



VENTURE INTO VIETNAM

Vietnam. You only have to say the word and a movie reel of images starts playing in your mind. But the Vietnam of today is very different to the war-ravaged one of 30 years ago. As KR's on-call motorcycle adventurer Chris Stephens found out when he joined Mike Britton and Angela Bruce on this year's 'Venture Into Vietnam.'

WORDS & PICS: Chris Stephens

IT'S 40 degrees, the sun is shining and we have just crossed the bridge that marks the old demilitarized zone DMZ between old North and South Vietnam.

We stop for lunch with the jungle oozing an almost deafening chorus of insects and prepare a spot to rest. The grass is moving and closer scrutiny reveals a floor of leaches looking for sustenance! A bite pain reveals a leach gorging on Sam's ankle. It's quickly dowsed in salt and carefully removed by jungle knife. This is Sambo's first blood! Forget the movie, this is the real thing!

Vietnam is truly one of the last tourist frontiers. It's possible to have a real adventure here made all the more so by motorcycle. It's hard to imagine covering the ground and achieving the access on anything but a motorcycle. In fact, most of Vietnam is on motorcycle there being about 14 million so forget the bus tours and the air-conditioning, the real experience is on two wheels!

This particular experience is organised by Mike and Angela of Britton Motorcycle Adventures who run several two and three week tours each year in addition to their Bali excursions.

RUSSIAN AROUND

The Russian Minsk 125cc 'trail bikes' we rode seemed a far cry from my KTM450EXC! However in a country where 175cc is the maximum cc limit and roads are generally designed for such modest engineering I fear I would have got into a lot more trouble on the EXC!

The Minsk is a truly robust workhorse, its torquey but under stressed engine promising and delivering longevity. The styling is definitely retro but by Vietnam standards they are quite powerful since Honda 90 scooters seem to be most common transport.

And the rules of the road?

Don't anyone tell you size doesn't count! Vietnam



In Northern Vietnam we venture up the 'Old French Road.' Abandoned now, but formerly used by the French in their control of the North..



Workers here are harvesting the rice destined for your Chowmein. The bright green is stunning and an exotic back drop to the ride

'CORNERMAN'

The tour uses the 'cornerman' system (basically follow the leader and drop a person at every turn who waits for the sweep rider) to dispense with maps and give you the freedom to enjoy the ride knowing that at least someone knows where they are going!

In Vietnam it is easy to blend in with the locals and get lost in the crowd and hence we all wear the bright lime sashes.

When you stop for cornerman duties there's always a crowd.

1: Most of the time you are surrounded by inquisitive and happy children and we always have some small gifts on hand.

2: Here some Villagers near Mai Chai discuss the accuracy of Sam's GPS and where a McDonalds might be (sorry none in Vietnam!).

3: Now on record! I have been accused of taking the wrong turn at a Y intersection in deep western Vietnam. The sweep rider had his Minsk wound full noise to catch me before I entered Laos.

I'd like to submit below that the cornerpersons involved were otherwise 'involved!' Note the 45 degree bike position and the ambiguous arm indication. We realised later that Willi (German) was obviously pointing in his second language! The defence rests its case!



road rules are simple and as far as I can tell number two. Firstly give way to anything bigger than you simply because otherwise it's going to really, really hurt!

For example. There will be a bus overtaking a truck which is overtaking a scooter which is overtaking a bicycle and they are all headed your way, so you do give way OK? — even if that means the ditch!

Secondly it's all about merging and timing your crossing of another vehicle's path whichever direction they may come. If someone looks like they will cross in front of you then you throttle off gently to pass just behind them. You don't look behind you or to the side, you concentrate only on what is in front with the expectation the others will do the same.

Now at a five-road intersection with 100s of scooters, and trucks all converging and all applying the same technique it is truly amazing to watch and be part of this great 'blender.'

Whatever riding experience you have had on New Zealand roads will prepare you naught for this style of riding. You will DEFINITELY be out of your comfort zone! But if my experience of it is anything to go by you will love it!

