

Heart to Heart



Vietnam: A Journey by Bike (some years later!)

by Butch and Maureen Kolar

A return to Vietnam after a 42-year absence has been on my bucket list for years....it no longer is! However, never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined pedaling our way through most of the country from the ancient city of Hue to Saigon (I refuse to call it Ho Chi Minh City). Nonetheless, I feel fortunate to be able to return to Vietnam, especially this way. It was an opportunity that arose with less than two months notice when we received an email from a friend in Colorado who also just heard about a group called Colorado HeartCycle who had organized a bike trip to Vietnam. Well, the stars aligned, a slot opened up and we were quickly applying for a visa with the Vietnam Embassy.

Colorado HeartCycle (CHC) is a non-profit organization based in Denver that organizes local rides in the state as well as domestic and international bicycle tours. It is run by volunteers who enjoy the challenge and thrill of the sport and want to share their enthusiasm. They definitely live up to their common thread. This was their 2nd Vietnam tour; the first was in 2008 in which they also coordinated the trip with Pedal Tours Ltd from Auckland New Zealand. In turn, PedalTours works with a local Vietnamese tour company (Active Asia) to coordinate all in country tour and support services. There were 23 of us including 10 couples and 3 singles, all of which could not have been more homogeneous. It was no surprise that most were from Colorado with one couple from California, one from the UK and one from Florida (us).

We left St. Pete on February 17 and arrived in Hanoi on February 19 with "dogtags" in tote. It was no surprise that I was a bit anxious when I arrived in Hanoi. We spent the first few days touring Hanoi and experiencing the socialist capital that it is. In contrast, Saigon is clearly a cosmopolitan city with an ever growing capitalistic destiny. CHC had arranged a side trip to visit the world heritage site of Ha Long Bay northeast of Hanoi and not all that far from the border with China. Ha Long Bay (or bay of the descending dragon according to myth) is often touted by proud Vietnamese as the world's Eighth wonder. After our brief encounter I concur.

(continued on Page 3)

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Traffic in Vietnam by Alice Crema

Vietnam traffic is a well-choreographed dance that flows to the sound of beeping horns and intertwines at the intersections! The narrow roads are full of motor scooters and bicycles moving people and all kinds of goods from one place to another. It was amazing to see how much was piled and tied to a motor scooter ... they become as wide as a car!



Signal lights with a countdown for light change existed in the bigger towns but no stop signs in sight. I did find one in Saigon and it looked hand made!



Just imagine the Vietnam traffic pattern in the U.S. ... what a sight that would be with so many cars doing their own thing!



One of the main attractions of Ha Long Bay is the bay's calm water and the thousands of limestone mountains that climb out of explored this unique area on board a rather luxurious "junk" our floating hotel. We were able to explore a few of the many caves and were greeted by some of the permanent residents also known as spider monkeys. A return visit to explore by kayak may be added to the bucket list!

We departed Hanoi on Vietnam Airlines to Hue where we met up with our bikes (provided by PedalTours) and the rest of our local support group. The bikes were hybrids including Trek 7.5's, Giant, etc. Although, most of the roads were paved or semi-paved they did include a hefty dose of obstacles. I would not recommend taking your road bike to Vietnam! It was my pleasure turning in someone else's bike some 14-days later after traversing approximately 800 miles of all types of road conditions, encounters with countless people, thousands of motorcycles, mopeds, bicycles, water buffaloes, and other 4-legged creatures none of which had any desire to notify you of their intended direction of travel! If you understand the picture here....the challenge was dealing with the various indigenous obstacles, not necessarily the physical challenge of pedaling a bike! It is not a stretch of ones imagination to compare the small towns and villages throughout the country to a colony of ant farms. Although we encountered many hundreds of dogs along the way, I never had to waste any of my water bottles in defense as I think they must have all learned their lesson chasing the other elements before we got there.

The route and stops along the bike trip included Hue, Hoi An, Quang Ngai, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, to the Central Highlands via Buon Ma Thout and Dalat; then back down hill to the South China seacoast with stops at Mui Ne, Loc An and finally into Saigon 14 days later.

Day 5 of the bike trip (Hoi An - Quang Ngai) finished at My Lai. We visited the memorial to the My Lai massacre (the actual site of the village of My Son). This was a memorable and solemn experience. My Lai was an atrocity that happened in 1968 at the hands of a small group of US infantry soldiers. The Vietnamese people do not want this to go unnoticed (nor should they). It was overwhelming then and will remain as a dark day in our history of war.



