

# Return to Vietnam

**A look back at Vietnam on the edge of a new era - an era of unrestricted bicycle travel**



PHOTO BY STEVEN MCGEADY

**Redefining the meaning of fully packed, a woman pushes a load of coconut husks.**

**I**t was April of 1992. Dermot and I were waiting nervously in the customs line to enter Vietnam at the airport in Ho Chi Minh City, a.k.a. Saigon. We weren't sure whether we would be allowed in with our bicycles or if they would be confiscated and held at the airport. Tourism was new to Vietnam and the rules and regulations were in such a state of flux that it was hard to get accurate information on what we would be allowed to do. The Vietnamese visas that we obtained in Bangkok had "No independent travel permitted" stamped boldly on them. In spite of this, our plan was to bicycle around the Mekong Delta. We ended up doing much more than that.

We were on the last leg of our around-the-world bicycle journey when the possibility of bicycling in Vietnam came up. We hadn't thought that it was an option when we left the United States nine months before. But, as we met and talked to travelers in southeast Asia who had been to Vietnam, we became more and more intrigued, and decided to go in spite of the risk

that we might not be able to bicycle. This was an optimum time to visit the country since it was only in its beginning stages of tourism. We'd had our best experiences in countries with a low tourist level and we wanted a chance to see and learn firsthand about the history and culture of Vietnam — history that had important links with our own country, the United States.

We breathed a sigh of relief after the customs official merely noted our bicycles on our declaration forms and waved us outside into the warm and humid Saigon air. We loaded our panniers onto our bicycles and headed toward the city center about six kilometers away. After traveling for nine months throughout the world by bike we had perfected the art of minimalist travel. We had an unorthodox load of one pannier each. Since Dermot's panniers, with their "life-time guarantee," had fallen apart after six months of travel we were reduced to sharing my pair. Other than bike tools, spare tires and tubes, we didn't need much — just a few changes of clothing and our camera equipment. It felt good to travel so lightly.

By Carla Fountain





PHOTO BY CARLA FOUNTAIN

Here's another way to get around in Vietnam, where agriculture is still the most important industry in the country.

The road to downtown Saigon was surprisingly quiet. Most of the traffic consisted of other bicycles, rickety one-speeds and a few motor bikes. Traffic moved slowly, allowing people to talk with us as we cycled along. People waved and greeted us from the street, asking us where we were from, grinning broadly and giving us the thumbs up sign when we said we were Americans. There still aren't many foreigners coming to Vietnam so we were quite a novelty, especially since we were on bicycles. We encountered this enthusiasm and friendliness throughout our month-long trip.

Several young men biked alongside Derm and I and chatted with him. An older man cycled beside me and said he'd take us to the hotel we were looking for. The bicycle traffic picked up as he guided us through the large French-style boulevards of the downtown area.

The hotel recommended to us by travelers we had met in Thailand was an old French-style building with high airy ceilings that helped keep the room somewhat cool. After checking in and leaving our bicycles with the bicycle guardian at the hotel we went up to our room to shower and organize. As in every hotel we stayed in throughout Vietnam, our room came with mosquito nets. Our bathroom had a shower and a western-style toilet, but we often stayed in hotels where we used the traditional scoop and bucket method of bathing and had squat toilets. We seldom had hot water, but this was not something we missed since we were there in April, one of Vietnam's hottest months.

Travel in Vietnam is tightly controlled by the government, and if your papers are not in order, you risk considerable fines and even

deportation. We had 48 hours to register with the police in Saigon and try to find someone who could help us get papers allowing us to bicycle independently. Within a few hours of our arrival we met several people who had worked as interpreters for the Americans before 1975 and now made a living as guides, helping foreigners get travel permits. We decided to use the services of a man we met, who seemed trustworthy and competent. It cost us a little more, but we had a better chance of getting the papers we wanted. Our travel permit allowed us to spend the night in the towns listed on it. Unfortunately, the permit only allowed for five locations. At first we thought of taking some other routes anyway, but throughout our trip we received so much attention from the police that we rejected any earlier thoughts about trying to bend the rules further than we already had.

