

# WHAT IT TAKES: THE EASY RIDERS OF VIETNAM

# NAM

There are 65 million motorbikes buzzing through the streets of Vietnam and they are the best way for foreigners to experience the Land of the Blue Dragon. This has created a market for motorbike guides, known as Easy Riders, who help tourists experience the country like a local, travelling with them for weeks at a time. This is a peak into the life of an Easy Rider.

**M**otorbikes and Vietnam go together like egg and coffee – which, if you haven’t tried, go together surprisingly well (cà phê trứng if you’re interested). The country is the fourth largest consumer of motorcycles in the world and there’s a whole genre of travel article teaching tourists how to dance the dance around the 65 million bikes that clog its streets. If you’re lucky enough to find yourself in this jewel of South East Asia, it’s unlikely you’ll leave without getting on the back of a bike, whether that’s on a multi-day tour through the stunning northern mountains or simply on a Grab Bike; which is like Uber but with motorbikes and the most convenient way to get around Vietnam’s major cities.

This bike-heavy infrastructure and a want to do as the locals do has made motorbike tours one of the most popular activities for foreigners in Vietnam. Adventure tourists, many of them for the first time, rent bikes and often guides to explore the spell-binding countryside and mountain passes. This has created a demand for guides and riders who can use the skills they likely already have – a motorbike license – and make good money from the 12.6 million international visitors to the country (2023).

To be a guide, it’s likely that some level of a foreign language is required, but this can vary from place to place as Tuan Tran (the founder of Vietnam’s original motorbike tour company, Easy Riders Vietnam) explained in an interview in May. To carry a pillion passenger without guiding, the only barrier to entry is a license and a want to travel across the country’s stunning, if occasionally treacherous, roads.

## Natural Assets

With the country only opening fully to international tourism in 1992, following a turbulent century of European colonialism and American aggression, the industry developed slowly but naturally, taking advantage of Vietnam’s natural resources. Universities started offering business and tourism courses in English for students to take advantage of the growing market; students like Tuan, who attended Da Lat University which is famous for its English education.

“We are some of the first generation who studied English properly when Vietnam opened for foreign tourists. We went to university for tourism and business in English in 1996. We started walking from the student areas to the city centre where we could meet foreign tourists to practice our English as well as improve our listening and speaking skills. At that time there were very few people who could speak English so the foreign tourists really liked the idea and asked us if we could help them to walk around and take them on a motorbike. Motorbikes are one of the most convenient way to travel around Vietnam, so we started and, at first, we took them for a couple of hours around the city and then later on to the countryside and they loved the way that we did it. They asked us if we could take them to other provinces like Nha Trang, Hoi An and some people wanted to travel all the way to Hanoi. Because of that, we became famous I guess. Some of the guidebooks like Lonely Planet wrote about us. They have big sections about travelling in Vietnam and wrote; ‘if you travel to Vietnam, you should do this’.”

Others had similar ideas and the popularity of Tuan’s moniker ‘Easy Riders’ (so called because the 1969 American cult film Easy Rider) caught on. “The people in Hoi An, Da Nang or Hanoi spoke a little English. They said to tourists on the street, ‘Hello, I’m an Easy Rider, would you like to do a day tour?’ around the same time [as Easy Riders Vietnam gained popularity].”

Before long, Vietnam became internationally synonymous with motorbike tourism which was cemented when, just 11 years after Tuan started his company, Top Gear released a 75-minute feature episode ‘The Vietnam Special’ in 2008. The three hosts were tasked with buying cheap motorbikes and riding the length of the country on them. The massive



Taking a rest in the Central Highlands



# HA GIANG PROVINCE

Because of its mountainous terrain, flash flooding is not uncommon in Ha Giang, however, in July 2024 disastrous land-slides and flooding claimed three lives and damaged 350 houses and countless roads in the Ha Giang province. As those affected rebuild their villages and tourism returns, it is vital that locals are able to share in the profits of the tourism that their communities facilitate in order to develop a more resilient and safe home province.



Travelling on rural country roads in the heart of Vietnam

popularity of the show and the adoring way they described their experiences in the ‘incredible, beautiful, brilliant country’ immediately put Vietnam at the top of many traveller’s bucket-lists. Their description of the Hai Van Pass, which connects the ancient capital of Hue and the vibrant port of Da Nang, as ‘one of the best coast roads in the world’ brought a wave of tourists who were, perhaps for the first time, interested in riding beautiful and interesting roads on the back of a bike. The show was so popular that, in country, the road is known as the ‘Top Gear Pass’.