The bike-experience level of our group was varied including a combined 30+ IM finishes, a few trips across America on a saddle to a few novices including my dear wife, Maureen, who survived quite well. Well, almost....if we discount her encounter with a "kamikaze" motorbike who took a short cut through her front wheel (by the way, the hospital visit and a dozen stitches set us back a total of \$7.50 USD!). The terrain included a number of climbs (and descents); biking endless miles along undulating roads next to the sea; riding through many villages which look just as they did 42-years ago or 100 years ago for that matter. The green of the rice paddies go on forever and the storied lives on the faces of the people cannot be forgotten. My most vivid memory is that of the children of this diverse country. I lost count of the hundreds of young children who would rush to the road as we passed with what we know as a "peace" sign and perhaps the only English word they know...."hello" or "Xin Chao" in their language.

As we sat in the Tan Son Nhat airport awaiting our flight back home (through Tokyo) I experienced a compelling sense of familiarity, and also a sense of "eeriness," really Déjà vu, except I was certain it was not attributed to a dream. It was a good feeling to be heading home as it was 42-years ago under completely different circumstances. However, I must admit it was a little discomfoting as I was looking at CNN on my iPad and learning about an earthquake that had just happened in Japan. Fortunately, it was the one just prior to the devastating occurrence we all know about and unlike some of our travel mates; we were able to catch the last flight out of Tokyo at the time. We have asked each other as other friends have also raised the question: Would you return or recommend this trip to others? The answer: In a heartbeat!

Yes, We Have Been on a Bike Trip

by Johnny and Emily Bruno

We have been able to cycle 40 to 60 miles a day and have often had the opportunity to do far more. Even a Coloradan would not scoff at some of our climbs, both for grade and distance. We have all chuckled at the bike itinerary's frequent use of the term "undulating" for it often described a seemingly more challenging terrain than that adjective implied. This was just as much a cultural odyssey as a bicycle trip, and perhaps could only have been done by bike in order to see and feel, to hear and to smell this country like we did, in areas where most tourists never venture. All of us, I think, left with our preconceptions dramatically changed and maybe even our world views altered.

We slowly began gathering in the lobby of a pleasant hotel in downtown Hanoi, many of us not seeing any familiar faces. The sights that greeted us on the trip from the airport had us wondering about smog and traffic, each the bane of the cyclist's existence. For most of us a nice decompressing side trip to Ha Long Bay diverted our attention from the bike riding ahead. We had a lovely night aboard a motorized "junk" that carried us in stately fashion to a series of dramatic limestone projections from the sea with a variety of activities included. Perhaps the most devilish was the "beach" trip, which in reality may have been Jim and Mickey Berry's (our trip leaders) perverse way of checking on our fitness, for we promptly left the beach and ascended some 600 feet of steps to reach the "view." We must have all passed, because none of us was sent home.



Our return to Hanoi for the evening gave us our first get-together meal which was a Hot Pot featuring Vietnamese food which became very familiar to us in the weeks ahead. The following morning, now as a group of friends, we were driven to the airport and flown halfway down the length of this skinny country to Hue in order to jump start our bicycle trip. As we did so, we left the smog behind, but were amazed at the plethora of little motorcycles. It seemed that bike and foot traffic had given way to this ubiquitous form of transportation, and we learned

that the number one rule of the road was that there are no rules! Nevertheless, the Vietnamese moved about in dense herds, pouring like tributaries into the rivers of city streets, blending and mixing incongruously but without anger or shouting, just horn honking. By now we had come to have complete faith in our Vietnamese tour guide who shepherded us out of the cities and into the countryside where traffic eased and the familiar rhythm of the pedals returned to our feet.

I suspect that the same awareness hit each of us at the same time, as we moved out into the countryside. From nearly every doorway on both sides of the street little children scampered to the roadside with warm, excited smiles, big hand waves, and hailed us with "HELLOS," thrilled when we answered back. What a sense of welcome this created as we moved past tiny, but neatly groomed hovels.



