

# Travels in Vietnam, 2014

## March 8. Saigon

The officials at Guangzhou ('Gwongchow', Canton in old money) International *can* smile but it doesn't happen often. That's not due to some People's Republic edict; still less surly disposition. The first time I was there they pulled all the stops to get me out of a tricky sitch whose story I'll tell in due c. The second time I had a ten hour stopover en route from Bangkok to Heathrow. Mindful of negative online feedback - are you listening Boston MA, NYC and above all Miami? - the authorities whisked me and others in similar circs off to a swanky hotel, scooping us all up in the morning to get us on our diverse ways.

No, the reason they don't smile a lot at Guangzhou is the same reason faces are corpse-pallid and, outside the airport, always masked. Permanent smog. The most populous nation on earth, or at any rate its industrial east coast, is in a state of constant depression.

God knows we Brits have little enough to write home about. As has often been said, someone really does need to do something about our own weather. But this place makes us all look like Brazilians. Think of the gloomy days we specialise in (of which we've had a particular abundance of late) and imagine that as permanent state of affairs. Welcome to Guangzhou.

South China Airlines Flight CZ304 had brought me the 6,000 miles without mishap. We flew north of Moscow - counterintuitively, till you remember the earth isn't the same shape as an atlas - before arcing gently south-east into the People's Republic.

I'd struck lucky. Despite a near full plane I was sole occupant of my block of three seats. That and a 22:30 take-off got me a better than average sleep, putting a zing in my step as I strode into Guangzhou customs, immunized from the dreary vibe by Abbey Road blasting through my iPod headphones.

I had a ninety minute wait for my Saigon connection - baggage going all the way through - followed by two hour flight, walk to nearby hotel and a second night of sleep better than a restless soul like me generally gets at home. Jetlag is all in the mind.

## March 9. Common People

'Everybody hates a tourist', sang Jarvis Cocker, the one phoney note in the most inspired song ever to emerge from my home town.

I know it isn't true. Tourists who *engage* - and part with much needed dollars - are liked and appreciated; even on occasion respected, though that's harder won and rightly so.

A moment of shared humanity, no matter how banal or fleeting, can transcend barriers of language and skin colour, oceans of lived experience. For me, a lottery winner at birth, that's above all what travel is about.

Sometimes it really is just a fleeting moment, as with the guy I saw today catching grasshoppers outside the crumbling brick walls of Hue's Forbidden City. I pointed to him, then my lens, raising my eyebrows in query. By way of answer he threw a huge grin and toted the polythene death row in which those insects most recently caught hopped out their last seconds of sentient existence before collapsing on a mounting pile of their lifeless brethren.

Had we been able to converse I'd have told of summer days in meadows round Parson Cross, northern Sheffield, circa 1960, stalking grasshoppers for the thrill of the chase and feel of their frantic dance in the prison of my palms. But the information that I then let them go wouldn't impress him. "We eat everything but the leg", a Viet girl told me on my last trip. "The table leg!"

I happen to know from a stall on the night bazar in Chiang Rai, Northern Thailand, that deep fried grasshopper is a real treat ...

Sometimes, though, the encounter is more substantial. Across the road from the Forbidden City's southern wall stand two rows of military hardware: Russian tanks, MiG jets and items - helicopters, armoured vehicles and a fighter-plane - "captured from American Imperialists in War of Liberation". As I snapped them, Thinh approached: in his late thirties, I guessed, with English good enough for us to have an enjoyable conversation.

"Terrible times", he told me, pointing my flash gun at a T-54 Soviet tank while I triggered it from a radio transmitter on my camera. "My father ... killed In Tet Offensive, 1972."

Surprised, I reappraised him. This is a young country, most were born after the American war. Surely this man would not remember his father.

"How old were you when your father died, Thinh?"

"Eleven"

I guess my incredulity showed. Slowly he raised his cap to reveal a face more weathered than I'd first thought, but still amazingly unlined for a man born in 1961.

And sometimes the encounter is just plain funny. Like the middle aged woman who wanted to sell me a pineapple. When I said I'd just eaten, she reached out to give my belly a rub.

I love Vietnam. And Jarvis: great song, but on this one small point you're completely wrong.

### **March 11. Danang**

With a few exceptions I try to avoid writing on my travels of things you can find out yourself in books or online. For instance the walls of Hue's Forbidden City are 'crumbling' due to ferocious US mortar fire in 1968. Officially in 'South Vietnam' (China having deliberately brokered a deal at Geneva that undersold a spectacular string of North Vietnam Army victories culminating in the routing of French forces at Dien Bien Phu) Hue was sympathetic to Hanoi. When Vietcong took the city in '68 America, who'd entered the war on the back of a lie (the Tonkin Incident) threw everything at them in the most vicious house to house fighting, *a la* Stalingrad, of the entire war. The VC lasted ten days and lost ten thousand lives, against five hundred Americans<sup>1</sup>, but were back seven years later as the south's demoralised soldiers, deserted by their commanding officers, shed uniforms by the road and fled while the Americans pulled out with zero dignity.

Yesterday I took the train from Hue ('Hway', but with a dramatic tonal rise that makes it a half-way house with 'Hwee') to Danang, three hours of heart-stopping scenery: dense green jungle piling down to formidable cliffs pounded at their base by surging foam, interspersed with wide bays and visibly racing tides that are the stuff of surfers' dreams. I can't be sure but it seems likely the insane scene in *Apocalypse Now* - yeah, I know, there were many - where a gung-ho colonel

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<sup>1</sup> One way the Pentagon and White House deluded themselves was by claiming victory in battles - almost all of them - where VC casualties were higher. This overlooked the most significant aspect of the war: the preparedness of the Viet resistance to remain undeterred by high losses.

and Big Sur freak moves a fleet of choppers north the moment he hears of a particular beach where the surf is to die (and kill) for, was one of those I saw from my crowded carriage.

Danang too owes much to the Americans. This is where, to the chagrin of the Pentagon, CNN turned the arrival of the first GIs into a media circus in what would prove to be the world's first televised war. It's now Vietnam's fourth city. Most backpackers avoid it. As far as I could tell all the farangs piling off the train entered immediately into bartering with taxi drivers for the hour's ride down to Hoi Anh, quaint old port of the Cham Dynasty before the sun set on them around the time Drake and Raleigh were pirating the Spanish Main.

Perverse soul that I am, I took a motorbike taxi to a bourgeois hotel, a staggering twelve quid the night, on Danang's Han River, shielded from the coast by a strip of peninsula on the far bank, its towering skyline testimony to economic liberalisation. Here businessmen meet and middle class Viets chill. That evening I took a stroll on a riverfront dotted with elegant marble sculptures. Some reminded me of Hepworth, most were Hindu inspired; classically South Vietnamese; all quite fetching. As night fell I took to photographing them. Four schoolchildren approached, mid teens and uniformed. Shyly they asked, one brandishing a camera, if they could be photographed with me. This is a tactile culture. I was ridiculously pleased by the way they clung to me for the pose. Could I photo them? Afterwards I took their email address and said goodnight. Delightful.

