

If a cuisine as diverse as Vietnam's had a national dish it would have to be *pho*. A million pavement joints sell it at 50-80 pence but price isn't all it has going for it:

- Soup's too small a word. A huge bowl swims with noodles, meat or seafood, tofu, all kinds of veg. Mix your own condiments, in a tiny bowl from chillhi sauces hot or sweet. Miso too. Dunk in the piles of green salad. Float the lot.
- Most farangs shun such places as unhygienic. I never got ill, and they love you for being there.
- No stressful decisioning: they'll do just one pho, and do it well.





And stuff happens at these joints. On my last night in Kon Tum, this minx caught my eye, and not *just* for being a dead ringer for Little Miss Sunshine.

Unlike anyone else at the shared table, hawk-eye here had clocked her fishing out what she didn't like – which seemed to be an awful lot: that's the pampered kids of today for you – and dropping it into big bro's bowl when he wasn't looking.

If I know anything about sibling power relations, she'll be running rings round him all his days.

I didn't snitch, though I could have:
mum's English was good enough.
But the big presence for me was
granddad, all silvered dignity across
the table.

Anyone old enough to have fought
with or against the Americans gets
my attention, though a couple of
things stopped me going there.

One, he spoke no English.

Two, this is Montaignard country.
You need to know which side folks
were on before barging in.

As in Spain up to the nineties – the
last decade Civil War veterans were
still around – you'd need the word
skills to edge around the subject till
it became clear how things stood.





At the bus station next morning my *xe om* – motorbike taxi – drops suitcase and me. I smile at touts offering a ticket to Buon Ma Thuot for 300k. I'm still smiling as they drop to 200k.

At the bus station office the same ticket sets me back 120k.

The five hour ride is uneventful – which if you know what's good for you is how you want your bus rides in Vietnam – bar the quiet, elegantly posed and stunningly good looking woman next to me. Two hours in I note a short exchange with the driver's lad, and his handing over two small plastic bags.

She is decorously and accurately sick: nothing goes astray. She smiles self deprecatingly as, anticipating her next move, I slide back the window I'd shut minutes earlier when we hit an unmetalled – hence dust-billowing – stretch of highway. With wrist flick most genteel she sends the package sailing out.

No – I *didn't* take any pictures.



Tân Hoà

HÙNG - BI

MIẾM ĐÁNH VÀ LƯỚI CUNG LƯỚI ĐÓNG TỰ ĐỘNG NHỎ
PHỤ LỆA SẴY ĐÓNG SẴY ĐÁNH SẴY ĐÁNH

ĐÂY CỬA - BÁC ĐÀM - ĐỒ NGHỀ - BÀ LANG - CON TỖ

For the second time in a year I'm at my fave section of Buon Ma Thuot central market.

It's early afternoon: sun blistering; shade soporific. Many traders have morphed into human croissants in hammocks fixed to tree or concrete pillar.

Others, seeing my camera, urge me to snap the naps of their less alert brethren. I'll do it only if the latter don't look any way I wouldn't want to be seen.

See my essay, illustrated from last year's trip, on such matters.

Ya gotta have efficks, incha?





