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ZEN AND THE ART OF THE VESPA

Operated out of Zoom Cafe, Steve Mueller's fleet of vintage Vespas proved the perfect partner on a memorable trip travelling the coastal road from the peninsula of Vung Tau to the beachside of Mui Ne. Words by Julia Montague.

KHOA TRAN

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PHOTO BY PETER STUCKINGS

THE TRIP GETS OFF TO THE WORST possible start. I miss the boat.

Our 10am start has now been pushed to 11.30am and the crew is waiting in Vung Tau, while I am sitting observing the sun's increasing intensity through the windows of the hydrofoil. We are to drive from Vung Tau to Mui Ne on Vespas, and now we are facing the real possibility of having to do part of this scenic journey in the dark.

I had been advised that any Vespa trip in Vietnam had to be preceded by watching Top Gear's special episode on Vietnam. It begins with the host, Jeremy Clarkson's inability to start the bike and unceremoniously dumping it on the ground, 1,000 kilometres later, despite scrapes and cracked ribs, he is singing the praises of the Vespa.

I am not travelling 1,000km, but I have my doubts and I certainly don't want to come away with cracked ribs.

● Get Your Motor Running

Upon exiting the ferry terminal in Vung Tau, any reservations I have disappear. Laying my eyes on the fine-looking Vespa that is to be my companion for the next 24 hours, it is love at first sight. I cannot be more excited.

These are enviable machines. Steve Mueller, joint owner of Vietnam Vespa Adventure, explains that our motorcade of four are all VLB Sprint 150cc bikes manufactured between the years 1967 and 1970. They are originals, all restored by Steve.

He whisks me away for a crash course.

"Have you driven a Vespa before?"

No.

"Ok, well it'll probably be about a ten-minute learning curve. Then you'll get it no problem."

Pause.

"Have you driven a manual car before?"

No.

"Ok, maybe twenty minutes then."

No pressure.

My stock-standard Honda Wave has done nothing to prepare me for the intricacies of driving my Italian stallion. I feel like I am physically hurting it every time I let go of the clutch too quickly, causing it to lurch forward and sputter into silence.



PETER STUCKINGS



KHOA TRAN



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Stalling and jerking my way forward, I am certainly not doing the Vespa justice. But I am up and running, and ready to hit the road.

Life is a Highway

On the road, led by Steve and the tour's resident guide, Australian Walter Pearson, we are followed by a van full of staff, gear and sustenance. Our route is the newly completed coastal road from Vung Tau to Mui Ne, and the mostly new blacktop is a dream to ride on.

Our first stop is Long Hai Village and the famous Dinh Co Shrine. Walter, a Vietnamese speaker and documentary maker who also did two tours in Vietnam during the war, tells us the story of a young woman named Le Thi Hong Thuy. So beloved in the village for her generous spirit and kindness, when she tragically drowned they erected this memorial. Almost 200 years later, she is still celebrated by thousands of people who come from all around to attend her festival.

From long stretches of beach, the road rises up to more wooded areas.

"The mountains were named after two comrades Bui Cong Minh and Mac Thanh Dam," Walter tells us. "They were killed by the French in the late 1940s. Thereafter the base became known as the Minh Dam Base. The Vietnamese believed that as long as the base remained solid, so, too, would the revolution. If the base fell, the revolution would be over. The base was never threatened."

We disembark from our bikes and hike up past gargantuan boulders, still bearing signs of strife in the shell marks that scar them. At the top of the mountain, we are treated to an amazing view of the coastline that is ours to discover for the rest of the day.

As we continue down the highway, Walter signals us to take a turn onto an unmarked dirt pathway. The Vespa scoots unsteadily along the gravel. At the end, a huge monument sits in silence.

"The memorial commemorates the Vietnamese forces engaged in defending and using the Ho Chi Minh Trail of the Sea," explains Walter.

We are the only visitors, and we soak up

the moment.

Vietnam 101

The silence of the countryside begins giving my mind time to wander. The soundtrack of our journey is the steady putt putt of the Vespas and the crashing of waves. The only interruption are the shouts of school children. Their joy at being able to shout "Hello!" and share a brief exchange and a smile is endearing.

I feel connected to this bike and this country.

The other striking part of this experience are the smells. They change with the landscape, from fresh ocean breezes, to the unmistakable fish sauce odour as we approach Phan Thiet. Along the road there are small fires burning.

"It smells like a harvest," remarks Steve's wife, Phuong. "This is the smell of Vietnam."

We finish off our last day just as the sun is setting and the headlights from our Vespas are turned on. We have covered 150 kms today and our bodies feel it. Fortunately we are staying in the luxury Princess D'Annam, 35 kilometres south of Phan Thiet. It's not part of the tour, just a little treat we've been given, and it's the perfect tonic after a long, hard day on the road.

Sauce and Temples

The following morning we start the last leg of our journey. We stop at a local fishing village as baskets of last night's catch are loaded into a van. These small, silver fish are the ingredients of the *nuoc mam* for which Phan Thiet is so famous. The fishermen and women pay us little heed. There is nothing staged like during most open-tour bus stops. The connectivity with the land and the people is unparalleled.

After passing through Phan Thiet we make our last stop en-route to Mui Ne. We hike up to the Cham Temples, a 1,700 year old remnant of the ancient inhabitants of

the area. The burnt stone colour juxtaposes beautifully with the clear blue sky and the breeze carries the smell of blooming frangipanis through the afternoon heat.

In The Here and Now

It's late afternoon and our convoy now rolls into the Mui Ne resort strip. Our journey is coming to an end and all I can think is that I want more. I feel connected to this bike and to this country, more so than I have in my entire time in Vietnam. Cruising down the street, I catch my reflection in a hotel window. Do I look cool? Damn right I do.

The inimitable Robert Pirsig writes: "On a cycle, the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming."

From atop a Vespa, with the amazing team that has joined me on my journey, it's been incomparable and my trip home by van reinforces this. It's frenzied and loud. It eats away at the peace I've been fostering and I want it to be over as soon as possible.

I have been touched by the colours, smells, sounds, tastes and people of this country. The remnants of changing cultures, religions and centuries of struggle are stamped all over this land.

Walter sums it up best: "These are the sights, sounds and smells of the real Vietnam."

Vietnam Vespa Adventure offers three and eight-day adventure tours to other destinations including Dalat and Nha Trang, as well as one-day off-the-beaten-track tours of Saigon. Tours can be booked at Zoom Café at 169A De Tham, Q1 or through their website at www.vietnam-vespaadventure.com.

German-based Vietnam Vespa Travel also offer well set up adventure tours from Saigon. Each tour is 12 days, with either Hue or Nha Trang as your destination choices. For more information check out their website at www.vespadrive.com or email info@nigoco.de.