

Cycle Touring Vietnam (2)

Karst, Coffee, and the Long Road North

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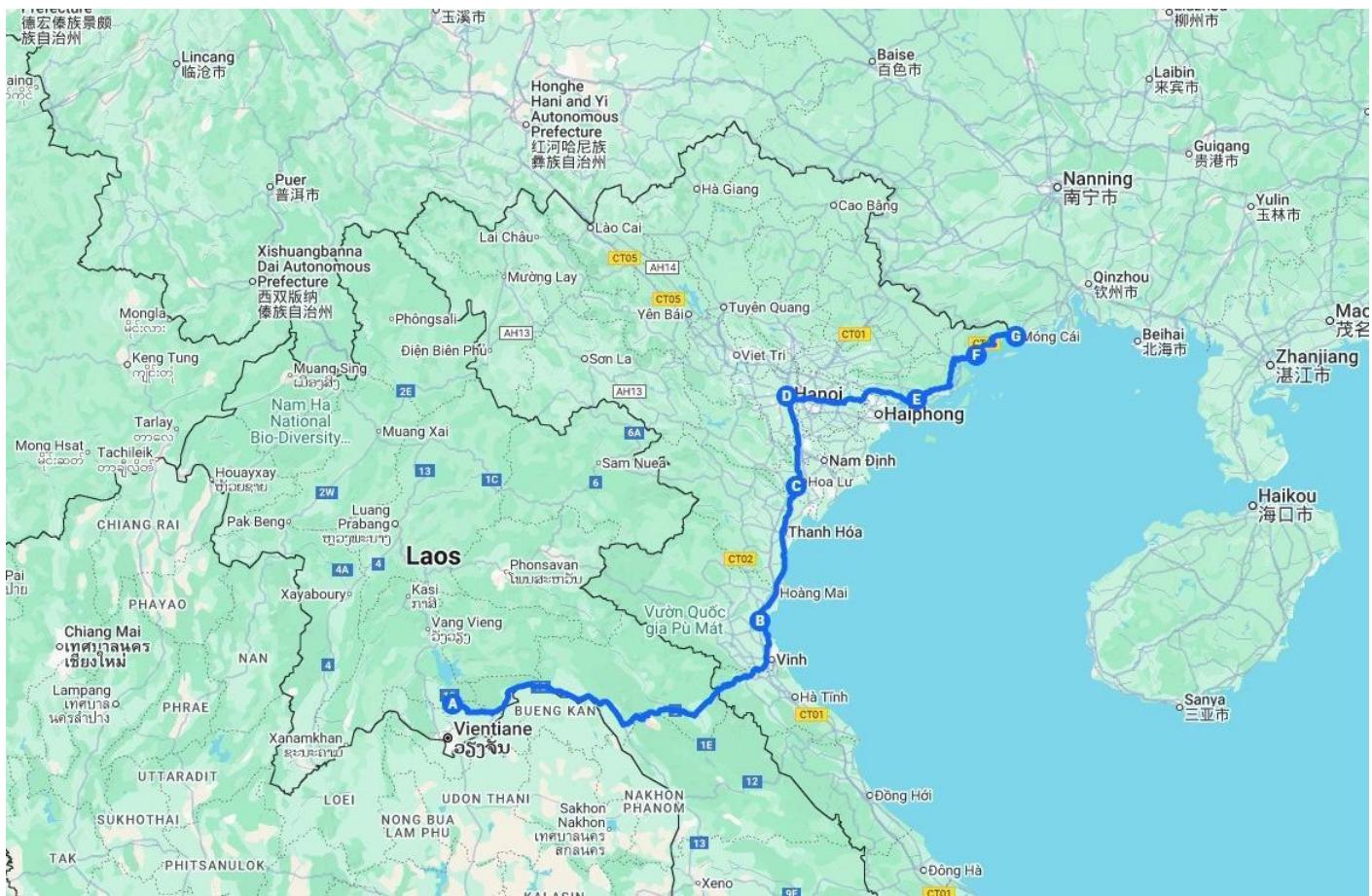
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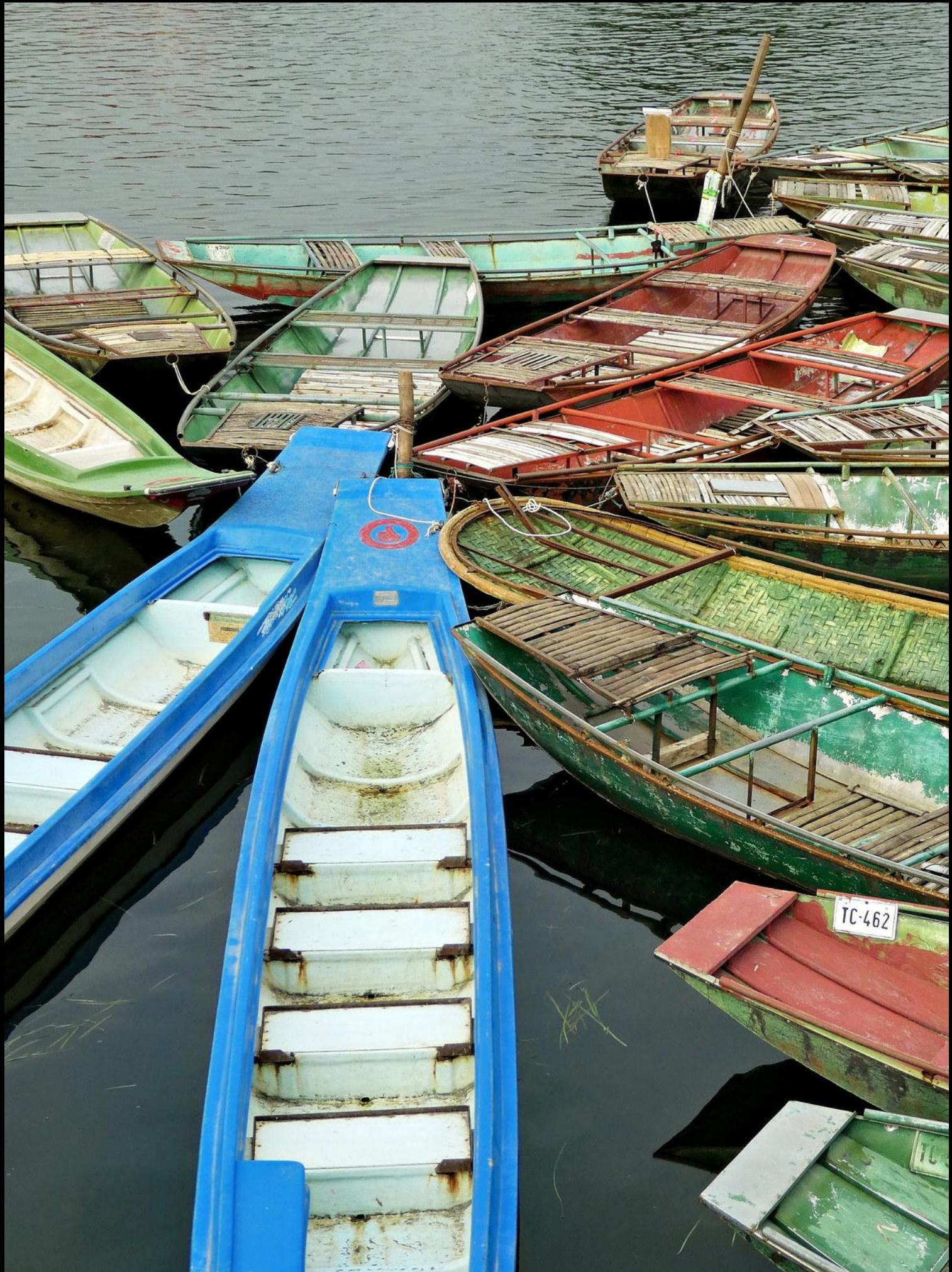
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Vietnam (2)

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Thank You

I am immensely grateful for the kindness of strangers and the random acts of generosity I encountered during my cycle tour of Vietnam. It was truly a humbling experience.