A younger girl, more poorly dressed, asked me to buy chewing gum. I gestured *no thank you* - never use the stuff - then looked at her again: not pretty, but her open face melted me.

"How much?"

"Tin thousand dong".

She beamed proudly. I laughed. She laughed. Thirty pence was a ridiculous price.

Her friend, better dressed and with some English, arrived. I told the friend I'd buy the gum, at the crazy price, but wanted to photograph them. No problem - other than that both stuck two fingers out from each side of their heads for the pose. For some reason every teenager in South East Asia insists on growing antlers at every photo op.

Still on the river front - a riot of colour and sound to rival Saigon or Bangkok - youngsters in their teens and twenties, with one or two older, had set up a sound system on the plaza and were dancing quite formally in pairs. For several minutes I watched, charmed by their unselfconscious enjoyment of each other. Close by, several boys and two girls played skilful five-a-side football, barefoot, as is the norm here.

A boy in his late teens gestured - English speakers are thin on the ground away from the *farang* haunts - that it was OK to take pictures. As often happens he was interested in my kit. With each trip I bring more. (It's a curse really for one who spent a year in Afghanistan and India, hippy days, with my only constant possessions my passport and a beautiful carpet bag bought in Kandahar and stolen a year later in Sheffield by a 'friend' overdosed and buried thirty-five years ago.) Of course it's insured for theft and damage but if there's a cover policy against local resentment, at the flaunting of kit costing more than most will earn in a decade, I haven't yet found it.

It seems unnecessary anyway. I've detected no such resentment, though I'm thin-skinned enough to be on the lookout for it. If that seems surprising, consider this. For the people I meet in Asia, Africa and Latin America - their lives for the most part marked by toil, hardship and in some cases destitution - my possessions aren't the most striking aspect of our differing fortunes. Most amazing to them is the fact that *anyone* could afford to do nothing for weeks on end but travel, for no reason other than that it pleases them.

In fact my photography opens rather than closes doors.

While I took pictures of the dancers - holding my own flash gun now, left arm outstretched to maximise the angle between flash and lens - chewing gum girl spotted me again, ran up to give a fierce hug, then darted back into the night. How can you resist a country whose young do stuff like that?

### **March 12. Sex, money & the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie**

A good friend once commented, and I dare say others have thought it, that a man visiting South East Asia alone is likely as not driven by the desire to get laid with no strings attached.

(Steve: you clearly haven't tasted authentic Thai or Viet cuisine!)

Compared with India this is a non-pestering culture but a male farang alone on the night streets gets used to the motorbike pulling alongside, its male or female driver asking if he wants 'boom boom'. That's not a reference to firework displays or sessions with an AK47, though those too can be easily arranged.

I like sex but am old fashioned. I doubt I could even get it on with some gum-chewing twenty-something with whom I haven't even language in common. I do like to talk you know. Before. During. After.

The whole subject of sex, money, farangs and SE Asia is complex, meriting more considered treatment than I can manage on these crappy hotel keyboards and the crappier email interface of my Kindle Fire. (OK Apple evangelista, I admit it: shoulda got myself an iPad.) I've no wish to add to the mountains of simplistic guff already written and spoken. Take the PC puritan brigade with their kindergarten equations - *brown skin good, white bad; youth and beauty good, age and money bad*.

Or their mirror opposites: it's all natural and healthy, a fair exchange between consenting adults. Well, maybe, but when you put sex and money together in the big-time way Saigon and Bangkok do there's no way that's gonna stay clean and wholesome. Sex slavery? Children? Forget Gary Glitter. The Russian mafia are here and, unlike that chump, they know how to fix things with the people who count.

As it happens, one of the most interesting angles for me is this. I've long thought the pull of sexual desire to be no different for women than for men. What has for millennia been different is the *relationship* to that necessarily powerful aspect of the human experience. For women the stakes have been far higher. Interestingly, and I'd like to hear the female take on this, there are growing signs that now middle class western women have gained control over their fertility and finances, some have begun to behave 'like men' in that department. Mostly they don't come to Asia for NSA sex with dash of romance. They seem more drawn to the Gambia and Dominican Republic.

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What I didn't say in my previous email is that one of the dancers on the riverfront, older and fuller figured, had caught my eye. She danced well and was aware of my camera in the way photographers love. Afterwards they all crowded round to view the results. You get used to the press of male and female flesh in these circumstances. It's sensuously enjoyable but, on my part and I'm pretty sure theirs too, innocent and sweet.

I asked, with some difficulty, did anyone have an email address? Dancer girl scribbled on a scrap of paper and handed it to me. I looked up in surprise. This was no email address. Just her name, Ha.

And her phone number.

Call me naive but I don't think Ha came out that evening to pull a trick. I doubt she's on the game at all but, like many in her situation, is aware both of her sex power and the size of the farang wallet. She's a healthy opportunist and I respect that.

*I hated Vietnam*, a friend told me recently, following a tour of Cambodia, Laos and the country in question. *All they were interested in was taking our money.*

We were at a mutual friend's yuletide gathering. It wouldn't have done at all to tell her she was talking through her bum. I simply said that wasn't my experience.

What is my experience is that otherwise sane, intelligent and educated Brits go soft in the head when it comes to money and what is euphemistically known as the developing world. The revolutionary idea that exchanges with farangs are for many Viets the sole, main or purely windfall means of putting food in their bellies and clothes on their backs seems too much for them. Or rather, what's too much for them is the idea that just because for many Viets money is the main purpose of dealing with farangs - how on earth could it be otherwise? - it isn't necessarily or even usually the *sole* purpose.

I took issue with Jarvis Cocker's absurd proposition that everybody hates a tourist. I take issue with his mirror opposites. On this subject at least, simpletons both.

In case you were wondering, Ha's number was last seen in a litter bin on the river front. In another world it might have been a delightful interlude. In this one? Way too complicated.

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Yesterday I toured jungled hills and coast - beaches like Cornwall's on a good day - near Danang on a hired motorbike. Vietnam is developing fast. Already some of the best beaches are private, the roads down to them guarded by armed and uniformed men. The luxury villas jutting from the jungle canopy as it slants down to dazzling white beaches and coves are monstrous. What is it about new money, the whole world over?

### **March 13. Motorbiking**

Absolutely the way to go here: typically 125cc, and that's enough. Two things are needed. One, you must know how to control the bike. (If unsure, find a way of practicing at home first.) Two, forget all you know about rules of the road, especially the quaint western notion of 'right of way'. It's nonexistent here unless you count the fact might is right, with four wheels (quite rare) trumping two and sixteen (rarer still) doing the same in quadruplicate.

But get those two things under your belt and for three quid a day - five if they do twenty-four hour hire - with a tank of petrol another three, you're free as a bird. Everything opens up.

