

Motorcycle Odyssey
A Backpacker's Guide to Riding the Length of Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

THE LAND OF THE BLUE DRAGON

"The most breathtaking and inspiring natural beauty coupled with the genuine threat of crashing and dying at the side of the road." – Carlos, Colombian Backpacker

That's how Carlos described motorcycling through Vietnam—and he was right. We were sitting in a rundown bar overlooking the Saigon River, sipping beer and watching the cyclo drivers argue on the corner. Carlos had just finished the 1600km journey down from Hanoi with two friends.

"The odds of dying are high if you crash your bike," he said.

"Okay," I laughed nervously. "But you made it back safe and sound. How can we do the same?"

"Don't crash."

Carlos looked me in the eye. "Don't crash, don't die."

He repeated it several times and explained that you lose control of what happens to you once you are injured. If you're well enough, you may be able to climb up the bank, jump back on your bike and seek proper medical care in the next city—but that's a big "if." It's simply better to control your riding and avoid crashing altogether. There are many dangers on Vietnam roads, and the best way to mitigate them is by driving defensively and wearing proper gear.

Carlos described how the mountainous regions along the Ho Chi Minh Highway had spotty phone reception—which proved to be true when I travelled there in 2019. So,

even if you do miraculously survive a bike crash, make a call for help, and an ambulance arrives before you die, you're still not through the worst of it.

A few locals passing by on their way home might scramble down the bank to assist you, and with no knowledge of first aid or spinal care, there's every possibility they may aggravate your injuries while dragging your sorry ass back up to the roadside. But let's say an ambulance arrives—and they extract your mangled body from the jungle without causing further damage—once medical staff have hold of you, there's still no guarantee they'll treat you correctly. You could find yourself on the operating table where staff suddenly have 'no option' but to amputate.

Carlos scared me with his treacherous, albeit slightly exaggerated scenarios. But there was still undeniable proof sitting before me; that a trip could be made across 'Nam without being fatal.

"But you didn't die," I said. "You didn't even get injured."

"No, I didn't," replied Carlos. "And it was hands down the best experience of my life."

I leaned back and listened to him recount the beauty of rural Vietnam—the undiscovered waterfalls he and his friends swam in, the girls they fell in love with on the beaches of Nha Trang, and the sumptuous feasts cooked fresh on the sand. He recounted whack experiences with locals where both parties worked hard to understand each other, often ending up in fits of laughter. Pythons, tarantulas, and cheeky monkeys, also featured in Carlos' stories. What interested me the most were

the bomb craters and battle sites from the war that one could visit on a whim and the endless street markets where everyone fights for a deal.

"Put that away and enjoy the moment," I said as Carlos pulled out his phone to show me some pictures.

"Why? Don't you want to see everything we did?"

"There's no need." I was already sold.

Congratulations on taking the first step towards making your Vietnam Motorcycle Odyssey a reality. By picking up this e-book, you're arming yourself with first-hand knowledge—knowledge that will help you decide whether this trip is for you. People say the pain of not doing something can be more devastating than the actual act itself. Staying at a job you hate could result in years of pain and dissatisfaction, whereas the act of quitting only takes a few minutes. After talking with Carlos back in 2015, motorbiking across Vietnam haunted me. If I had known everything I know now, I would have jumped on a bike straight away. Instead, it took me several years to get my head around the concept, save some money, and finally book a ticket to the land of the blue dragon.

Here's what I've since learned:

- You can ride all inclusively in Vietnam for less than \$90 NZD per day. (Even as low as \$50 NZD per day if you really try)
- You can comfortably ride the length of Vietnam in 2 weeks. This still leaves you with 50 weeks of the year to do other stuff.

- Travel insurance is as important as the motorbike.
- 10kgs of essential belongings is all you need.

Most of you have undoubtedly spent hours trawling through websites, strangely formatted blogs, and low-res YouTube videos trying to get a sense of how best to approach a journey like this. There's an overwhelming amount of information on riding in Vietnam; some of it is good, a lot is outdated, and big chunks are straight misleading. Most of it is written by foreigners you can't relate to—Americans or Germans who can't spell correctly—I even came across a moto video diary by a Japanese guy; it was well produced but was all in Japanese, and the guy hadn't bothered to add subtitles.

All you want to know is where you can get a bike and what a trip like this will cost, yet every blog is in U.S. dollars or pounds, and it just adds to the confusion. This online roulette game is deflating—it's a damn shame some people will never attempt their Vietnam motorcycle odyssey because of the upfront hassle in finding quality information.

