



# Rat Tales

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*Ballarat Bushwalking and Outdoor Club*

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## VIETNAM TRAVEL AND CYCLING TRIP

DECEMBER 27, 2007 — JANUARY 16, 2008

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**A**lan and Karena Esnoff, Mary and Ian Caddy, Frank Hanrahan, Graham Walker and three non-club members from Bacchus Marsh, Joe and John Ballard and Anne Cadzow all met in Hanoi to begin three weeks of travel and cycling around Vietnam. Two Grasshopper Tour guides, Mike Keenan and Ha Pham, a husband and wife team, completed the group of eleven. The trip visited three geographical regions; Hanoi in the north, Hue to Nha Trang in the centre and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in the South, with approximately one week spent in each locality.

Central Hanoi is busy and noisy with road rules that appear totally chaotic! However, they work and after familiarisation they seem to be a reasonable way to share the thoroughfares with all - pedestrians, foot merchants, motorcycles by the thousand, cars and trucks – with everyone managing to gain satisfactory mobility whilst mostly avoiding log-jams of traffic, though not without some horrific road casualties.

The Ho Chi Minh mausoleum, a traffic free zone, houses the embalmed corpse of Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese communist hero who led the country towards unification throughout continuous periods of debilitating civil, colonial and imperial war from the end of World War II (and as a revolutionary agitator prior to that) until his death in 1969. Ho died aged 79, without seeing his vision for the country realised. Inside the mausoleum, a continuous line of visitors parades past the corpse and soldiers stand guard to admonish anyone who whispers, wears a hat or pauses for longer than a few seconds.

Our exploration of Hanoi was completed by a visit to the Water Puppet theatre where musicians in traditional costume play bamboo flutes, beat gongs and drums and pluck stringed instruments. To accompany these rather discordant sounds a performance of puppets representing nobility, peasants, ducks, snakes and dragons conduct a ballet in a pool of water to re-enact some of the themes and myths of Vietnamese society.

The World Heritage listed site of Halong Bay is situated about four hours by bus east of Hanoi. Here, limestone mountains and rocks dominate the seascape and rise

majestically from the sea, bathed in a misty light that imparts quietness and serenity. Some of the island-rocks harbour sandy coves and limestone caves and a short walk to the top of one, which Ho Chi Minh is reputed to have climbed, offered us panoramic views of the bay. A walk through the cavernous limestone hollows revealed ancient stalactites, though at this time of year they are quite dry and lack the glistening, waxy appearance of many limestone cave structures.

Embarking and disembarking from our boats (actually luxury, diesel powered junks) was a little chaotic as dozens of them jostled for position at the dock, with some forming a footbridge to others that were less accessible to the shore and newly arriving passengers mingled with those who had just completed their bay tour.

Calling at several craftworks both to and from our journey to Halong Bay, we saw on display the skill, dexterity, patience and enterprise of Vietnamese that we would witness repeatedly on our trip through the country. Elaborate embroidery, delicately woven cloth, stone and wooden sculptures, polished gems and lacquer ware, were all made to standards of high quality.

Travelling west of Hanoi we joined our bicycle mechanic to commence the work of our trip – cycling. After an overnight stay at a French themed mountain resort, we mounted our bikes, all pre-fitted and customised the day before, for a 65 km ride. Rough, stony roads and abundant mountain and rural scenery characterised the first 20 km. We also made several unscheduled encounters with local farm workers, making brooms for export to China or hewing poles for construction, that resulted from the occasional wrong turn along these unmarked back roads. After reaching bitumen and cycling another 45 km through similarly scenic countryside, we boarded the bus for the final grind over the mountain and into the valley township of Mai Chau where our home stay accommodation was situated amongst the rice paddies, in a long hut elevated on stilts, with a bamboo slatted mat floor and thatched reed roof.

Traditional dancers provided the evening entertainment with each dance representing some aspect of village

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life. We were all invited to join the final dance in which bamboo poles crossing the floor were clapped together in time with the music and nimble footwork was required to avoid one's ankles being trapped painfully in their clasp. As our reward, we shared a communal jug of fruit wine at the finish.

Cycling through this neighbourhood on dirt tracks, along the tops of paddy dykes, over rickety bridges, in and out of villages, dodging goats or ducks or water buffalo or wooden carts or even the occasional motorcycle, was very satisfying but required concentration to avoid a fall or collision. We came to know an almost universal sport for children along back roads, village roads and even through some larger townships, to shout a happy greeting of *hello* to us strangers on bicycles. Not to disappoint them, we returned with our own greeting of *hello* or *xin chao* (pronounced *sin jow*) except where concentration, fatigue or road conditions dictated otherwise.

