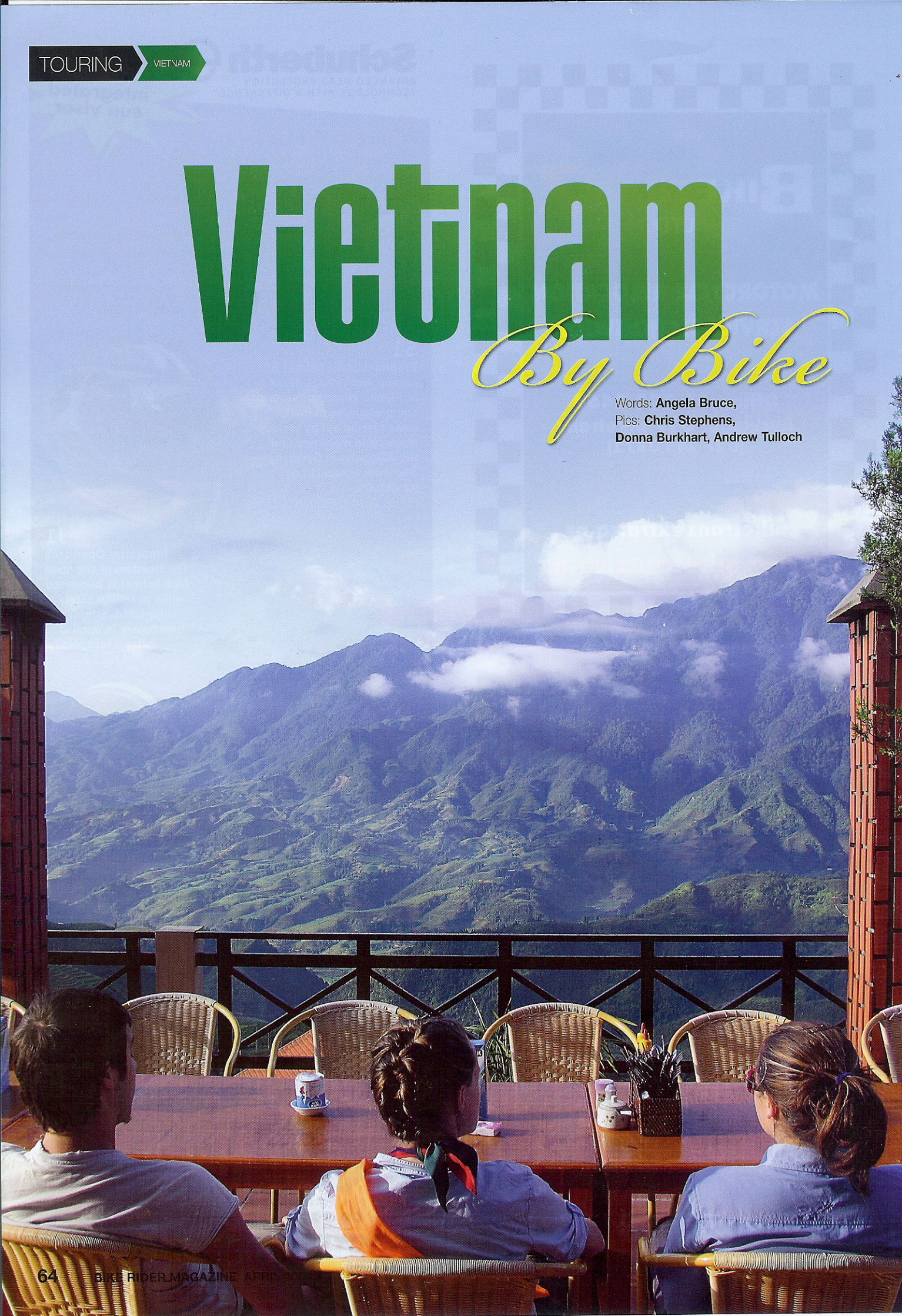


# Vietnam

## *By Bike*

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It used to take approximately 160 trudging steps up the side of a steep hillside to get to the rooms and restaurant of the Cat Cat Hotel in Sapa, Northern Vietnam. It was an exhausting challenge, but the effort was worth it as the Cat Cat has spectacular views. However, the owner, Ms Luang, has now installed an elevator at the Cat Cat Hotel and we are delighted that this breathtaking vista is now even more accessible.