But what if you had a comprehensive—all-in-one—guide covering in detail what to do? Would your trip still be sitting in the 'too hard' basket? Heck! You could fly tonight, read this entire guide on the plane, and be ready to hit the ground running once you land.

Booking that initial plane ticket should be an exciting experience—your journey is happening. It's locked in. No one can take it away from you now, and once you have an arrival date, everything else falls into place smoothly.

This guide advises on the type of helmet you should buy, right down to how much gear you should pack. It will remove the confusion surrounding which licenses you need and also tell you how to get a local Vietnamese license—which is necessary if you want to be covered by travel insurance. Most importantly, you'll find out what a trip like this costs right down to the price of a Banh Mi on the street. I recorded every dollar I spent on my most recent Vietnam journey, purely for your analysis. Other writers leave out these crucial details when recounting their romantic motorcycle journeys. Still, details are what you need to make your trip a success—you need to know whether you can jump on that plane tonight or if you'll need to sell a kidney first.

Only by travelling to Vietnam will you experience first-hand what things are like and how you will adapt to them. I highly recommend checking out the films, books, and blogs mentioned in the very back pages. Doing so will give you a better-rounded picture of Vietnam and what to expect when you get there.

Motorcycling through Vietnam is like riding through history—the country still bears the scars and memories of the war from a time not so long ago. By travelling the length and breadth of the country, you'll soak up Vietnam's past while simultaneously experiencing its present. The biggest reward is the sense of accomplishment you get from achieving something few other tourists do. You're not only conquering distance

but also overcoming the fear many travellers have of moving outside the boringly safe, westernized tourist holidays. Ultimately, you're getting the true freedom.

Chances are, since you're reading this book, you and I aren't that different. I was you at one point—I wanted the reins to my holiday. I didn't want my daily activities to be dictated by a strict tour group itinerary with no room for spontaneity. I wanted to go off-grid, away from the tourist hordes, yet remain safe enough to share my travel stories with others—albeit better ones! I was desperate for information on Vietnam, anything that would make my trip abroad successful and not result in embarrassment, falling on my ass, or death. Because most blogs I read were written by foreigners, I felt I wasn't getting the full picture. Down under, we have a reputation for being straight talkers. So, I wanted to hear from the Kiwis and Auzzies who had ridden in Vietnam. I wanted to know what the roads were like, what to watch out for, and what you could get away with. But none of us had bothered to write anything substantial online, and the only way I would get answers was to get on a plane and find out for myself.

I've travelled through Southeast Asia many times now and have ridden motorcycles in many places, including Vietnam. Having written books, magazine articles, and countless online puff pieces, I can assure you this e-book has a simplicity that most blogs don't. I have outlined our entire journey and what we did to make it a reality. The goal is to give you all the information you need and nothing else.

Just a short disclaimer before we go any further. This e-book isn't going to answer all your questions—it won't magically solve stupidity. It isn't a Lonely Planet guide to Vietnam or a high school journal of every single little thing we did on our Saigon-Hanoi road trip. Weekend warriors who enjoy Sunday rides on \$40,000 Harleys won't be interested either. Riding through Vietnam is dirty, dangerous, rapid, and ultimately rewarding. Read between the lines of this guide and formulate your own opinions and plans of attack. You'll encounter some grey areas and confusion, just as we did. This is where you'll need to rely on old-fashioned brainpower.

You may not take on board all the advice this book offers, and that's fine. I encourage you to find better, more effective ways of doing things. However, I would ask that you share your findings to make it easier for the next guy.

Without further ado, gear up, settle in and turn the key.

CHAPTER 8: OUR JOURNEY

"What we had in common was our restlessness, our impassioned spirits, and a love for the open road."

Che Guevara – *The Motorcycle Diaries*, 2004

The cross-country odyssey was over. We dropped our bikes at the train station and headed for the nearest bar. Before the second round of Saigon Greens had finished, we had already planned a trip back. That's pretty much how it went down once we finished our 2062km ride into the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi. As we sipped on cold alcohol, our bodies tired and weary after such an epic journey, we reflected on what had led us there.

This chapter gives you a day-by-day itinerary of our trip. It covers ride times, distances, and other notes you may find useful. I've mentioned *Vietnam Coracle* a few times already as a great additional resource to this e-book. Out of all the online material I came across, it is one of the most comprehensive and frequently updated websites. Coracle's author Tom writes clearly and to the point. His day-by-day breakdowns of many different Vietnam road trips help inform potential riders of what's possible and what to expect. It's well worth comparing other motorbike trips to help form an idea of what your journey will look like and what to include/skip.