### **Some highlights from yesterday ...**

A wide beach - aquamarine choppy, racing white horses and golden sand - just three miles from town but totally untouristed on account of its fishing boat bobbing sea.

(The Viet fishing boats are gorgeous, though the best I've seen aren't here but on the Southern Island of Phu Quoc. To stumble on them at sundown, berthed up for the night on some out of the way and west facing estuary - their reds, blues and turquoises gently burnished by the dying rays - is one of the most divine sights I've been privileged to witness. That's when you know the bike would be cheap at twenty times the price.)

From a high hill the Lord Buddha, all forty white marbled metres of him, looks out across the South China Sea. As fishermen pole their tiny circular boats, essentially the same design and

construction as the ancient Welsh coracle, across the shallows to the big boats four hundred metres out, his must be a reassuring presence. With his vigilant eye on things, what could go wrong?

Though it's mid day, a recent high tide means the women on the shore are sorting the catch. Wicker baskets a metre deep and the same across are piled high with fish, though few are more than six inches. (Bet your life on it they curse the Chinese factory ships hoovering the ocean floor.) Beside them on the sand, sea snakes writhe out what remains of their lives in the full glare of the sun. Some are barely a foot long, others more than a metre.

Aged twenty I once walked the length of a deserted Colva Beach in Goa, at night and stoned out of my mind, toe-nudging dying sea snakes back into the water. Had the fishermen seen me I don't know whether they'd have been amused, pissed off or worried on my behalf. Sea snakes are all highly venomous for the very good reason their prey must die instantly else be lost in the depths. The task of separating them from the catch was given to boys with the fastest reflexes. It helps that sea snakes, for all their lethal potential, are among the least irritable of beasts.

The difference here being that these snakes won't be left to rot - *everything but the (table) leg* - though their slow agonising death on the sand will make gutting alive seem merciful.

I ask a woman if I can take pictures. She flashes her lovely smile. Viets are more reserved than Thais as a rule. The latter hand it to you on a plate. Here you have to engage to get it and it's all the more appreciated for that.

An hour later, on Monkey Mountain, I turn down a tiny path to a wooden shack next to an open shelter - conical thatched roof supported by three wooden poles - where bamboo chairs offer sweeping views across the bay. I order a beer. She brings two: the second time in twenty-four hours this has happened, and the second time someone has read my appetites better than I had. Slowly downing them, one after the other, serenely scanning the ocean below like the Buddha himself, I know the meaning of full, unconditional contentment. As he told, truly enough, desire is the root of all suffering in this world of *maya* - illusion.

That night I take the bike deep into the city, easily the size of Manchester. I'm now very OK with the traffic. The trick is to regard every other biker - ninety-eight percent of it - as you would pedestrians on Oxford Street, Xmas Eve. With no such thing as priority you have to be aware of everything around you. That's not as hard as it sounds though you must have full control of the bike. It helps if there's poke in the throttle. A judicious tweak of the right grip, and deft nudging of handlebars, are the equivalents of the hop-step you do to avoid collisions in crowded malls.

City speeds are twenty mph tops, which is what they would be in the UK if the road lobby wasn't so powerful. That's not to romanticise things here. I'm sure road deaths are far more common in Vietnam but the system kind of works once you get the hang of it. Oh, nearly forgot. Lights after dark are optional.

Mid evening I'm threading my way down a narrow curving street of the kind the farang in town for just a few days hasn't a hope in hell of seeing otherwise. All of life is out on the street and my nostrils are tormented by one ambrosial scent after another. It hits me that my total intake this past twenty-four hours amounts to several glasses of thick strong coffee, a small bottle of water and those two beers.

I stop by a roadside cafe, idling the engine. Zero chance of English being spoken here but it's amazing what hunger and sign language can pull off. I suss the woman running things and shout *xin xiao!* I point to the low chairs and stools, then to my mouth and tum, finally to the bike. She even grasps the meaning of that last gesture; smart woman. At her command a youth comes over to park my bike in an acceptable spot while I stand over the stoves like a kid in a sweet shop. *I'll have that. And that. And - oh yes! - that ...*

It's all delicious of course. This is Vietnam. Sorry dog lovers (and I've become one myself of late) but the chances of my having chewed the canine are, well, rather high.

At the hotel I step into the shower, but not before I've checked my face in the mirror. *Fuck*. My nose is bright red. I always do this. My arms are the same colour. Better make it three rules for motorbiking in Asia. That deliciously enveloping rush of cool air you're constantly bathed in is hiding the sinister truth that what you're actually doing is akin to stretching out like a starfish on some sun-fried beach, and should act accordingly.

Factor fifty. It's the way to go man.

### **March 14. Zen and the art of bartering**

Two small porcelain trays have caught my eye. Their rectangular bases and shallow curving sides are painted delicately; Cham patterns in muted greys. Now the fun begins.

*"How much?"*

The girl smiles.

*"Sixty thousand dong each."*

I look thoughtful.

*"Forty thousand for the two."*

She looks suitably horrified. The older woman squatting on the floor glances up and smiles.

*"Eighty thousand for two",* the girl counters.

The furrows on my brow deepen.

*"Well, I don't know ... maybe I'll come back tomorrow."*

I make as if to go outside: a tried and tested move so long as you don't do it in an aggressive or insulting way. Face matters a great deal here.

*"No - you no come back tomorrow!"*

I pause. Wait for her next offer.

*"Sixty thousand for two"*

A quid each.

*"I give you fifty thousand."*

I hold up a taut right palm, five digits stretched upward; throw a beaming smile. She volleys back but hers is bigger and beamier.

*"**Sixty** thousand."*

Again I make as if to get on my bike but I'm not serious. We're thirty pence apart. She knows she has the sale and at a good price, though not the killing she may have hoped for.

In the end it's fifty-five. I hand over five thousand in one-ks then a hundred-k note. As she gives me a fifty in return she spies the five-k note, crumpled and blue, in my wallet.

*"You give me five thousand."*

Another sixteen pence. Outrageous!

*"We said **fifty-five**"*

I hold the severe look a moment then crack a grin as I slam the note into her palm. Both women burst out laughing at my theatrics. We've all played the game in the right spirit and their smiles from the doorway, as I get back on my bike, would have been worth twice their starting price.

Not that *that* is ever a good idea, mind. When farangs pay the first price asked they not only look fools but wreak havoc on the local economy. My Ethiopian friend Sisay once made the point succinctly. *"Last year I was paying ten birr a kilo for bananas. Now the shop keeper won't sell them to me. She knows she can get twenty from the faranjis."*

As always there's a balance to be struck. (I'm a Libran, see - not that we Librans believe in astrology, you understand.) At the other end of the spectrum you see farangs apoplectic at being 'ripped off' for an amount any sane onlooker would consider a reasonable 'tourist tax'; an amount, moreover, that would buy zilch back home. It's embarrassing to watch, but can get a lot worse than embarrassing.