My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her efforts, there would be no record of my journey.

I owe a great deal to my friend Val Abrahamse for managing my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dream.



Karst, Coffee, and the Long Road North

**Cycling through history, hospitality, and
the quiet strangeness of everyday life**

Prologue

***The road into Vietnam opened under a soft veil of rain,
mountains rising like old storytellers along the border. I entered
the country slowly, on two wheels, letting incense smoke,
coffee steam, and the echo of old wars fold themselves into the
rhythm of my ride.***

***Travel asks only this—to surrender to what appears, to the
kindness of strangers, to the rain that soaks you, to the stories
waiting in the quiet between hills.***



Crossing Into the Green Silence

A short twenty-kilometre ride from my Laos guesthouse brought me to the border, where immigration went surprisingly smoothly. Vietnam greeted me with a detour into Lao Bao—just long enough to withdraw a generous three million Dong and pick up a local SIM card before the road tilted upward into the mountains.

The climb revealed sweeping vistas, the kind that hush the mind. Descending again, I passed turnoffs to war-scarred sites, including the Rockpile—a jagged karst outcrop once used as an American observation post. Its silhouette lingered like a bruise on the landscape.

Yet the region felt as rural and gentle as Laos. Women smoked long, slender pipes while selling banana hearts; people carried goods in woven baskets strapped to their backs. Their laughter drifted across the road like a soft breeze. I followed the hilly ribbon of asphalt all the way to Dong Ha, a hundred-odd kilometres down the drag.







Rain Over the DMZ

I woke to drizzle tapping at the window, torn between staying cocooned in my room or surrendering to the wet world outside. Restlessness won. I pedalled into the grey morning, the drizzle thickening into a steady rain.

Crossing the DMZ felt surreal—this land once carved by conflict now lay peaceful, quilted with rice paddies and grazing buffalo. In the constant rain, my focus wavered, and I missed the turnoff to the tunnels. I refused to backtrack. The downpour dulled the day, kept my camera tucked away, and left me sighing at the missed photographs. Still, there's a strange refreshment in cycling through warm rain, a cleansing of sorts.

I arrived in Dong Hoi after another 100-ish kilometres. The town quickly taught me about prices and the art of not being duped. Vendors laughed when I challenged them, refunding me with good humour. I learned to order only from menus with printed prices; shops without them left me feeling like a fish out of water.

I stayed an extra day, wandering a city still bearing the scars of the 1965 B-52 bombings. Only fragments remain—water tower, city gate, a Catholic church, a lone palm tree. I cycled between them, drinking cup after cup of aromatic Vietnamese coffee, sheltering from the rain, swapping stories with travellers, and sampling the local cuisine.

One thing struck me: the absence of stray dogs. Instead, motorbikes carried wire cages filled with dogs destined for the dinner table. Dog meat, eaten with rice wine, is considered a delicacy. Though unsettling, I reminded myself that cultural practices often sit in uncomfortable grey zones.







Funeral Smoke and Karst Mountains

After a hearty breakfast, I set off toward Phong Nha National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where some of Asia's oldest karst mountains rise like ancient sentinels. The landscape unfolded in dramatic sweeps—towering peaks, lush valleys, the rhythmic hum of my wheels.

Halfway there, a funeral procession caught my eye. A man in a brown robe chanted while mourners in white gathered around offerings of food and incense. They urged me to take photos, then stuffed my handlebar bag with fruit and snacks until it bulged comically. I performed an exaggerated puja in thanks, palms pressed together, bowing repeatedly, laughing at my own theatrics.