The Cat Cat Hotel is just one of northwest Vietnam's many gems and there is nothing finer than riding the twisting mountain roads on a motorcycle arriving in Sapa in time to relax on the balcony restaurant of the Cat Cat with a cold beer, excellent food produced onsite from a tiny corner kitchen, and a view spanning Mt Fan Si Pan and the Hoang Lien Son mountain range and valleys.

### Controlled Chaos

Britton Motorcycle Adventures Venture Into Vietnam: Hill tribes and Ho Chi Minh Trail Tour starts in Hanoi, a city like no other. It is a curious blend of east and west, family life and traffic madness, capitalism and commu-



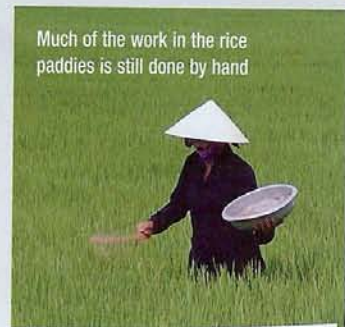
Arriving in the picturesque village of Mai Chau

nism. Hanoi's Old Quarter is reputed to be one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Whole families sit on small stools outside their houses or shops hoping to catch any breeze, and street side food outlets cooking local delicacies spring up in the most unlikely places. Locals sit, with chopsticks in hand, deftly scooping their food into their mouths, while crammed at dinky kindergarten-sized tables and chairs wedged into any available space. Scooters line the footpath forcing pedestrians to

walk on the edge of the narrow roads while avoiding the bags of rubbish and still glowing coals that have been placed there for the street sweepers to collect. In the midst of all this chaos are a whole series of excellent photo opportunities, each one as interesting as the next. The country girl straining under her heavy load of fruit balanced in a yoke across her shoulders; an elderly woman half hidden behind the pile of baguettes she is selling; or the scooter zigzagging through the narrow streets with five or six young men wedged onboard all talking loudly to one another.

From the colourful, controlled chaos that is Hanoi, the tour heads out to Halong Bay for a night on the water staying onboard a luxury junk. Halong Bay is a World Heritage Site, a well deserved title as the, approximately 3000, rocky limestone islands that rise straight up into the bay are quite spectacular. Cruising around the bay allows time to check out some of

Much of the work in the rice paddies is still done by hand



Mike and Donna Burkhart (MX ace Luke Burkhart's parents) on the road to Son La, North West Vietnam.



Bicycles double as firewood transportation



On the road to Sapa

the highlights. Those who are strong swimmers can swim through a hole in the rocks into the centre of a hollow island; for the active, a climb up many steps into one of the spectacular limestone cave systems; and for the inquisitive an opportunity to board one of the many floating fish farms that are the livelihood of the people who live in the bay. Many of these floating homes dot the bay, and there is even a floating school. Fresh seafood is featured on the menu, and we are rocked to sleep by the gentle lull of the water.

After Halong Bay it is time to go back to Hanoi and have a last look around before heading north on motorbikes the following day. While it may take a while for some to get used to the Vietnamese style of driving (basically don't look behind, always give way to anything in front of you,

“Riding through rural Vietnam means that you have a ringside seat to witness the daily lives of these very adaptable and tenacious people.”

and if it is bigger than you then get out of the way) most feel like old hands by lunchtime on the first day of riding.

### Eye Opener

The first part of the motorcycling leg takes in a northwestern loop.

A heavy load of corn stalks and leaves that are used as animal fodder



The stilt house accommodation while staying in Mai Chau



The ethnic minority people in their colourful traditional clothing, winding mountain passes, breathtaking views, centuries old terraced rice paddies, and the general feeling of freedom and intrepidity make riding this trail an unforgettable experience. With its wide diversity of minority ethnic hill tribes, the north west of Vietnam will challenge any preconceptions a traveller may have about Vietnam and its people.

