

Two rides in Vietnam

In the north of Vietnam, near the Chinese border, the country reveals a host of great characters, an abundance of great food and, above all else, a wealth of great riding

Words **JAMES SPENDER**
Photography **ROB MILTON**



Hanoi hits my senses like a tsunami. Stepping from the air-conditioned coach into the street is a bewildering experience. The air is stifling, as is the

cacophony of shrill toots from the sea of mopeds that somehow manage to avoid either total gridlock or a mass pile-up. Luckily my host in Vietnam, Mr Thang, is on hand to demonstrate the ways of the pedestrian. Picking his moment he steps purposely into the road, and as if by magic the mopeds part like the Red Sea to grant us passage to our hotel. It seems as much a blind act of faith as anything else, but Thang cheerfully explains how it's done: 'You don't just walk into traffic, but once you're on the road they move out of the way. Why would they want to run you over? They have places to go too.'

It's in the hotel lobby that I meet my ride companions Adam, an endearing mix of poet and proper Aussie bloke, and his best mate Paul, who moved to Australia because 'frankly it's nicer than Wolverhampton' and who has since set up a bike shop. High up on a roof terrace above the hubbub of the city, Thang attempts to outline the itinerary between pauses in our excited chatter about what bikes we've brought and what the riding will be like. He assures us that where we're going we needn't worry about automobiles - 'If it's OK for mopeds, it's OK for bikes' - but I'm less assured when Adam and Paul tell me they're riding Specialized Diverges, basically gravel bikes with 32mm tyres. I'll be riding an Orbea Orca, an out-and-out race bike rolling on 25s. 'It'll be interesting to see how she goes on the roads here,' says Adam wryly as we make our way to our rooms to grab some sleep before tomorrow's 6.30am departure.

Chicken heads

The first leg of our journey is by van to Ha Giang, the capital of the Ha Giang province some 270km north of Hanoi. Thang has now been joined by Dzung, a man who it turns out is two parts rally driver to one part Michelin-starred chef, and Mr Trung, a Vietnamese track cycling star of his day who used to take his saucepans to a nearby rubber factory to have them melted down and cast as bicycle wheels, such was Vietnam's economic downturn after WWII.

If we thought the roads of Hanoi were hazardous, our journey to Ha Giang has us screaming like '1D' fans. The modus operandi of Vietnamese drivers is to overtake at all costs, irrespective of vehicle size, road width, line of sight or obstacles. The trick seems to be to beep the horn incessantly as a warning ▶



Limestone karst formations covered in trees sprout from Dong Van Plateau floor. Geologists have found fossils dating back 600 million years in the area

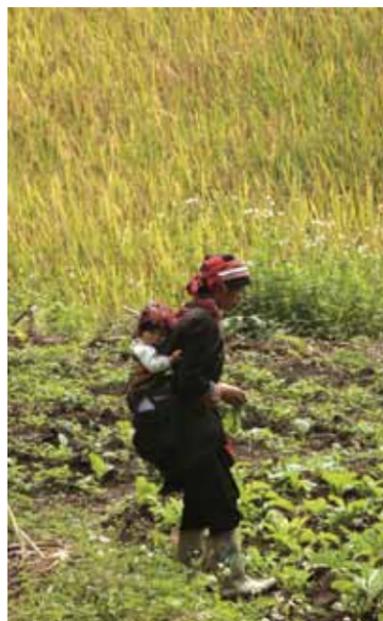
Below right: There's no shortage of bicycles in northern Vietnam, although the kids aren't down with stem-slamming



Vietnam vitals

Follow *Cyclist's* path to redemption

Cyclist's two-day trip was a bite-sized version of the nine or 10-day trips by Ride and Seek (rideandseek.com) in partnership with Grasshopper Adventures (grasshopperadventures.com). Day one took us from Hanoi to Ha Giang, then on to Tam Son, where we stayed before setting off for Meo Vac the next day.