After returning to Hanoi our bikes were transferred ahead of us to Hue in preparation for the next leg of our trip. Meanwhile, we conducted a short ride on the outskirts of Hanoi using spare bicycles and finishing at the home of our guides where we had lunch before transferring to the airport for the flight to Hue.

The start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> week began with a 600km evening plane flight to Hue, the old Imperial Capital of Vietnam. After the cool temperatures of the north, we were preparing for a slightly more 'tropical' feel to greet us. Wrong! It was still just as cool, and raining lightly as well! Due to an unavoidable delay in leaving Hanoi, we now had a bit of time to catch up, as we began the more 'serious' cycling component of our trip.

Our first day began early as we set out on bike to visit the many cultural highlights of this city. Hue was Vietnam's feudal capital from 1802-1945 under the Nguyen Dynasty, but much of the magnificent architecture of its citadels, palaces, royal tombs, pagodas and temples date back as far as the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. It even has its own Forbidden Purple City. Most sites are now UNESCO protected. We couldn't help but reflect on the collision of history here—Hue was the site of one of the bloodiest battles of the Tet Offensive, and many of the beautiful old buildings are pock-marked by mortar damage. Hue and its surrounds looked rather 'wintry,' with all those bare and stark frangipani trees—what a sight it must look in summer, with frangipanis, water lilies, and lots of other tropical plants in bloom. (No doubt the increased heat and humidity would make cycling between the sights less attractive though!) Oh well, can't have everything. The amazing bonsai everywhere helped to compensate.

We rode around the outskirts of Hue, up and down hills,

to other cultural sites, and to lookouts over the Perfume River. We passed lots of tombs, both for royalty and commoner alike. The place is truly littered with them! We traversed a myriad of quite muddy backroads, (which really tested our cycling skills—only 1 wet foot to report), then over dykes through paddy fields being ploughed with the assistance of water buffalo, until we eventually reached a Buddhist nunnery for lunch. What a delicious vegetarian meal—this really set the tone for most of our lunches during the upcoming week—fantastic food, in quite humble surroundings, and really one of the highlights of our trip.

During the afternoon, as steady light rain set in, we commenced our cycling foray along Highway 1—rather confronting to begin with, as we began mixing it with trucks, buses, countless motor bikes, pedestrians and assorted animals! Amazingly, it actually became quite exhilarating—maybe this is how the locals feel as they duck and weave around each other?! With fading light we arrived at Lang Co beach resort - wet, dirty and appreciative of this pretty spot beside the South China Sea. Our evening meal, as we reflected on our 90 km ride, was beside an open fire providing a beautiful aroma from the cinnamon bark being burnt, but unfortunately little warmth. (Is this really Vietnam—where are our thermals when we need them?!)

04/01/2008

Day 2 of our 'serious cycling' (SC), from Lang Co to Hoi-An, dawned fine and slightly warmer, as we contemplated our first real cycling challenge (apart from avoiding being flattened by a truck or bus!)—the 10 km slog up Hai Van Pass, the geographic divider of North and South Vietnam. As a group we proved we were well and truly up to the challenge. However a lot of us failed badly at resisting the persuasive powers of the touts amassed at the top! Unfortunately the views were a little spoiled by haze and cloud, but nothing dimmed our enjoyment of the thrill of whizzing downwards for 10km. The rest of the day was flat, thankfully, and varied—from riding through busy and 'fume' Danang, lunch at a small beach-side cafe (delicious seafood again!) to riding along coastal sand dunes densely populated by burial grounds. The tombstones were certainly a feature of the landscape—many painted gaily in the same pastel colours they use to adorn their houses. Mention needs to be made here of the Vietnamese houses—owing to the fact that they are taxed on their house frontage width, and their inbuilt ability to 'sidestep' regulations, all houses are incredibly narrow, up to 3 stories high, and go back for the full length of their allotment. They are built of concrete, and then beautifully painted in a staggering array of pastel shades. Styles vary from 'wedding cake' confections to stylish balconied abodes. The final riding leg of the day, took us inland through endless paddy fields, to the beautiful historic town of Hoi An.

05/01/2008

Rest Day: Hoi An.

Our rest day was welcomed and enjoyed by everyone.

Hoi An is a delightful small town by Asian standards, (approx 80,000 pop) that largely escaped the destruction of successive wars. It has a 2000 year history of being an international trading post and between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century it was one of South-East Asia's major international ports. Due to the silting up of the Cai river which links Hoi An with the sea, trade moved to Danang, and now Hoi An is more frequented by tourists than seamen. However it still retains a sense of history that envelops you as you explore this World Heritage protected town. The Old town is very user friendly—cars are banned, distances are walkable, touts don't bother you, and it's great for shopping! At night, when lit up with silk lanterns in a myriad of colours, it is just picture perfect!

