

Da Lat days



I'm not supposed to be here at all. Sinead O'Connor

I've been meeting guys like 'Steve' since Istanbul in '74. They speak OK to excellent English, often idiomatic. Two minutes after he'd seized my case at Da Lat bus station I'd heard *hunky dory* twice and lost count on *easy peasy lemon squeezy*.

Asia's Steves have their uses and in truth are to be admired even as they irritate – they put food on the family table in the face of odds that would have us weeping like babies – but as I fix my skid lid to get up behind *this* Steve I silently applaud the wisdom of my itinerary this past three weeks.

It's kept me clear of farang hot spots and the Steves they produce.

Thinking to avoid Da Lat I'd asked at Buon Ma Thuot for Bao Loc, closer to HCMC. She shook her pretty head: '*tomorrow*'. So the Bao Loc bus isn't daily? No, not that. She rested same pretty head on side-steepled hands to mime sleep and repeated, 'Da Lat'. *Got it!* Viet roads don't support BMT to Bao Loc in a single day.

That was Tuesday. It's Friday. Guess where I am, still. Picture lovely Alpine resort; all mountains, pine and classy French archi. Add Asian kitsch. Cram 200,000 residents, with motorbikes. Add Lonely Planet crowd 'doing' Asia and booming home tourist market as Viet middle class goes exponential.

What's not to like?



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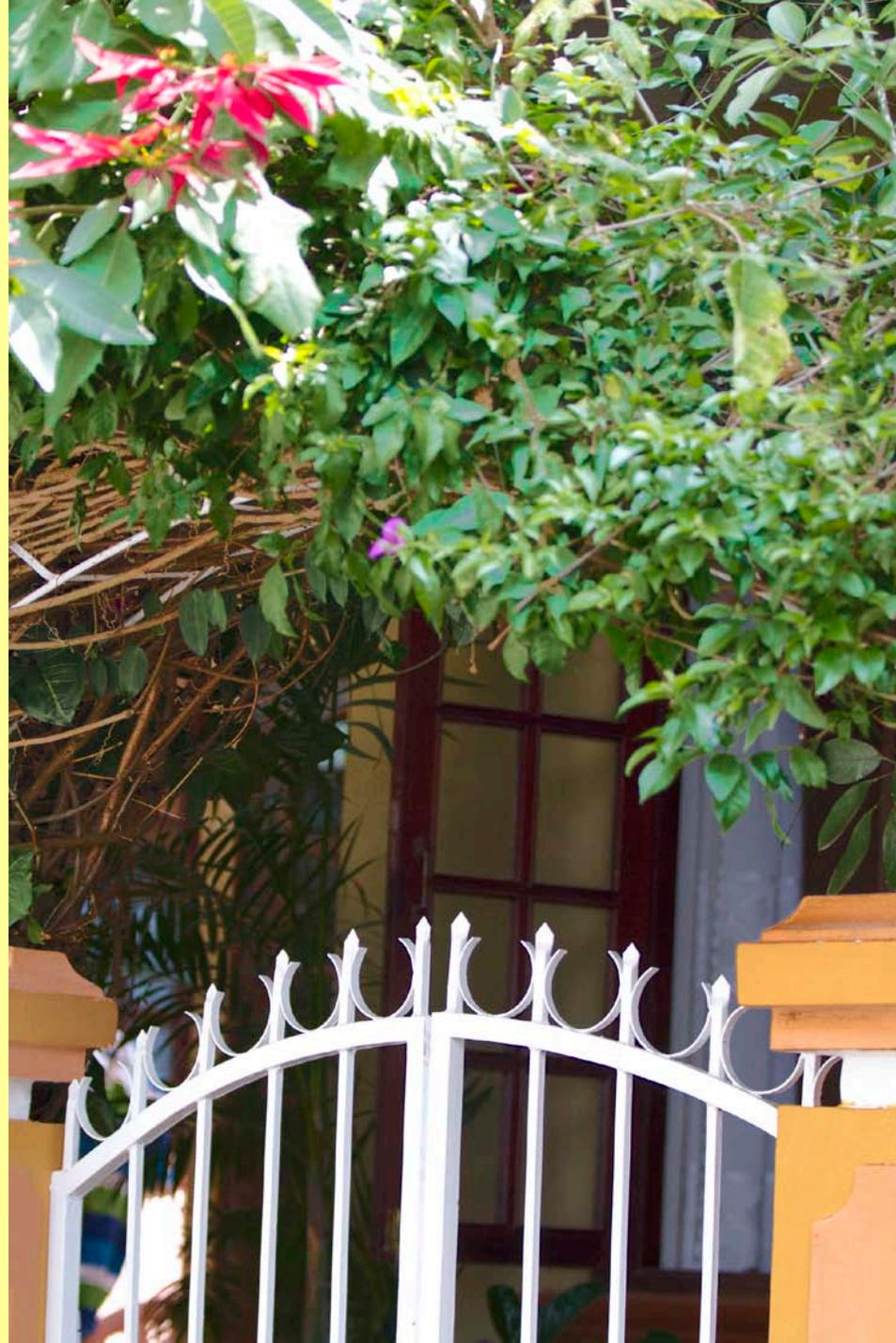
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Guest House **Phong Lữu** Travel in DaLat

