

# RIDING Vietnam

It's a country that famously saw off our military in the 1970s, but is now welcoming peaceful motorcyclists with open arms. GUY ALLEN reports on the ride of a lifetime...



Above: Halfway through the trip and the gang is happy. We were still grinning like fools by the end of the trip – Vietnam can have that effect on you.

Left: Some days you really earned your lunchtime noodle – here we've spent the morning riding in cloud, though it didn't seem to bother the local scooters.

History suggests that any complex plot put together by the Lemmings Motorcycle Club (motto: death before courtesy), particularly if Spannerman was to take a leading role, was bound to get sidetracked. Otherwise known as Magellan, or the human compass, he has in the past managed to get Melbourne confused with Darwin and

run an entire fleet of followers out of fuel. Despite that, nine of us mugs managed to land in Ha Noi at more or less the same time and limber up for a motorcycle adventure around the northwest of Vietnam. It was Spannerperson's greatest triumph.

The whole plan started to come together several months before, when the initial group looked large enough

to fill a suburb. As always happens with these brilliant ideas, people's lives got in the way – oh, and there was the small matter that the tour company we'd settled on only had a certain number of bikes and guides available.

In theory, we'd spend seven days (which became eight) on motorcycles, and about the same time again hanging

around Ha Noi looking for trouble.

Our mob consisted of Spannerman and Mrs S (sorry, ladies, he's taken), plus Spanner's brother Stuart (just as mad, but more stealthy), Professor Dingleberry and partner Rae, occasional Motorcycle Trader staffer Janette and Andy Strapz, plus yours truly and Ms M snr.

There was a broad range of riding experience in there, varying from recidivist with not a lot of miles under their belt, to daily punters, and from reasonably quick to those with a much more leisurely outlook on riding – something that had the potential to be

Below: Vietnam has seen off half the world – here they're celebrating thrashing the French. Bottom: Stopping to tie up the luggage is as good a way as any to meet the locals.



a real challenge for our guides.

### CHAOS CITY

One of the ideas behind our vague itinerary was to have a few days in Ha Noi to get acclimatised, before screaming off into the countryside. On reflection, this may or may not have been a good idea. Ha Noi is a fabulous city, and we quickly established which was our favourite bar in town, overlooking what may be the world's most chaotic intersection.

For those unfamiliar with traffic conditions in much of Southeast Asia, try to get a mental picture of a cyclone in a tissue factory – good, now replace the tissues with motorcycles, then throw in a mix of very dodgy-looking buses, at least a few hundred

street vendors flogging everything from balloons to banjo strings, several school children, plus a handful of baffled tourists. On the sidelines, there'll be a couple of bored looking cops largely ignoring this bun fight as if it was perfectly safe and normal.

To western eyes, it's a miracle anyone gets out of this mess alive. The thought of crossing the road is reason enough to reach for a good stiff drink, while actually riding in it seems utterly insane. But we were, and soon.

Adding to our trepidation was the fact they ride on the other side of the road. That is, on the occasions that anyone took any damned notice of which side they were supposed to be on – a system which may or may not have been aligned to the phases of the stars, as there was no clear system in play. We were eventually to work out you had to use this to your advantage.

Guiding us through this little trial, and the wilds of the countryside over the coming days, was a mob called Offroad Vietnam. The Spannerpersons had traveled with them before and swore by the service. With nine round-eyes to herd, the company supplied two guides, called Long (aka 'Sea Dragon', and a gem) and Hung.

And the bikes? The Dingleberrys were sharing a machine, so they got the big XL250 Baja, while the rest of us took the choice between XL125s or a model unfamiliar to Australians, a GL160 single-cylinder road bike. The

taller folk tended to opt for the XLs for their more roomy seating position.

Why such little bikes? For a start, the government places some huge tariffs (100 per cent, plus huge registration costs) on larger machines, which are a very rare sight in Ha Noi. Plus, once you start riding, you soon realise a big bike would be a liability.

The traffic is dense and chaotic in the city, utterly unpredictable anywhere else in the country, and the speed limits are low. Most people happily pile up a 110cc step-thru with the sorts of loads you'd normally expect to see on a brickie's ute, so engine capacity over 250cc seems excessive. A ride on a Hayabusa would be brief and spectacular...

After a few days sampling the delights of Ha Noi, we finally lined up at the tour firm, which is based in an office about the size of a large wardrobe, smack in the centre of town. Andy, who has been running a one-man global campaign to rid motorcycling of traditional, hooked ockie straps, had some lively discussion with our guides on the

correct loading of luggage, after which we mounted up and faced the inevitable.