During the two days it took to arrange our papers we explored Saigon. We visited the Museum of American War Crimes, the Museum of the Revolution, the History Museum, the zoo, parks, several art galleries and many Buddhist temples. It is a wonderful city to cycle in, since there are so few cars. The city caters to a bicyclist's every need with bicycle parking lots and bicycle repair stands on practically every corner. In fact, during our whole month there, we never had to change a flat tire ourselves. There was always a repair stand nearby. Often the attendant would locate the puncture first by putting the tube in an old combat helmet filled with water. Then he covered a piece of rubber with foil, clamping it onto the tire with a vise before squirting kerosene on the foil and igniting it. It burned for about two to three minutes — when

unclamped, the tube was sealed and we were rolling again. All this for about 10 cents.

Armed with our travel permits we set off at dawn for Mytho, a town 72 kilometers away in the Mekong Delta. The early morning bicycle and motorbike traffic was so heavy and dense that until we got at least 20 kilometers out of the city we couldn't go much faster than 11 kph. We were relieved when it cleared up a bit so we could go more quickly, because we wanted to reach our destination before the hottest part of the day. Along the way we had plenty of opportunities to stop for refreshments of cool, fresh coconut juice, iced coffee and Vietnamese sandwiches. The sandwiches were made with fresh French bread, and filled with sliced cucumbers, spices and barbecued meat or cheese.

We arrived in Mytho before noon. The breezes from the Mekong River fanned over the town, freshening the air. It felt good to be out of the sweltering heat of Saigon. The man who secured our papers for us had made us a list of reasonable hotels. But when we tried to

check into the one he recommended in Mytho, we had a run-in with Vietnamese bureaucracy. The hotel manager declared that foreigners were not allowed in the hotel and that we had to go down the street to a more expensive hotel. So instead of paying \$1 for a room, we paid \$10. We encountered this for the rest of the trip. Even some of the hotels listed in our Lonely Planet guidebook were off limits. Not only were there some places where foreigners couldn't stay, but the other hotels had two prices posted. One for foreigners and one for Vietnamese. This was often mandated by the government and then inflated a bit by the proprietor.

The next four days we bicycled to the city of Chou Doc, following the Mekong river to the border with Cambodia. We crossed the river's numerous tributaries several times by bridge and by ferry, where we were the main attraction on the boat. At times all the attention we received would get a little tiring. People would call us "Lien Xo" which means Russian, because since 1975 most of the foreigners



PHOTO BY CARLA FOUNTAIN

Many varieties of fruit are grown on the Mekong Delta and sold at roadside stands like this one.

in Vietnam were Russian.

The Mekong Delta region is rich in agriculture. We rode through many small villages where people worked by the side of the road throwing rice into the air with baskets to get rid of the chaff, raking the rice out on the road to dry, and loading rice into sacks. All this activity made riding a bit difficult at times because the road became quite narrow and the mounds of rice on the shoulder made it hard to move over when a bus or a truck passed. Rice, sugarcane, coconut, and many varieties of fruit are also grown in the Delta and it was a welcome treat to stop at roadside stands selling the local mangos and pineapple.

In Vinh Long, our second stop, we explored the river life more closely by taking a three-hour boat tour of the canals. We saw dozens of small houseboats, sampans taking produce to and from market and small "taxi boats" transporting people. We glided through narrow canals fringed with lush vegetation and caught glimpses of romantic colonial villas on the banks interspersed amongst the more traditional houses of bamboo and palm fronds. We passed rice granaries, children swimming and playing, women washing their hair, old men bathing and farmers herding their ducks. It was an enchanting three hours.

Every night the hotel manager would take our visas and travel permits to register us with the police returning the papers in the morning when we checked out. This went without a hitch until we tried to check out of our hotel in Long Xuyen and the desk clerk cheerfully told us that the police had taken our papers and wanted us to go to the police station. We were scared. Had someone figured out that we weren't supposed to be bicycling independently? Were we going to be fined or put on a bus and sent back to Saigon? Dermot went to the police station armed with some "gifts" we had brought with us and our Vietnamese phrase book. I spent an agonizing hour waiting as the day got hotter and wondering what was going on. Finally Dermot reappeared, looking a bit shaken up, and said it had been very slow going until he told the interpreter in charge that we were teachers. At that point, the interpreter, who happened to be a teacher himself, changed his harsh tone and became quite pleasant. Teachers are very much respected in Vietnam; people always responded favorably to us when we told them our occupation.

