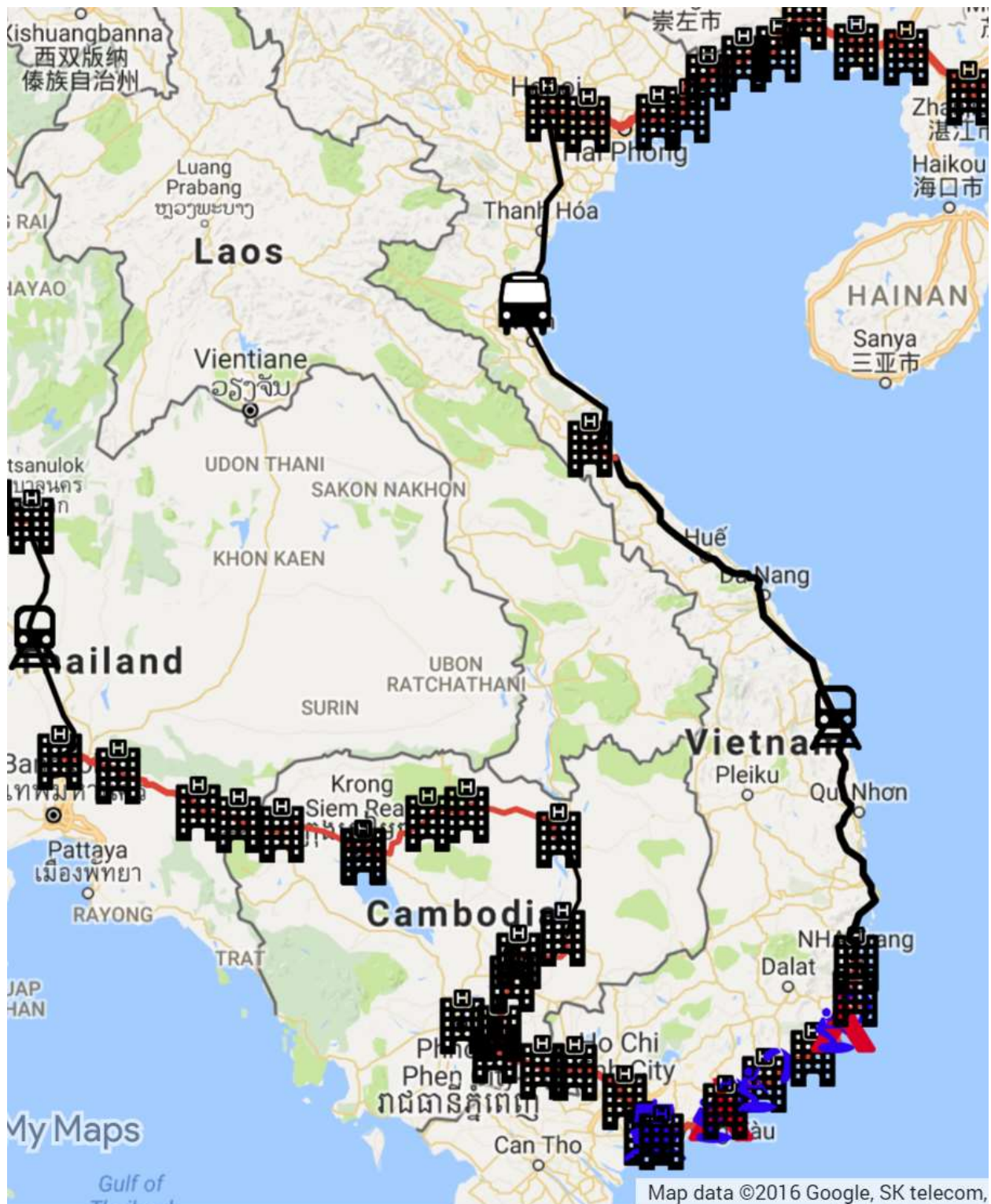


Season 9 – Part 3. Train and caves and Hanoi.