With one guide in front and another bringing up the rear, there was minimal opportunity to get lost, but dealing with the traffic was something else. At first you feel like you're constantly being assaulted, dive-bombed, tooted and generally used. Then, the proverbial penny drops. No-one is out to kill you and in fact they're trying very hard not to. It's just the rule book has been used for heating fuel and everyone is expected to take every opening they spot, no matter how small or in which direction, without running over the other person. And the tooting? Well how else is anyone supposed to know you're there? In this game, a working horn is as valuable as brakes.

### LOCAL RULES

After what seemed like a lifetime of minor incidents and narrow squeaks, the outskirts of Ha Noi loomed up into the somewhat smoky horizon, a signal for Long and Hung to rally the troops



Central Hanoi late at night and the traffic is just settling down to maniacal. The Legends bar in the background is the perfect spot to marvel at the chaos.



Of course you can carry your entire restaurant on a scooter...

### GADDING ABOUT

Communicating in English isn't too much of a drama in Hanoi, as there's usually someone who can manage at least the basics.

Internet access is surprisingly good in larger population centres, as is mobile phone reach.

Automatic tellers are readily available in Hanoi, though it pays to use one from a substantial local bank. Muggins left his card in one by mistake, but was quickly able to recover it, at no cost, thanks to some sympathetic staff and a willing courier.

We had no problems with stomach bugs, thanks in part to the fact we stuck mostly to cooked food and bottled water.

The locals are very friendly and rightly proud of the fact they've seen off military challenges from the French, the Chinese and the Americans (and us).

Ultra-good exchange rates mean travel in Vietnam is inexpensive and, in many (but not all) situations, you're expected to haggle.

Getting in and out of the country is easier than for Australia.



Above: Ahn, the owner of the tour company, has few grey hairs given the business he's in. Below: High-tech factory one day, water buffalo the next – in Vietnam there's no shortage of contrasts.



### WHY USE A TOUR COMPANY?

If you want to see more than what the major local tourist routes offer, this is the way to go.

Assuming you're not fluent in the language, Vietnam can be a real challenge to navigate your way around. Experience tells me you'd be at risk of spending more time fretting over travel arrangements than enjoying the trip itself.

Current local knowledge not only opens up areas of the country you would never otherwise have seen, but it's invaluable having someone on hand to sort out food, accommodation and breakdowns.

We struck some issues along the way, and our guides' knowledge and flexibility meant we were able to change the itinerary on the run with no real fuss.

Our firm, Offroad Vietnam ([www.offroadvietnam.com](http://www.offroadvietnam.com)), comes very highly recommended. Costs run to about US\$130 per day, which includes guides, bikes, petrol, food and accommodation. Frankly, it's a bargain. We used them only for the motorcycle section of the trip and worked out the rest ourselves.

While the company had been using a mix of XL125s and GL160s, the 125s were being replaced with 250s. The firm goes to great pains to point out it does not use Minsk (still a popular alternative with some hire firms), as they're too unreliable.

We also used the Lakeside Motel in Hanoi (which has a small network of offerings in the centre of town) and can recommend it.

and lay out some ground rules. There were two.

The first was that if you got lost (some of our number struggled with the concept that riding in a group meant following the leader...), just stop and wait for someone to find you.

My favourite was rule two, which was, "If the police stop you, I am not coming back. But I will wait for you, out of sight up the road." Eh?

"Just keep talking English – they'll soon give up and let you go." Evidently if a local gets involved and breaks the language barrier, it's far more likely that a substantial donation to the police retirement fund will be asked for, in cash.

Moving out of Ha Noi and into the countryside can, as with a lot of Australian cities, take an enormous length of time, as there's little to mark the boundaries between the capital

city and its nearby satellite towns.

If the day had started in a somewhat traumatic manner, we were soon to get an insight into what would be a major highlight of the trip – the food. Lunch was a stop at the first of what would be many roadside cafés. You need some tolerance to chili to get the best out of it, and a willingness to eat more or less anything that has had a pulse, but in return you'll soon discover this country is potentially a gourmet's delight. This is one area where having local knowledge on tap, in the form of Long and Hung, was invaluable. A few days of this and you soon began to get a whole new perspective on the term "movable feast".

With less traffic to cope with, we started to get some sense of order on the roads, up to a point. In my previous travels in China, I recall seeing a government car fitted with



Above: Colour, movement and lots of interesting people – welcome to life on Vietnam's back roads. Below: The food is sensational, with everything from a steamboat for Spannerman in Sa Pa (left), through to dog and goat in the hills (right).



Helmets regularly get perched on top of the traditional head-dress. Oz safety nazis would have apoplexy...

loudspeakers trolling the streets in a little town in the centre of the country, shouting at people to keep to the right. No sign of that here and the locals made an effort. Except when they were overtaking, at which point the formerly two-lane road could easily find itself accommodating three and sometimes four-wide splits.