The last major town before the Cambodian border was Chau Doc. We visited the temples at Sam Mountain, a major pilgrimage center three kilometers away from town. The Tay An Pagoda was one of the most beautiful we visit-

The hustle and bustle of a Vietnamese town where the bicycle is an important part of daily life.



PHOTO BY RICK BAUMAN



# Nuts and Bolts

**EQUIPMENT:** If you are considering anything more than casual biking in Vietnam, you should bring your own bicycle. Most international flights will transport your bike at no additional charge in lieu of one piece of luggage. The bikes available in Vietnam are mostly Chinese, plus a few inferior models from Hong Kong. The good news is that in a country with tens of millions of bicycles, every village and hamlet — and almost every block in the larger cities — have bike repair and parts shops. Be sure to bring repair parts — spokes, cables, tubes, etc. — and special tools that fit your bike.

Touring, hybrid, and mountain bikes are appropriate for biking in Vietnam. If you are using a touring bike, make sure your tires are heavy duty. There are many rugged stretches of road in Vietnam, and the expansion joints on the bridges are gaping.

**TIME OF YEAR TO GO:** To avoid the extremes of heat and rain, the best time for biking in Vietnam is from January through April. Even though this is the “cool” part of the year, you must expect temperatures near 90° F and high humidity in Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta year-round.

**OBTAINING A VISA:** Pending the restoration of full diplomatic relations between the U. S. and Vietnam, you can obtain your Vietnamese visa through Vietnam’s embassy in Mexico City, located at Calle Sierra Ventana 255, 11000 Mexico, DF. Phone: 5401612. There is a \$25 charge, plus postage, for the visa. You will have to send a copy of your passport — the visa will be issued separately from your passport — with three photos. Although the visa is processed by the embassy, final approval must come from Vietnam itself, via fax and express mail. This will involve additional time, and money. Visa applications are available from most travel agencies that specialize in Asian travel, e.g. Travel Advantage, 1-800-334-4555. For a \$60 fee, Travel Advantage will process your Vietnamese visa for you in 10 to 14 days. Similar services may be available from other travel agents.

ed in Vietnam. Its dimly smoky interior was filled with hundreds of wooden carvings and dozens of altars where the faithful offered burning joss sticks. Sunlight pierced the hazy smoke in streaming rays, illuminating women who said prayers as they raised burning clusters of incense above their heads and brought them down again in reverence to Buddha. The pagoda’s nuns and monks welcomed us and encouraged us to visit the temple thoroughly.

We bicycled around the mountain and then climbed the steps to visit the Chua Hang Cave Pagoda. From the top we could see a tributary

**TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS:** Although you may be discouraged, by travel agents and others, from visiting certain areas of the country, travel is currently unrestricted in Vietnam.

**FOOD AND WATER:** Adequate — and often delicious — food is readily available throughout the country. If cooked, the food is probably safe to eat.



PHOTO BY RICK BAUMAN

**CAMPING:** Don’t! The only tradition of camping in Vietnam is from the war. It is just not seen as a recreational activity. Campgrounds are nonexistent.

**TRANSPORTATION:** Daily flights to Vietnam are available from Cathay Pacific Airlines (via Hong Kong), Thai Airlines (via Bangkok), Singapore Airlines (via Singapore), Philippines Airlines (via Manila), and Malaysia Airlines (via Kuala Lumpur). Getting seats can be tight near Tet (late January, early February). Flight availability should improve as United, Northwest and Delta airlines have all applied to begin service to Vietnam.

**MONEY:** Most large hotels will change both U.S. dollars and travellers’ checks. If you are

of the Mekong flowing around the Cambodian mountains on the horizon. Phenom Phen was just two hours away — we longed to keep going to reach Cambodia and the Angkor Wat. But as foreigners we could not cross the border here.