Heavy goods vehicle

A few of the things we saw being carried on mopeds

- Family of four
- Two water tanks
- Bundle of scaffold
- Wheelbarrow
- Two wheelbarrows
- Ladder
- Double mattress
- A small kitchen
- Patio doors
- Drainpipes
- Bits of temple
- Dead ducks
- 40 cases of beer
- Two Alsatian dogs
- Palette of yoghurts
- Three fully grown live pigs
- Tray of jewels
- Gas cylinders
- Chest freezer
- Several goats
- Nine piglets
- Four cockerels
- A marquee
- Another whole moped



Even riding steady feels exhausting thanks to the effects of the stifling humidity and heat

Bottom left: This little guy has some serious bike style and, given how fast he was riding, some impressive power-to-weight

It feels like that scene in a movie before a tornado whips into town, the road quiet, the air heavy and sweet

to other road users, and simply hope that oncoming traffic will swerve out of the way.

Mercifully as we get deeper into the countryside things let up a little, and by the time we reach our lunch and bike-departure stop, things are borderline sedate, the only company on the road a squawk of scrabbling roosters.

We discover to our delight that food is central to the Vietnamese way of life. Whether perched on a little plastic stool on a Hanoi side street or kicking back in a fan-conditioned restaurant, it doesn't matter. The food is fresh, plentiful and to be enjoyed en masse. Thang has clearly phoned ahead and ordered for us, so before we can unzip our bike bags a flurry of activity has bestowed all manner of steamed veg, fried meats (including a whole chicken head), dipping sauces and broths onto the table, and we're ushered in to eat in a friendly free-for-all fashion.

It's hard to pull myself away from the table, especially given that the rice is bottomless (a fresh batch arrives even before the previous one is finished), and the dips are concocted from some heady funk of chilli, fish sauce, sugar and lime. Thirty minutes in and I'm wondering if the Vietnamese ever let anyone finish a meal, such is the restaurateur's readiness to bring out more, but finally we're bidden by Thang to assemble our bikes. It's with a heart almost as heavy as my stomach that I rise from the table.

Fish tails

The first few pedal strokes in unknown territory are always exhilarating, but as we roll out under the archway that marks the gate to Ha Giang the already sublime scene takes on the ethereal. Behind us is a flat expanse, but ahead lie huge mountains, unchanged for millennia. It feels like that scene in a movie before a tornado whips into town, the road quiet, the air heavy and syrupy sweet, with dark storm clouds brooding





◊ in the sky, enveloping the mountainous peaks to form a great, grey abyss. Before any of us can remark upon the impending rain, I feel the first warm spots tickle my bare forearms.

The road turns slick almost as quickly as it turns upwards. It's already late in the afternoon and we've still to make a near-on 1km vertical ascent over the next 40km before we get to our hotel in Tam Son. For a few minutes the lush green rice fields and dotted banana palms take on a vivid luminescence in the failing light of the storm, but soon the landscape is awash with rain. Adam and Paul seem happy enough on their hardy tyres, but I stop to let some air out of mine in the search for more grip. Seated riding is fine, but every time I stand on the pedals the rear wheel slips and I'm forced to back off.

My drop in pressure works, but before we can get too immersed in ticking off the kilometres, a huge dumper truck literally slides into view, its rear wheels fully locked as it fishtails around a greasy hairpin. Luckily we see our impending doom in plenty of time and pull off into a layby, half expecting the rusty yellow truck to disappear down the mountainside, but instead the driver steers into his skid to round the corner like a Vietnamese Colin McRae. Careering past us with a friendly blast of his horn, he then makes the exact same pendulum turn down the next hairpin. 'Bloody hell!' yells Paul cheerfully.

By the time we reach the summit the sky has gone pitch black. Fortunately we've all had the foresight to bring lights, but it's still with some

serious trepidation that I shoot off after Paul and Adam. I've ridden some scary descents in my time, but this takes the proverbial. On occasion there are cat's eyes and reflective road markings, but in the main it's a hair-raising plunge into an unknown chasm of potholed switchbacks and sheer drops.