Some people use blogs, journals, or video to document their Vietnam motorbike adventures. The truth is, if you're doing it right, you're not documenting anything at all. You're enjoying the trip for what it is and 'living in the moment'. You just won't have time to keep a journal, playback footage, and manage social media accounts. Your time will be spent riding, eating, drinking, swimming, and interacting with others – which is way more fun!

So how do you keep the memory alive? Contrary to my ramble above, I did keep a small notebook and jotted down bullet points to look at later. I only ever allowed myself 5 minutes each day to quickly scribble down notes; that way only highlights made it in. All the photos we took along the way were worth 1000 words anyway. Here's what I've been able to string together.

DAY 1: Bangkok > Saigon

DISTANCE: 0kms

Had a comfortable, early morning flight into Saigon from Bangkok. Slept the entire ride due to a big night on Soi 23 with my cousin and his buddies. Than Son Nhat airport is decent enough. Clean and tidy inside with clear directions to ATMs, toilets,

etc. I withdrew some cash from an ATM inside the terminal and walked boldly out the front doors to a line of cabs waiting carnivorously for fresh backpackers. I walked down to the very end of the platform and looked for the oldest driver I could find driving a Green Vinasun Taxi. He flicked on the meter and began the 40-minute drive to the *Meraki Hotel* on Bui Vien street in the heart of the backpacker district. After a couple of minutes of light-hearted small talk, I was convinced the driver wasn't trying to rip me off. After checking in, I quickly find my room is directly overlooking a karaoke bar. I ask to change to a higher floor, and the clerk hooks it up. The rooms are basic but have air conditioning and an ensuite. No one's coming here for their honeymoon or anything, but it's worth staying somewhere cheap and central just to be close to everything. It's not even midday yet, and I'm starving. I manage to track down a delicious Banh Mi and beer at Charm Bakery. Then it's back to the hotel to sink a few beers at the rooftop bar before meeting up with Giang, a local Vietnamese chap from way back. He drives me around the city and reintroduces me to the ways of Saigon. We visit *Landmark 24*, the tallest building in Saigon. After getting my bearings, we cross the river to explore new suburbs, before ending up at *Heart of Darkness* bar for a craft beer tasting.

INSERT PHOTO OF SAIGON

DAY 2: Saigon

DISTANCE: 0kms

I re-acquaint myself with District 1 and start to explore Saigon on foot. I visit the Viettel cellphone store at 166 Đường Trần Hưng Đạo street and grab a sim card loaded with data. This is only a short 10-minute stroll from *Meraki Hotel*, which is great because it's 40 degrees outside. I sit back while the shop girl registers the sim and shows me how to check my balance and add credit. I draw more cash out ready for the trip ahead and break some of the larger bills down at bars and 7-11 stores. I then hide the money in random places throughout my backpack. An afternoon thunderstorm kicks in, so I start streaming *Apocalypse Now: Redux* on my laptop. Wi-Fi speeds are impressive at 835mbps -which isn't bad for a \$30 per night hotel. Once the sky stops pissing itself, I venture out for drinks with other visitors from the hotel.

INSERT PHOTO OF ROOFTOP BAR

DAY 3: Saigon

DISTANCE: 2kms

Lars arrives early, and I meet him in the lobby. The stocky, bearded Dutchman has just finished arguing with the receptionist about checking in early. He tells me how much he paid for his taxi from the airport and it's immediately clear he got ripped a new asshole. I continue to tease him about it for the rest of the trip. We chow down on some freshly made Banh Mi's then venture on foot to pick up our trusty steeds.

Heading south towards the Ben Nghe river we become lost but eventually find [Dragon Bikes](#), camouflaged down an alleyway. We sign some forms and pay the rental fees upfront, along with a refundable deposit. Patrick, the owner-operator, is a laid-back, 40-something Canadian dude who wanders around in Birkenstocks while preparing our bikes. It feels like he should be renting surfboards on the beach in Bali, not motorbikes in the bustling metropolis of Saigon. Patrick gives us some helpful tips for riding in Vietnam and offers 24/7 phone assistance should we need it. We quickly programme his details into our phones, expecting to need his help as soon as we drive away. He mentions that if police try to pull us over, just to keep riding and that the chances of them following us are zero. This jives with what others had told us too. A sweaty Vietnamese guy with a toolbelt made of rope gives the bikes a once over and adds a smear of oil to the chains. Patrick talks to his mechanic in Vietnamese while Lars ties down his bag as if it were about to enter orbit. "This puppy ain't goin nowhere", he says proudly. We ride our bikes back through the manic afternoon traffic plaguing district one and park inside a dingy bunker opposite our hotel. "Someone is guarding this parking area at all times", an elderly Vietnamese gentleman tells us. He shows us his raggedy hammock and tiny colour tv to prove it. Like valet parking, he hands us a numbered tag, and we pay him a few bucks before heading back to the hotel to freshen up.