In Son Trach, I found a guesthouse and headed straight for Phong Nha Cave. A boat ferried me up the Son Trach River to its yawning entrance. Inside, the world transformed—stalactites and stalagmites rising like frozen cathedrals, each formation more magical than the last.

By morning, I was packed and ready to leave, but I felt a tug—an intuition that I wasn't done here. I stayed another day.

The road to Paradise Cave wound through rice paddies and karst peaks, leading to a modest entrance that concealed one of the longest caves on Earth—thirty-one kilometres of hidden splendour discovered only in 2005. A wooden staircase carried me into its vastness. Even with a tour group nearby, the cave swallowed sound and space, leaving me in quiet awe. Words fail; even my photos feel inadequate.



PHONG NHA-KE BANG







Along the Old Ho Chi Minh Trail

Dark Cave tempted me, but the cost of the adventure tour nudged me back to practicality. Instead, I savoured my included breakfast—Vietnamese omelette, baguette, iced coffee strong enough to wake the dead.

“Where you go?” they asked as I packed. “China,” I replied. Blank stares. The concept seemed distant, abstract.

The road north carried me through quintessential Vietnamese countryside—rice fields, buffalo, karst silhouettes. Farmers ploughed with oxen; fishermen cast nets from slender boats. I followed an old Ho Chi Minh trail, its history heavy with sacrifice. Old graves dotted the landscape like quiet reminders.

A sugar cane juice vendor offered sweet relief. A missed turn pushed me onto the main road, but it became a blessing—women collecting recyclables, men tending buffalo, two women herding geese and ducks with effortless grace. I ended the day after biking 125km when I spotted the Yang Hotel, grateful for the nearby restaurant.







Buffalo Rivers and Strange Conversations

My morning began with drama: an Australian woman demanded I delete a photo of dogs being transported by bike, threatening to make me “friendless.” As if that would stop the Vietnamese from eating dog meat. I wondered which of my Facebook friends might receive odd messages from her.

Later, a man insisted cycling was easier for women because we are “stronger,” while men struggled—this from someone riding a motorised bicycle. His logic escaped me, but at least someone shouted a cheerful “Welcome to Vietnam.”

The AH1 highway made a dull, busy, 110km ride to Dien Chau. The day’s highlight was watching a herd of buffalo swim across a wide river—graceful, powerful, unexpected.







Laughter in the Face of Collision

The following day unfolded like a comedy of errors. Rounding a parked truck, I nearly collided with a woman riding against traffic. She dropped her bike; I rode straight over it. She burst into laughter—Vietnamese humour at its finest.

Locals approached me to practise foreign languages—English, German, French. My repeated “I don’t understand” did nothing to deter them. One man greeted me with “Salaam alaikum,” and I responded with the only Arabic phrase I knew. I must have looked wildly out of place, but it made us both laugh.

Closer to Hanoi, the road grew chaotic—trucks, buses, produce drying on the tarmac. Mining scars marred the landscape, but farmers harvesting rice and women cycling with heavy loads brought beauty back into the frame. I ended the day's ride at Thanh Hoa.





The Limestone Kingdom of Tam Coc

A short 60-kilometre ride led me toward one of Vietnam's most iconic landscapes. Tam Coc buzzed with tourists, but its beauty was undeniable—boats gliding between limestone cliffs rising from emerald paddies, a land reminiscent of Ha Long Bay.

Rain threatened, and I debated whether a boat trip would be worth it. The sky held the answer.





Into Hanoi's Warm, Rain-Soaked Embrace

The drizzle persisted, nudging me toward Hanoi rather than upriver. After breakfast and a strong coffee, I surrendered to the city's pull.

The route wound through rural settlements where women balanced wicker baskets on shoulder poles. A surprise stop at ancient Hoa Lu—Vietnam's former capital—offered moss-covered walls, old temples, and narrow alleys steeped in history.