**Angkor Wat, Cambodia:** my first visit to South East Asia. It was near sundown when a woman working one of the gates sold me a pair of peasant pants: thin black cotton jobs with ties at the back you pull round the front to fasten in a bow; their baggy, one-size-fits-all construction abso the ticketo for the heat and humidity.

She'd wanted five dollars. (In 2009 the Cambodian currency was and for all I know still is on its knees.) I went in hard on two erroneous assumptions. The first, a product of my visits to India, was that the start price would be many times the 'fair' price. I've since learned that a ratio of two to one is a fairly reliable guide in these parts.

My second miscalculation was the neoliberal, "pure market discipline" assumption that if the price went too low she simply wouldn't sell.

I got the pants for a buck. Pleased as punch I showed them to my Angkor guide, a sweet and highly intelligent young man.

*"Good price, no?"*

He agreed. It was indeed a good price. But ...

*"She will have paid a dollar herself in the market at Siem Reap."*

The woman was nowhere to be seen. I had no way of putting right my boorish error. Sometimes traders sell at a loss just because they need the liquidity. It's one thing if you're a *win-some-lose-some* wheeler dealer of the Arthur Daley/Del Boy school. And another entirely when you're struggling to hold body and soul together in one of the poorest nations on the planet; one, moreover, still living with the fallout of its recent, nightmare past.

I guess you live and learn. All the while knowing you will *never* know; not really.

## **March 16. The cops took my wheels man**

***How much d'you want for that? (I'm goin' to the store). Man says three dollars. I say alright - will you take four? (Bob Dylan, Love & Theft.)***

Five men, amputees all, sit by the roadside hawking cheap fans. I'm not a fan fan - if ever I come back from the east with one for you, feel free to take it as a sign my ardour is cooling - but have a soft spot on disability and like to do my bit. My proffered fifty-k note is causing confusion though. They want five per fan and think I'm trying to buy a bag of twenty with it. A shop keeper spots the impasse and comes out to explain what I already know: this is not a bartering sitch. The one useful thing she does is open the bag to pull out a fan.

"This - five thousand. No fifty thousand for twenty!"



Showing commendable wisdom I renounce the urge to hand-signal that I'd sooner stick pins in my eyes than walk away with twenty of the buggers. I take the fan and leave the men, clearly a team, with a smile and the fifty note.

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This is Hoi Anh, port town for the Chams who held sway from seventh century to sixteenth. The shipping action moved forty kilometres north to Danang when the estuary silted up but its prettiness, famed night bazaar, beaches and 10th century Hindu ruins at nearby My Son make Hoi Anh a big draw. Strolling round on my day of arrival, for the first time encountering farangs in serious numbers, I was reminded of Totnes in Devon. When a man suggested I take his picture - '*one dollar only*' - I knew I was seeing the Vietnam that had disenchanted my Yuletide friend. But just as you'll still find the old east-end spirit in gentrified Hackney - if you look for it and engage, only engage - so does the principle apply even in Asia's Phukets and Goas.

The law of supply and demand, always volatile in Asia, works in intricate ways here: not all to the disadvantage of the farang. My hotel room, a fiver the night, is not only the cheapest so far but the nicest. Hotels have sprung up like toytown, paring margins to the bone for the hotelier. More is expected, and for less.

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My second night In Hoi Anh. I've spent the day visiting surrounding villages on a hired bike. It's dusk by the time I glide back through narrow streets already filling with tourists but, ingenue that I am, I've yet to realise that things have barely started. More to the point, I've yet to realise that most of the narrow roads bringing me to the quayside will soon be closed off to motor traffic as the night bazaar gets into full swing.

I ease onto the water front - one mistake with the throttle will mean big splash and heap of trouble - park the bike on its side-stand and walk away without a backward glance.

*This is Vietnam, right?*

It is, but when Vietnam meets Totnes the rules change. What I will learn tonight is that I may just as well have left it under a lion at Trafalgar Square on New Years Eve and hiked over to Leicester Square to catch a show; all the while expecting my faithful steed to await patiently my return.

Blissfully ignorant I stroll about. This is a pretty place, though I know the farangs will have spoilt it rotten. That's a practical judgment, not a moral one. I hope I never get to be the farang tourist equivalent of a 'self-hater'.

On a floating cafe, a man strums accoustic guitar. The tunes are predictable - Yesterday. Chiquitita. Greensleeves. Que Sera Sera - but he plays with skill and subtlety, and I'm happy to linger over my overpriced coffee till the midges and moskies get to me.

*Shoulda brung the deer.*

I return for the bike. Except it isn't there. OK, deep breath. Must've left it further down the quay. No? *Up* the quay then. I'm walking faster now, not quite the relaxed chappie of a few minutes earlier. It doesn't take long to let in, and begin calculating implications of, the fact my little yellow yammerhammer isn't remotely where it's supposed to be.

Back to the boat, a husband-wife operation: he strumming middle of the road toons; she serving and cooking, her English not stretching beyond taking orders. She shouts over an elderly Viet tourist. His English is only marginally better but they've understood my plight and are taking it

seriously, more than I could expect in the UK from two people whose respective priorities are or should be to (a) make money, (b) have fun.

Also indicative of the higher moral standards out here is that as I run through possible explanations, including the correct one as it turns out, I don't for a second entertain the possibility of theft. I've left bikes with key in ignition many times here, including downtown Danang at night. These are law abiding people.

Viet tourist leads me off boat to local on quayside bench. Vigorous exchanges ensue. I don't understand a word but can read tone and body language as well as the next guy. The vibe local man gives off, as he repeatedly points over the roof tops while his hands chop out a set of left and right directions, tells me this is a routine event.

*Man leaves bike in stupid place. Traffic cops impound it. End of.*

I'm relaxed now with the bigger picture but there's devil in the detail. How I'm supposed to find destination unknown with only the vaguest sense of the way seems as apt a metaphor as any for this confusing set of events we call life. The streets are heaving, my expectations of success low. After a few minutes I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's Quay Bench Man, clearly no more confident of my competence for this errand than I am. It takes every bit of Finest English Reserve to refrain from hugging him in gratitude and relief.

He leads me up a narrow alleyway busting with atmosphere. Out onto a heaving walkway. Left, right then left again till we arrive at the police station as a fresh batch of confiscations is being wheeled into the pound.

I thank QBM profusely - he's too well dressed to offer money (tricky business this tourist game; easy to get things wrong either way) - then turn to deal with the constabulary. They don't speak English either but it isn't long before I've grasped that I can't have the bike till nine-thirty. Later I will discover that the impoundment isn't a means of getting me to reflect on my wrongheaded and iniquitous ways. There's no chance of my riding or even wheeling the bike through these throngs. It stays put till trading ends, and the heaving streets empty.

Presenting myself at the cop shop at the appointed time - having witnessed, in the interim, locals laying into one another with fists and crash helmets in a traffic dispute ... silk clad men playing chequers in China Town ... Australians slamming down (of all things) tequila sunrises in the Happy Time Bar - the desk sergeant indicates fifty-k as suitable penance for trouble caused. It slides neatly into the breast pocket of his tunic.