Later that evening, we catch up with my friend Tien, a local Vietnamese guy who is going to help us escape Saigon. A few weeks before arriving, Tien offered to lead us out of the rat race to the city outskirts where we would continue to Đà Lạt alone. We gather at an Egyptian themed bar and drink beer while discussing plans for the next day. A giant sandstone pharaoh stares at Tien as he recounts motorcycle horror

stories from his time in Saigon. Anticipation levels are high even though the trip hasn't even begun. After a couple of hours yarning, Tien leaves us. Lars and I head to a rooftop bar nearby for more pre-emptive celebratory drinks. City lights stretch as far as the eye can see, while the Bitexco financial tower stands proudly alone as the city's futuristic symbol of progress. We eventually call it a night and wander back through the crowded streets. Foreigners stumble in and out of bars while the doof of dubstep vibrates up and down the block. Viet girls in tight skirts drape themselves across barstools trying to find customers. At the same time, random street hawkers offer you fake ray bans and cocaine in the same transaction. I realize I've traded the neon of Bangkok for the neon of Saigon. And in less than 6 hours this lively cesspit will be in the rearview mirror.

I ask Lars, "You ready for this?".

"Fuck yeah", is his definitive response. We pack our bags for the next day.

INSERT PHOTO OF TIEN CATCH UP

DAY 4: Saigon > Đà Lạt

DISTANCE: 293kms

6.30 am Tien, and I start loading the bikes. Lars slept in. Ha! We follow Tien out of the tourist district in single file, and already the roads are clogged with traffic. We take the QL1A east through the city, which is a swarm of motorcycles. Concrete jungle doesn't even begin to describe Saigon as we duck and dive through side streets and onramps trying to find the quickest route. There's beauty to be found in all the chaos though. Sleek skyscrapers impress with their marble entrances and impeccable design when our eyes aren't glued to the chaos ahead. Once we're in the rhythm, things become easier. Our riding naturally attunes to the commuters around you. As we near the Dong Nai river the motorcycles of suburbia mingle with the brutish trucks of rural Vietnam. We are forced to mount the curb several times to make it past gridlock and breakdowns. It's dusty, smokey, and hellish. Crossing the Dong Nai River is brief but rewarding as it's the first glimpse of nature signalling an end to the high rises and construction of the city. On the other side, we divert onto the QL51, which has marginally less traffic. Through many twists and turns, Tien leads us to calmer waters in one piece. His help is invaluable. Around 10 am, we sit down at a café in Quảng Tiến to grab coffee and rest after the morning push. Lars and I milk Tien for any last-minute pearls of wisdom before he departs.

Now, the journey truly begins.

Traffic is still moderate as we continue East away from the city. The QL20 road inland towards Đà Lạt is where traffic truly starts to thin out. We're able to get some decent space on the road and finally see the houses separate into farming plots.

We have an interesting meal for lunch at a restaurant along the main street of Quang Trung. I suspect it could be dog. Lars enjoys it.

Quang Trung is indistinguishable from the sprawling outskirt towns we've passed already but has a slew of restaurants and a couple of guesthouses on the main street. We refuel here before continuing North. The next 50km of road is relatively flat and easy. Traffic thins even further with the odd tour bus screaming by on its way to Đà Lạt. The hazy Saigon pollution leaves our sight as plantations and single-story cottages take over.

A few kilometres past Phu Son, an impressive monument catches our eye, so we pull over. The Da Huoi Memorial Park is a newly built gesture to local martyrs who died in the Vietnam War. Despite being in the middle of nowhere, we poke around the monument and its surroundings for a bit. Entry is free.

Rolling hills along the Lam Dong/ Bin Thuan provincial borders turn into steep climbs as we leave civilization behind and become engulfed in green. I keep expecting a shapeshifter to jump from a tree and murder us like in the 1987 film Predator. I'm sure Lars doesn't share these irrational fears, but I never ask. In case he does.