Eventually, the AH1 swallowed me again, narrowing into a potholed single lane. The final stretch into Hanoi was a heart-pounding dance with chaotic traffic. Arriving soaked and exhausted, I found refuge in a cheap guesthouse tucked into the old quarter's maze.

The days that followed became a tapestry of street food, coffee, laughter, and nights out with Bret, Hayley, and their friends. Rumours of a typhoon kept me lingering. Each morning, the weatherman declared, "Today's the day," and each day I booked another night.











Following the Duong River's Quiet Pulse

Nothing much came of the storm and I packed up. Leaving Hanoi felt like peeling myself away from a warm embrace. I drifted through settlements along the Duong River—matchbox houses, rice paddies, red-roofed homes that reminded me strangely of Eastern Europe.

My GPS, set to “walking” by accident, guided me through markets, cobblestone alleys, temples, and residential lanes. Buffalo wandered freely; chickens and pigs added their soundtrack. Farmers tended vegetable plots by hand. Villagers dried rice on the tarmac, turning it with quiet precision.

I hesitated to take photos, but couldn't resist capturing a man carrying not just fishing gear on his shoulder pole, but an entire boat. I pedalled on for about 115 kilometres before calling it a day at a roadside Hotel.







Halong's Haze and a Forgotten Passport

A blissfully short ride carried me into Halong City, framed by karst formations rising like ancient guardians. Yet the city itself felt like a construction site—development booming under Vietnam's free trade agreements.

Then came the realisation: my passport was still in Hanoi. The hotel receptionist sprang into action, calling her brother, a minivan driver, who retrieved it and delivered it to my hotel in Halong City! Kindness, once again, saving the day.





22 October — A Day Devoured by Fog and Food - Halong City

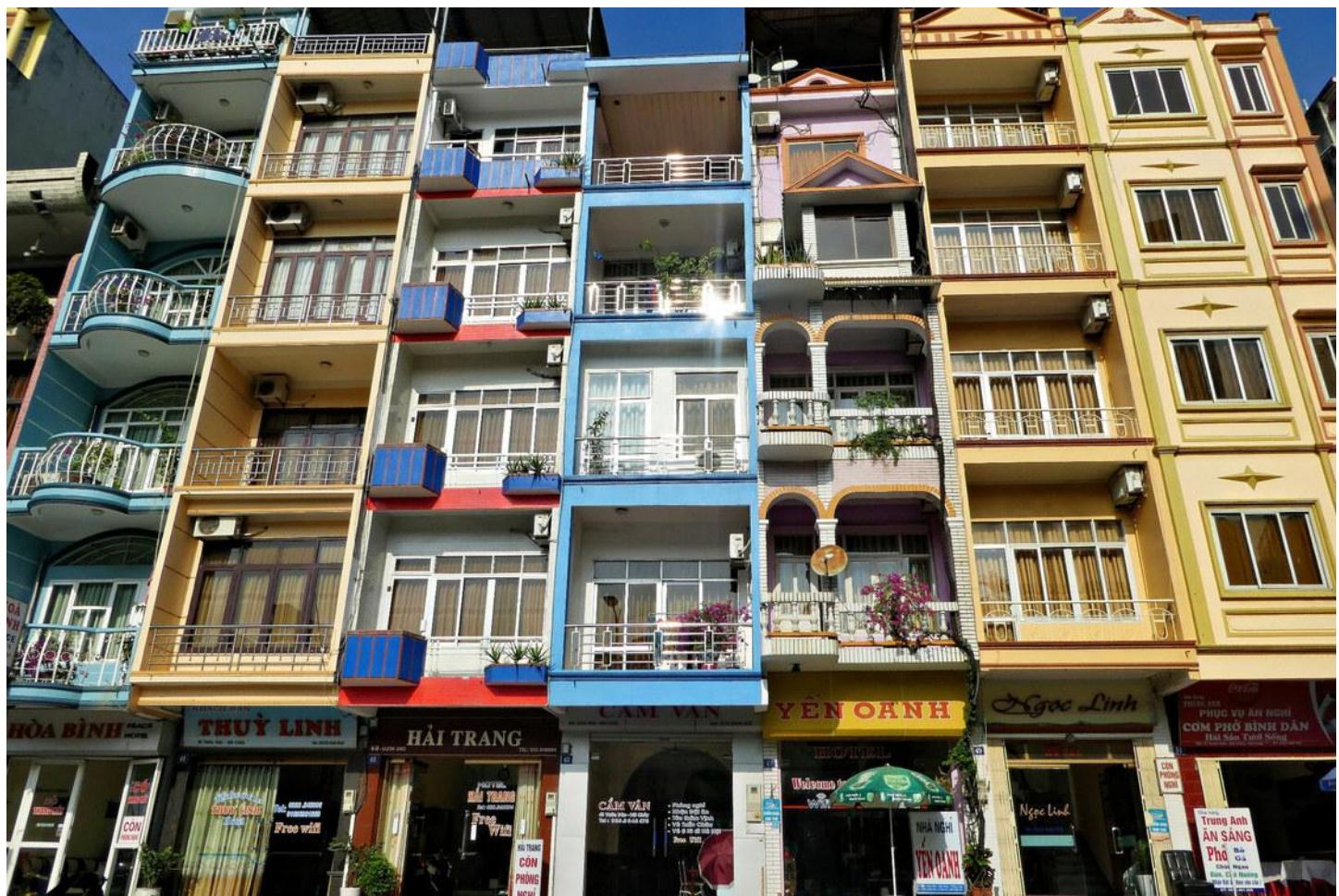
The weather turned foul—pollution, haze, fog. A boat trip was out of the question. Instead, I surrendered to the pleasures of food and drink, letting the city feed me in its own way.

