

Simon and Dorothy's 100th birthday cycle ride in Vietnam

(4-18 November 2008)

See more photos here: <http://tinyurl.com/6xqtm4>

We did it! We cycled 392 miles in 8 days, climbing 35,000 feet in the process. You did it too: you gave the Medical Foundation a total of £13,500. Fantastic.

Tuesday/Weds 4/5 November: we flew from Heathrow to Kuala Lumpur (12hrs) and then on to Hanoi (3 more hours). Bus to hotel, freshen up (it was now 3 ish), have a quick look around the area, supper, bed. The dominant feature of Hanoi is the mopeds: there a 2 mopeds for every 3 inhabitants (and there are 3m of those). Dorothy reverts effortlessly to weaving across roads through traffic, not so most of our group.

Thursday. When people mutter that our 6.30am breakfast is to be served on the 10th floor with no lift, the guide says sourly, 'if you can't manage 10 floors you'll struggle with the Tram Tonh Pass'. Bus for a couple of hours out of town to our starting point. This is when we started to get to know our fellow cyclists, about 30 of them. Everyone is supporting different charities. A huge range of people, from age 21 to 60+, from judges to scaffolders. We discover two other folk on 50th birthday expeditions – the SAGA group is formed!

Disaster strikes. Shortly before we arrived in Hanoi there had been torrential rain (thankfully we'd missed it) which led to waist-deep floods in the city. On our way out the road went right through a still-flooded area for a mile or so: traffic jams, people carting mopeds through the flood on carts etc. Vietnamese all cheerful. In the end we had to get out and wade (queries from the tender types about water-borne diseases), and the bus just made it. Disaster averted.



We get to the jumping-off point. Alas, Dorothy's saddle (carefully brought from the UK) does not fit the bike! So D and I alternated with the rather skimpy saddles the bikes came with. Generally speaking, our main pain point was sore bum not weary legs.

Off we go: 40km mainly up hill. Easy really. Hot! We stay the night in a traditional "home stay" place, which means big dormitories in houses on stilts. Very picturesque. Hard floors!

Friday: 60km today, with 4,500ft to climb. The hills are very green and beautiful. People are working all the time, in the fields, tending animals, building homes. It rains HARD for the first, but only time. We all get soaked, coated in ochre mud. Overnight at a Trade Union hotel in Moc Chau.



Saturday. A big day: 120km! But the first 30 (yes,

thirty) km are a fantastic downhill run along the side of a huge valley, with the occasional waterfall cascading down the side. Glorious sunny day, but not hot.

Then a long flattish bit, and lunch, after which there is a steep 6km hill. Now it's hot!! By the time we reached Son La we are knackered. But there was a teapot in a basket in the hotel lobby - bliss.

Another Trade Union hotel. Some of our fellow-cyclists have amazing stamina and join a karaoke session after dinner, but we head straight for bed.

Sunday. Today is a day of very bumpy and potholed roads, especially in the morning. This group are laughing good-naturedly at us as we pushed our bikes through a small river that the road simply forded. The Vietnamese are



delightfully friendly. One pair of old ladies come up to Simon while we are waiting at a market, stroke his fair skin, and pinch his arms, grinning toothlessly all the while. The women are dressed up for the market, and wear black skirts and white blouses with a wide band of brocade down the front and a brightly coloured sash. Also very bright head coverings with cross-stitch designs.

When we cycle through a village (i.e. often) all the children call out from the houses "hello, hello!". We wave royally.

Tracey falls off her bike in a particularly rutted bit and jabs the pedal into her leg. At lunch (more noodle soup) an hour later she goes into shock. At this point we are all very happy that we have an Irish doctor with us (it's a cushy trip) who gives her pills, injections, bandages, splint, and escorts her off in the bus to hospital in case she's fractured her leg. (We hear later that the hospital looks like a total building site in massive disrepair, but inside one particularly disreputable-looking shed is a gleaming X-ray machine; she is fine and rejoins us that evening.)

The afternoon is dominated by a huge 14km hill. We crank up at walking pace in the full heat of the sun. Seriously hard work, but a warm welcome at the top from those who've made it already, and the view is fantastic. Dinner in Tuan Giao. It's all very cosy: the restaurant owner seems to be from the same family as our Vietnamese guide.

Monday. I can't remember much about this day! It finished with a long but rather bumpy descent. The road surfaces were poor. Richard (one of the really fit sporty types) hit a bit



of wood and came off his bike at speed; but emerged with only grazes. We stayed the night in a Very Smart Hotel by a lake, the first place where we saw bottles of a health-giving liqueur with snakes and lizards in it.

