

JOURNEYS VIETNAM



JUSTIN MOTT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The southwestern section of the Mekong Delta is known as Vietnam's rice basket. The author bicycled 200 miles through the delta region.

The Mekong, Seen Over Handlebars

By PORTER FOX

THE squeaky bridge appeared again off the left shoulder of the dirt road. Cobbled together out of rusty iron bars and splintered lumber, the wooden structure spanned a murky, slow-moving canal, one of thousands that crisscross the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam. At one end of the bridge, a laminated sign showed gruesome photographs of crocodile victims to discourage passers-by from taking a dip. On the other, a line of mopeds waited their turn to cross the rickety overpass.

The deck was barely wide enough for my bicycle, and as I pedaled my way past the coming traffic, I realized that this was the third time I had crossed this bridge in as many hours. There was no denying it: I was going in circles, completely lost in the Mekong Delta.

Which was, in a way, the point of the trip. After eluding DVD hawkers and French tourists for a week in the backpacker boomtowns of Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City, exploring the marshy backwaters of Vietnam by bicycle seemed the perfect break. Traveling by bike affords a kind of eye-level communion you can't get on a bus or train. What's more, most of the delta's roads are built atop narrow levees that were engineered by Ngyuen lords in the 16th century, so the only way to get around is by bike or boat.

The plan was to cut a jigsaw route across the delta, starting in the east in Ho Chi Minh City and biking southwest for 200 miles to the Gulf of Thailand. The tour would take four days, on Trek hybrid bikes brought over from New York. Each bike was outfitted with panniers that held a change of clothing, lightweight sleeping bag, rain jacket and, perhaps most importantly, a military compass from the 1960s, bought just days earlier in the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon.

ONLINE: IMAGES OF VIETNAM

Tour the Mekong Delta in a slide show at:

nytimes.com/travel

It was a steamy Monday in late December, when a taxi dropped me and my girlfriend, A'yen Tran, on a nondescript road an hour south of Ho Chi Minh City, near the village of Thu Thua. The smell of sawdust wafted from a nearby boatyard. A long junk drifted down the canal, transporting rice and sugarcane. As we hopped on our bikes and rode off, nearly everything appeared green — even the air, so thick with humidity that it obscured the sun.

The plan for that day was to ride 60 miles southwest, to the trading outpost of Cai Be. But none of the roads leading from Thu Thua were marked, so we ended up riding an Escher loop back through town. Three laps later, we decided to stop at a roadside cafe where the owner, a kindly middle-aged woman in a flowery green pantsuit, drew us a map accompanied by directions written in Vietnamese.

Soon, we were high-wheeling along a levee that weaved past open-air houses, convenience stores and bamboo cafes on stilts along the shoulder. Schoolchildren on clunky three-speeds eyed our featherweight aluminum frames and sleek helmets. Everywhere we looked, rice farmers plodded behind water buffaloes in the lush paddies.

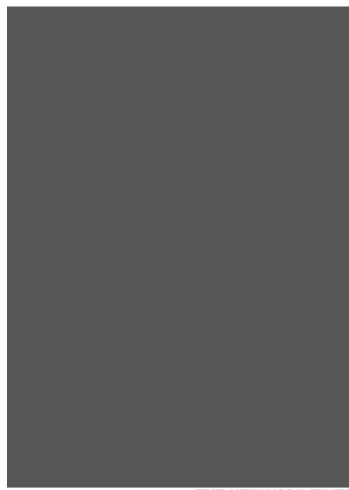
Four hours and 40 miles later, twilight approached and the green hue morphed into a dull orange. Our stomachs were rumbling, so we stopped 20 miles short of Cai Be, at a tumbledown roadside cafe built onto the side of a house. A glass case displayed freshly sliced vegetables, herbs and 17 varieties of fruit-flavored soda.

The owner brought us two banh mi chay tofu sandwiches stacked with hot peppers, coriander and pickled carrots. By the time we finished, it was dark outside. The owner, a young father of four, invited us to camp on the cafe floor. Since there wasn't a hotel for miles, we accepted and soon fell asleep to the sound of cartoons blaring on a TV.

In the morning, the father sent us off with highballs of thick, black Vietnamese coffee cut with condensed milk. Buzzed on caffeine, we planned to make up for lost time and ride through Cai Be,

until we reached the hub city of Can Tho. We pedaled hard past a shipyard assembling halves of a 60-foot steel junk, a rice mill loading burlap sacks onto a barge, and an enormous Stalinist sculpture of three workers' fists thrust in the air.

An hour later, we recognized the floating market of Cai Be, made up of a dozen wholesalers hawking sugar cane, rice, fruit and vegetables from boats floating in the Tien River, one of the branches of the Mekong. Buyers circled



THE NEW YORK TIMES

the boats in sampans, inspecting the goods displayed on tall wooden poles.