The ancient imperial city of Hue had been highlighted by our beautiful and gracious hotel. We had been fitted with bikes, briefed on the next day's ride and now we could begin to discern the outline of our trip. Mr. Nhan was our intrepid leader and, though his English was heavily accented by his heritage, he was very knowledgeable about his own country and ours. He remained a resource for all of us and commanded our respect for the duration of the trip. By the trip's end, he had so endeared himself to us that I dare say he could have become a Heart Cycle member with plenty of invitations to stay in the U.S.

We had a small bus and a van, with drivers for each, followed by a truck which could carry all of our bikes and three Vietnamese handlers/mechanics. This armada moved slowly down the byways as we progressed from farmland to shoreline and then back into the Central Highlands on our way to the ultimate destination of Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. The visual feast along the way was endless. Water buffalos tilled the rice paddies as families transplanted the growing rice shoots in an age-old pattern, unbroken for millennia. We learned that Vietnam has become the largest rice exporter in Asia.

As we moved toward the shore areas, rice gave way to shrimp and fish farming, which stretched out of sight to the south along lovely, unpopulated beaches. Vietnam may now be the largest fish and shrimp exporter in the world. As we entered the highlands, miles and miles of terraced hillsides have been converted to coffee bean and tea plantations, creating a new prosperity evidenced by the mansions springing up in a previously impoverished area. As we made our way further south, dragon fruit, absolutely delicious when fresh, transitioned to rubber tree groves. Throughout, the enduring banana tree flourished, always available with its fruit. At the poles of the country (Hanoi to the north and Ho Chi Minh City to the south), high-tech companies are building factories and office towers, heralding a time when an ancient culture and way of life will be imperiled by the coming onslaught. How special to have seen this ageless country before the embrace of capitalism and the new marketplace erase the little markets where we bartered for beautiful arts and crafts and studied the amazing panoply of sea life, fruit and vegetables, all fresh from their respective origins.



The food was uniformly good. Though breakfasts were often at 6 AM, the staples ranged from traditional American corn flakes to Asian exotic and seemed well-enjoyed. We broke for lunch at a pre-arranged location, always offering a good multiple-course meal. We biked again in the afternoon, finishing either at our destination or outside of town to be bussed in, depending upon the traffic and distance to town. We would clean up and meet for a 7 PM dinner and briefing for the next day. Again, our meal was served as multiple courses, shared in groups of 4 to 6, which contributed to camaraderie. There were few night owls, as we were promised another early morning departure.

The accommodations ranged from near-luxury to "nice," and the staff eagerly took care of us. The roads ranged from bucolic byways to short stretches on busy highways with a few too many oil tanker 18-wheelers, but the staffs' careful preparation kept us out of trouble, when potholes and twisting descents lay ahead. Well, almost out of trouble, since we did have two out-patient trips to the hospital for care. The hospitals received rave reviews from those who

did have to go for road rash clean-ups, a CT scan, and a few stitches. All of us, save a British couple, used the provided hybrids, which were well serviced and withstood the bumps and unpaved sections better than our own road bikes would have. As we road up into the Highlands, ascending over 5000 feet, the air was cooler but did not require any real clothing change. The final portion of the trip was actually hot. We never had any rain to speak of, so the mechanical and logistical components proved to be no problem. There were three stops where we were on location for two days; however there was no wasted time. Events were planned to maximize our exposure and, for some, our buying power. Few suitcases returned as light as when the trip started and some of us even bought additional bags (knock-off North Face, etc.!). We swam and snorkeled; were massaged and manicured.



There were many "take-aways" from this trip that may differ from person to person, but here are at least some.... This agrarian society has fought off its invaders over the millennia, finally removing the monarchy in 1945, beginning to experiment with a more classic Marxist agrarian model. The Americans intruded in the 60's, trumpeting our disdain for communism by trying to destroy the country with napalm and "agent orange." We need not have been so worried because in little more than a decade after they ejected us, the limitations of the human spirit in the face of ownerless, communal mediocrity caused the leadership to begin to experiment with a limited return to private ownership. Rice production which had been marginal in the Communist system dramatically increased and entrepreneurship took off like a rocket. The country which had trouble feeding its own people is now driving food export out the roof in southeast Asia. Everyone is an entrepreneur, from the farmer with the water buffalo to the young visionary in a high rise with a cell phone.

We can all see potential problems ahead for Vietnam with such dramatic growth. Bikes give way to motorcycles, which in turn give way to cars, as the strong physical work ethic enters the struggle for economic success. With a land mass the size of Colorado, Vietnam already has a burgeoning population of 84,000,000 people. Beautiful forests of pines in the Highlands and

rain forests in the lowlands are threatened by population and development. The infrastructure is woefully inadequate for this new dynamic, and they don't know how to deal with "garbage."