QUY ĐẶC SẢN ĐÀ NHIÊN

Like St Ives, Robin Hoods Bay and other towns built into hillsides – but on a larger scale – Da Lat is full of surprises.

Leg it up a steep flight of ancient stone steps and it all changes: view, housing, ambience, people.

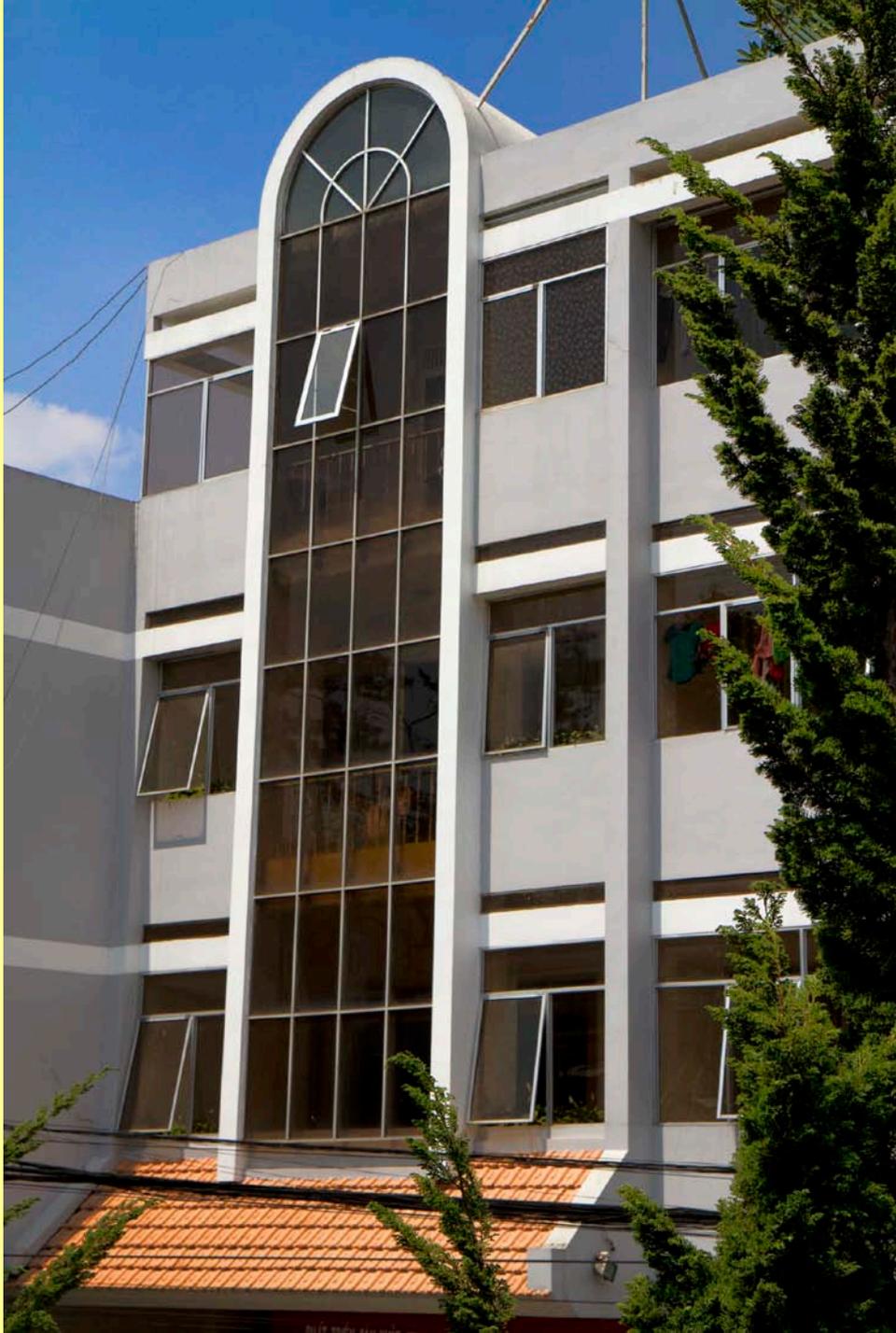




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high altitude sky, the
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Around three-thirty the heat loses ferocity. By five the rays have mellowed further, yielding the photographer's sweet spot, *aka* the golden hour.



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Khoing: another Asian Steve. I'm taking slow exposures after dark, resting camera on whatever's to hand. *"Hello my friend!"* Hmm. Where I've been, few spoke this much English and on none of the many times folks initiated contact had I cause to suspect motive.

Rule 1, we do **not** Already Know. Asian Steve/Khoing is a human being, not a stereotype. Rule 2, life is too short – and Vietnam trips way too short – for brain-insulting vacuity from smooth operators. What you get if you ignore rule 2 is mind-numbing tedium and/or rip-off. What you get **to be** if you ignore rule 1 is too ugly for words.

Earlier a bunch – is it really so scary to travel alone? – of young farangs came by. A good looking Brit – six-three, designer stubble on chiselled jaw – turned to girl beside him.

“So these Saigon hustlers are coming on every ten seconds? And I’m like, excuse me; **fuck off!**”

Don’t think he’s had her yet: still feels the need to impress ...

She tittered on cue, eyelashes full on cutesie flutter.

Yup, he’ll have her tonight ...

* * *

How about ignoring *neither* rule?

“Hey Khoing, put it there man! I’m Philip ...”