While searching for a place to stay in Chau Doc, we met an English teacher who directed us to a guest house run by his friend, who just happened to be the “number two” man at the police station. Staying at his guest house proved to be a good move for us. Both the teacher and the police officer were very help-

ful, showing us around and giving us advice. In fact, the teacher was so helpful that we began to think it was part of his job to watch out for us, and make sure we didn’t get into any trouble. He barely left our side while we were in town.

**FILM:** 100 ASA color print film is widely available throughout Vietnam for about \$3.00 roll. If you want anything more sophisticated, bring it with you. Make sure your film does not go through the X-ray machines at the airports when arriving and leaving the country.

**T-SHIRTS:** If you pay more than \$1.50 for a standard T-shirt or \$3 for an embroidered one, you need to work on your negotiating skills.

Our loveliest time by far in the Delta was the day ride we took out of Chau Doc to Tan Chou. We took a five-minute ride on a passenger ferry from Chau Doc to get started on the other bank, riding down a quiet road lined with trees and many old colonial houses built in the ‘20s and ‘30s. As we rode farther we

saw wooden houses on stilts. Many of them had lovely antique dressers, made of teak, in the entry ways which held the family altar, joss sticks, and a Chinese scroll. Since trucks and buses could not cross on the small ferry, the road had only pedestrian, motor bike, bicycle and water buffalo traffic. People worked by the side of the road winnowing rice with straw baskets and loading the harvest into bags. The stilt houses created a perfect shady and breezy work space for the weavers who labored on huge looms. Women spun thread in front of houses. Imposing skeins of freshly dyed bright red, purple and yellow thread hung drying in the sun.

About three-quarters of the way to Tan Chou we decided to stop for some iced tea at a cafe in a very small village. Within minutes of our arrival we were surrounded by small children. Then pretty soon others came, mothers with babies, young and old men. At first they all stayed outside the confines of the bamboo-walled cafe porch, but pretty soon people started to push their way inside. I started counting faces and figured we had at least 100 people around us. I hadn’t even realized that the village was that large! It was friendly curiosity though. Everyone was smiling and we never felt threatened. We decided we should leave before the crowd became even larger and as we pushed our way out, a policeman came up and insisted that we go to headquarters — a small bamboo shack next door where he proceeded to interrogate us in Vietnamese. Luckily we had our Vietnamese phrase book with us and were able to tell him that we were staying with the “number two” man in the Chau Doc police. That obviously carried some clout because he immediately dismissed us and told us to check in with him on our way back to

# The Group Option

Although independent, unrestricted bicycle travel is possible in Vietnam today, you may find the prospect a bit overwhelming. You may want to go instead on an organized group tour. Cycle Vietnam, based in Portland, Oregon, offers a 16-day tour from Hanoi in the north to Ho Chi Minh City in the south. Next year’s tour will run from January 10-February 2, 1995. The 1,200-mile tour is limited to 50 participants. For more information, contact Cycle Vietnam, P.O. Box 4481, Portland, OR 97208; or call 1-800-661-1458.

VeloAsia Cycling Adventures, Inc., based in Berkeley, California, offers 12-day bicycle tours from Ho Chi Minh City north along the coast of the South China Sea to Hue, with departure dates in January, February, March, April, May, June

and July. Each 1,000-mile tour is limited to 10 participants. For more information, contact VeloAsia Cycling Adventures, 1412 Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Berkeley, CA 94709; or call 1-800-884-ASIA.



PHOTO COURTESY OF VELOASIA

Chau Doc.

After two days in Chau Doc, it was time to get ready to head back to Saigon. On the eve of our departure our host invited us to taste his homemade liquor. He assured us it was a health tonic made from herbs so we toasted our newfound acquaintances as we exchanged addresses. Because our time was running low, we headed back to Saigon by bus. Our bicycles joined several Vietnamese bicycles and even a few motorbikes on the roof. As we rumbled along a bumpy, rutted back road towards Saigon we longed to be on our bicycles and not stuffed into the diesel-guzzling

monster. But we consoled ourselves with the fact that we would soon be applying for our new travel permits to explore more of Vietnam to the north by bicycle. ●

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A centuries-old silhouette on the Mekong Delta waterways.

PHOTO BY CARLA FOUNTAIN