Any doubt about where to stop is dispersed when I bowl around a corner to see a dizzying array of neon lights strung up over an archway. Like Ha Giang, two archways, 300m apart, mark Tam Son's city limits, with a sandwich of houses, restaurants and hotels in between.

Once again Thang has ordered ahead, and regardless of whether or not this might be the only restaurant in town, it's definitely the best. Plate upon steaming plate is served, including one that looks suspiciously like offal, but which Thang tells me is mushroom and I tell myself I don't care either way, it's delicious. On the other side of the restaurant a group of students is having a birthday party, and after a few rice wines it's not long before Adam is up and trying to join in with a Vietnamese rendition of 'Happy Birthday'. 'I think they think I'm some kind of pasty ginger god!' he shouts over the singing.

The international language of bike

I awake in the morning to find Mr Trung diligently cleaning my bike with a standard-issue hotel toothbrush. Before I can tell him that's very kind but entirely unnecessary, he spins on his heels, makes a sweeping gesture ◊

On occasion there are cat's eyes, but in the main it's a hair-raising plunge into an unknown chasm of sheer drops

The rider's ride

Orbea Orca M10i, £5,279, orbea.com

It's a lot of money for a bike but, as it turns out, the Orca is a lot of bike for the money. Having slimmed things down from the previous generation, the frame now weighs under 900g, meaning this build happily punched in the sub-7.2kg category (size 55). That low weight was a big help up the long, draggy climbs and, while I might have liked full-carbon wheels just to justify the pricetag, the alloy/carbon Vision Trimaxes coped admirably with the wind and rain. Tougher tyres would have been preferable to the lightweight Kenda Kountachs, which gashed terminally on one gravelly descent, but it's testament to the overall build quality that the Orca frameset took several poundings and didn't flinch once.



Above: When the rain falls it pours, making the hot tarmac decidedly slick. It does offer some respite for sweaty riders though, sitting somewhere between cool hose and warm shower in the refreshment stakes

Right: Mopeds take the place of runabout, car and truck. This one is a rare sight in that it is not carrying something 10 times the size of the rider







Below and bottom left: The daily market near Tam Son sells everything from local veg to chainsaws. And Arsène Wenger will be pleased to know there's at least one happy Arsenal fan in the world



Dotted along the verges are rows and rows of beehives making honey



▷ like a magician revealing his assistant and says, 'Trung!' before putting a thumb to his chest. Today he's riding with us, so as we pedal out into the hillside in search of breakfast, we embark upon one of those wonderful conversations that only two people completely devoid of the other's language can have. We are at least united in a common love of cycling, and to prove this point Mr Trung jabs a finger into my puny quad and then into his bulging one, and utters another proud, 'Trung!' You'll not see a 70-year-old cyclist in better shape.

Breakfast is by the roadside. The van is parked up, the gas burner out and Dzang is cooking some extraordinarily good omelettes, along with fried bananas, watermelon and copious amounts of some of the best coffee I've tasted. I feel sure the van must be equipped with a secret barista, but when I mention this to Dzang he smiles broadly, whips out a bag of instant and a tin of condensed milk and points at the coffee pot.

It's definitely the rocket fuel we need, but before we can get going a tiny kid on a bike so large he can only reach one pedal at a time comes skidding up to our breakfast bar. We try to make conversation but he's too taken by our bikes to notice and, soon, I'm too taken with his. For all the carbon fibre and Di2 shifting in the world, there's nothing like a hand-painted bicycle with sticks for pedals, a tiara on the rack and a motorbike chain on the sprocket. This is clearly one well-loved bike, and it puts that common goal of cycling into perspective.

While yesterday we rode basically alone, today we are met by all manner of people, from sun-beaten old men herding water buffalo to pensionable-age women bent double under mammoth sacks of rice. In fact, the only things looking like they're having a harder time than these diminutive yet powerful females are the mopeds whining painfully past us. Apparently there are 37 million mopeds and motorcycles ▷

◻ in Vietnam – and that’s just the ones that are registered – and after seeing Hanoi I can quite believe it. But in these rural parts, instead of being the daily run-arounds mopeds play the role of tractor and truck. We see mattresses, a washing machine and even another moped being transported on these beleaguered 50cc workhorses, but best (or worst, depending on how you look at it) are the pigs.