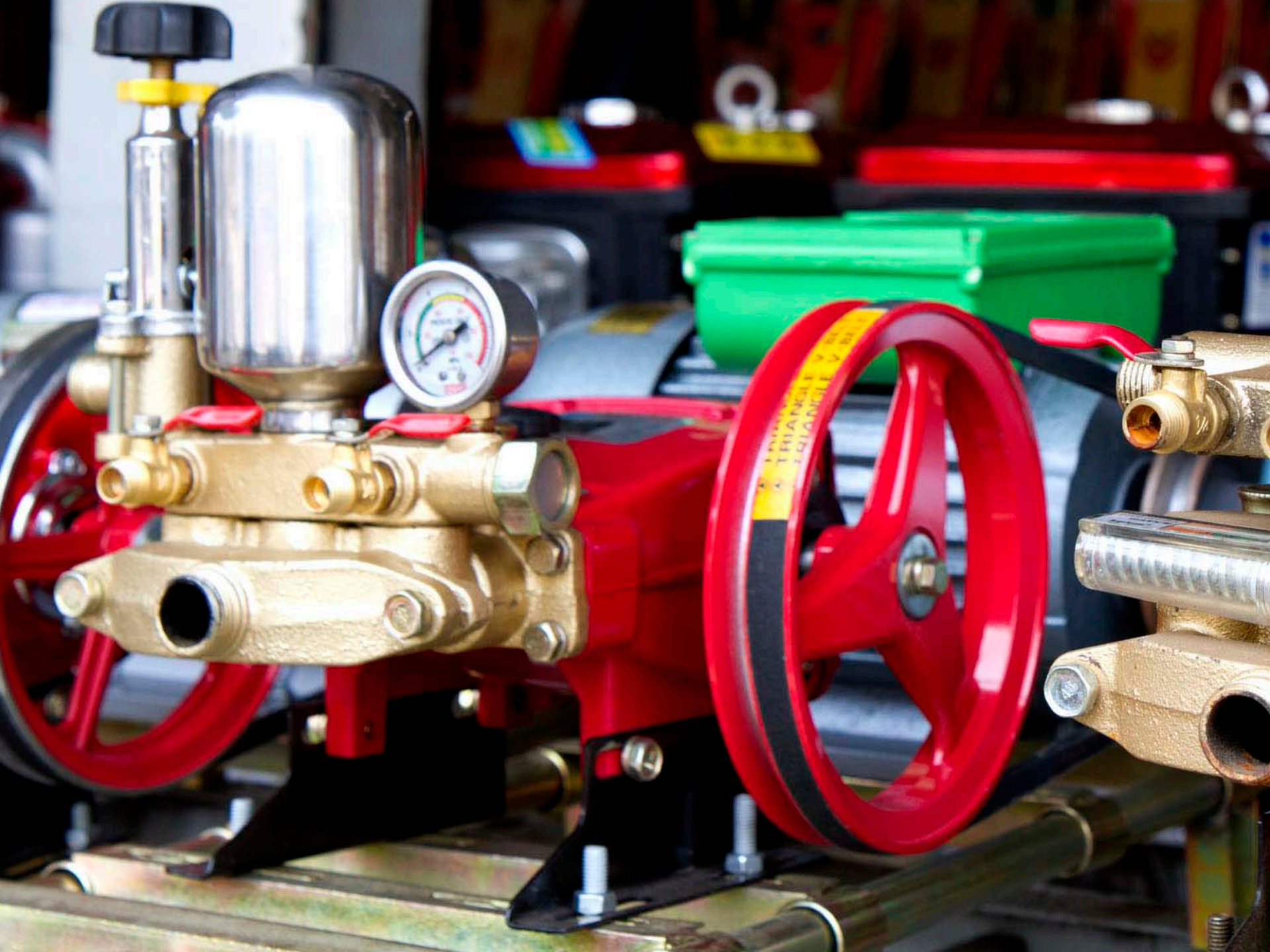




This is a cog'n gear land of bolt and band-saw; bench tool and bearing race; block pulley and PTO shaft.

I can lay fair claim to knowing a PTO shaft from a pineapple. In another life I drove a tractor and trailer for Big Jim Callaghan on one of his job schemes. The PTO plenitude tells you why this bit of market is so big. Coffee and rubber are kings round these parts. Coffee and rubber need water, and plenty of it. There *is* plenty – this is the tropics – but it has to be directed, accurately and in quantity.

That puts engineering know-how at a premium. The boy in me loves the bold reds, greens and brass of rich farmers' toys in showrooms a stone throw from these stalls ...



But the other boy in me – Sheffield born, to a steel roller – is drawn even more by the rust, blue-black and dulled silver of bare metal.