I switch on the engine in delight. What a dashed civilised place this is. If you don't agree, try parking a motorbike in a comparable spot at a venue in the UK - the Quay at St Ives, say - on a Saturday night in high season. Think you'll get off with a three hour confiscation, and one pound fifty 'fine'?

### **March 18. One flew over the cuckoo's nest**

One of the first sights I registered on arriving a few days ago in Hoi Anh was a low, attractive building. It stands close to the river and old town, fronted by a leafy courtyard, and is clearly institutional; a school perhaps, or small hospital. Closer inspection showed it to be a refuge for disabled people of all ages as well as those whom life has left, aged and homeless, with neither family nor friends to support them.

Which was of interest to me on two counts. One, I developed such graphic design skills as I possess working on disability and social inclusion issues. Two, I spent a big slice of my childhood in care, so consider myself more sensitive than most to the prevailing atmosphere in such

places. Being in the near absolute power of folk - 'ordinary' folk, not monsters - who do not love you endows what I see as a healthily realistic appreciation of the human condition.

Suffice to say I'd mentally filed the location, together with the fact those glimpsed in the courtyard - many of them amputees, some literally faceless, a few clearly not the full shilling upstairs - seemed a happy crew. If you ever visited comparable institutions in the UK you'll know that's no small thing.

On Sunday I returned, waltzing in through the gates unchallenged. Motive? Nosiness, make small donation and if but *only* if it felt right, take a few pictures that may be of some use to the place.

For ten minutes I strolled around that courtyard: waving, high-fiving - where there was a hand to connect with - and flashing smiles returned in most cases with interest, though of course there were a few vacant stares too.

(I invite you to contemplate the likelihood of getting away with this in the west. One, I'd never get through 'security'; two, in the unlikely event I did you can bet I'd fast be accosted by tight-lipped officialdom - the "*can I help you?*" sufficiently laced with venom to ensure its subtext landed: "*WTF do you think you're playing at?*")

Finally someone showed up from the other side of the counter, a pleasant woman in her thirties with toddler in tow and a smattering of English.

I managed to convey what I was about, something she wasn't entirely unaccustomed to. She explained that not all were disabled. Some were just destitute. (Be sure of it: Vietnam's economic liberalisation won't be without social costs born disproportionately by the elderly and otherwise disenfranchised.) On one thing I failed to make myself understood: whether hitherto unexploded ordnance was the main cause of the many amputated limbs.

In neighbouring Cambodia that's not in dispute. While LBJ then Nixon were denying they were even in there, the B52s were dropping more bomb tonnage than hit Germany in WW2. Much of it landed with soft plops on jungle and rice paddy, to lie dormant for decades till discovered by the foot of an unsuspecting farmer, a gleefully playing child. In fairness it has to be said that Pol Pot helped things along nicely, the Khmer Rouge mining half the country as a farewell gift when Vietnam, finally exasperated by cross border raids on the Mekong Delta, drove them out.

In fairness it also has to be said that years of saturation bombing, and consequent destabilization of the entire country, created near perfect conditions for the black-clad fanatics who, in 1975, emerged eerily silent from the jungle to evacuate Phnom Penh at gun point as Pol Pot declared Day One of his chilling, cashless dystopia.

But on one point the woman was clear. Those terribly disfigured faces? *Agent orange*: the defoliation concoction for whose devastating effects - and not just on individual lives: whole areas of countryside are only now returning to cultivation - Uncle Sam has paid not a cent in reparation. Because the idea was not to inflict the human devastation it did inflict - rather, to strip the North Vietnam Army and Vietcong of ground cover - agent orange's use was not classified as chemical warfare. It was *herbicidal* warfare.

So that's alright then.

\* \* \*

The residents were a dream. They posed, shouted encouragement, and laughed delightedly as I showed the results. Alas, once aware of the lens on them, their glee was dropped as without exception they adopted the solemnity and gravitas this windfall opportunity clearly called for in their view. My pictures don't catch a fraction of the joy that afternoon, much of it expressed as they viewed themselves and bantered with one another. I needed a hidden accomplice taking the

real pictures unobserved. Such practices would get me locked up back home but here, so long as I got the goods, I think they'd have loved it.

It's ludicrous, I know, to swan in like this then swan out an hour later to pronounce the place happy. My approach falls a tad short of the pristine in respect of methodological and epistemological standards. But I did things the more elaborate inspections of western officialdom seldom do. I came unannounced, took the place as I found it, spent ninety-five percent of my time with the residents, and liked what I saw.

Ain't claiming more than that. Ain't claiming less.

### **March 20. Close encounters of the photographic kind**

Kon Tum, Central Highlands, the French-in-Indochina's answer to the British-in-India's Ootacamund: a hill station where Europeans could take temporary refuge from summer's heat and white man's burden, a town awash with handsome colonial architecture said to be the best in the country.

The Montagnard church, built in 1913 and constructed throughout in wood, is a particularly fine example. Its generous verandah and elegant gables give a Swiss feel, but stripped of the schmaltz.

Best of all are the stained glass windows depicting scriptural scenes - Moses & burning bush, JC calming storm on Sea of G, ravens bringing tucker for Elijah - with a modernist simplicity quite unlike the heavily ornate renditions of our Renaissance churches.

It's the golden hour: the setting sun lighting the windows splendidly, with enough left over to warm the rich hardwood tones of adjacent pews, and throw patterned shadows on the floorboards. But the situation is not without technical challenge: specifically, how to bring out detail - in a big, wide angle shot - from the shadowy area around the altar without washing out those sumptuous windows? I'm chuffed because I solved it in a way I couldn't have a year ago. I hid my flash gun, softened by an orange gel-filter to match the colour of the light outside, in a vase of lilies to point up at the centrepiece Calvary scene. This would not have worked, until recently, without trailing heavy cable: not a tactic I'd advise, even in hard-to-offend Vietnam, without getting permission in advance. In any case, even I have limits on the kit I'm prepared to schlep out here.

Previous Canon and Nikon flash guns could only deliver wireless triggering through infra-red beams requiring line of sight between flash and camera, but last year Canon brought out the RT-600 EX, whose radio triggering opens up a raft of new possibilities.

I'm all the more pleased for the fact that, just as I was packing away my gear, a coach pulled up outside to decant Chinese tourists by the dozen. Someone was looking out for me. When I needed the church to myself, I'd shared it with no one but a pair of worshippers and a girl tending the lilies. I might even sell some of these shots. Church Times last year bought three of my pictures of spectacular St George's Church in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Good money they paid too, though they were slow to shell out.

Can you take God through the small claims court?

Dead beat, I sit at a pew near the altar. If I'm not careful I'll drift off but ... **WTF?!?** The serenity of the place is bust asunder by hip-hop ringtone followed by vocal tones neither Vietnamese nor any European language I recognise. I look up to see a pretty Chinese lady striding around the altar as she shriekes into a cell phone.