Next stop after the north west is the charming and picturesque village of Mai Chau. Spending two nights here, sleeping in stilt houses surrounded by rice paddies, does wonders for those still unwinding from a busy western lifestyle. The majority of the people in this village are White Thai, and as well as Vietnamese, they still speak Thai, the language of their ancestors. A day off the motorbikes allows time to wander through the

villages, colourful market stalls, take a cycle ride around the valley, or just lie about in a hammock drinking beer.

From the village of Mai Chau we ride alongside the black river on a narrow winding road that is the scene of much day-to-day village life. At one segment of the road, we even ride right through the middle of a market. This narrow road suddenly opens out onto a wide double-laned road that intersects the recently built Ho Chi Minh Highway.

Roughly following the Ho Chi Minh Highway, with a few side trips for better overnight accommodation, or to ride a smaller more scenic road, leads us to Kilometre Zero at the start of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Ho Chi Minh Trail is actually a series of trails that was, without question, focal to the whole Vietnam War (known in Vietnam as the American War). We haven't had to dodge American bombers but have still managed to have plenty of adventures on past trips when travelling by motorcycle down Vietnam's famous Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Britton Motorcycle Adventures have been organising motorbike tours in Vietnam since 2004, and this year's will be their tenth.

“With each tour we refine the route but every tour we've had in Vietnam features the Ho Chi Minh Trail, because it's so interesting and that's what New Zealanders are interested in, the Vietnam War,” organiser Mike Britton said. “Many of our riders

This year's Venture Into Vietnam Hill tribes and Ho Chi Minh Trail Tour is in May. To book, or for more information contact Mike or Angela, phone 07 8556132 or 0212849047 email [mike@adventurerides.co.nz](mailto:mike@adventurerides.co.nz) or check out the website [www.adventurerides.co.nz](http://www.adventurerides.co.nz)



A roadside scene – threshing the rice

are of an age where the Vietnam war played a part in their early adult years, adolescence or childhood.

“Visiting such places as the museum at the former US firebase in Khe San really gives you a different perspective on the conflict. Near the firebase at Khe San is a fascinating scrap metal yard full of rusty war hardware, and we stop here for a look.”

Mike also reckons riding through the A Shau valley, near, American named, Hamburger Hill gives you a sense of what it must have been like for those young men coming here.

The tour isn't all about the war though, there is always plenty to see and numerous fantastic photo opportunities everyday. Riding through rural Vietnam means that you have a ringside seat to witness

the daily lives of these very adaptable and tenacious people.

### Tale Of Two Cities

The tour starts and finishes in two very different cities Hanoi and Saigon (now known as Ho Chi Minh City). Both are fascinating; Hanoi, more traditional; Saigon, with its long history of French and American influence. Also in the tour itinerary is the historic city of Hue. While it played a big part in the January 1968 Tet Offensive, a famous battle in the Vietnam War, Hue is a city with a



Spectacular rice terracing on the Middle Road to Sapa

very old and royal history.

Another town of significance we visit is Hoi An, a quaint riverside settlement that came out of the conflict with its buildings unscathed. Hoi An has some of the most historic and fascinating buildings, with influence from the Japanese, French and Chinese. It is also known for its excellent food, and the tailors that will whip you up some stylish clothing,

overnight almost.

Motorcycle travel allows a certain amount of freedom and autonomy – one is not at the mercy of the rest of the tour group, or a driver. It is possible to stop and take a photo anytime or pull over to gaze at the landscape, or try communicating with the locals seen walking along the side of the road going about their work.

Yep, there's nothing quite like being

on a motorcycle, travelling along some winding road in rural Vietnam or, with your heart pounding, riding through city traffic. Every trip is different, and on each of the past nine tours there have been a number of scary, exciting, interesting, and just plain funny incidents, many of which have been embedded in the memories of those who were there for a long time to come.

Masterton Motorcycle dealer, Grant Langlands, encourages his wife Ruth to sample a local delicacy of deep fried stink beetles

