinctly more rural. Barges meandered peacefully down canals and the road was lined on either side with woven mats covered in rice. The villagers were drying the rice in the sun, and in most places the mats encroached onto the road. Just outside one tiny village the farmers had gotten so audacious that the drivable part of the road had shrunk to a single, narrow lane, barely wide enough for a minivan to pass. The mats acted like a chicane, slowing the traffic considerably. The local constabulary took full advantage of this, sitting under a tree just south of the mats and nabbing motorcycle riders for not wearing their helmets, before they had the chance to speed up.

The Bat Pagoda wasn't actually in Soc Trang. It was four kilometres out of town and it didn't take long for me to get terribly lost. I ended up in remote part of the Delta down near the South China Sea, with plenty of rice paddies and shrimp factories but very few pagodas. I spotted a restaurant ahead and decided to ask a bunch of Vietnamese guys sitting at a table getting drunk if they knew where Chua Doi was. Before I could ask, one of them spoke to me in English.

'Noice bike,' he said in a broad Aussie accent, nodding towards the Vespa. *'Where ya from?'* When I answered Sydney, he said, *'Me too!'*

I'm not sure exactly what kind of odds a bookmaker would put on meeting a fellow Aussie in this neck of the woods but I would suggest that they would be rather long. I was lost in the middle of a one-duck province in rural Vietnam and I had stumbled upon not only someone who could speak English but who was an Aussie to boot. His name was Phu, he ran the shrimp factory down the road and best of all, he knew the way to the Bat Pagoda.

Before sending me on my way, Phu insisted that I join him and his friends for a drink. Judging by the number of empty bottles on the table, they had quite a start on me, but he waved over the waitress and soon I had my own bottle of warm beer and a glass full of ice. As is customary in Vietnam, the waitress also gave me a refresher towel sealed in a plastic pouch. I scrunched it up, getting all the air down one end, and popped it, just as I'd seen the locals do. The sound echoed around the hall like a gun shot.

Phu laughed. *'You are becoming Vietnamese!'* he said, pouring me a beer.

Over the next hour, Phu continually topped up my beer, telling me about his life between rowdy cries of *'Cheers!'* and the boisterous clinking of glasses. When I finally

staggered out of the restaurant I knew that Phu had grown up in Cabramatta, that his kids went to school in Australia and that I was feeling a bit under the weather. I couldn't tell how many beers I'd had in my bottomless glass, but I hoped I was in better shape than Phu. He staggered out onto the road, blinking in sun, and used a telegraph pole for support while he gave me directions.

‘The sign for the Bat Pagoda faces this way, so you'll see it this time,’ he said with an effort. ‘Just turn left.’ His mates managed to join him on the road and waved goodbye too. I set off down the road, a little gingerly at first, pleased that I was still in the middle of nowhere. Hopefully I'd be in better shape by the time I hit any traffic.

The Bat Pagoda wasn't very good. It looked like every other pagoda in Vietnam - gaudily painted and in need of a good scrub - except for a tree where maybe twenty bats were hanging. A young novice dressed in a bright orange gown was sweeping the path and when he noticed my disappointment he pointed to three graves at the back of the compound.

‘Five-toenailed pigs!’ he said.

Now that would have been something to see. A family of deformed pigs with one more toenail each than they should have had. But they were dead and all that was left were their portraits, painted on their headstones.

I left Cantho the next morning just after dawn. I hadn't planned to leave that early but when I'd asked the night before what time check-out was, the manager had told me 5.30 am. I realise now that she just wanted me to go on a floating market tour to Cai Rang and was probably hoping I would say, ‘What the heck? I'm up now, I may as well go see some more of those excellent floating markets.’ But at US\$18 for a half-day tour -

more than a lot of Vietnamese earn in a month – that wasn't likely. I decided instead to hit the road before it got too busy.