It starts raining as we gain altitude up the mountains. We get soaked, yet our clothes are completely dry by the time we hit the lowlands again due to the intense mid-afternoon heat. My bike runs low on gas, so I pull over and refill the tank for \$6.00 – a steal! We stop again due to the heat and replenish with ice cream and Bia Saigon in Bao Loc. Famous for its tea and coffee plantations, Bao Loc is often referred to as 'baby Đà Lạt' due to it being a tidier, less frantic sister town. There are many accommodation options, restaurants and cafes to choose from. We don't stay long, yet Bao Loc gives the impression that life is less crazy on this side of the mountains. People eat in the shade while nearby restaurant staff play on their phones next to strategically placed fans. The odd beeping horn punctuates the relaxed silence and

is a far cry from the orchestra of grinding engines and screeching brakes back in Saigon. One could easily spend a night or two in Bao Loc without getting bored. The tree-lined streets guide us through downtown before ejecting us back amongst the plantations.

A few kilometres up the road we speed through a police checkpoint, even as they stand in the middle of the road trying to wave us down with batons. They're lucky we didn't run them over. The two cops meander back to their patrol bikes parked at the side of the road but fail to give chase. It's only day one, and we've already put Patrick's advice to good use. Twenty minutes up the road, we pit stop for more coffee at a roadside café and celebrate dodging the law.

INSERT PHOTO DRINKING COFFEE AT PITSTOP UNDER TREES

Typical semi-rural roadside café.

Approaching the foothills of Đà Lạt, we accidentally drive onto the CT14, which is a stretch of highway strictly reserved for cars. Thankfully, traffic is light, and we manage to speed through this area in under 15 minutes before linking up with the motorcycle path running parallel. Halfway up the mountainside to Đà Lạt, we pull over and explore *Prenn Waterfall*.

It's a typical tourist park with a few pagodas, bridges, and strange sculptures dotted about. The waterfall itself is impressive, with a pathway that allows you to walk right underneath and behind the curtain of water.

INSERT PRENN WATERFALL PIC

Pren waterfall: Entrance Fee \$30,000 VND (\$1.80 NZD)

After cooling down in the shaded valley of Prenn, we weave around tour buses taking the final climb into Đà Lạt. The dense pine canopy covering the road stops sharply as we roll into the city outskirts at dusk. The inner city is choked with traffic, especially around Hồ Xuân Hương lake. I whip out my phone and book us beds at *Pi Hostel*, a brand new, stylish hostel overlooking the lake and downtown area. It's the perfect place to escape the throng of Chinese tourists and swarming vehicles. The friendly staff and classy ground floor bar make Pi Hostel a bargain for \$12 per night. The Wi-Fi speeds and air conditioning are up to scratch as well. Hostel staff park our bikes off-street and even secure them with chains for us. After freshening up, we smash some beers in the lobby with a few other nomads, then hit the streets. The city is abuzz with bodies mingling in a mist of cigarette smoke and sizzling barbeque. Tight alleyways become even more constricted as people jostle for tables at popular local restaurants. We kick things off with some Bánh tráng nướng from a squat woman stoking three fires at the same time. About twenty people are sitting down munching on her pancake pizza creations so it must be good. She thrusts a pair of scissors at us aggressively before Lars and I learn it's for cutting the pancake. I hit her up for two cans of 333 beer and quickly realize by the look on her face that I've blasphemed by not requesting these when making the initial order. The old maid flips pancakes effortlessly with one hand while reaching into her box of ice with the other. She tosses me the cans and shortly after a human chain of customers pass along

our pancakes to where we're sitting. Entrée complete. Navigating our way through the crowds, we top up with a few more cans before arriving onto Nguyen Van Truoi street. Apart from a few lithe backpacker chicks, the road is dominated by locals in a symphony of slurping, crunching, yelling, and clanging. Lars spots a place with a stream of people spilling out the front doors into the street. We immediately join the queue, even though we can't even see what's on offer. We push forward into the mass of people like an arrow – Lars being shorter is naturally the tip of the spear. It's like a Rugby scrum except you're bowling through men, women, and children. For our efforts, we are rewarded with some Avocado ice cream – apparently the best in Vietnam. [Kem bơ Thanh Thảo](#) is located at 76 Nguyễn Văn Trỗi, Phường 2, Thành phố Đà Lạt, Lâm Đồng, Vietnam.