*If I were God I'd strike her down this minute with some terrible ague. Leprosy seems appropriate. That'd show her!*

My sinful meditations on China's economic miracle aren't registering on my features. I know this because another of the contingent, portly dude in middle age, had been about to snap the altar on his iPad. Momentarily he catches my eye before stepping - apparently thinking I'm surveying the wondrous cross and pouring contempt on all my pride - respectfully aside. It's a common enough courtesy, but executed with a grace and elegant simplicity that wash away my impure thoughts on China's shortcomings. You see Jarvis, we're *not* all the same ...

\* \* \*

Morning coffee at a roadside stall. A matron cycles up the road, all coiffured grey curls and tailored red blazer. Ten minutes earlier I missed her as she cycled down the road. Now I grab my waiting camera to click in the nick. I wave. Bit cheeky that - like when you cut up a fellow driver then give a wave of 'thanks' as though they'd let you in - but she waves back despite knowing what I've done, so that's OK.

\* \* \*

A tiny old woman sells chopsticks by the roadside. I doubt she's much above four foot, and thin as a rake. I've seen many like her. The contrast with worrying signs of obesity in the children of Vietnam's economic winners symbolises emerging divisions. The town may be awash with hoardings in 1920s Soviet agitprop style - Uncle Ho leading a nation undivided onwards and upwards - but me, I see trouble ahead. Buddhist Vietnam will discover that the promised material progress comes with all manner of hidden price tags. Truly, all is *maya*.

This diminutive woman has piercing brown eyes and a beauty of bone structure that shines through the wrinkles. I wouldn't want to repeat America's mistake of underestimating her.

And I got to have this pic ...

I point to my camera, then her, in the querying gesture I've now got off pat. Yes, she signals. I can have the shot, but on her terms. Slowly she raises her aching bones from squatting on her heels to full towering height. Even more slowly she adjusts buttons, straightens cuff and collar. Only when good and ready does she look up, proud and beautiful, into my waiting lens.

It's a peach of a shot. I show her. She smiles. Pointless to ask - even if I could - if she has an email address. But how to get money from my pocket to hers without it looking as if I'm paying for the shot? (Seldom a good idea, that. It leaves a trail of karma, not least for fellow photographers following on.) With traders it's easy-peasy. I grab a bundle of chop sticks and two rice paddles, thrust a fifty-k note into her hand and, before she's cottoned on that I've done the equivalent of paying a tenner for a box of matches, I'm away.

\* \* \*

I'm talked out, else would write of many other such encounters. I will too, but not now. The subject of photography on third world streets, and ethical issues posed thereby, demands its own dedicated space.

There's this too. Once a reasonable level of competence is gained in using your hardware to control light then, assuming a reasonable 'eye' for a good shot, the limitations are always the human ones. Laziness and fear are the biggest causes in my own practice of lost or sub standard pictures.

Correction: laziness and fear are *not* the problem. They'll always be there. It's giving into them you have to guard against.

### March 21. Charlie's Hill .. right and rong .. christian hospitality .. gasoline

Another hard day's riding in the Central Highlands. I've clocked more than a hundred miles - no small thing on these roads - in the area north west of Kom Tum, epicentre of Vietnam's coffee operation, now the biggest in the world.

I've come withing spitting distance of the Cambodian and Laotian borders; stood eyeball to eyeball with Rocket Ridge and Charlie's Hill, names as seared on the psyche of their two warring nations as are Culloden and Stalingrad on theirs. The etymology of Rocket Ridge is self evident. Charlie's Hill derives from GI slang for an adversary at this stage in the war no longer viewed with arrogant contempt but with fear, loathing and grudging respect.

These lakes and mountains aren't as spectacular, I'm told, as those further north. Nor was I seeing them at their best, the verdancy and bright skies of November to January having given way to the more parched and dust-laden tones of the final month before the rains. Even so, the vivid greens of rice paddy and heady scent of jasmine delight the senses.

In any case the rarity of farangs in Kom Tum, and their total absence from the villages, more than compensate for any scenic shortcomings. Every cattle driver I pass either initiates a wave and smile or responds in kind to my own. At each village infants shout 'hello' or 'xin xiao' and, when I return with a grin and wave, give the deep throaty chuckle of happy children the world over. I feel I've no right to be here but, since I am, will extract every drop from the fact.

Villagers mix Buddhism and Christianity with ancestral worship. Curious? Look up the *Jarai*, who feed their dead through bamboo stakes drilled into their tombs, and *Bahnar*. The latter villages are centred on the *rong*, roughly akin to the Moot Hall of Saxon England. Here a kind of tribal justice is dispensed, wrongdoers ordered to sacrifice a chicken or in more serious cases a pig or bullock. For good measure they must also apologise before the entire village.

*Hmm. Wonder how that would play on Peckham's Mozart Estate, Manchester's Moss Side or Sheffield's Parson Cross ...*

The Central Highlands hold Vietnam's largest concentration of protestants, fewer in number than catholics and not smiled on by Hanoi. That's not on account of theological differences over the transubstantiation, but because they backed America in the war. It probably seemed a good idea at the time.

I stumble on a protestant village, early afternoon. I've almost driven through it when a small but pretty lake catches my eye. U-turning the bike, I ride back and up a verge to park close to a cluster of dwellings whose air of impoverishment I've seen on three continents. No one is around, possibly because at this time of day all sensible folk are dozing. But as I thread my way past shack, shed and shanty - looking for the way I know must lead to the water's edge - a man calls 'hello'. Of itself this means little other than that someone at least is awake. It's a standard Viet greeting, no more indicative of conversancy with English than a Brit's *ciao* is of conversancy with Italian. But in this case the 'hello' really is for me. A man in his forties strides out of a hut, his stained t-shirt a union jack. This too is common. In the city I've seen it on *chic* handbags, key fobs and the gleaming pillions of pride-and-joy motorbikes.

John Bull hasn't a word of English but I manage to convey my desire to see the lake. *Sure*, his tones and gesture indicate, but first I must meet the kin. Turns out they're lunching in the shade of a tree conveniently en route to water's edge. JB indicates stone on ground, one of a ring on which other family members are already seated. I take my place. I've been in such situations before and they're not to be turned down. On days like this, serendipity is king.

(This seems as good a place as any to share one of my top tactics for top tacticians of travel. When you find yourself without a word in common, yet are thrust once more into the role of cultural ambassador for Blighty, give the sitch and all in attendance your biggest and brightest.

Grin like a maniac; look every man and woman smack in the eye. Do it for England because from a certain point of view that's exactly what you represent; exactly why fate has chosen this precise moment to lead you to this particular juncture. I'm sure there are situations where smiling eye contact doesn't work. It's just that I've yet to come across one.)