The ride to Chau Doc went largely without incident. A number of roadwork projects had been started and abandoned, causing the kind of traffic jams that induced Vietnamese truck drivers to become even more reckless. At one point a bus came careering directly towards me in what appeared to be an attempt to dunk me into the grubby canal beside the road. But it was my second day on Highway 1 now and I realised that this was all just par for the course. Just like the truck drivers who insisted on blowing their air horns when they drew level with my eardrum. For some reason it never dawned on them that I could sense their lumbering presence just millimetres over my shoulder.

Just after the town of Long Xuyen, a guy on a Chinese motor scooter decided that riding along a major highway at 80 kilometres per hour was as good a place as any to practise his English. He wore a black pork-pie hat in place of a helmet and spoke in measured tones, even as he yelled to be heard over the road noise. There were trucks and buses bearing down murderously on us, but it seemed churlish of me to refuse to talk to him.

The lesson did not start well. He asked where I was going but before I could answer he had to swerve out of the way of a minivan that pulled across in front of us to pick up a passenger. He pulled alongside me again and continued by asking me where I was from. I told him I was from Australia but he missed my answer when a truck passed in the opposite direction, blaring its horn and barely missing him. Unfazed by the fact he had nearly ended up on the front grille of a Mitsubishi Canter, he asked me my name

before waving goodbye and powering ahead. The lesson was over before I learned his name.

Chau Doc is a town with big plans. Its approaches are lined with giant fish farms and shrimp factories geared for international trade with neighbouring Cambodia, and the direct river link with Phnom Penh makes it perfectly placed to take advantage of the increasing commerce between the two countries. The impressive Victoria Chau Doc Hotel sits grandly overlooking the river and offers all mod cons, including a business centre, fitness club and in-room massages. But the clearest indication of the town's ambitions is that it has plans to build a monorail.

I spotted the sign for the monorail on the outskirts of town on my way to the Delta Adventure Centre, a place my guidebook described as the best-value lodging in town. The sign was nailed to a tree and featured illustrations of the monorail winding its way up nearby Sam Mountain and pulling into stations that looked like Disney-esque palaces. Naturally, the sign was hand painted, as most are outside of HCMC.

I thought immediately of the episode of *The Simpsons* where the good folk of Springfield are conned into building a monorail by the smooth-talking Lyle Lanley. I suspect that the *indochine* version of Mr Lanley had been in town recently, congratulating the folk of Chau Doc for embracing *Doi Moi* so successfully and talking them into not just the monorail but the awful giant fish sculpture down on the waterfront as well. The money would have been better spent on improving the roads, of course – the potholes in Chau Doc were the kind that swallowed cyclos whole. But the last laugh would have been on Vietnamese Lyle: there just aren't too many places on the planet where you can spend a briefcase full of dong.

The Delta Adventure Centre seemed to be expecting big things too. It was halfway along the road to Sam Mountain and featured thatch-roofed bungalows set around a manmade lake. It described itself as tourist complex but I was the only one staying there. After being shown to my room, a sterile box where every surface was tiled, I ate in the attached restaurant that my guidebook promised had the ambience of a harem. To my untrained eye it looked like just another Asian restaurant with battered chairs and peeling paint. I decided that the guidebook writer had probably meant ‘Harlem’ – the cockroaches scuttling up the wall certainly gave the place that sort of vibe – and retired to my room early.

The next day I rode along the border with Cambodia to the Bone Pagoda at Ba Chuc. The pagoda is a memorial to the thousands of villagers massacred there by the Khmer Rouge in April 1978. Historically, the Cambodians have always regarded the Delta as part of the Khmer empire and this province in particular had seen a number of nasty border clashes. None as nasty as this one, though – over 2,000 people were slaughtered in three days – and many claim that the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia at the end of that year came as a direct result of it.