The velvety texture still manages to taste good off the back of several 333s, so we give it a thumbs up and move on. Having annihilated desert and an entrée, we quickly zero in on a busy Korean-style BBQ joint. The menu on the wall shows plates of pork, beef, and squid piled high for 79,000 dong, which is about \$5 NZD. We order a bunch of pork and a few phat squid tentacles marinated in chilli sauce to throw on the hot plate. The meal wouldn't be complete without more beer and a bottle of cheap soju. It's great to finally be inhaling barbeque fumes instead of exhaust fumes which we more or less had for breakfast. By some miracle, we end up lakeside after dinner and grab a few more cans to cool off with.

After being told off for sitting down on some guy's scooter, we loop back to the lakefront and round off with a few more 333s and cheap whisky at [Cà Phê Nhật Nguyên](#). We double-take at the strange environment we find ourselves in. It's a bar that serves a kind of tobacco shisha while also having café-style seating and serving drip coffee. The place is full of old Vietnamese guys sucking back cigars like

lollipops, their tightly wrapped girlfriends hiding their age behind the nicotine clouds. There's a visible fog between myself and Lars, and we're only sitting 3 feet apart. I try to take a photo of it, but my phone dies after one flash. A few of the old guys turn their heads disapprovingly as if I've captured something I shouldn't. The emphysemic laughter dies down a little and Lars and I take that as our cue to exit, but not before buying a bag of chips off the vendor stalking the entrance like a hawk.

INSERT STREET FOOD PIC

DAY 4: Đà Lạt

DISTANCE: 85kms

Wake up to a cool 18 degrees which is welcome relief compared to the dank lowlands. We grab breakfast at the hostel then head off on foot to buy rain ponchos and snacks. The architecture of the Doha Café and Big C dominates the lakefront with their reflective glass panels and low tiered concrete. They don't ruin the scenery of the lake, offering excellent wide-angle photo opportunities and picnic spaces for tourists. The paddle boats shaped like swans show their age while the building traffic at the lake's edge makes the Swan boats seem like a faster, safer option across. After sampling some Sap Ong fresh from the hive, we visit the Đà Lạt Cable Car gondolas stretching over thick pine forests at the edge of town. With the sun now firmly above the horizon, we decide to grab ice cream for the trip ahead in the

Gondola. Lars inadvertently picks up a Durian flavoured popsicle which quickly fills the car with its scent. Naturally, I verbally harass Lars until he winds down the window. However, he defends his purchase with the prickliness of a mamma Grizzly. The Vietnamese couple and their babysitting next to us look concerned as we argue intensely about the merits and faults of the famous Durian fruit. The Gondola eventually reaches the **Trúc Lâm Phụng Hoàng Zen Monastery**, and we set off to explore. Tourists and monks mingle among the pristine gardens and buildings. The entire monastery grounds can easily be explored in 30 minutes, while forest paths lead in every direction to other sites of cultural significance for those willing to battle the heat. A handful of Vietnamese families enjoy picnics in the shaded groves, combining nature and religion over lunch.

After returning on the Gondola, we book a Grab bike to come pick us up. The driver turns up and looks confused since two foreigners are standing on the street instead of just one. We pay him an extra \$50,000 VND to take us both on his piece of shit Yamaha, and he relents. Lars and I theorize that whoever is in the middle is the safest so therefore the person riding on the back gets to wear the helmet. Regardless, three sweaty grown men riding around on a scooter is incredibly gay, and we never talk about it again. Until now.

After questioning our masculinity for 15 excruciating minutes, we get back to the hostel, unchain our Hondas and spend 2 hours off-roading through the bush to find *Tiger Cave Waterfall* (Hang Cop Waterfall). It's good to get away from downtown Đà Lạt and see how the bikes handle without any gear strapped on the back. We veer left at the edge of town and follow the QL20 at a leisurely pace until traffic becomes sparse. Red dirt blows across the road, making it appear more like a clay track. Our helmets and gear are covered in dust. We feel like Mad Max as he rides *Fury Road*.

Besides clothes hanging up on fences, verandahs, and tree branches, there are few locals to be seen. Perhaps they're working in some faraway field or dodging the midday sun in a hammock. We turn off to Tiger Cave waterfall and thrash the bikes along some deserted forestry paths. It's good fun until we come upon a farmer running a herd of gaunt cattle up the middle of the road and have to weave through them.