Tuesday. Dien Bien Phu is the place where the Vietnamese won a huge battle against the French in 1954, which essentially ended the French occupation of Vietnam. We spent an hour at the (good) museum, before getting on our bikes again to cycle to Lai Chau. Costumes changed – a different tribe - the women now in bright coloured skirts and leggings, and black jackets with decorated arms. Undulating country – a word at which we all now groan, when our guide is describing the route. They don't give us maps, or even seem to have one – culture shock for us. but there is pretty much only one road anyway. A very comfortable room for the night, which has a translation of the rules for guests, ending 'Joyful and happy congratulations to distinguished guests during your rest days in the hotel'

Wednesday. The morning started by crossing a Chinese-built suspension bridge across a deep mud-coloured river, and then followed a road that contoured (albeit with plenty of up and down!) along the side of a spectacular steep river gorge, with heavily-forested mountains both sides. After 50km we stopped for lunch, but the afternoon felt even longer: another 30km, leading to a 18km hill gaining about 1000m. We were told we had to make it to the top by 5pm, or we'd have to stop and take the bus to avoid being caught by the dark. We clanked our way up, arriving at 4.56, and whizzed down to Tam Duong --- but by then it was dark, and we had no lights, and it turned out to be a busy town with lots of traffic. Nor did we even know the name of the hotel... Most of the roads in rural North Vietnam have no junctions, so it's safe to say "cycle on for 30km", but Tam Duong has junctions. Just when we were losing hope we saw one of the Vietnamese crew waving us into a side turning, only to find *another* hill. Luckily it was short and the hotel, for the first time had hot water. Bliss.



Thursday. The last day of cycling, and the hilliest and most spectacular of all. First up 400m; then down 600m; then a long, long, long, long pull up 24km, gaining 1200m to reach the Tram Ton pass. The mountains in this area look quite different from earlier on: they are on a bigger scale, and are less pointy and steep; it looks much more European somehow. Still very green and beautiful. The road creeps up around the sides of several big valleys. It's often cloudy at the top, but we are in luck: the view is terrific. Everyone is euphoric to have made it, including us, and most especially Dorothy when she discovers a Tea Lady.



We descend another 10km into Sapa, a French-built hill station and tourist trap. We stayed in the best hotel yet by far; not only hot water but baths too. We say "yes" to tourist traps.



Friday. We spend Friday wandering around Sapa, shopping. Many Vietnamese in tribal costume (for benefit of tourists, but very enjoyable and colourful nevertheless). Then into the bus to descend 1400m to Lao Cai, and the overnight train to Hanoi.

Saturday, Sunday. The train arrives at 0600. We go to the hotel with the group, have breakfast, and then say our farewells, as we nip off to the Kangaroo Café, where we'd booked a 24-hr trip on a junk in

Ha Long Bay (as featured on Top Gear). This is tourism at its most packaged: there are hundreds of junks and thousands of people on them. But on ours there was only us and five others, and we had a very nice time. Ha Long Bay is famous for the thousands of little humpy islands. We had great food, swam, walked to the top of one island, saw a very large limestone cave. Restful and pleasant; and we were lucky with our company: an American PhD student studying Vietnamese in Hanoi and his father.



Monday, Tuesday. We find a very satisfactory hotel in central Hanoi, and spend a happy two days wandering around, mainly in the Old Quarter. Everyone is so friendly and pleasant. The only difficulty is guilt from not buying from the dozens of cheerful or desperate (or, somehow, both) street sellers. We went to the Water Puppet Theatre,



where puppeteers standing waist deep in water behind a screen use rods underwater to move around brightly-painted puppets in little set-piece scenes, accompanied with weird music. It's all very ancient. Dorothy liked it; Simon just thought it was interesting and curious. Plenty of nice meals in little cafes. Very moving Women's Museum, which has the obvious but unusual idea of accompanying each exhibit with an A4 page of closely-written description of the person who owned this artefact. Not just "here is a woven basket used in the war" but "Mi Lo Phat carried messages in this basket...". Reading

these fragments from the lives of women whose world was turned inside out by the Vietnam War, was quite affecting, especially since it was all from the side opposing the Americans. Vietnam seems amazingly un-scarred by the war, considering how recent it was.

Tuesday lunchtime: taxi to the airport, and long, long flight home.

The hard facts. One of the keener members of the group gathered copious data about how far we went, his heart rate, blood pressure etc. Here's his summary;

Date	Ascent	Max Elevation	Av Speed	Distance	km	Calories
06/11/2008	2410	2580	8.0	28.4	45.4	1540
07/11/2008	4560	3850	7.1	38.2	61.1	2380
08/11/2008	3080	2860	10.9	73.5	117.6	2500
09/11/2008	4950	4520	7.7	52.4	83.8	3200
10/11/2008	3090	3020	8.3	40.9	65.4	2000
11/11/2008	3900	2990	9.3	53.4	85.4	2180
12/11/2008	6650	3530	6.8	55.6	89.0	3520
13/11/2008	7130	6310	6.9	50.5	80.8	3750
Ttl / Av	35770		8.1	392.9	628.64	21070