It could have been my imagination, but as I rode along the road that formed the border between the two countries there seemed to be a real menace in the air. The area was drier than the rest of the Delta and the road was dotted with bamboo watchtowers and signs that warned passers-by in Vietnamese, Khmer and English that they were travelling through a frontier zone. The plains were now backed by hills and mountains that seemed to press in threateningly. The smoke haze from countless fires lit by farmers burning off rice stalks seemed to hang oppressively in the air, cloaking the area in a dull,

muted sheen. When a soft-drink vendor saw me approaching, he ran out of his shack to make sure I didn't take the wrong turn at a fork in the road. The look of relief on his face that suggested that he had just saved me from some terrible danger.

No one warned the villagers of Ba Chuc of danger back on 22 April 1978. A sizeable force of the Khmer Rouge army captured the commune, herded the villagers into groups of between 30 and 40 people, and then shot them. Some tried to escape into the surrounding fields or took refuge in pagodas, but they were hunted down and killed. Some hid under the raised dais that supported the Buddha in the Phi Lai Tu Pagoda, only to be killed by a grenade thrown amongst them.

There is a photographic display next to the main memorial at the Bone Pagoda that includes grisly black and white images of fields littered with twisted and butchered bodies. The pictures were so horrific that my mind, numbed by violent Hollywood movies, had trouble processing them as real. More affecting was the eight-sided memorial where the skulls of the victims were piled. They were grouped according to age and I was particularly moved by the pile of 15-year-olds. That's how old I was when this terrible massacre took place. At 15, my biggest concerns were the unlikelihood of St George being able to retain the premiership and whether Christine Bartho, the cute girl on the bus, liked me. That there were boys my age being brutally slaughtered in a foreign field did not even enter my mind.

My mood wasn't lightened by the community service announcement I saw on the TV in my room that night. It was designed to encourage motorcycle riders to wear helmets and was presented by a pretty girl with Eurasian features wearing an army

uniform and a perky peaked cap that looked something out of Mao’s China circa the Cultural Revolution.

The show was basically a half-hour ‘Death in Asia’ snuff movie about motorcycle traffic accidents on Vietnamese roads. It featured close-up footage of police attending collisions, drawing chalk outlines around bodies and mugging for the cameras as they pulled a flattened head off the road, the gooey brains stuck to the tarmac and stretched like chewing gum on the bottom of a shoe. The message being pushed, and a spurious one at that, was that wearing a helmet would have saved these poor souls’ lives. By the time the show finished – lingering on a shot of a man who had been hit by a bus, his body still tangled and mutilated under the wheel arch – I was ready to abandon Steve’s Vespa and find a safer way back to HCMC.

I woke the next morning with the brilliant idea of travelling the 270 kilometres back to HCMC on a cargo boat. I was certain it was possible – the waterfront in Chau Doc was teeming with them – and I asked the pretty girl on reception if she knew of any cargo companies with boats that would take the Vespa and me back to Ho Chi Minh City. She tried to sell me the Delta Adventure Company’s two-day tour.

The tour was a Mekong extravaganza that included a boat ride to Long Xuyen and then travel by air-conditioned bus the rest of the way to HCMC. I pointed to the Vespa parked just beside the reception desk and asked if I would be able to put that on a bus. She looked at me as if I were crazy.

‘Oh no,’ she said with alarm. ‘I don’t think you could even get it on the boat.’ That she hadn’t even considered what I was going to do with the Vespa – a Vespa she

had admired the night before and asked where I'd got it from – astounded me. Perhaps she thought I was leaving for her as a gift.

I didn't have much luck down at the docks either. Most of the boats were only going as far as Cantho and even then didn't have room for the Vespa. In the end I chanced 25 kilometres back towards Long Xuyen along the Highway 1 Road of Death, before taking a small car ferry across to the other, less developed side of the river. Through a combination of B-roads, rural lanes and car ferries I'd be able to get as far as Cai Lay, near Mytho, without riding on another main road.

The moment I rode off the car ferry and nearly skittled a chicken I knew I had found the Mekong Delta I'd been dreaming of. There were no trucks or buses here, just drays pulled by oxen and bicycles ridden by girls with incredible posture, dressed in blindingly white *Ao Dai*, the elegant silk pantsuits favoured by the women in Vietnam. Here the Delta was a labyrinth of tiny roads and lanes, cutting through rice paddies and small rural villages populated by smiling children and toothless old men.

