



VIETNAM VESPA ADVENTURE

Story & Photos by Kim Bowman

So here I thought I was being adventurous by just going to Vietnam with my good buddy, Jack this May. But the real adventure sort of happened by chance.

We were hanging out at Cafe Zoom, the only Vespa-themed cafe in Saigon, owned by some of Jack's good friends, Steve Mueller and his wife, Phuong. I was trying to figure out how I was going to get out to the beach area of Mui Ne where I had made a reservation for a two-night resort stay, when Steve and Phuong suggested I join them on their Vintage Vespa Tour, as they would be stopping in Mui Ne. I was a little hesitant because I would have to leave two days earlier than planned and I didn't really know anyone in their group. But something I had not intended on doing turned out to be the highlight of my vacation.

They actually have an official tour company in addition to Café Zoom, called Vietnam Vespa Adventures which is run by Steve and his friend, Shawn Bader, another American living in Saigon. Both are from Hawaii and their company (meaning them!) restores vintage Vespas for sale and to use on the tours.

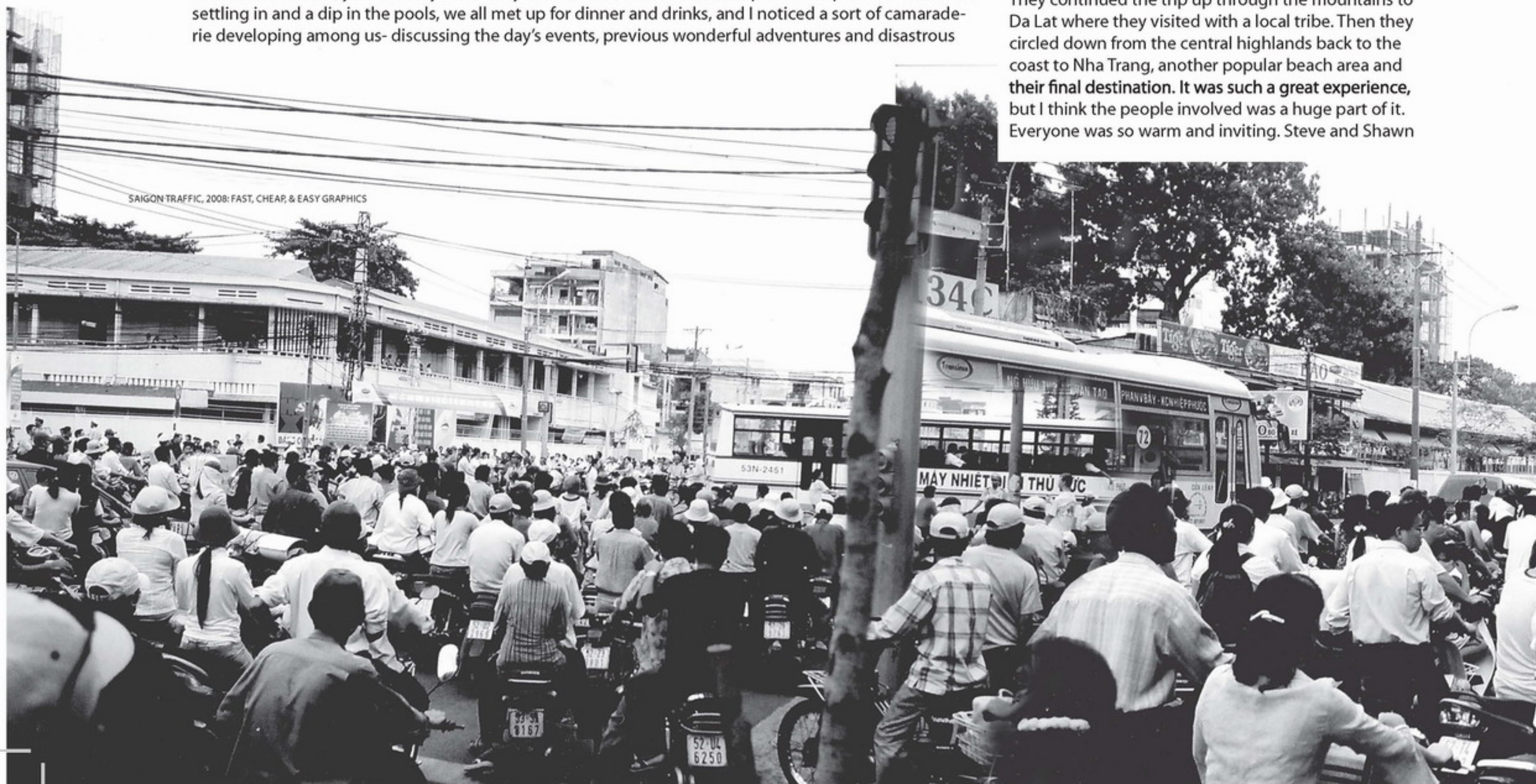
Our tour started out of Saigon where we took the ferry over to Vung Tau to meet the tour van and the Vespa bikes. There is a support van that follows behind the tour, which is nice. Going along for the ride, besides me, was a Belgium couple, Jackie and Alain, with their daughter, Julia. Jackie is a travel writer writing a story on the Vespa tour. They have been traveling for a year throughout Asia and have about three months to go...an impressive feat. We also had Scott visiting from Canada and Ha from Saigon. We headed out of Vung Tau and drove along the coast towards Ho Coc. Vung Tau is a beautiful little city that still bears a resemblance to the French Riviera. I was surprised at how little traffic there was on the roads which were pretty good, so it was ideal for this sort of ride. We stopped at a remote beach location for lunch, prepared right there on the spot. Yim, Vy and Phuong put together an excellent Vietnamese meal for us. We finally reached our destination for that night, the Binh Chau Hot Springs resort in Ho Coc, known for its natural hot springs and rumored to have healing properties. Because of its remote location, you can only reach it by motor bike or taxi. So this is a perfect stop on the tour. After settling in and a dip in the pools, we all met up for dinner and drinks, and I noticed a sort of camaraderie developing among us- discussing the day's events, previous wonderful adventures and disastrous