So it's good vibes all round. I'm offered wine - as sure a sign as the crucifixes over the doors that we're now well off the Buddhist straight and narrow - but, serendipity or no, getting plastered in the middle of nowhere on a hot afternoon is for me off limits. To soften any offence I mime wobbling handlebars and drunken collisions. If they don't think it's the damn funniest thing they've seen all year, they do a fine job of pretending otherwise.

Next I'm offered food, JB indicating a pan housing the most unappealing mess I've set eyes on since my arrival in this land of culinary delights. It looks like a can of tuna, opened then left in the sun for three days. I pat my tum and carve out a buddha-like belly to suggest I've just eaten to bursting point - a barefaced lie I'll probably burn for but if I had to choose I'd take the wine any day, even at cost of driving back k-lined. I'd rate it the lesser risk.

I rise to signal my desire to see the lake. It's pastoral harmony incarnate. Children swim and frolic. Smiling women wash clothes. Offshore, a man stands in a row-boat to cast a weighted net the way I've seen done on the Gok at Chiang Rai. Can I take pix? Sure I can, JB gestures expansively. Why ever not?

On my way back we stop again at the family tree. JB's wife is there, stick-thin and dressed dirt poor, baby at barely discernible breast. But she's all smiles and I'm struck again by the cussed strength and indomitable spirit on all sides of this long suffering nation.

Time to go, but I have a dilemma. It's not cool to wash up like this then flash the cash before stepping back into the roller and scooting off. (Scuse mixed metaphors.) But my God, they look like they could use some. A second dilemma follows hard on the first. Everybody knows that if you want to lend a helping hand in the third world you hold it out to the women, who are far less likely to bugger off if it's a big handout, or get wasted if, as now, it's a small one. I *could* make a PC point of handing my hundred-k note to ma but, like so many PC points, its sole impact would be to boost my sense of what a fine chap I am. If JB's intent on getting drunk with it, he'll have it out of her at fist-point the moment I'm gone.

In the circs I do my best. In front of everyone I hold up the three quid note and indicate with a circular motion that it's for all - in this place not quite the loaves and fishes gesture it may seem - before handing it with a flourish to John Bull.

\* \* \*

With a good fifteen kilometres to go before Kom Tum, the gauge points at empty. I stop to check the tank. Sure enough, you couldn't drown an earwig in what's left. Again I do what I can, religiously staying in high gear at cost of labouring the engine, switching off to free-wheel down every substantial decline. With seven clicks to go, a young couple spot me at it. They pull alongside, register concern. I point to the tank and give the international symbol, thumb and index finger a gnat's apart, for 'very little' but my smile says I'm gonna make it. Lady Passenger reaches out her hand. I take it. Is she serious? Probably. I've seen this done a few times: motorbiker hauling pushbiker along in the same fashion.

After a few seconds I let go with a rueful smile - not for me - but they stay with me, driving slowly to ensure that if I do run out, they'll be there for me. What a people!

Two clicks from KT they point out what looks like a village shop, smile, wave and speed off. Village shop sells cigs, cold drinks, sweets, assorted household goods. And litres of petrol.

### March 24. Coffee blossom

Viets have an earthy, robust humour that reminds me of my native Sheffield. On arrival in Kon Tum I found a hotel that seemed OK and told Slim, the lad on the desk, I wanted a motorbike in the morning.

"We have. one hundred-fifty thousand a day."

My eyebrows arched.

"I was paying just hundred thousand in Hoi Anh."

It had taken me fifteen hours by minibus, motorbike taxi, so-called sleeper bus (nobody got a wink) and minibus again to get from Hoi Anh to Kon Tum.

Deadpan beyond his years, Slim met my gaze. The sincerity of tone and butter-wouldn't expression could easily be taken at face value.

*"You want to go to Hoi Anh for the bike?"*

\* \* \*

On Saturday, the day after my encounters with Charlie's Hill and John Bull, I rode to Y Cham, a Jarai village seventeen kilometers south of Kon Tum. Rough Guide says to take a human guide as its cemeteries, the village's main draw, can be hard to find. I found my first within minutes and was happy to be on my tod. Guides spin your head with useless factoids.

Anyway I rarely bother with cultural tours, not even alone. As my good friend Anni once said to me, "you'd be less interested in the Taj Mahal than in the cleaners there". (True, though I'd taken the precaution, on my first visit in 1974, of saving a tab of strawberry fields for the occasion. Smart move though I say it myself. The place blew my mind.) But these tombs do interest me on several counts, which I'll go into in my photo essay on the subject. Here I just want to pick out two things. One, these bone orchards are full of personal touches. The Jarai have for the most part let go the practice of feeding dead rels through bamboo poles driven into their tombs, opting nowadays to leave food above ground. After a few years this stops, the souls being deemed to have moved on. But the Jarai still place artefacts associated with the deceased atop the grave. The crash helmets, rusting bikes and decaying bed-heads are oddly poignant. It's the very banality and transient trashiness of ordinary things that tug at the heart, when death has called, as marbled pomp never can.

A second aspect of interest is syncretism. Voodoo is the best known example of the phenomenon but I first encountered it in Guatemala, where the Maya fused the Catholicism of their conquerors with traditions of their own. I've seen devotees of the chain smoking San Simon petition his effigy, lighting candles to indicate their hearts' desires: white for health in a child, yellow for a good harvest, red for love, black to wish ill on an enemy. Not quite what the Vatican had in mind but when the conquistadors tried to discredit San Simon by dubbing him Judas Iscariot, the moniker was cheerfully taken up with no lessening of esteem for the tobacco toking, rum quaffing super-dude and all round good egg. Syncretism strikes me, non expert and non believer, as offering useful windows on the ontology of religion.

I spend an hour photographing, then it's back on the bike. At a rubber plantation two young women flit from tree to symmetrically arranged tree, painting spirals on the bark where I presume - they speak no English - they'll tap the sap when the time comes. Yes, they smile, I may take pictures. No, they giggle, I may not expect to be considered right in the head.

I emerge from cemetery two, just as easily found, to spot three girls of eight or so hiding up a tree. They laugh in delight when they see I've rumbled them. The photos are great and mum, drawn by the commotion, thinks so too. She's a bit of a looker so I have to snap her to make it a full house.



Later I'm photographing coffee bushes bursting with white bloom whose scent pervades the air and draws butterflies by the thousand. I've seen coffee grow on three continents but not before in flower. A small truth dawns on me as I take in greedy lungfuls and marvel that, despite having clocked up no fewer than sixty-one spins round the sun, no one ever saw fit to tell me the scent of coffee blossom is virtually indistinguishable from that of jasmine.

\* \* \*

That evening I consult the date on my iPod, something I've so far studiously avoided, to find that the days of my idyl are numbered. To be precise, I have just four left, excluding Thursday when, early afternoon, I begin the long haul home.