Every turn in the road revealed another magical Mekong vista. Old women in conical hats and VC pyjamas bending in the fields to plant rice, stopping only to buy ceramic pots sold by a hawker from a cart. Duck wranglers herding their wayward charges along a path. Joss sticks looking like neon-coloured sea urchins, drying beside the road. A cyclo rider with a harvest of spring onions as his passenger, the smell strong and acrid as I passed him.

It was a complicated route I'd chosen and I had to rely on the locals to give me directions. My method was simple. I stopped at each crossroads and enunciated the name of the next town to the nearest local. Vietnamese is a tonal language, so pronunciation is

the key. To get it right I used my old technique of using the accent of a character from a cartoon or movie. In Mexico I used Speedy Gonzales as my vocal guide. In Spain it was Manuel from *Fawlty Towers*. When I asked for directions in Vietnam I adopted the ‘love you long time’ accent of the Vietnamese hookers in *Full Metal Jacket*. It seemed to work. Most of the locals smiled and pointed me in the right direction.

By the end of the day I was approaching Cai Lay, a small town 100 kilometres southwest of HCMC and, alarmingly, I was back on Highway 1. I think the Vespa was as apprehensive as I was about returning to the main road, for after barely skipping a beat throughout the languid backwaters of the Delta, it died with a *blurgghh* just outside the town.

I could see the town ahead so I got off the bike and started pushing. It was hot and humid and within seconds I was dripping sweat like a tap. Even worse, before I could reach the town and, hopefully, a skilled motorcycle mechanic, I had to negotiate the inevitable arched bridge that signalled the start of every town in the Delta. When I stopped at the bottom of the bridge to collect my thoughts and catch my a breath, a guy on a Honda pulled up behind me and beeped his horn. Through a series of charades it finally dawned on me that he was offering to use his bike – and his outstretched leg – to push me up and over the bridge.

It was a Vietnamese push-tow and quite simple to do. The guy rode along beside me, a little to the rear, with his right leg outstretched and his foot resting on the Vespa’s rear cowl. All I had to do was steer. We powered across the bridge with ease and I spotted a few motorcycle mechanics’ shops just on the other side. When I went to pull off the road and roll into one, the guy pushing me beeped his horn and indicated for me to

keep going. For a moment I thought he was going to push me all the way to Mytho, a major town 30 kilometres away, but on the opposite side of town we came upon a repair shop proudly displaying the Vespa logo. My good Samaritan said something in Vietnamese to the mechanic and then jumped back on his bike. I offered to pay him for his help but he refused and rode off with a smile.

The first thing the mechanic did was shove a dirty big screwdriver up the Vespa's exhaust and rattle it around. Steve had warned me that mechanics here did that. It's meant to clear blockages and they prescribe it like doctors prescribe paracetamol. Next he pulled off the cowl and examined the sparkplug, cleaning it and then kicking the kick-start to see if it emitted any spark. When that didn't work, he used the same screwdriver to physically force the piston to turn. He turned and gave me the kind of look a schoolteacher gives a naughty child. From his wagging finger and a series of animated gestures, I deduced that the piston had seized.

Now, I would have thought that was a pretty major problem, but in Vietnam it seemed to be no big deal. And because Vespa engines employ such simple technology, all it took was a bit more oil in the petrol and a few more wrenches with the screwdriver to get the bike going again. The mechanic wouldn't accept payment – the whole process only took five minutes – but he wouldn't let me go until I promised to put 5 per cent oil in the petrol instead of 3 per cent and to not go over 40 kilometres per hour. I decided not to press my luck too much and after safely reaching Mytho, I found a room for the night.