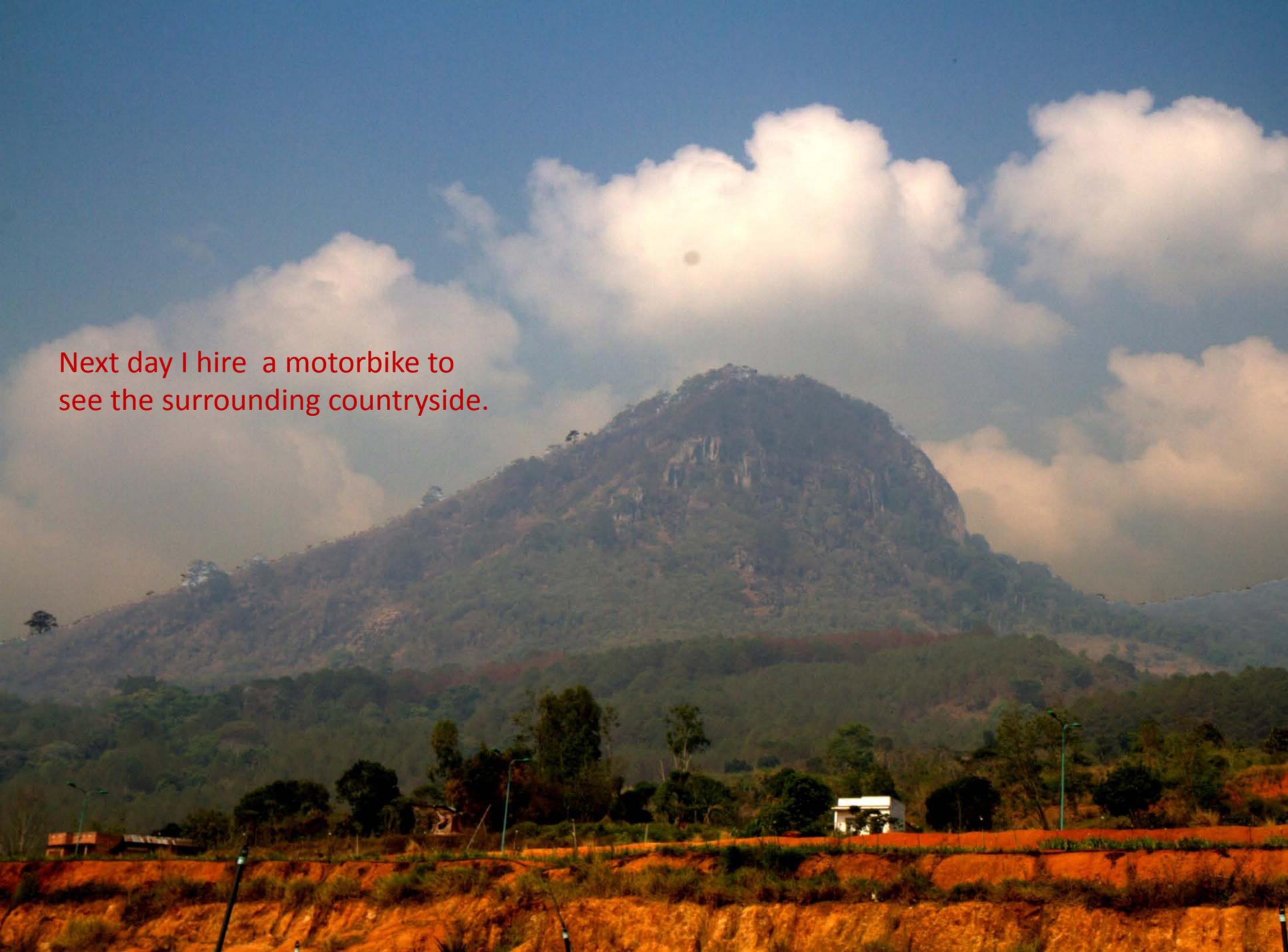
Arm out. Big smile. Eye contact.

“... I think you want to sell something – Easy Riders, right? Thought so. I don’t want to waste your time since I’m not in the market but wish you well. How is business anyway?”

Worst case it stops the drivel, and politely. (I’ll be rude if but *only* if there’s no other way apropos rule 2.)

Best case is right now. He answers with sincerity: *not good; too much competition*. Now things just got real: man to man; no BS; no agenda. It’s good. It’s wholesome. But I mustn’t detain him long; that’s not right. Can I snap him? Sure, he’s happy with that . He only *feigns* offence at my saying he looks like the young Mao. I don’t think he’s communistical.

Next day I hire a motorbike to see the surrounding countryside.



Lowland to the south. Farming country; coffee and humbler crops. No rubber that I could see.

















Country lads eating something wonderful – all chicken, spinach and Viet magic – in open fronted cafe. I'm called over. Again. What a country!

I take a mouthful. Then another. And another. From plastic bottle labelled Green Tea they pour me a small glass. It isn't green tea.

After three in a row, laughter and more food, I have just enough presence of mind to refuse glass number four. I'm 30 clicks from base – Viet roads, Viet driving – and this stuff kicks like moonshine.

Quoc is the boss. My pik doesn't do justice: he's way livelier than this.