Tu 5.7.2016, day 359. To the Miami Beach of Vietnam (Hai Lam – Nha Trang, 85 km)

The day's ride took us up over the steep hills back off the peninsula where we had spent the night and then onto the main number 1 highway up the coast. As soon as we could we left the highway again to follow the coastal road. It was quite a nice ride in all, the mistake we made was that we didn't eat enough. After our breakfast of noodle soup and baguettes with egg respectively we only stopped for some fruit juice and a coke right up to arriving in Nha Trang, and it was quite a tough hilly ride over 85 km. We were utterly starving by the time we arrived. Again we (or rather Siria) had checked out a couple of promising hotels on the internet. When we arrived we were both quite surprised that Nha Trang is actually quite a large city with skyscrapers lining the crescent shaped sandy bay. There were hundreds of hotels to choose from and we simply chose one where we could bring our bikes inside into safety. The hotel turned out to be perfect and just after we had brought all our stuff up to the room a thunderstorm struck and it started to pour with rain. We were planning to take the train up north from Nha Trang, but we were both so hungry, that eating was definitively the very first priority. We lashed out and went to an Italian place for pizza and pasta. By the time we were finished we were informed by the tourist information that the railway station was closed and so we'd have to check about tickets the next day. We spent the evening on a nice soft sofa in a rather nice air conditioned café. We're definitively among the most hedonistic touring cyclists out there!











We 6.7.2016, day 360. Hanging out (Nha Trang, 0km)

We headed for the railway station first thing to be met with some quite sour officials. No we can't take the train at 4:30 pm. Train full. No we can't take the bikes on a later train. What about tomorrow? No, train is full. As I was standing there the queue was getting longer and longer and people were elbowing in beside me. Finally, I was referred to another lady who seemed to be the supervisor and finally we managed to get on a train at 8pm next day. So we had a day to kill, this means spending lots of time drinking coffee! Which is exactly what we did. We also took a stroll through town and spent some time at the beach people watching. It was quite fascinating. The beach was packed, mainly with Asian tourists. In fact, if we looked along the beach it looked black with people.









Th 7.7.2016, day 361. Night train northwards (Train Nha Trang – Dong Hoi, 0 km)

We again didn't do too much all day. Slept out, had breakfast in bed, had another stroll through town then at 4pm we headed off to the station with our bikes as they had to be checked in at the luggage department. We had to buy additional tickets for the bikes and also for the trailer. They asked 10\$ to pack the bikes with a bit of cardboard on top of the 15\$ to take the bikes. Also the ticket was quite expensive at 45\$ per person. We left our bikes and the trailer to the luggage guys and went to have a coffee and wait for the train. Siria went to print out some stuff we would need for the Chinese Visa and then also went to get some food for the 16h train ride. I drank coffee and watched our stuff. I love our task distribution!

The train was finally over one hour late and when it finally arrived it was packed. We had a hard time fitting all our luggage in the overhead compartments and under the seat and then we squeezed into our tiny rather dilapidated seats. At least the car was air conditioned and also we found that when we lowered the seats it was quite OK. Siria with her amazing talent of falling asleep in all possible conditions was happily snoozing before the train had even left the station and I stayed up for a while reading "How to build an earth sheltered green-house". Fascinating read! Finally, I also dozed off.