I left Mytho the next morning at seven, while the air was still fresh and clean. I took it slow and easy like the mechanic had suggested and reached the outskirts of HCMC without incident, dodging the baseball caps and scarves that Vietnamese riders

always seemed to be losing. After the mayhem of Highway 1, the streets of the city now seemed strangely ordered and calm. Motorcycles were the vehicle of choice here and the vibe on the road was easier and less threatening. A prang with another bike would leave me bruised and scratched, not being scraped off the tarmac.

I scooted through the tangled streets of HCMC, past the flower district and the mobile phone shops, back to the backpacker enclave of Pham Ngu Lao. The Vespa was a bit grubby from my travels so I decided to get it cleaned before I gave it back to Steve. I found a place on the corner of Nguyen Thai Hoc where boys washed and detailed motorcycles for 8,000 dong. At night it became a restaurant, but its tiled walls and floor were perfect for hosing down grimy bikes during the day. The tables and chairs were piled in a corner and, while their vehicles were being detailed, customers sat on upturned plastic crates watching the Vietnamese version of ‘Wheel of Fortune’ on a TV that hung from the ceiling.

It was a very low-tech version of the show. The three contestants squirmed in suits a number of sizes too big for them, supplied by the studio because they couldn’t afford their own. Not that the production had much of a budget. The backdrop for the show was a screen with cherry blossoms on it and the letters were written on a whiteboard that could be wiped clean and used again. The grand prize was a giant Sony flat screen television, though, and Sunsilk gave every contestant a pack of the company’s products, including shampoo *and* conditioner.

The contestants tested their answers by scribbling them down on a piece of paper, which I felt was against the spirit of the game. It didn’t make a scrap of difference to the Vietnamese watching the show with me, though. To them the point of the show was to

laugh at the contestants who accumulated a large amount of money and prizes and were then cruelly robbed when the wheel stopped on ‘Bankrupt’. It happened three times while I sat there, and the other customers thought it was hilarious, whooping and clapping with delight. Soon I did too and I got so caught up in the perverse fun of it all that I didn’t realise the boys had finished with the Vespa. It sat outside, completely immaculate, the chrome sparkling in the afternoon sun. It looked beautiful and I realised that I would be sad to give it back.



Barely a week after arriving in Vietnam I was back in Vroom Café, sitting at an outside table and waiting for a taxi to take me to the airport. Life in Pham Ngu Lao continued around me as normal. The cyclo rider who knew everyone’s business on the block waved as he pedalled by. The ice vendor crouched on her haunches to saw up a huge block of ice delivered to her on the back of a bike. The cool Vietnamese couple on their jet black Vespa buzzed up and down Duong De Tham just to be seen. Steve’s brothers-in-law sat around doing nothing, waiting, they claimed, to move the tables and bikes off the footpath when the police came along.

It struck me how lucky I’d been on this journey. Not just because the taxi driver had dumped me outside the Zoom Café and Steve had lent me his Vespa. And not just because I’d just ridden 600 kilometres along some of the craziest roads in the world and survived. (I’ve since had it on good authority that the Australian consul in HCMC spends a good deal of her time assisting injured Aussies.) No, my luck had come in the people I’d met and the experiences I’d enjoyed – the big night out with Steve and Daniel, the

night in the homestay on An Binh, drinking with Phu and his mates, the guy who gave me the leg tow and the mechanic who fixed the Vespa for free. Without them the trip would have been rather different.

A girl selling books approached me and with a start I remembered my plan. This was my final chance to see if it had had worked – I had asked at least thirty different girls if they had any books by Peter Moore before I left for the Delta. Surely word must have filtered back to the powers that be by now. I took heart when the girl recognised my name instantly and pulled out a book with a smile. It was *Dude Where's My Country*.

‘Michael Moore!’ she said triumphantly. ‘Same same but different.’

I slid across US\$4 and bought the book. I already had a copy but I figured that if push came to shove I could give it to my taxi driver.

A slideshow of pictures from Peter's trip around the Mekong Delta can be found at:

www.petermoore.net/same_same/same.htm

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