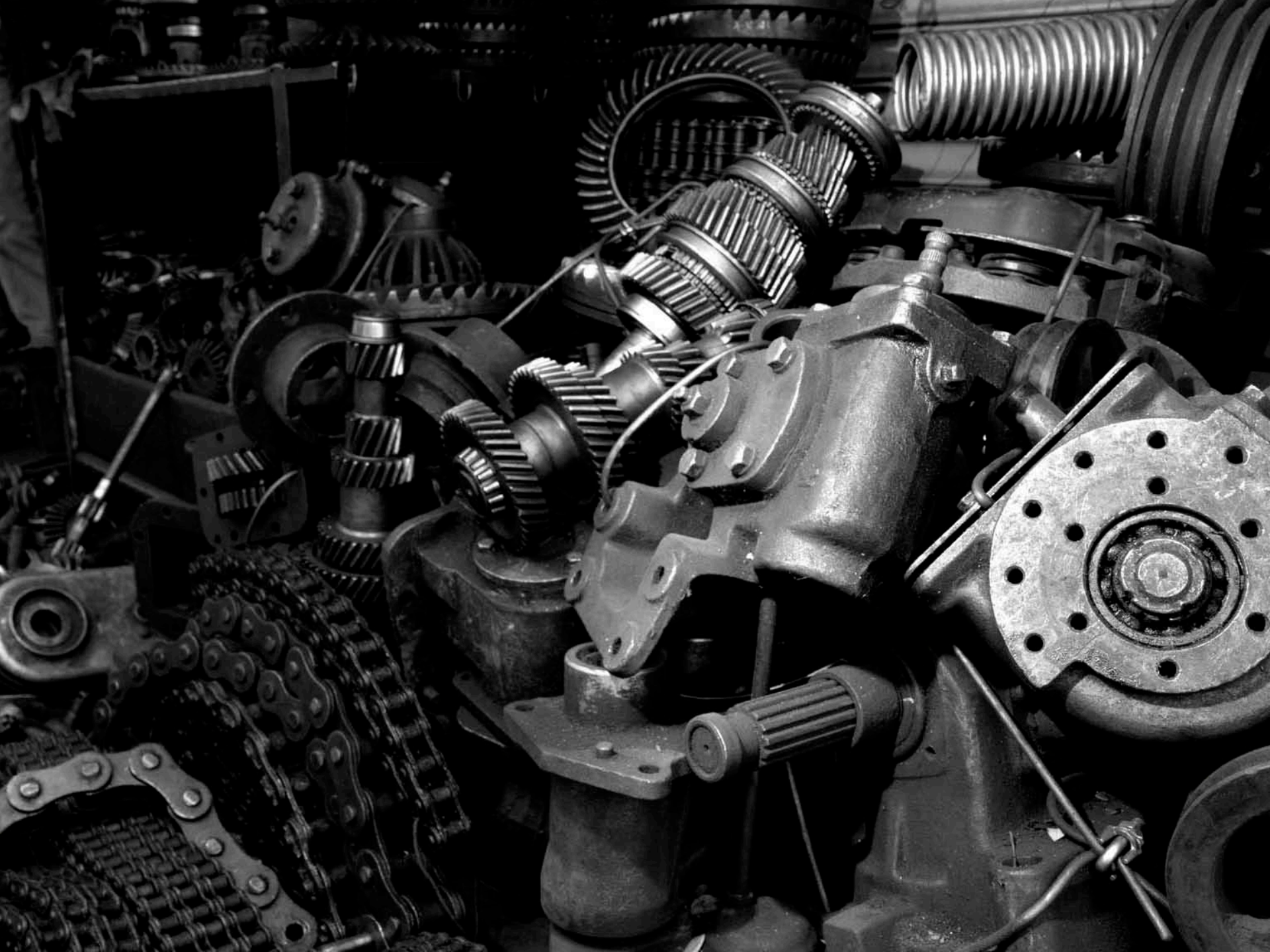
A nicely turned chunk of steel is a thing of visual and tactile beauty; *form* having intrinsic value over and above – but tied to – *function*.

These traders welcome me. I heft those of their wares light enough to allow it. They joke; trade glances with their fellows. Are they also sly poets of mill, forge and foundry? Do they too have iron in the soul and know why I'm so happy here?

Or is I just a soft farang with too much time on his hands?





















The lady has no English but smiles good. A fellow trader tells me she's 64 and looking for a husband. I say he doesn't fool me. I say she's 49.

I show two lottery tickets bought this morning from one of the many vendors who flit from bar to bar.

Crap way to have to make a living.

I have him tell her one of the tickets will make me rich. I don't yet know which one but when I do I'll come back to marry her.

She laughs, but we shake on it.

On the way out I shimmer through the bairnware and cool shorts section. This lady sells me a pair, barcode stripey and in the groove. I race back to my hotel to get them on for instant street cred.





Know what I'm saying?



Next day I get wheels. Riding round villages south of Buon Ma Thuot, I happen on this.

Many spectators – but none speak English. We can rule out a driver swerving to avoid the likes of me though: see *Motobiking II* ...



Two rescue trucks needed: lifter and tower. But (a) engine of rescuee must do its bit, (b) rescuee is rear wheel drive, (c) look where the chain is.