A GENTLE INTRODUCTION

OK, I guess that's the gist of it. A hairy ride through Vietnam on veteran Russian trail bikes! Thankfully Mike and Angela don't just chuck us in at the deep end. The first two days

of our tour are more touristy. There's a trip out into Halong Bay (north of Hanoi) on our own private luxury junk and anchored overnight it is a chance to recover from jetlag, detox from the office, reflect on the driving conditions viewed from the bus and get to know your ride buddies. More on them later! Halong Bay has stunning scenery. Karst limestone mountains, eroded by the sea, create hundreds of islands and limestone caves. It's a great unwind in a picturesque backdrop.

Back in Hanoi and now eager to ride we are taken to the outskirts of the city and paired with our Russian beast of burden for the tour. It's a gentle introduction to the riding conditions too but still it's a pretty cautious start by all. We are riding on the wrong side of the



Crossing through the DMZ and the demarcation between North and South over the Ben Hai River

road for a start and the bustle along the way does take some getting used to.

I knew there was a third rule! Sound your horn! Sound your horn as you approach anything and everyone you are overtaking (as a warning) and at driveways where someone will appear suddenly.

Thankfully we are quickly into the countryside and already amongst rice paddy fields and heading north into the hills of Mai Chau via some mountain passes with stunning climbs. As we get higher we come across the Muong people selling cooked sweet corn at the saddle. We stop and as throughout the tour are surrounded by children. We have brought small gifts to give out along the way and their faces light up as we hand them out.

DISTINCT ETHNIC GROUPS

Vietnam is not just one race of people. There are many minority pockets throughout the country and on these first days in the north we are guests of the White Thai in Mai Chau. Accommodated in a traditional stilt house we are treated to wonderful food and traditional entertainment. During the day we venture almost off road along the disused 'Old French Road' used by the French in their colonisation of Northern Vietnam. Now overgrown and reduced to a track in places this is real back of beyond but, of such importance in early times was the road that it showed accurately on our GPS toy!

As we climbed higher on this road we encountered another tribe (the H'mong)



Hey! Every Kiwi Rider bike appraisal has the customary wheelie test. We subject the Minsk to the same. I think on 'take 29' we finally lifted it!



Seems that KR magazine has found it's way to another biking nation. A young H'mong biker checks out what's on offer in the outside world. Pete, think of it! 14 Million Motorcyclists..... 5% market share here and you could retire!

CHILLING REMINDERS OF THE PAST

We pass places whose names we know from the 6 o'clock news of the past. The Rock Pile, Hamburger Hill and Khe San. At Khe San we ventured onto the remains of the American forces' runway. Mike shows me an undetonated Russian mortar discovered on his last visit. We restack the small rock pile as a warning. People earn a living extracting the scrap iron from the tons and tons of armaments dropped or left in the region. At Cu Chi you can shoot the weapons of the war. AK47s, M16s and here, Tom ammunitions an M30 in a matter of seconds. The sound is incredible, the experience chilling. Whoever fought under such gunfire must be changed forever.



ROADS & LOADS

While riding in the back of a young mother taxis hubby to feed the cat while she takes daughter to piano lessons. Talk about multitasking. Steve has just waved to the kids, swerved around the goats and dodged the dogs romping across the road. Jareel sharing a rest stop with local farm machinery operator. The animals are unphased by traffic. Some loads you see are staggering. The laws of physics seem quite different here.

who exist mainly on subsistence farming. Each ethnic group we encounter is distinct in their traditional costumes. Suddenly the heavens opened upon us and as we take refuge outside a farmer's hut we realize one of us has left their Camelbak/passport/5000/\$D [read 'fortune' in Vietnamese] at a small hut along the way. We dispatch a crew member back in the torrential rain. He returns soaked but with Camelbak and contents still intact and testament to the wonderful nature and honesty of these people.

THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

In the following days we gradually head south picking up what is considered the beginning of the Ho Chi Minh trail (major supply line for



0 kilometers - The beginning of the Ho Chi Minh Trail

the North Vietnamese Army during the war). This journey takes us through some places we knew only from the 6 o'clock news from a war now many years ago. The jungle has reclaimed much except around the old DMZ where Agent Orange was used extensively. This area is still less vegetated but the soil is poor and plant growth struggles without a forest canopy and much floor. We cross through the DMZ via a bridge over the Ben Hai River (the former demarcation line between North and South) and on past the Rockpile (former marine base), and then infamous Khe San.

Besides a museum here we visit a scrap yard where they have collected piles of exploded and unexploded bombs etc. There is



CONTRAST OF WAYS OLD AND NEW

Vietnam, under such rapid development sometimes displays staggering contrasts. A gang of women work laying rocks by hand and tar is applied from a watering can. On the main highway modern tarmac machines lay great stretches in a day. These two bridges look from different light years and yet note the engineering, is the same.

**FOOD!**

Well you won't find a McDonalds in Vietnam. There's always something 'interesting' to eat on tour. You can be adventurous or play it safe. The sea-snake liquor caught a few out. Testy scorpions were a treat at Son's restaurant (tastes like peanut butter!). The White Thai treated us to some fine traditional food and a strange bubbly drink from a long straw. For those not so adventurous there was always a good alternative.



also an interesting find (see sidebar story). Now we were braced for Kha San. Labeled 'hell in the past and present,' we were naturally apprehensive about our lodgings and our evening meal. Maybe we were getting used to it but it was all great and there was nothing left at the dinner table.

A FASCINATING JOURNEY

Our tour is a fascinating journey through everyday Vietnamese front and back gardens. We travel down valleys with rice paddies throughout bordered by jungle covered hills and much of it karst limestone mountain landscape. The workers in the fields wave out and watch us all go by. Children run out and wave and flash beaming smiles. Goats and dogs snooze in the middle of the road while you evade. Water Buffalo meander along knowing full well that their size counts. It's incredible just how much road sense all this wildlife has. The roads vary from ancient narrow tracks to brand new highways cut through mountains and jungle to open up the hinterlands to development.

The road is also a work place. For many it is their front yard. Rice husk is drying on the roadside often reducing the usable road surface to single lane at best. In other areas there are great mats of peanuts laying on the road to dry, destined for your coffee table one day. As we travelled into new regions there were also



Some stanning (limbs are on offer) via newly constructed highways into the mountains. Even on these roads you need to keep you wits about you.



A lanch stop in the wrong place. The ground was crawling with leaches! Here the little blood sucker gets the salt and cigle treatment. His drinking days are over.



Planting... the cycle begins again as it has for centuries.

different peoples, such as on one day, the Bru (aka Van Kieu) with dark complexion revealing their Polynesian connection, and the Ba Co and Ca Tu on our ride down the Ashau valley and on to Hue.

A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

The cities and their traffic do take you out of your comfort zone! It's a bit of a relief to arrive at a hotel and park that bike. One such city is Hue, the former imperial capital of feudal Vietnam. There's still some French architecture to be found in these cities, such as the luxury Marlin Hotel where we stay. The accommodation has been good considering our remoteness but it is nice to treat yourself with a hotel like this!

Vietnam is truly a unique experience. It's an Adventure Ride with a dif-



This little piggy went to market. This little piggy should have stayed home.

ference — not hard-out technical dirt riding however and, because of Vietnam's traffic, experienced riders and novices start almost on even footing. The challenges are to enjoy the sightseeing, the people, the food and survive in a strange traffic environment that appears chaos but is in fact calm and in a way strangely ordered. The blaring of horns and the bustle become distant and taken all in one's stride. Our's was a small-ish group on this tour and a heck of a lot of fun. Only half were seasoned riders, others brushed off cobwebs from dusty motorcycle licenses and still survived!

I guess what I'm saying is sure there's the leaches and the scorpions, snakes, the traffic and the heat but they all just help me make this story — of course you can do it! ... and take a friend!