

Train to Hanoi

Monday the 13th of January

After a pretty chaotic week in HCMC, it's nice to be on the move to Hanoi, with quieter more contemplative times ahead. Don't get me wrong, Ho Chi Minh was a blast, thoroughly enjoyable. With the bright lights, late nights and the rest of it, the time was well spent. But it wasn't sustainable, and certainly not conducive to working. And it's time to start putting the pieces together for this big adventure ahead.

In Hanoi, I'll meet up with Zainab for a couple of days. She was visiting Theresa in Hong Kong and decided to nip over to Vietnam to check it out. After she leaves, I'll start the ride... There is just one small (not so small) matter of my PhD viva exam on the 24th. But not to worry, that will fall into place in time.

When it comes to the route, I've got a rough idea of how it will pan out, but much is left to be determined. The big picture view is South east Asia, then to North east India, traveling west through Nepal, eventually ending up in Dharamshala then Leh Ladakh before finally moving to Pune to start thinking about my Career. This is the broad idea, obviously with much detail to be worked out along the way... There is also the point of interest in visiting new friends in China, and potentially even working there. But leaving that aside for now, the current objective is to get from Hanoi to Bangkok without excessive mishaps. The order will likely be: Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Thailand. Though if for whatever reason I need to wait for a visa in Bangkok, perhaps it will make sense to go more directly there first, then on an excursion into Cambodia.



The purpose is not so much an endurance cycling challenge, more like an exploration of curiosities. To see what I can uncover of these unfamiliar places and cultures. Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia (along with Sri Lanka and Myanmar) make up the primary countries following the tradition of Theravada Buddhism. Later, in northern India, I'll pass through places with a tradition of Tibetan Vajrayana monasticism. Comparing these two cultures is a primary point of curiosity. But more on that later.

From what it seems, Vietnam is a bit of a melting pot of religious traditions. You see influences from Chinese Confucianism, Communism, what appears to be Mahayana style Buddhism, along with some Christian churches, some from the French colonial time in European style, others in more unusual blended styles (see image). From what little I currently understand, Vietnam has been historically separate from the other now Theravada Buddhist countries to the immediate west.

Mostly, I'm curious about the symbolism and origins of this particular style of Buddhism in Vietnam. The temples have pagoda style roofs that you would expect to see in Zen Mahayana architecture to the north. But they are also adorned with golden dragons, and some of these decorations look like the golden toppings of some of the Tibetan style monasteries. There's often an image of a white standing female Buddha which doesn't seem to appear anywhere else. This is along with the more standard seated male Buddhas which often form the centrepiece to a shrine. Many of these for some reason have the Hindu style swastika on



their chest (symbolising the sacred sound OUM), one even had many arms holding multiple items. But perhaps this was something different. Hopefully, I'll learn more about all these particulars whilst here. Perhaps there'll be an old temple in Hanoi to go check out. Not in Hanoi, but I did see an interesting one on google maps whilst passing on the train: Ponagar temple, apparently from the 8th century; it's not clear whether it was build as a Buddhist or Hindu construction, but interesting regardless.

Starting the ride from Hanoi, the first leg goes north towards Ha Giang. Here there's a very famous route through the mountains which is often ridden by groups of tourists on motorbikes. It's about 500kms to the most northerly point of this route from Hanoi. Then there'll be about 600/700km going roughly south towards one of the few border crossings into Laos permitting internationals.

All being well, I'll find a suitable venue for the PhD viva one or two days out of Hanoi in a town. Perhaps I could even convince someone at a school to let me use one of their rooms with a whiteboard. It was initially the plan to stay in Hanoi for longer to complete the viva, but I realised that with the 45 day visa free limit in Vietnam, it might be a push to get to the Laotian border in time. And with some knee pain in training, I want to try and avoid being forced to rush. Of course, there is also the option of a lift to the border in the case of running short on days, but this would probably feel unsatisfactory. The Laos visa is 30 days which should be plenty to have a good ride around before ending up somewhere in Thailand or Cambodia. But we can figure out that route after this first leg.

Second night on the train to Hanoi

"I was standing by the door on this train, wistfully looking out of the small open window, half wondering to myself: do you think smoking is allowed here? Then, the ticket inspector walked past, gave me a nod which I replied to with a thumbs up. I was listening to music through earphones so couldn't do much better than gestures.

He went away for a while but came back shortly after, in the other direction. This time, again without a word exchanged between us, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered me one. I took one, and he lit it for me before once more going on his way. Perhaps here in Vietnam this kind of interaction is normal, but by UK standards it was incredible — You just couldn't get that sort of service back home."

On the second day and night of the journey I got chatting with a Vietnamese guy called Tangerine. Later, an American and his Vietnamese friend joined us and we ended up staying up late in the

canteen carriage. They were serving beers and someone produced a couple of joints. So as you can imagine, we had some interesting conversations. Tangerine was on his way back home to Hanoi after a Saigon love affair went south. He had quit his job as a personal trainer just a month prior to go and live in Ho Chi Minh with the love of his life. Unfortunately it didn't work out, but thankfully he was able to retake up his old job back home.

We were talking about the best age to settle down and start a family. Tangerine was eager to find someone and have children as soon as possible. With him being only 23, I asked whether he thought it might be sensible to save some money first and develop his career more before making such commitments. (As this is my mindset at 27). He said it's ok because his family are rich from dealing cocaine and so

he doesn't need to worry about money. His parents had just finished a two year prison sentence after being caught, but did get off lightly by paying off the police. Apparently the possession of 1kg of cocaine with intent to supply can be punishable by execution here.



Tangerine



Hanoi



Train Street



The American man was called Steve, he was 65 and was travelling around the country with his Vietnamese buddy by motorbike. He said that back home he has an asphalt company that services commercial real estate developments. It was quite inspiring hearing his story about he'd started with a small piece of equipment as a young man, and had followed his entrepreneurial instincts to grow the company to 40 staff.

The four of us stayed up sharing stories until around 11pm when it was finally time for the canteen staff to clear up the room and prepare all

the cooking equipment for the next day. They had been very generous keeping the carriage open another couple of hours for us.

After than, we all went off to sleep.

The train arrived at 5am into Ga Hanoi. Getting out into the the relatively cooler morning air, we all went for a coffee across from the station and planned to meet that evening for more beers. I didn't go in the end, having done quite enough staying up late partying in Saigon. Zainab and I got an early night which both of us was much needed. Zainab, my friend from Leeds, was visiting just for a couple of days from Hong Kong (there to see another friend, Theresa). We rented a scooter the next day and drove to a temple and some other places out of the city.