At seven-thirty next morning a taxi drops me at the bus station on the edge of town. I buy a ticket for Buon Ma Thuot ("Boo-won-mat-oo-wot"), broadly in the direction of Saigon, but the bus doesn't leave till eleven-thirty. Leaving suitcase at ticket office I go walkabout in the already hot sun, kilos of camera gear on my back.

Outside a hospital a hoarding depicts man sneezing into thin air - *bad*. Next to him a woman does the same but daintily and, more to the point, into a hankie - *good*. Large Viet print says (probably) that *coughs and sneezes spread diseases: trap the germs in your handkerchief*.

And from sun-baked pavement in twenty-first century Asia I'm transported to East Cheam, 1960, with Tony Hancock singing the English version to the tune of Zion, City of Our God. Or if you prefer, Deutschland Deutschland Uber Alles.

\* \* \*

At a pavement cafe I down two coffees. *Good morning Vietnam*. I pay, carry on wandering, confident of my sense of direction. I come across a builder's gang laying concrete on the red earth. They shout and whistle at my appearance but for all the raucousness there's a softness rarely encountered in the west. They josh one another as I take photos and of course they do the two finger thing. No, not *that* one.

I'm walking in circles. Next time I see the builders, two of them are shoving one another with gusto. I smile indulgently: good to see the old spirit of horseplay alive and well; the same humour that once sent many a first-day apprentice at Sheffield rolling mill, forge or foundry out to the shops for elbow grease, sky-hooks or can of striped paint.

Wait a minute though, that was quite a biff the tall one just threw. And the other guy's wince didn't look pretendo.

*Right, not horse play at all then. Now I really do feel at home.*

Except I'm completely lost. And nobody round here speaks a word of English. Nor does my drawing of a bus impress or, more to the point, *enlighten* the motorbike taxi man I look to for salvation.

*Don't quit your day job*, his lugubrious features counsel.

## March 26. Ethics

I'm at it again. Sipping my favourite drug - having long since renounced the illegals and, with more difficulty, tobacco - at a pavement cafe in downtown Buon Ma Thuot. A street photographer and caffeine addict does not choose his watering holes lightly but with good coffee everywhere, selection criteria narrow to quality of view. It's different in the villages but here in the city I favour busy streets and intersections.

This is neither. I was drawn by the caged bird retailer next door. As elsewhere in Asia, the patrons of Vietnam's tea shops and eateries like to hear birds chirrup as they sip and dine. Moreover, in a city grown rich on coffee the domestic pets so indicative of prosperity and Maslow's hierarchy are much in evidence.

A young woman decants insects the size of wasps - but surely unable to fly, else why stick around for what's to come? - from large open box to small poly bags like that deployed by Grasshopper Man in Hue. She's meticulous, adding a few to this bag, shaking a few from that, to avoid the wrath of weights and measures officials who no doubt turn up, at times you'd least expect, to see to it that Vietnam's bird owning population is not short-changed.

As the bird food asphyxiates I recall a sight the previous day. I'd been at an ethnic village too commercialized to detain me long. Starting up the bike, I was passed by two lumbering elephants carrying tourists: farang, chinaman and viet. The metal contraption they sat on didn't strike me as much fun for the put-upon pachyderms, and again my Libran sense of balance kick-started a thought train. It went like this.

We are the mother of all apex predators. A trillion hand-downs of mitochondrial DNA, all honed and tweaked by random genetic mutation and natural selection, have gone into perfecting our ability to flourish at the expense of our fellow creatures. We did not get where we are by weeping over their suffering at our hands.

I have good friends who are vegetarian. What they stuff their tums with is none of my biz but if they think eschewing rather than chewing flesh confers moral superiority, and most of my v-pals are way too smart to think that, they must also believe Hitler a better man than Mandela. I'm assuming here that where concern for the animal kingdom is the key driver, then for consistency's sake they don't - given the inextricability of meat and milk production - eat dairy either. I'm assuming also that if the protein inefficiency of large scale meat eating is the main b of c, their stance is tempered by the mildly self deprecating irony we should all adopt when pissing in the Atlantic.

(Yes, I do realise this does not exhaust the list of reasons for being vegetarian. We need only consult relative stats on the incidence of bowel cancer in rich and poor countries to see that, even allowing for the fact causation and correlation aren't the same thing, we in the west eat far more meat than is good for us.)

On the other hand those same evolutionary processes have also conferred, seemingly on our species alone, self awareness. God knows why. Some say it's a by-product. Stuff any animal with the volume of reasoning power we've been saddled with, they say, and self awareness comes *gratis*. Or maybe it *is* needed by a species so dependent on sophisticated communications. Who knows? But whatever its purpose, self awareness brings empathy in its wake. Once we've reached a certain altitude on Maslow Hill, even those of us who swig milk and ride elephants tend to look askance when small boys pull the legs off spiders, and rough types in the sticks place bets on cockerel fights.

\* \* \*

Over the road a middle aged woman in powder blue appears in a darkened doorway. She stands motionless for a good minute or two, surveying the morning activity as she looks north toward me and the insect packing plant next door. The low streaming sun lights up the right side of her face, throwing the left into deep, chiaroscuro shadow. It has all the makings of a great shot.

I carry on sipping my coffee.

Respect for her privacy? For sure, respect matters - hope I've made that clear - but anyone saying you must never sneak a picture is a hypocrite or just plain dim, and probably a middle class farang of the type brought up to believe bragging or showing off a heinous crime.

(Given that everybody at some level thinks they are special - and the closer that belief is to the surface the healthier things generally are - that leaves only one way of feeling superior. Since you mustn't big yourself up you do the next best thing: Little Down The Other. That's how we end up walking around with the look of people sucking on lemons.)

My rough and ready rule is this. If I'm tempted to sneak a shot I ask myself why. If the truthful answer, and another rule of mine is that I'm the one person I want never to lie to, is that I'm too frit to ask permission then I don't take it. The pic will almost certainly be inferior, its mediocrity a permanent reminder I bottled it.

But in my book there are valid reasons too for pinching a pic. Two days ago, on my way back from snapping waterfalls south of Buon Ma Thuot, I stopped at a roadside cafe, deserted but for a small boy playing patience. He called out the back to announce my arrival, then resumed his game, concentration personified. Flapping up my intent would have ruined the shot.

With the pic in the bag, I waited. And waited. After ten minutes I got back on the bike, switched on the ignition and drove off. He didn't even look up.

So no, it wasn't guilt or piety that kept me sipping coffee while chiaroscuro lady stood begging to be snapped. The banal truth is the shot called for the L-series telephoto in the bag beside me, while I had my wide angle fitted. Switching lenses would take fifteen seconds at most, including extraction from bag.

Not for nothing is laziness one of the seven deadlies. (And, with cowardice, a prime cause of missed opportunities and duff shots in street and travel photography.) As the Good Book says: *"go to the ant thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise."*

That said, ants do seem to go in for a lot of pointless running around. And who'd want to be an ant anyway, in a country with a hundred ways of serving them up as a side dish?

**Philip Roddis, 2014**