Fr 8.7.2016, day 362. Off the train and onto the bikes (Dong Hoi – Phong Nha, 45 km)

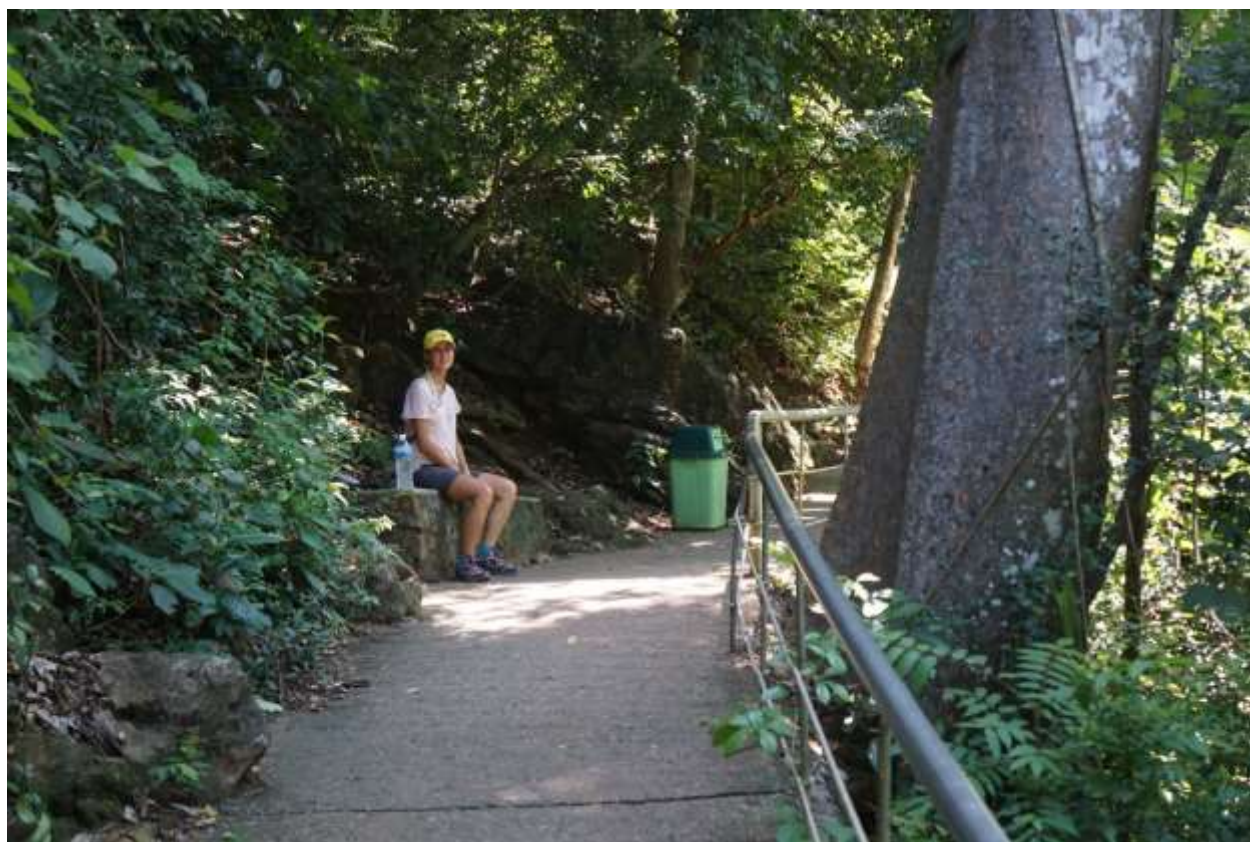
I actually slept quite well, maybe three times 2 or 3 hours at a time and was feeling quite refreshed in the morning. The train gradually got emptier as people got off at all the small towns where the train stopped. Finally we arrived in Dong Hoi, got off with all our stuff and were relieved to see that our bikes had also arrived more or less safely. Still what they say is true: bikes are damaged during transportation and not during riding. They had clearly been bounced around quite a bit and Siria's front mudguard had finally truly given up the battle also my kite board was looking even more battered than it had when we left. We chopped the cardboard, that was actually more decoration than protection, off the bikes and packed the bikes up in the sweltering heat. Sweat was again pouring off me. It was a relief to be on the bikes and moving with a cooling breeze in my face. The 45 km ride to Phong Nha, where there were some caves we wanted to visit, was wonderful and already made the trip with the train worthwhile. We biked through sparsely inhabited farmland with rice and cassava while the green steep hills in the background got closer and closer. The sky above us was clear blue and in the distance there were almost black storm clouds making the scenery quite spectacular. We arrived in Phong Nha just after sunset, easily found a nice place to sleep and also bought the night bus ticket to Hanoi for the following day. We were very positively surprised by Phong Nha. It is a laid back sort of place with hostels and small hotels. The crowd is mainly backpackers that either come here by bus or by scooter. In fact, this seems to be the way to travel in Vietnam. Scooters or motorbikes can be bought everywhere for a couple of hundred dollars. Racks are mounted to the back to strap a backpack on and off you go! Only thing is the scooters can no longer be taken in busses after there were some incidences of busses exploding due to petrol leaking from the tanks of scooters that were stored in the luggage compartment below.