Pork is a staple in northern Vietnam, but those piggies aren’t going to take themselves to market, so instead the locals weave pig-shaped baskets into which they thrust the poor trussed-up animals, live, before slinging them one either side of the seat. The effect looks like a miniature plane struggling to take off under the weight of its bombs.

Revelatory road

Our initial climb ticks by without incident, the landscape still shrouded in morning fog that turns the paddy fields and dirt tracks into large daubs of green and streaks of brown. But as we descend, plateau and then rise again, northern Vietnam begins to reveal her wiles.

In other countries a single mountain range would suffice, but here for each set of peaks there is another even higher behind, etched in jagged grey strokes ascending to the heavens. The air is sweet again, only this time not with the smell of rain but with wild lavender and peach blossom. Dotted along the verges are rows and rows of beehives making honey, a common product in these parts, which I’m only too happy

to sit down and sample when we happen upon our second roadside pop-up restaurant.

Dzang has been at it again, the table laden with watermelon and persimmon, a fruit somewhere between a pomegranate and a tiny melon, and sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves. But not even the food can compare with our lookout point. Stretched far into the distance are perfectly uniform terraces, cut into the hillsides to turn steep gradients into arable land, and below lies the dense vegetation of a valley all but untouched by human hand.

Next to us in the bark of a tree are some curious carvings, which Thang explains have been made by farmers tapping the tree for sap, which they mix with petrol to form the glue used to repair tyres. I’d wondered what the locals did for puncture repair kits, but like so many things Vietnamese, there isn’t time for daydreaming, they just get on and do. Much like we need to now.

Time has once more overtaken us, the prospect of cycling shelved in the presence of such a contented picture, but there’s no escaping the fact there’s still a lengthy descent to our end goal of Meo Vac, and I’m not keen on any more night-time riding. Yet Mr Trung seems unfazed by the prospect and his trusty toothbrush is out again, this time on Paul’s pedals. But hey, he seems happy, and sitting here with the gently whispering trees above and the spectacular vista laid out ahead, so am I. ‘Trung!’
James Spender is staff writer for Cyclist and has an equal passion for cycling and food

The morning fog turns the paddy fields and dirt tracks into large daubs of green and streaks of brown



Left: The transportation of pigs isn't exactly the most humane looking affair, and it tests even the most experienced moped rider's skills

Right and above: While gravel bikes with bigger tyres will lap up the Vietnamese roads, a skinny-wheeled racer still has the edge around flat corners



How we got there

TRAVEL

Direct flights to Hanoi are a rarity, but at certain times you'll get lucky with the return leg. We flew in October with Vietnam Airlines for around £550 return and got a direct flight (14 hours) home. Once there, Ride and Seek and its partner, Grasshopper Adventures, took care of all our transfers.

GUIDING

To get the best out of such a remote place, where language will likely be a barrier too, it's essential to go with a tour guide.

Ride and Seek's friendly staff, Mr Thang, Mr Trung and Mr Dzang, not only made us feel welcome and safe but had an incredible knowledge of the area, were extremely well-connected and Mr Dzang, in particular, proved to be one hell of a cook and driver.

Check out rideandseek.com for more detailed information, but as a rule expect them to take care of everything over a nine or 10-day trip, including hotels, meals (both on the fly and in the best local restaurants), luggage transportation, mechanical

support and general jokes and good times. All you have to do is ride. Prices from around £2,100, not including flights, with trips scheduled for this October.

THANKS

Huge thanks to Dylan Reynolds at Ride and Seek for putting our trip together, and for Grasshoppers Messrs Thang, Trung and Dzang, for executing it with such aplomb. They worked tirelessly to ensure everything ran smoothly, while being on hand during the ride to tell stories and offer moral support.