Handsome San



Hiep – shy even
when plastered



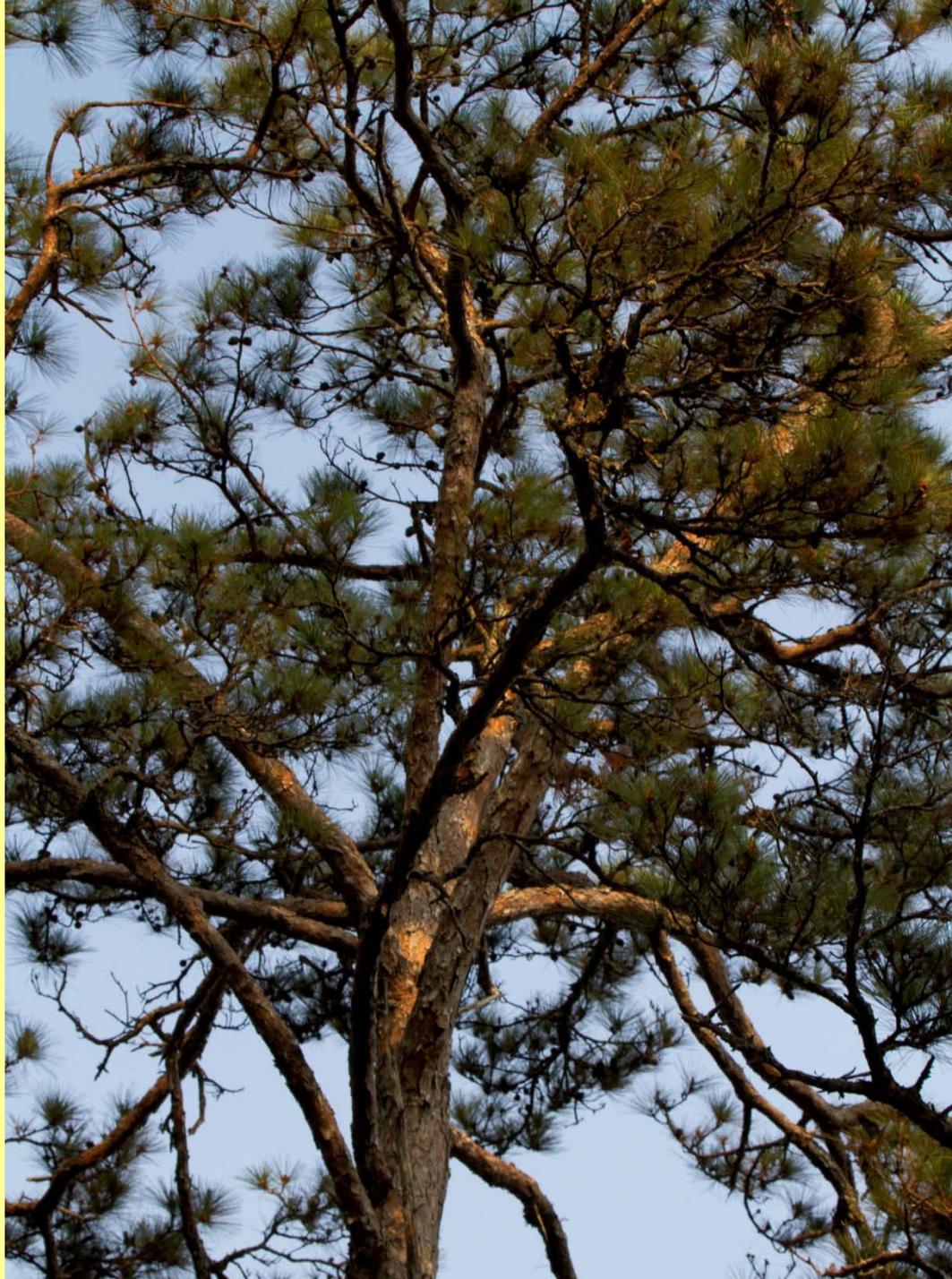


*Mister Bil – joker
and photographer*





The road back twists on up into steep mountain.
I'm glad I turned down that fourth glass.





Could be Cumbria, no?



OK, maybe not. For reasons I'll go into another time – reasons to do with China – Vietnam is on the alert.



075
TEXT





I'm keen to be back before dark
– but not so keen as to pass on a
hillside market town at golden
hour ...





COFFEE

063.2219 581

Sach



Now I really **do**
have to get on
my bike and burn
rubber.
Show over.



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