These people are incredible! Rather than holding resentments or grudges against us, their former invaders, they are pleased to look at and possibly adopted many of our models for planned economic development. It may be that the Confucianist/Buddhist philosophy of acceptance and moving on has allowed them to accept our presence and make us feel so well received.



Several in our group first saw this country through bomb and gun sites, so that the opportunity, in hindsight, to view the country now provided them with a remarkable opportunity. How much we might learn, as a people, from Vietnamese culture. As I wipe the residual chain grease from my calf, waiting for the washing cycle to finish and see if all of the red clay dust is out of my socks, I am reminded of this wonderful trip and the seemingly ideal way that I was immersed into a culture where such a strong language barrier exists but whose heart beat in tandem with mine. How typical it was that Heart Cycle has managed to erase the gap between our gaudy, lycra-clad crew of cyclists and these gentle people we travelled among.

Colorado HeartCycle 2011 Tours

Vietnam

February 23 - March 9 Status: Full
 14 days, E37 - I75 \$2,520.00
 Jim Berry, jimberry@qwest.net
 (303) 779-3607 or (303) 880-4282

California - Springtime in San Diego

April 22 - May 1 Status: Full
 9 days, A60 - E80 \$1,060.00
 Sy Katz, SKSKATZ@Comcast.net
 (303) 789-5268 or (303) 550-2073 (Cell)
 Bob Rowe browe49@comcast.net
 (303) 762-0494 or (303) 910-7230 (Cell)

Utah Southern Canyonlands

May 20 - 29 Status: Full
 9 days, I59 - A78 \$1,190.00
 Ken Condray, condray3@comcast.net
 Becky Botino, bbottino7@comcast.net
 (425) 745-1159

California's New Wine Country

May 21 - 28 Status: Cancelled
 8 days, I75 \$1305.00
 Duncan Rollo, duncanrollo@msn.com
 (970) 224-2783

California Middle Kingdom

June 4 - 12 Status: Cancelled
 8 days, I38 - A74 \$1,250.00
 Duncan Rollo, duncanrollo@msn.com
 (970) 224-2783
 Dan Pappone, danpappone@att.net
 (408) 316-1667

New York Spring into Summer Finger Lakes

June 11 - 19 Status: Open
 8 days, I70 - A75 \$1,195.00
 Jim Bethel & Janet Reilly
jim@bikes5.com (518) 446-1766

Colorado Never Summer Challenge

July 1 - 4 Status: Open
 3 days, I56 - A86 \$425.00
 Sheridan Garcia, sheridangarcia@yahoo.com
 (303) 638-0330

Colorado Chama Challenge

August 5 - 8 Status: Full
 3 days, I49 - A90 \$395.00
 Sheridan Garcia, sheridangarcia@yahoo.com
 (303) 638-0330

Colorado Western Gems

August 20 - 27 Status: Full
 7 days, I37 - A72 \$1,025.00
 Harvey Hoogstrate, harvhoog@gmail.com
 (303) 755-9362
 Ken Condray, condray3@comcast.net
 (425) 745-1159

Wisconsin River Bluffs

September 3 - 9 Status: Open
 6 days, I45 - A80 \$750.00
 Jay DeNovo, jdenovo@tds.net
 (608) 241-2601
 Gary Angerhofer, garyangerhofer@gmail.com
 (303) 919-2818

Pacific Coast Border to Border

September 10 - 24 Status: Full
 14 days, I27 - A78 \$2,190.00
 Jerry Bakke, jerrybakke@msn.com
 (303) 738-9861
 Steve Parker, parker3097@yahoo.com
 (970) 382-9551

Wisconsin Explore the Door

September 11 - 18 Status: Full
 7 days, E50 \$1,120.00
 Jay Wuchner, jaywuchner@comcast.net
 (720) 840-6467
 Deb Wuchner, debwuchner@comcast.net
 (303) 792-2111

Pennsylvania Autumn Harvest

October 8 - 15 Status: Open
 7 days, I63 - A81 \$975.00
 Bob Eaches, bob.eaches@gmail.com
 (201) 384-0740
 Rich Crocker, richcrocker@hotmail.com
 (719) 481-2313