Over time, you soon developed a whole new sense of what was 'normal' out there in the traffic. For example, after the first couple of days, no-one was surprised, or even bothered commenting on it, when you went hurtling around a hairpin bend only to be confronted by first an unmarked pile of gravel (impending road works) then two trucks, both coming your way – one grinding its way past the other – as the drivers leaned on their respective horns.

The first time a water buffalo came skidding down a muddy embankment and on to the road (we have drop bears, they have drop buffalos), it was cause for great excitement. By day three you're muttering into your helmet, "Bloody drop buffalos, I wonder what's for lunch?"

The general route for this journey was northwest out of Ha Noi, up through the ranges to the Chinese border, across to the well-known tourist town of Sa Pa and then back

home. Along the way we encountered plenty of mountains with scenery reminiscent of Europe. Ever seen those alpine picture postcard shots looking down on a long sinuous ribbon of road that takes an apparently impossible number of twists and turns? Swap the deer for buffalo and the Peugeots for step-thrus and you've got northern Vietnam. This is a very beautiful region.

Of course we occasionally paid the penalty for the elevation – it was mid-winter and more than once we found ourselves scrambling around in cloud, with the speeds dropping to 30 to 40km/h.

In fact it was rare for the speeds to get much above 60km/h, thanks to a combination of animal life (the local pigs seemed particularly suicidal), oddball traffic (overtaking a step-thru loaded with a complete lounge suite can be more challenging than it sounds), and the route chosen by our guides.

We spent much of our time on obscure backroads, a treat that made you feel as though you were seeing the 'real' countryside. It also provided some exposure to a variety of ethnic groups, forever blowing away the impression of a mono-cultural nation.

The atmosphere was never dull, and Janette's notes from the trip sum it up

### HA LONG BAY

If you're in the north, Ha Long Bay is a must as a side trip. Brace yourself for a very 'touristy' experience as there is a huge armada of vessels out there, varying from karaoke boats (don't say you weren't warned) through to giant fake junks.

However, the area is very beautiful and is worth putting aside at least a few days to see.

Below: Stunning, but popular.



nicely: "We travel through many small poor villages. Dogs, chickens and pigs aplenty. Most animals seem to have recently given birth or are about to. One poor pig was dragging her bellyful along the ground.

"Children run to greet us and shout hello. Some hold out their hands to be slapped on the way past. Parents are busy tilling, tending to the harvest (rice or sweet potato) and the daily grind."

### HOME BOY

By far the most 'colourful' overnight stay was a motel hidden in a hellish-looking little village, whose primary product appeared to be dust. Which was a little ironic, as the entire area was soon to be flooded for a major

hydro-electricity development.

Clearly the building owners had given up on maintenance, as you could hear the termites in action as you went to bed at night. The insects were in for a very unpleasant surprise.

Mixed in with the motel accommodation along the way were home stays in stilt houses, sometimes with the head family of the village. The people doing this are clearly set up for it and some, such as Mr Boy, are infamous. He takes pride in the apparently vast quantity of rice spirit his family churns out and thrusts on unsuspecting guests.

Dinner at the Chateau Boy is followed with a little local-style wrestling; where you're left in an awful quandary – if you toss the guide on his back, will he remember it the next day? And, if so, what will be his revenge?

No matter, Mr Boy ensures all memory banks are wiped clean with an improbable number of toasts to anyone he can think of, accompanied by the salutation “how me do!”

We ambled back to Ha Noi with hangovers of various sizes, and a set of memories that really had the head spinning. It was then the few extra days we'd allowed in the country, for some sort of mental decompression

before flying home, suddenly seemed to make a lot of sense.

By now we were cultural ‘veterans’, more comfortable with wandering around the old city and searching out its delights, like the chaos, the art, the industry, the people, and the giant pools of soup sold for a couple of dollars at street stalls.

In all, we'd covered just over 1100km – you get a lot of challenges and experiences for your effort in this country – with even the most ‘saddle-hardened’ among us agreeing that 190km can feel like a big day.

Having toured by bike in Europe, the UK (including the Isle of Man) and America, I rate this trip as the best ever. It was truly an adventure and I'm going back. If you've been considering it, do it. ■

## TRAVELLING WITH MOTORCYCLE GEAR

This and other overseas bike trips have convinced me that you need to take a giant gearbag on wheels, so all your riding gear can be loaded into the cargo section of the aircraft.

Some of our number got stuck wandering around airports for hours with helmets and other paraphernalia, which soon wears thin.

We ended up using a lot of Andy Strapz gear ([www.andystrapz.com.au](http://www.andystrapz.com.au)). The A Bagz seat-mounted luggage was invaluable, as were the Ultra-Sil dry sacks, used by several of us to protect our laptops.

Oh, and don't forget to ensure your travel insurance covers motorcycle use.



Above: This surreal vision greeted us after a day weaving through tiny and remote villages.

Below: The next day you'd find yourself in one of these wonderful stilt houses. Lots of areas offer home-stay accommodation.