Some of us delved into the history aspect, others, after a visit to the Japanese Bridge and a couple of historic old houses, delved into some retail therapy! 'Same day' making of shirts, shoes and even the traditional ao dai, provided much entertainment, if not always satisfactory results. (Can't imagine what shoes TOO BIG for Alan must have looked like!)

06/01/2008.

Day 4 of serious cycling(SC) from Hoi An to Tam Ky actually started with a 1 hour boat ride down the Cai River and over to the opposite sand spit. Much interest was generated in watching the fisherman at work, with 'tourist brochure' images of them casting their nets and hauling in catches. Our relatively short day of riding (52km) on backroads varying from thick red mud to sand dunes, through areas not normally frequented by tourists, was an absolute delight. We felt like we were participating in the 'Tour de France'!—people out cheering us on with endless greetings of 'elloww, elloww', children running from all directions and waving. Whenever we stopped, children gathered to look and giggle—they were an absolute delight! I think this all crystallized what was a highlight of this trip—the people; ever welcoming, and ever ready to be subjects of our incessant tourist desire for photos, and never once expecting payment.

After a pleasant picnic lunch at beautiful Tam Thanh beach (and a quick doze in the deck chairs for some) we continued along coastal sand dunes before heading inland on Highway 1 again 22n to the small town of Tam Ky. We briefly visited some local Cham towers, relics of the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century Champa civilization. Over the centuries these muslim people have gradually been pushed further south by the Vietnamese, leaving just an architectural footprint.

07/01/2008

Day 5 of S.C. was a longer day of 90km, cycling from Tam Ky to Quang Ngai. A very pleasant cloudy, but warm day began with the first very flat 40km along Highway 1. Once off Highway 1 it was right into 'rural' Vietnam. The whole landscape looked like it had been 'photoshopped' to produce impossible hues of chlorophyll enhanced green. Dotted the landscape were conical hatted farmers working their paddy fields, and everywhere white herons forming a wonderful contrast to all that green. Judging by the amount of scarecrows, plastic flags and strips of reflective tape across the paddy fields in places, the farmers don't quite view the birds with quite the same roman-

tic eye as us!

Lunch was at the small coastal village of Sa Ky. Here there was the usual melange of fishing boats, and even a shipyard with a wooden boat under construction. From here we cycled to the memorial at the site of the My Lai massacre—a very moving and sobering experience, and truly a testament to the Vietnamese character that they have been able to simultaneously grieve for their people lost to war, and yet move on with no signs of obvious rancour towards their foreign aggressors. The terrible irony is that their most recent foes, the French Americans and Australians, now make up a huge bulk of the invading tourists.

After 90 km of riding we finished the day at Quang Ngai—a modern town of ½ million people, and such a contrast to the small villages we had become familiar with. We even found a big supermarket as certain people tried to get a chocolate fix! The Vietnamese 'do' great food but their chocolate is spectacularly awful!

08/0/2008.

Day 6 of Serious Cycling. Quang Ngai to Quy Nhon. This slightly shorter day of riding (72km), was just an absolutely perfect day, weatherwise—sunny, clear blue skies, but HOT for riding. We travelled the first 100km by bus, and then began riding at 11am. (What was that about mad dogs and Englishmen?) We cycled through the most stunning countryside—to our right the mountains of the hinterland, with their myriad shades of blue/grey folds, giving way to a foreground of those surreal green paddy fields, interspersed with houses surrounded by palm trees and brilliant, flowering bougainvilleas. --to our left were sand dunes and glimpses of the the sea sparkling in the sunlight-- and all this covered by a clear blue sky.

A few steep hills before lunch tested our resolve in the heat, but as we whizzed downwards, the views of the bays with gaily painted squid boats anchored, more than compensated. Our lunch stop at a restaurant right beside the beach was memorable—calamari to die for!

The afternoon's ride was relatively flat, but through the same stunning scenery, to the seaside town of Quy Nhon. Our 4 star hotel, overlooking the beach was really appreciated—especially those 2.7m wide beds. (Measurement courtesy of our resident builder, Frank)

09/01/2008. Day 7 of S.R. Quy Nhon to Tuy Hoa.

The day dawned hot and hazy as we contemplated a long hard day of approx 100km of undulating (read HILLS!) terrain—once again along Highway 1. The morning's ride was truly spectacular though—once again along beautiful coastline similar to Victoria's Great Ocean Road, but in a tropical setting. There were lots of sandy beaches, and bays dotted with fishing boats. Great to feast your eyes on as you crested each hill. Roadside stalls with people selling all manner of fish were also a feature of today's ride—even a young mussel vendor whose produce were feeling the full force of the sun whilst he slept under a canvas awning!