16 years on from the Top Gear boom, Vietnam is a highly appealing destination in South East Asia with stunning sights from the very top of the country to the very bottom. It’s impossible to tell how many tourists engage with the bike tourism industry, or indeed travel to the country specifically to partake in it, but looking at a province like Ha Giang, which could be considered a contemporary equivalent to the Hai Van Pass for its popularity with bikers, suggests that it’s a high percentage. In 2023, the province welcomed 9 million visitors, 3 million (or 23% of the total, national tourism number) of which were international. Though a percentage of that number came to the region for hiking or cultural stays, the Chairman of the Ha Giang Provincial Tourism Association acknowledged in November of 2023 that the majority of that number are hire motorbikes and their guides to ride the Ha Giang Loop, which sutures the rural, ethnic minority communities of the northern mountains with the rest of the country. These numbers suggest that bike tours remain one of the major tourist past-times in Vietnam and therefore an attractive, year-round job prospect for Vietnam’s 98 million people.

## The Same River Twice

For Tuan, the realisation that there was money to be made showing tourists around on the back of a motorbike, and that he himself enjoyed the travel and cultural exchange of it all, happened accidentally.

“We had a German couple who were backpacking in Vietnam in 1997. First, they wanted to do a day trip around Da Lat in the countryside.”

When the day trip was over, Tuan and the other guides showed them a notebook of messages from tourists who had enjoyed their time with the then students.

“We showed them the notebook and then they said, ‘Oh, can we do another three day tour to Na Trang, because we like the way you travel?’ We did a three day tour to Na Trang and then on the last lunch, on the third day of the trip, they talked to each other and they said ‘we really want to go to Hoi An with you guys.’ So we travel to Hoi An for another four days - so seven days - and when we were in Hoi An they said ‘Can you wait for us for one day in order to relax? And then we would love to travel all the way to Hanoi.’ It’s funny because at first we just brought clothes for three days and at the time Vietnam was still really poor. We didn’t have laundrettes or anything like nowadays, so when we were in Hoi An we had to go to the tailor shop to make new clothes so that we could travel all the way to Hanoi.

That was the very first time that we travelled far away, and from Hoi An to Hanoi we didn’t know the road. We had the map and no internet and we lost the way sometimes, but whenever we got to a freeway we stopped at a cafe and asked the locals for the road to travel on.”

Tours continue to vary in length from one and three days to full weeks and even months on the road. Tuan’s wanderlust and love for meeting locals and foreigners alike means he prefers longer tours, and has done since the exploratory days of his youth. For every rider and guide however, these longer tours come at a cost.

“You have to stay away from home for several days, which is hard when you have a family and children. So without the passion I cannot do this because I’m away from home. It’s hard but it’s good if you like it, if you have a passion about it. It’s good to also have income to support the local communities.”

Tuan joked that he and his colleagues were not only tour guides





Riding the Ho Chi Minh Trail



An Easy Rider group stops near Lak Lake

but “storytellers, buddies, and translators”, starting work at 8:30 in the morning, finishing riding at 4:30 or five and then having dinner and drinks with clients, and talking about “history, customs and cultures”, until midnight. His favourite tours include his local central highlands, because there, “nobody swims in the same river twice”.

“It’s over five provinces and it’s really beautiful because of the mountains. Vietnam has about 54 different ethnic groups and the Central Highlands have about 44 of them. That means it’s really interesting to explore the different culture and customs, the ways of life. It’s different every day that we travel. And the landscape of the Central Highlands is also really interesting.”

## The Price of Popularity

This interchange of cultures, both between Vietnamese groups and with foreigners, is one of the things that makes travelling with the Easy Riders special. Tuan and his clients have been invited into countless homes and been cooked countless meals by locals in traditional villages. He’s even been involved in a number of weddings, which he says often take place on the roadside in Vietnam.

Tuan admitted that in places like Ha Giang, where tourists often outnumber locals, this type of relationship is not possible. Foreigners have the time to forge relationships with their guides and riders but a lack of tourism infrastructure in what is one of the poorest provinces in the country means the transient nature of bike tourism is compounded in Ha Giang. With the main activity of a bike tour being ‘passing through’, tourists spend relatively little money within the regions that they travel in. In provinces where visitor numbers are so high, this creates an environment where the

local infrastructure cannot keep up with the influx of transient tourism because the money being generated by the tourism isn’t reinvested.