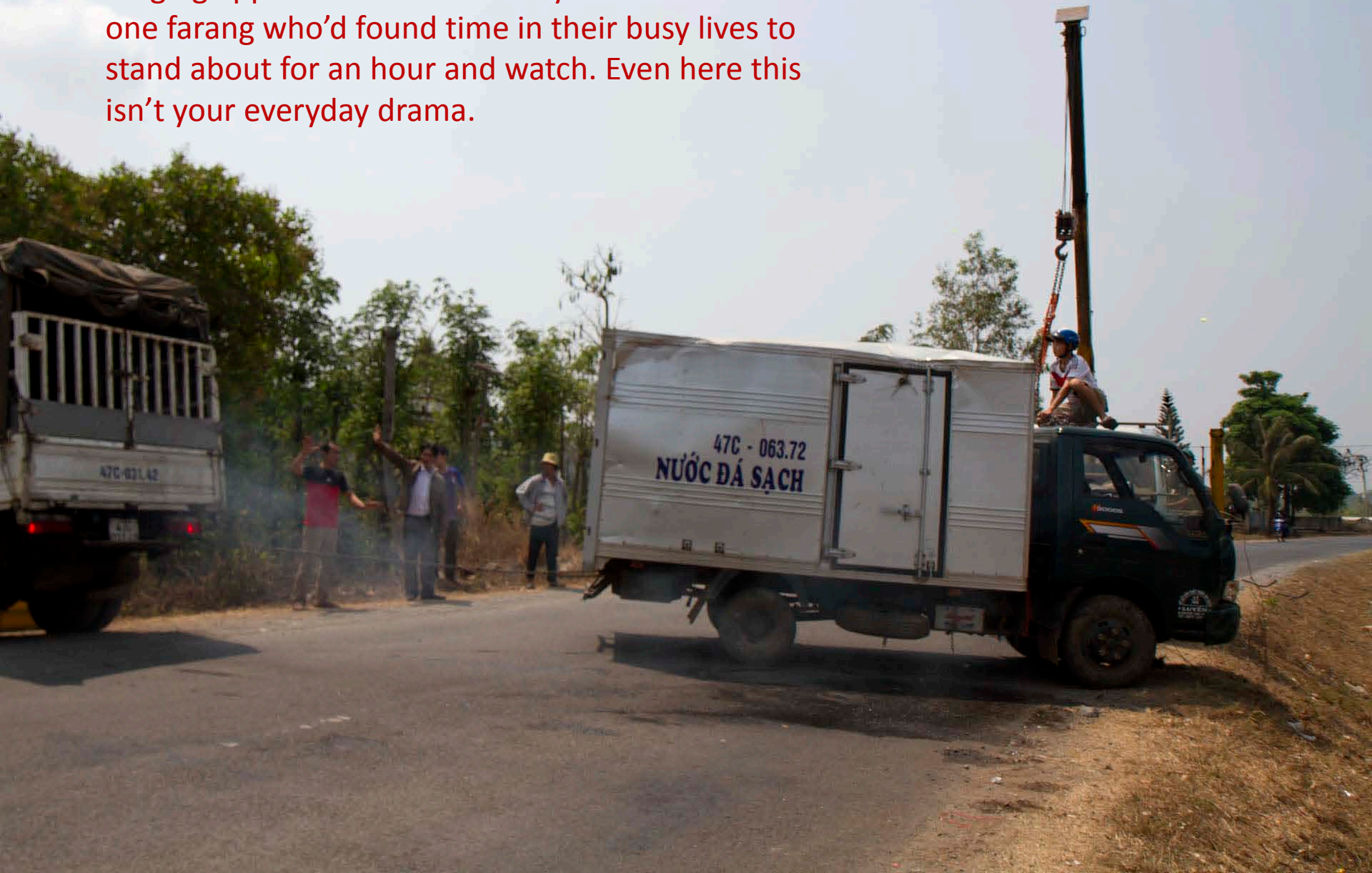


That's more like it ...



47C - 063.72
NƯỚC ĐÁ SẠCH

Ringing applause from the ninety-nine Viets and one farang who'd found time in their busy lives to stand about for an hour and watch. Even here this isn't your everyday drama.





Ho died in 1969 so never saw his country put back together again – nor the decades, long and vindictive, of Uncle Sam punishing nations who traded with her. But his presence, like Buddha, Sacred Lady of the Heart and a myriad animist shrines, is never far away.



Sunday I take a bike again. This is the way to see Vietnam. Don't be afraid to stop in remote villages. Folk may be a tad reserved at first but smiling will win through. I talk a lot in English because (a) as any animal lover knows, speech is multi-band, its verbal channel just one of many; (b) you don't feel so goofy doing all that smiling when you're saying stuff as well. Especially when they are smiling too as they talk right back in their own tongue. It's kind of therapeutic in its cordiality.







