



# Good morning Vietnam!

Vietnam was a new cycling destination for me; I've done many trips in Thailand and Laos as well as several in Europe. This time I wanted to go somewhere fresh; Europe is a long flight, the fare is over \$2000 return and daily costs are relatively high. Research on the internet led me to a group tour of the Mekong Delta starting and finishing in Ho Chi Minh City which everyone still calls Saigon, even though the name was officially changed one day after the end of the "American war".

The tour operator was ActiveAsia, a Vietnamese company; I booked through World Expeditions in Melbourne, the agent for Australia. Details and prices are on

<http://www.activeasiavietnam.com/cycling-tours/south-vietnam/mekong-delta-cycle-tour-9-days-inn-trip.html>

My criteria included reasonable daily distances, not too many hills, interesting surroundings and good quality hotels. Most tour companies carry your suitcase from hotel to hotel so it is waiting for you at the end of the day's ride. My bike was a Trek hybrid with sprung front forks, good on dirt roads and the tracks along the canal banks. The tour was nine days/eight nights with up to 51km riding a day.

There are many ways to get to Saigon from Melbourne. The most direct is with Vietnam Air but the fare is relatively high. An economical route is via Singapore. I flew via Bangkok in Thailand both ways, spending a week in the Land of Smiles on the way out and then two weeks after the bike tour; I met up with my sister and her husband, refugees from the cold English winter and also had my regular visit to the dentist in Bangkok; the service is excellent and the charges are about

one third of Australia; for example I had three X-rays at only 50 bahts each, less than two dollars.

My return ticket to Bangkok on Thai Airways cost \$865 on Skyscanner and a return from Bangkok to Saigon on Jetstar Asia was \$134. You do not need a visa for Thailand for up to thirty days but I did have to buy one for Vietnam, a hefty \$95.

The Vietnamese currency is the dong; there are no fewer than twenty thousand dong to one US dollar. If a Vietnamese says the price of your purchase is “Forty”, that means forty thousand dong, two dollars. I did enquire if there was any proposal to clean up the currency (as has been done in other countries including Germany, France and Turkey) but the answer seemed to be that it was not necessary. In tourist areas American dollars were widely accepted – you get your small change in dong – but not in small local convenience stores. I’d taken \$US500 cash with me and still had some money in hand at the end of the trip so splurged it on a large bottle of Bombay Blue gin at the airport; dong are worthless outside Vietnam. So I averaged \$50 a day in spends on bits of shopping, ice creams, beer and a few meals; the bike tour price did include most meals.

The bike tour price included one night on arrival at the May Hotel in Saigon; I got there sooner so had booked an extra two nights on the internet. On the way from the airport we passed the palace of the former president of South Vietnam; in the forecourt was the Chinese tank which drove in through the wrought-iron gates to end the so-called “American War” on 30 April 1975. The hotel was fine, only a few minutes walk from the centre of Saigon. One whole city block was a construction site to be the main station of a new metro system being built by the Japanese; the first line of 35km will be underground in the city centre but on stilts further out.



Traffic is terrifying, Saigon has ten million residents and seven million small motorbikes. At an intersection they are lined up twenty wide and twenty deep, ready to roar off on full throttle when the light turns green or even before. To cross the road I just tagged onto a group of locals; the technique is to walk across the road at an even pace, not slowing down or speeding up – one motorbike swerves to miss your front by ten centimetres and another brushes your rear! I did not see any accidents. Motorbikes divert onto the pavements in places to cut past holdups so you do need to keep your eyes open and be ready to leap out of the way.

On my first evening I was hesitating at a crossing on my way back to the hotel. A pretty young woman saw my plight and took me by the hand to lead me across the road. She then enquired where I was staying and could I find the way? Generously she offered to accompany me back to the hotel for a fee.” Tomorrow”, I promised.

There were only four riders on the tour, all from Australia: John and Christine from Ocean Grove, Karen from Perth and me. We had an outstanding leader, Viet, 30, with excellent English and Mr. Mung drove the support van with the luggage; he met us at points on our route to hand out fresh bottles of water and to give a lift to anyone who fancied a rest. Neither John nor I did this but the two ladies fell victim to temptation on occasions.



Viet, Ian, Christine, John, Karen. Mr Mung took the photo.

The Mekong Delta is a rich agricultural area with enormous rice fields and many fields growing vegetables and fruit. One of the world's largest rivers, flowing 4500km from Tibet, the Mekong (“mother river”) has eight estuaries. However eight is an unlucky number so the Vietnamese say it has nine estuaries! On our route we crossed hundreds of canals which channel water for farming, some wide with a lot of boat traffic and some very small. New canals are being built, nowadays by machine, not hard manual labour as in the nineteenth century.





Makeshift “monkey bridges” cross the small canals. Kids run across them but I was more cautious.



The Victoria Hotel at Chau Doc in the Mekong Delta was a two night highlight of our trip. Originally built in French colonial times it has been completely restored and modernised with lavish spacious rooms, a delicious restaurant and a riverside swimming pool with a cocktail bar. We played pool in the lounge in the evenings after a stroll along the riverbank. The Victoria at Can Tho was almost as nice.

**Vietnamese etiquette note**

A visitor to a home is offered a cup of tea. A full cup means “When you finish it, off you go.” A partly filled cup means “ Welcome, many refills.”



Reception at the Victoria Hotel in Can Tho included a no-charge welcoming neck and shoulder massage.

Statistics can tell us a lot but do not always reflect the reality of everyday. Many agree that the cost of living in Thailand is about one third of Australia; that is why so many pensioners retire there to live better than they could at home. The same is true of Vietnam; people looked well fed, well dressed and cheerful.

Country	Population millions	Gross Domestic Product per head	Gross Domestic Product per head in purchasing power parity (USA 100%)
Vietnam	88.8	1407	7
Thailand	69.5	4970	18
Australia	22.6	61790	87

Source, *The Economist yearbook 2014*

**Travellers' tip**

If going to a Muslim area, check the location of your hotel. Is there a mosque nearby? If so, you are liable to be awakened at 5.30am by an amplified call to prayer, not just a few seconds long, but some minutes.

This trip I was caught thus on Phi Phi island in Thailand and I remembered a similar trap years ago in Istanbul.



A neighbour kindly looks after my unit when I am overseas: checks the post, runs the car engine etc so I decided to buy her a small Vietnamese landscape painting as a thank you. The shop I went into had a large collection of copies of Monets, Manets, van Goghs and anything else you fancied, "We'll have it ready tomorrow for you". I invested in Gustav Klimt's famous "The Kiss"; I'd seen the original in the Belvedere Palace in Vienna two years ago. The landscape and the Klimt cost \$45 (opening price was \$57), rolled up for safety in a cardboard tube.



The original is just about lifesize. My copy was smaller, about one metre square. But then I paid just \$US40, not \$100 million.

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