To continue our trek, we needed to find someone willing to ferry us and our bikes across the Tien River to the city of Vinh Long. It took us half an hour, but we finally found a teenager in a Samsung jersey who agreed to do it for 650,000 dong, about \$36 at 17,600 dong to the dollar. After spending the past 36 hours essentially riding blindfolded, we were happy to hop aboard his 14-foot sampan and watch him navigate the 12th largest river in the world.

The Mekong flows about 2,600 miles from its headwaters in Tibet before diffusing into the delta. The Vietnamese call the river Cuu Long, or Nine Dragons, referring to the nine rivers it splits into. It took two hours for our teenage skipper to cross the Mekong and dock in

Vinh Long. There, we caught a bus — bikes on the roof — to Can Tho, the delta's commercial center, before rolling into the whitewashed facade of the Victoria Can Tho Resort just after sunset.

Victoria hotels are an institution in Vietnam and Cambodia. The Can Tho hotel was built in 1998, but its teak balustrades, hardwood floors and bamboo ceiling fans evoked a Rudyard Kipling poem. Staff members quickly snatched our muddy bikes at the check-in counter and produced hot towels for us to wipe down with.

The following morning, a dapper concierge mapped the remainder of the route across the delta. We spent the next two days following his handwritten directions along the 100-mile ride to the ocean.

The southwestern region of the delta is known as Vietnam's rice basket, and for 10 hours a day we cruised past endless fields of green rice paddies. Workers in conical bamboo hats waved as we rode by, and every 20 miles or so there was a graveyard for soldiers soldiers from the war.

On the final morning, modern Vietnam reemerged when we left the provincial capital of Vi Thanh to make the 70-mile push to Rach Gia, a seedy port town on the Gulf of Thailand. We hoped to catch a ferry to the white sand island of Phu Quoc, but the last ferry was scheduled to leave at 3 p.m.

As the red-and-white mile markers to Rach Gia ticked down, the scenery quickly changed from rice paddies to industrial chaos. Thousands of mopeds, transport trucks and tour buses clogged the highway. Sunglasses vendors hailed from the soft shoulder, then DVD hawkers, T-shirt salesmen and children hustling 12-volt batteries.

Somehow, we were able to get to the ferry five minutes before departure, and collapsed on the stern deck, still in our biking clothes. A German couple sat next to us and struck up a conversation. They said they had just come from a package tour of Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh City and asked where we'd been. We answered that we had no idea, but that it was somewhere deep in the Mekong Delta. ■

LETTERS

PITTSBURGH AS THEATER

To the Editor: I got a kick out of the travel section's "36 Hours in Pittsburgh" (July 6). Pittsburghers have known for a long time that the only people who don't like our city are those who have never visited. The theater scene here is vibrant. Not to be missed is Quantum Theatre (www.quantumtheatre.com), which since 1990 has been producing works in sites specific to them like a city park, abandoned industrial warehouse or an empty swimming pool in Andrew Carnegie's first library building in Braddock, Pa.

MIMI KORAL
Pittsburgh

BANGKOK DISTRICT

To the Editor: I was very distressed that the Travel article "36 Hours: Bangkok" (June 29) chose to include a trip to Patpong, the infamous red light district. First, with a mere three days in a city rich with art, culture, religion and food, why would anyone waste their time at strip clubs or buying porn? But more disturbing, why would The Times advocate visiting a part of the city that profits from the sex trade, a business that exploits men, women and children? Visitors who want that experience will find it without a tacit endorsement by The Times.

LAUREN BUFFERD
Nashville

THE LEOPARD

To the Editor: I would like to congratulate Adam Begley on his excellent article, "Sicily, Through the Eyes of the Leopard" (July 6). Having been born in Siracusa, Sicily, and grown up there in the 1960s, I was made to read "Il Gattopardo" in high school and never appreciated it. Not sure how, but recently I found the old high-school book, reread it and loved it. The article captures, better than any I have ever read, the essence of the book, the author, the land, the people, the contradictions, the culture.

PAUL PIRROTTA
Glastonbury, Conn.



CHRIS WARDE-JONES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

To the Editor: As the translator of the screenplay of "Life Is Beautiful" by Roberto Benigni and Vincenzo Cerami (Hyperion, 1998), I am not surprised that Mr. Begley did not name the translator of the English edition of "The Leopard" that he quoted so extensively in his otherwise wonderful article on Sicily. We are us. Worse than giving us a bad name, we are given no name. No wonder the Italians have an expression: "Traduttore/traduttore (translator/traitor)."

LISA KRAMER TARUSCHIO,
Macerata, Italy

CORRECTIONS

An article on July 6 about Sicily, with Lampedusa's novel "The Leopard" as guide, referred incorrectly to flights between New York and Palermo. There are indeed direct flights, in spring, summer and fall, between the two cities; Eurofly flies nonstop on Wednesdays and Saturdays until Oct. 26.

An article on June 22 about the art and food scenes in Berlin misspelled the name of a street. It is Tauentzienstrasse, not Taventzienstrasse.