INSERT TIGER CAVE OR LINH PHUOC PHOTO

On the way back to the city, we visit the impressive *Linh Phuoc Pagoda*. It's conveniently placed midway between Đà Lạt and Tiger waterfall and gives us a chance to refill our bikes and get some water. Built in 1952, the pagoda has continually had buildings and reliefs added to it over time. This Buddhist shrine is made entirely of broken terracotta, porcelain, and glass pieces. Twelve thousand bottles were used to construct the Dragon's head at the entrance, which is more beer than Lars and I could ever drink – although not for lack of trying. The 37-metre high bell tower is a grand sight, but it's the 18-metre tall statue of Bodhisattva which is most enlightening. The scale and detail of the statue's dress, made of individual gold and yellow flowers, is a sight to behold. Despite being out of town, the shrine is insanely popular with local Vietnamese and tourists. Don't be surprised if a dozen tour buses are parked up on the main road clogging up traffic. This is where having bikes was an advantage. We simply cut down an alleyway, parked up for free, and entered the pagoda from the back entrance. No lines. No problem.

After arriving back at the hostel, the owner lets me ride his Ducati around town. Even though I said huge trophy bikes are unsuitable for riding in Vietnam, the Ducati turns heads and has enough grunt to outrun any cops. A few more laps around the block and I hand the \$100,000 piece of metal back to its rightful owner, thanking god I didn't wreck it. After tempting fate, Lars and I venture out on foot to explore Đà Lạt's nightlife again. The entire lakefront is buzzing with tourists, hawkers, and Grab drivers. We decide to head West away from the lake and into the working-class neighbourhoods lining the Cam Ly Stream. Hunger pangs for western food are too great, and we give in to a hearty meal at Oz Burger a few blocks from the hostel. We grab a few cans for the road and continue our evening odyssey before ending up at a rowdy beer hall full of locals. We sit down at a table smack bang in the middle of the chaos and start checking out the menu. Most of the people in the place are off their tits drunk, and a table of guys near us seem content with throwing peanuts at one another. There's yelling, laughing, and a layer of cigarettes and spilled beer on the floor. We spot a typo on the menu that states you can get an entire 3-litre beer tower for \$4 NZD. Lars says he'll drink it with me if it exists. I walk up to the counter and pay for one of these so-called 'beer towers', and within 2 minutes, 3 litres of golden nectar gets plonked on our table by a pretty waitress. Excited by our groundbreaking discovery, we order a second beer tower just to check we're not dreaming. The rest of the night is self-explanatory.

INSERT CHEAP BEER TOWER PIC

DAY 5: Đà Lạt > Elephant Falls > Buon Ma Thuot

DISTANCE: 215kms

Begin riding at 9 am. The best views of the trip so far come into sight as we leave Đà Lạt on the DT725 and wind down through the mountains. The road is in excellent condition here with a smooth surface and freshly painted lines. No doubt the tourist board is trying to make a good impression on all the cashed-up Chinese visitors bussing into the city. Panoramic scenes of farmland are visible from every corner as we wind down to the baked clay lowlands. The ground looks tough and dry, but locals have managed to sustain various crops and eke out a living without being drawn into the tourism vortex of Đà Lạt. Once we reach the flats, the road changes from immaculate tarseal to something less maintained. We stop to visit *Elephant Falls* (Khu Du Lịch Thác Voi - Đà Lạt) where a giant white Buddha statue greets us. The enormity of the Buddha is impressive, especially since it's still under construction. You can wander around the temple and grounds free of charge, but there is a small fee to walk down and see the waterfalls up close. Trekking down the cliffside, it's quickly apparent the entrance fees don't go towards maintaining the trail. Flooding had washed away parts of the track, while rusted handrails and rotting floorboards barely covered the slippery rocks. Anyone with knee or leg problems may want to give this one a miss as there were times we had to use all four limbs to get up and down the cliffside safely.

An hour's ride South of Elephant Falls, we pull the bikes over at a street stall in N'Thol Ha for lunch. We knock out a few pork buns, and sesame covered hollow doughnuts, known as *Banh Thieu*, along with some *Sữa Sương Sáo*, a grass jelly,

and milk dessert also known as Che. The chef's son lies in a hammock playing on an old school colour Gameboy from the late 90s. With such a massive grin on the boy's face, it'd be hard telling him that smartphones have better games and more.