ones, too. Never a lull in the conversation amongst this group, that's for sure...good times.

The next day we headed out for Mui Ne. We took some photo ops along the way so Alain could get some good photos for their story. We stopped at another remote beach location for lunch, this time with views of cliffs and the lighthouse in the distance. I must say, Steve and Shawn have scouted out some really cool places for the lunch stops. And again, we had another excellent Vietnamese meal. That was probably some of the best food I had the entire time I was in Vietnam. We finally arrived at our hotel in Mui Ne, which is literally right on the ocean. Mui Ne is a resort town, for obvious reasons- its gorgeous stretch of beaches. Again, we settled in and had dinner at a local restaurant. Next day, Shawn gave us the option of renting jeeps and going to the white sand dunes in Mui Ne or sleeping in. Ordinarily, I would have chosen sleeping in, hands down, but instead I dragged myself out of bed at 6am and we headed off to the dunes. They were an impressive sight to see. Such a drastic contrast in the middle of a lush tropical climate. It was definitely worth my 6am wakeup call. There is even a mini-oasis and water lily-filled lake in the center of the dunes. Watching little Julia having so much fun sliding down them and just being a kid made me smile. On the way back we stopped at the local fisherman's village for some beautiful sightseeing.

So this is where my tour ended with the Vespa group as I had already made plans for a stay in Mui Ne, something I had booked earlier. I really wanted to continue on up north with the rest of the group and they tried to talk me into it, but I already had \$ invested. They continued the trip up through the mountains to Da Lat where they visited with a local tribe. Then they circled down from the central highlands back to the coast to Nha Trang, another popular beach area and their final destination. It was such a great experience, but I think the people involved was a huge part of it. Everyone was so warm and inviting. Steve and Shawn



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GREEN ENERGY

The Vietnam Vespa Adventures tour is GREEN. They use biodiesel fuel that Steve Mueller's company, Green Energy, produces in Saigon, as a replacement for the 2-stroke oil of the Vespas and for fueling the chase bus.

When Steve started Green Energy in 2004, it was with a desire to improve and protect the environment of Vietnam. He hit upon an original plan of taking used cooking oil from restaurants and hotels, who were happy to participate in the novel environmental project, and recycling it into clean biodiesel fuel at a small refinery. It was easy for him to find a market for his biodiesel in an economy of rising biodiesel prices. By selling it at \$.07 less per liter than the pump prices, he soon could not keep up with the demand, so he began looking into other oils. Catfish oil, cashew oil and other vegetable oils were not cost effective. So Steve explored agriculture in Vietnam. But growing the most suitable crops for biodiesel oil, such as palms or soybeans, was not sustainable for Vietnam because it would take land away from food cultivation which would in turn raise the prices of food there.

Then Steve discovered *Jatropha*, a small oil-bearing tree that grows in Vietnam's most unproductive land. Steve's company, Green Energy, now assists rural farmers in the provinces with the poorest land conditions, by offering planting materials, technology, money and guaranteed contracts to buy all of the *Jatropha* seeds that they can produce. He has planted *Jatropha* in five provinces to demonstrate the benefits to the local farmers and authorities.

Green Energy is committed to investing \$3.5 million this year to develop 5,000-6,000 hectare projects in these provinces, boosting farmers' incomes from \$300 to \$900.

Last year, Mueller attended an international biofuel conference in Hanoi where Green Energy was the only company present who actually grows *Jatropha*. The focus of the conference was to establish the biofuel industry in Vietnam. Green Energy hopes to help Vietnam expand the biofuel industry in a pro-farmer manner. This will benefit the poor, create new income for local communities and address real issues for the environment.

"We can all make a small difference to help the environment," says Steve.

are very knowledgeable of the country and well traveled in general. They're like Allstate- we were in good hands. And I think the tour is of a very relaxed and laid back style. You get to see what you want to see.

Even though I was only with the group for a few days, I think you can become quite close with new people when you travel together, sharing

stories of travel and adventure, learning each others backgrounds, with the realization that maybe we all have a common bond- a love for travel, the open road and the desire for non-mediocre lives.

I had such a fantastic time that I am actually considering going back next year in April, dragging some friends along and doing the entire trip. 🍀

For Vespa fun in Vietnam look up www.vietnamvespaadventure.com