Being Highway 1, there were the usual 'hairy' moments with the traffic, and by now the constant tooting of trucks

and buses was starting to wear pretty thin. Ian managed to achieve a minor victory amongst all this mayhem—as he was pedalling up one ‘undulation’, the bus driver kept tooting incessantly, until Ian turned and remonstrated and ‘shushed’ him emphatically—all of which made not one scrap of difference of course! However as they both made their way down the hill, Ian zoomed past the bus—with all the passengers hanging out the windows, clapping, and giving him an emphatic ‘thumbs up’ sign!

Later in the day, as we headed inland, Frank unfortunately had a minor mishap—lost some skin, but fortunately no serious injuries. Our overnight stop at Tuy Hoa reminded me little of our Gold Coast. (interpret that any way you wish!)

10/08/2008.

Day 8 of Serious Cycling. Tuy Hoa to Doc Let.

Our final day of cycling dawned sunny, clear and once again HOT!—with 100 km riding ahead. Today was more of the same—Highway 1, spectacular coastline, one 3km pass to climb, but fabulous downhill overlooking bays, coast and mountain, little villages smelling of the ubiquitous fish sauce. We reached our lunch stop in serious need of cold drinks and ice too slather over our bodies. The final 30km after lunch seemed endless, with the sun’s rays really searing into any exposed skin. We finally arrived at the resort of Doc Let, hot, tired, but extremely jubilant to have completed approx 700km of cycling with no serious mishaps, and to have bonded into such a cohesive little cycling group. Most importantly it was a fabulous way to experience a country and to meet her people. And to top that, it was a lot of fun!!!!

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**A**fter enjoying our rest day at Doclet White Sands Resort, we departed Saturday morning on a short bus trip to the Nha Trang station. Here we caught the 5 star train, which took us on a 7 hour journey to Saigon City. The trip was comfortable and relaxing apart from a ‘bump in the night’. The lights went out and the train stopped suddenly. Resuming our trip we were told that we had hit a motor cycle at a level crossing. The rider was apparently unhurt but the motor cycle was crushed beneath the train.

Upon arrival in Saigon City, (approx. 8 million people) we were transferred to the Continental Hotel built in 1880 and famous because the author Graeme Green, wrote a novel while resident there called ‘The Quiet American.’

Early Sunday morning we explored the markets and shops of this modern westernised city before heading off to the Cu Chi Tunnels. These were first built during the war with the French and later extended to 250km on three levels to fight and resist the Americans in the late 1960’s. It was amazing to see how small the tunnels were, however we still managed to squeeze through. The methods of dealing with smoke dissipation, camouflaged entrances, booby traps, cooking methods, and ventilation were quite ingenious. The Vietnamese people used great ingenuity in building this maze of underground tunnels, yet used only the most basic of implements and equipment. Almost everything discarded by the American troops was salvaged during the night and

put to some use fighting their enemy.

Next day (Monday 14<sup>th</sup>) we were off to the Mekong Delta – the food basket area of Vietnam. Here almost every imaginable variety of fruit and vegetables are grown and traded at local markets. The population density is very high with most villagers cultivating their small holdings. Farming and transportation methods have basically remained unchanged for centuries. However it is amazing to see the uses and quantities of produce that can be balanced on a motorbike. At first we explored the delta area on local bikes by following winding pathways through villages. We rode along levee banks and across canals and bridges.

The following day we explored the Mekong River by boat. We visited the largest floating market in Vietnam. Here we witnessed locals taking their fresh produce to market in a huge variety of boats. Most boats were loaded to the hilt and it wouldn’t take much to see them overturned. The Mekong provides an endless supply of water, a major highway for transporting all kinds of goods, a local market place, homes for locals, supports a large fishing community and also acts as a huge waste disposal vehicle.

After tantalising our senses by the sights, sounds and smells of the Mekong, we headed back to the comforts of our hotel in Saigon. It was now time to have a final celebration dinner and say good bye to our guides (Mike and Ha) and to other members of our group, who were heading home early the next morning. Some of us had the luxury of an extra night in Saigon and the chance to look around a little more, do a little extra shopping or visit local attractions.

Upon reflection the three weeks spent in Vietnam had gone very quickly. Such a lot had been crammed into such a short space of time. Our accommodation had been quite varied and always a pleasant surprise. Our mode of travel included planes and trains, cars and buses, bikes and boats. The food was quite different to what we had at home, but always very healthy and tasty. The scenery was quite spectacular. It was forever changing from views similar to The Great Ocean Road, here in Vic. to acres and acres of flooded rice paddies with mountains in the background. The people were very friendly, happy and always obliging. We were greeted with cries of hello, come in my shop, how much you pay, I have your colour, and I have your size by the shopkeepers in all market places. Bargaining completed the expression of ‘you happy, I’m happy’ pretty well sums up the whole experience of visiting Vietnam. A wonderful experience.

Alan andarena  
Mary and Ian Caddy.  
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