Leaving N'Thol Ha, the road curves gently through rural towns, the outskirts of each seamlessly transitioning into the next. After some easy riding through rural lowlands, we cut up into the lush, jungly Lam Dong mountains where temperatures cool again. This comes as a huge relief since we didn't get a swim in at Elephant Falls. The QL27 snakes northwest towards Buon Ma Thuot and rolling mountains surround us on all sides. The road is decent quality but very twisty with a lot of blind corners and hairpin cutbacks. A sea of green soaks up the pollution of Đà Lạt, now behind us. The skies are clearer and the air cleaner. Tour buses and honking horns are long gone. Our only real companions on the road are the odd farmer, the heat, and each other. For the first time since leaving Saigon, we feel like we're in 'real' Vietnam.

INSERT RURAL RIDE PIC

We blow through another police checkpoint as we enter the tiny town of Pang Pe Dong. No one bothers to follow us. For the next 100km there's a smattering of villages dotted along our trail with a few cafes and gas stations, but nothing of note.

I fall off my bike after the front wheel skids out in some mud. I was pulling over to consult the map and had applied the brakes while entering what looked like a dried puddle. The bike pins my ankle to the gravel, but I manage to get back up with only a few scratches to me and the bike.

Skirting the Nam Kar Nature Reserve, we come across locals hunting for the large spiky Durian fruit with machetes. Women stand guard at the road's edge with their mounds of 'jungle gold' while the men penetrate the bush and toss their findings down the bank to be collected. Authentic scenes like the one above punctuate our entire trip and remind us why getting behind the wheel and going native beats a tour bus any day.

In hindsight, it may have been better to divert at Buoch Dong lake and take in more of the nature reserve before linking up with the AH17 into Buon Ma Thuot. The hairy Dutchman on the bike next to me would have found himself right at home hunting for a strange, fragrant fruit. Next time.

We eat lunch at a lone, unnamed restaurant perched on the side of a hill. This is where we get our photo taken with Mr Drunky. (See *Chapter 7: Drunk Driving* for this story)

It feels like a long day riding due to all the stops. Leaving the Lam Dong mountains behind, we pass through scenic rice plantations before stopping again for coffee. It's the Vietnam you see on postcards. Women in conical hats plug away in the fields while we wonder how they work so studiously in such heat. We're merely riding motorcycles, and even that's exhausting.

Another hour's ride and the scrappy towns of K' Ram and Hoa Thang show signs of civilization again. Traffic starts to build as we enter Buon Ma Thuot city and before long we're part of the 6 o'clock rush hour. After a few wrong turns, we finally reach our stately accommodation: The [*Khách sạn Nam Sơn*](#) Hotel. The reception area is empty except for a guy sleeping on a bench. I nudge him awake and we start talking in English. After a few minutes, we realize this guy is hammered drunk and in no way

associated with the hotel. It turns out he had attended a wedding earlier in the day and could find his room so just fell asleep in the lobby. His curiosity about our Bike trip is now bordering on invasive, and for a second, I thought he would ask to join us. Finally, the actual receptionist lady appears and sorts out our booking. We get a double room each, so we quickly drop bags and go in search of food and drink. As we wander through the lobby, we see the drunk guy in the carpark with some friends. He waves to us as he plonks his ass onto the back of someone's scooter. One arm drapes around the driver, while the other holds a full-size suitcase that looks like it'd weigh at least 20 kilos. Lars and I look at each other then give the guy a hesitant wave in return. It's bizarre, but then again, it's Vietnam.

After hitting a nearby bar, we wander through a local market and grab dinner. On the way back we divert into a dingy store to buy beer since the hotel minibars only have four cans each. The hunched shopkeeper, a sweet 90-year-old woman, can't believe her luck when us two whiteys buy all the beer she has. We watch on as she places the cans tenderly into double plastic bags as if she were laying a baby down to sleep. She then gently adds chunks of ice for the walk back. I almost wanted to pick her up and kiss her, but the shock may have killed her. We arrive back at the hotel, which is a steal for \$20 NZD per night. Tucked a few blocks away from the mayhem with no other tourists in sight, it was the right decision. The barbershop on the corner is just one of many amenities within walking distance. Since it doesn't look air-conditioned, we pass up the opportunity for a trim and instead catch the evening breeze on the hotel verandah. Another hotel guest joins us as we drink our Saigon greens. The well-travelled Vietnamese chap from Saigon speaks decent English and tells us we're not missing much by not staying in the town centre. He gives us a few

tips on places to check out while smoking his way through half a pack of cigarettes. Eventually, all three of us get sidetracked by a local guy picking peaches from his neighbour's tree while hanging precariously off a wooden ladder.