Rice Fields, Ruins, and Rice Wine Invitations

Northern Vietnam is a paradox—achingly beautiful yet suffocated by pollution. As I moved inland, the haze lifted, revealing rolling hills and ripening rice fields glowing gold.

Old houses crumbled gracefully beside the fields. Locals at roadside stands offered food and drink; kiosk owners beckoned me to join them for rice wine. I declined with gratitude.

I reached Dam Ha after 120 kilometres and found a guesthouse beside a simple restaurant serving one dish and Bia Ha Noi on tap. Pointing was enough to order. The meal—rice, tofu, sausage, greens—was enormous and unexpectedly delicious.







The Curious Eyes of Mong Cai

A short 60-kilometre scenic ride brought me to Mong Cai, a bustling border city alive with markets and cross-border trade. I stood out immediately—foreigners rarely pass through here. People peered into my shopping bags, watched me eat, and hovered with curiosity. Two women sat beside me and stared until I packed up and left to get takeaway elsewhere.

Adventure comes in many forms!





Into China, Under a Sky of New Possibilities

Crossing into China felt like stepping into a quirky film. Crowds gathered around me, inspecting my handlebar bag, my solar panel, my jewellery. Their curiosity was intense, almost overwhelming.

Immigration officers examined my passport with puzzled fascination—perhaps they'd never seen someone from "Nanfei." Eventually, they waved me through.

In Dongxing, I withdrew 4,000 yuan and hunted for a SIM card. The first shop couldn't help, but a kind woman led me to the main office. By 11 a.m., I was ready to ride.

The road to Qinzhou was a delight—quiet, scenic, refreshing. Urban sprawl appeared intimidating at first, but Chinese cities proved surprisingly easy to navigate.

Evening fell early with the time change. I splurged on a luxurious hotel—double my usual budget, but worth every yuan. After dinner, I attempted laundry in a tiny basin, grateful for the drying rack beneath the air conditioner.

A new country, a new rhythm, a new chapter unfolding.



Epilogue

By the time I reached Mong Cai,

Vietnam had settled into me—

its rain, its laughter, its open-handed generosity.

Crossing into China felt like stepping from one dream into another,

the road ahead wide and waiting.