The Dong Van Karst Geopark, which is one of the main attractions along the Ha Giang Loop, famed for its glistening peaks and plummeting valleys, is home to around 400,000 people made up of 19 ethnic groups. Despite the millions of bikes carrying millions of tourists through their farms and villages every year, only 1.4% of the park’s residents earn any money from tourism.

Many companies, including Tuan’s, partner with organisations that help to improve the lives of ethnic minorities throughout Vietnam (who, although representing just 15% of the population, account for 70% of the people living in poverty). These organisations provide education and resources to the communities and the tour companies offer socially and environmentally conscious trips, operate and encourage their guests to spend money locally, and facilitate meaningful cultural exchanges with residents. The governments in Ha Giang are also putting in place measures to prevent this economic leak, including the introduction of fees to certain tourist attractions (previously just four attractions along the Ha Giang Loop charged for entry) including the Dong Van Karst Geopark, and providing education to the ethnic minority populations in languages like Vietnamese and English. The hope is that more locals will be able to earn money directly from tourism which can then be reinvested in their homes, businesses and villages to create a more resilient province in the face of its swelling popularity.

## Like Friends

The continuing success of motorbike tourism in Vietnam and the sheer



Twisting roads in the Central Highlands complement the views

| Epic Views on the Ha-Gaing-Loop



amount of potential revenue on offer has meant that the leaking of profits away from locals is happening on an international scale as well, which Tuan understands all too well.

“Because of our reputation there are so many people who steal our content and make their own websites illegally. For example, a Dutch couple made a website - they just sell the tours to Dutch people or European tourists and then resell them to riders. The commission is like 15-20% of that of the price. Then they send it to the local riders and those local riders don't have any permits or certificates to travel with the tourists. If something happened, an accident or something like that, they could just run away and nobody knows who they are. So that's dangerous.”

Tuan has consulted lawyers about his options when it comes to preventing such practices but they are limited and come at a high price point. As with many of the issues affecting popular tourism destinations, the most simple solution is for prospective clients to do their due diligence and ensure they are booking with local companies that have the proper licenses and insurance. This helps to support local tourism infrastructures, works towards protecting the wages and rights of guides and riders, and keeps passengers safe if anything should go wrong on the road.

Relative to European countries, things do go wrong more frequently on Vietnamese roads, especially in poor and mountainous provinces like the ever-popular Ha Giang. Poor road surfaces, bad traffic and reckless driving are typically pointed to as causes for this problem, but it is exacerbated in popular tourist destinations by the influx of inexperienced foreign riders renting bikes cheaply.

Ha Giang with its steep cliff faces, narrow roads, and unreliable weather is not a good training ground for new riders, and even riders without licenses,

but it's common to find inexperienced tourists at the handle-bars on these unfamiliar roads. Unfortunately, this has on numerous occasions led to fatalities.

“To be honest, there are so many people that have died who have tried to drive by themselves in Ha Giang, especially the young people who travel to Vietnam and hear about the motorbikes and have never been on a motorcycle before. The people who live say it's beautiful. They really like it because the scenery, the villages, the customs, the colourful life of the local people, but there are people who cannot talk because they died.”

We talk to each other because in Vietnam we know that many serious accidents are caused by foreign tourists. The people who want to ride a motorcycle in Vietnam - we recommend them to have their own motorcycle license. Otherwise, just jump on the back of our motorbikes and we'll cruise them around. They still have the feeling of adventure and what motorbikes have to offer.”

The reality of the fatalities in some of the popular destinations for easy riding shouldn't put people off exploring the magnificent country via its most quintessential mode of transport. Neither should any of the social and economic concerns raised. Ultimately, it is a thrilling, awe-inspiring and convenient way to see a very special country. With a conscious effort to choose the right guide and location and a consideration for the local communities en route, motorbike tourism can be a sustainable, accessible and profitable force within Vietnam's tourism sector. What is most special about it however, is you could make a friend for life in your guide as you witness Vietnam from their perspective and share in their enthusiasm for its beauty. As Tuan put it;

“It's like friends travelling together.” 