Sa 9.7.2016, day 363. Scootering round and visiting caves (Phong Nha, 0 km)

We had a delicious long sleep, got up at about 9:30 and went for breakfast. We left our bikes and luggage in the hotel and rented a scooter for the day that cost us all of 5\$! We then scootered off towards paradise cave. It really was a very nice day indeed. The landscape here is really amazing with the typical steep limestone cliffs, that are covered in dense dark green jungle. We decided to only visit Paradise Cave. Dark Cave would also have been interesting. It is sort of an adventure set up, where you get to the cave along a zip line then go through the cave with headlights at times wading through the mud. Paradise Cave was absolutely amazing. Apparently there is another cave round here somewhere that was only discovered a couple of years ago and is supposed to be the biggest in the world. Only problem is it costs a couple of thousand dollars to visit and there is a waiting list of a couple of years.

We enjoyed a wonderful scooter ride through the hills back to Phong Nha, stopping on the way for a quick swim in the river and a banana shake with added coffee (a first for me, and really quite a nice combination!).

Then we had some dinner and hung around town waiting for the 9:30 pm bus to Hanoi.







































Su - We 10-13.7.2016, day 364-367. Days in Hanoi. (Phong Nha – Hanoi, 20 km)

We were never really planning to go to Hanoi and yet there we were, after a very hot and uncomfortable ride on one of the sleeper busses with colourful lights that seem to be the preferred means of transport for the scores of backpackers travelling around Vietnam, pulling our absurd amount of baggage out from the luggage compartment of the bus. Everyone else was quickly husked away by taxis and tuk-tuks until we were the only ones left on the pavement, packing up our bikes. We had a nice little chat with an Israeli guy, who was fascinated by our trip. Then we biked into the tourist centre of Old Hanoi, sat down in a little café for breakfast, then I went around to check out the hotels while Siria stayed to look after all our stuff.

The main reason we were in Hanoi was to get the Chinese Visa. Siria had all the paperwork prepared spotlessly. We were at the embassy on the dot at 8:30 on Monday morning when they opened. In fact we were there already at 8am. Everything went smooth as silk, until they asked for our Vietnamese telephone number. We had none, we tried to give our Swiss mobile number, but they didn't accept it, so I pulled out a business card of a restaurant that we had gone to the night before and wrote down that number, saying it was our hotel number. Then they were happy, they gave us a receipt and told us to pay the 60\$ at a certain bank down town. The whole process was really simple.

We spent wonderfully relaxing days in Hanoi, a city that is absolutely hopping with tourists, but also with locals. Old town is absolutely packed in the evenings with people sitting out eating street food or drinking the cheap freshly brewed Bia Hoi beer. The very first night we were there, things were particularly crazy as the final of the EURO 2016 was broadcast live at 2am in the morning. Needless to say, that we were fast asleep by the time the game between France and Portugal kicked off.

Our only obligation in those days was to visit the restaurant whose telephone number we had given to the Chinese embassy daily to check if they had called and also to have some coconut ice cream.



