I pedalled forward knowing that every border crossed

is simply the beginning of the next story.



About this Blog

Welcome to My Cycle ride in Vietnam

Join me on my ride through the captivating landscapes of Vietnam! This blog is your peek into my cycling adventure, sharing the roads, experiences, and stories I've gathered along the way. While this route might not be the ultimate path for every cyclist, it certainly offers an exhilarating glimpse into what Malawi has to offer!

Here's What to Keep in Mind:

Distances:

These daily odometer readings may not always follow the shortest route; after all, sometimes it's the detours that lead to the most incredible discoveries. You'll find plenty of twists and turns in my daily distances, but rest assured, every kilometre is accurately logged.

Time of Year:

This bike ride took place in October 2016. Just a heads-up: the scenery might look different now. Roads could have been improved, charming stops might have changed, and places I once loved could be upgraded or gone.

Insurance:

Don't hit the road without a travel insurance policy! It's your safety net against loss, theft, and medical emergencies. Just make sure to scrutinise the fine print—some policies may not cover activities like scuba diving, motorcycling, or trekking.

Clothing:

As the sun beats down in Vietnam (especially away from the higher elevations), packing smart is essential! Comfortable, high-quality padded cycling shorts will be your best friends on long rides. I recommend lightweight hiking shoes or breathable sandals. And don't forget those personal essentials—bring insect repellent and anti-chafe cream to ensure a smooth ride. Most importantly, strap on a cycling helmet for safety—your future self will thank you!

The Bicycle & Gear:

Choosing the right bike is crucial for comfort during your adventures. I ride a mountain bike equipped with a sturdy Merida frame, reliable Shimano Deore components, strong Alex wheel rims, and tough Schwalbe tyres. My secret for smooth travels? Tubus racks and Ortlieb panniers—they may cost a bit more, but they're built to last. And before you hit the trails, brush up on how to fix a puncture. A phone holder on your handlebars will keep your map handy (I personally rely on Organic Maps or Google Maps). Plus, don't forget a handlebar bag for your camera and any must-have items throughout the day!

Recommended Further Reading:

If you're looking to dive deeper, check out the Lonely Planet e-book. It's budget-friendly and packed with handy tips!



About Vietnam (Please refer to the Internet or your favourite travel guide for a more in-depth overview)

Capital City

Hanoi is the capital city of Vietnam. However, unlike many national capitals, Hanoi isn't the largest but the second-largest city by population. Ho Chi Minh City is the largest city in Vietnam and is still referred to as Saigon.

Currency

The local currency is the Vietnamese Dong (VND)

Language

Vietnamese is the sole official and national language of Vietnam. It is the first language of the majority of the Vietnamese population and a first or second language for the country's ethnic minority groups.

Religion

According to a 1999 census, most Vietnamese list themselves as having no religious affiliation. However, shared beliefs and practices remain an integral part of Vietnamese life, dictating the social behaviours and spiritual traditions of Vietnamese individuals in Vietnam.

Folk religion includes Confucianism and Taoism. According to the Pew Research Centre estimates, most of the religious Vietnamese practised folk religions (45.3%). In addition, 16.4% were Buddhists, 8.2% were Christians, and about 30% were unaffiliated with any religion. Officially, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is an atheist state.

Location and size

Situated on the eastern coast of mainland Southeast Asia, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) has 329,560 sq km, extending 1,650 km North to South and 600 km East to West. At its narrowest, Vietnam is only 50 km across. The nation is bordered on the North by China, on the East by the Gulf of Tonkin, on the East and South by the South China Sea, on the Southwest by the Gulf of Thailand, and the West by Cambodia and Laos.

Population

The estimated population of Vietnam was 101,783,427 (2025). Thus, the population density in Vietnam is 328 per Km2.



About the Author

Hailing from the vibrant city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a path that would lead her to become the first woman to complete the entire route from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.













It is the unknown around the corner that turns my wheels.