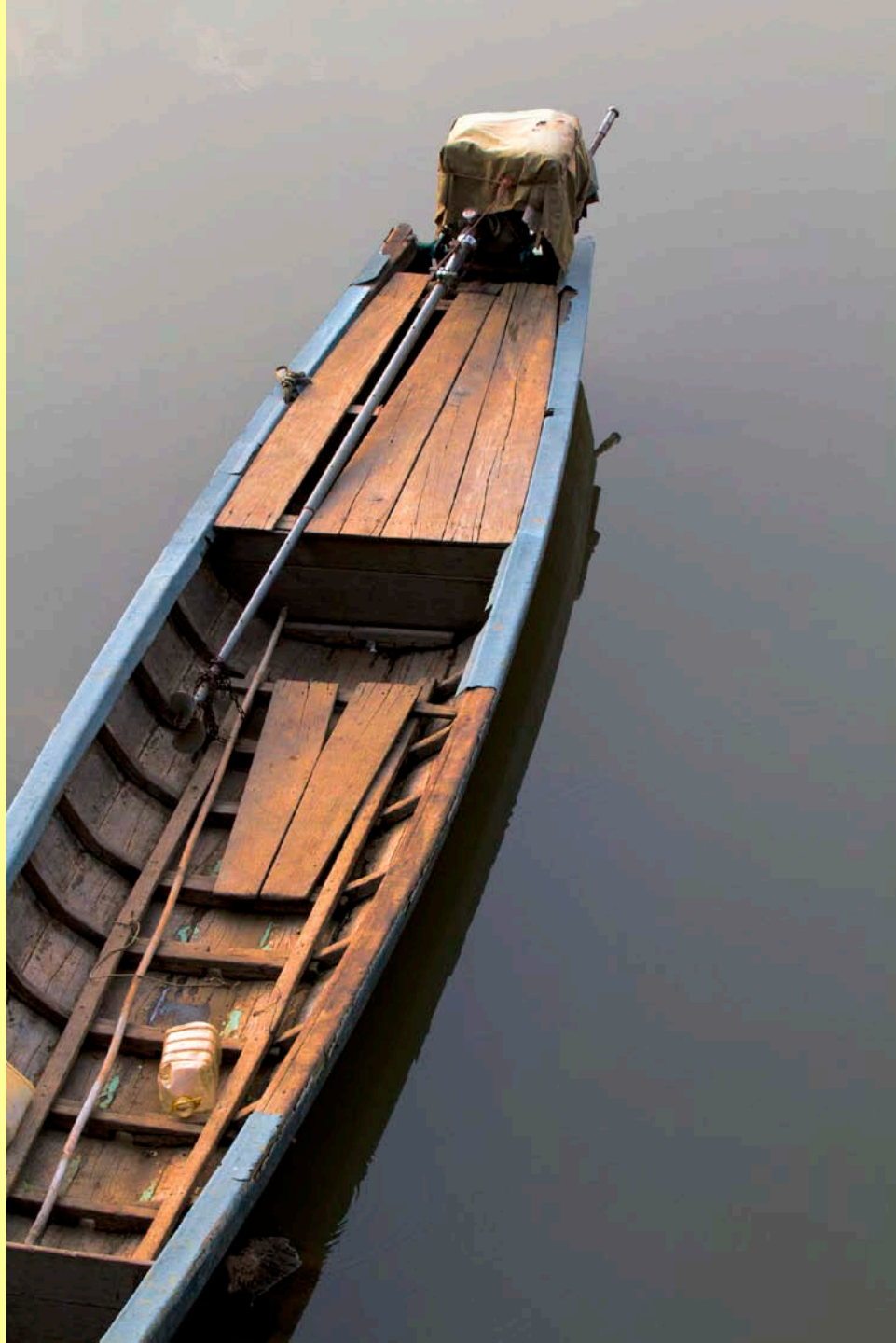












That this tiny dot
could have such
consummate
control over so
huge a fellow
creature speaks
volumes for our
place at the
cutting edge of
evolution, no?





Back at the Big Apple of Buon Ma Thuot – I'd raced back to be off the bike by nightfall (*Motorbiking II* again) – I eat cordon custard at pavement *patisserie*. I note set of youngsters at next table, and am about to ask if I can snap. They beat me to it.

Shyly, this stunner asks if they can be photographed with me. Where else would such a pretty thing *want* to put her arm round a guy my age, and be snapped doing it? I bet I'm on FB already.





**technically a crap pik:
but a good note to
end on, methinks ...**