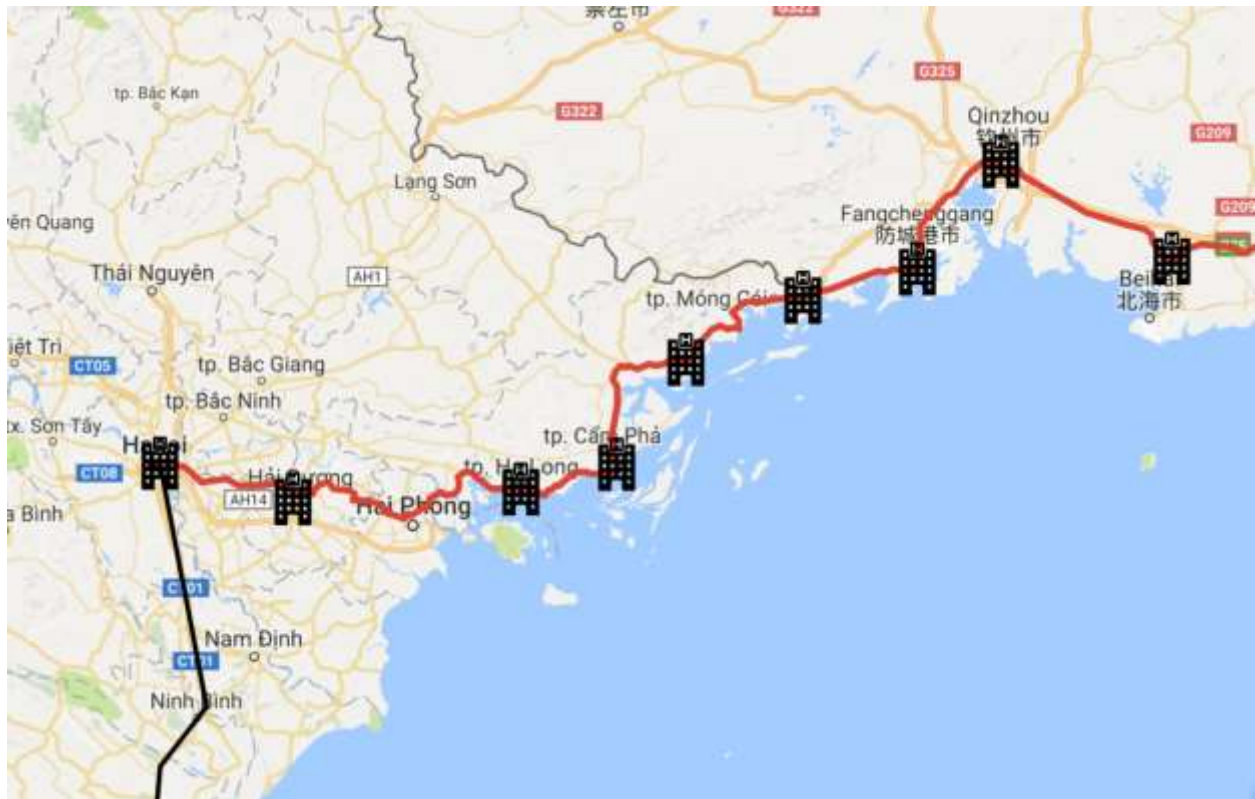


Season 9 – Part 4. Towards China



Th 14.7.2016, day 368. Out of Hanoi (Hanoi – Hai Duong, 67 km)

We were both a bit apprehensive. Things have simply gone so smoothly during our whole trip that we somehow both are expecting something to go wrong sometime soon. The Chinese Visa was one of those things. We heard so many stories on the internet how people have had problems getting the visa or had it refused. Once again everything went smooth as silk. We were in and out of the embassy in less than 5 minutes, passports with Chinese Visa in Hand. So it's off to Hong Kong! We then biked back into the Old Quarter to find the shop where we had our "bikenkitetheworld.org" stamp made. It had turned out wonderful, for me it is a mystery how he managed to make such fine carvings in the wood. Incredible craftsmanship! We then packed up everything and once more we were on the road. As expected the ride out of Hanoi was a bit of a pain. We soon found ourselves on one of the many highways leading out of the city. Most of the time it was fine, but there was just so much honking of horns, scooters buzzing around everywhere and all sorts of vehicles and other things on the road to watch out for, that it was quite tiring. Also we had head wind all day. After about 30 km we left the highway and we soon ended up at the very other end of the spectrum of roads to bike along. First it was a wonderful 2 lane road with some traffic. Then it turned into an even nicer single lane road with almost no traffic through surprisingly rural landscape with rice paddies. Then the road turned into a tiny extremely bumpy dirt road. And so we bumped along at a bit more than walking pace, stopped in a small village for a coke, finally got back onto paved roads and ended up in Hai Duong, where we had something to eat and then hunted round a bit for a Guesthouse and finally found a 24h place that also rents rooms by the hour. But it was OK.





Fr 15.7.2016, day 369. Big off road bike day (Hai Duong – Halong, 123 km)

We are slowly running out of time here in Vietnam with our Visa expiring on the 18th. Our plan for the day was to reach Halong, quite a long way away. We both had problems getting out of bed, in my case I think it was due to the 4 Bia Hoi that I downed the night before in some sleazy street food place (Bia Hoi is beer from kegs that is freshly brewed and must be consumed immediately as the beer does not keep. It's really big in northern Vietnam and can be found at every street corner. Also it's really cheap, about 25 cents per glass.)

But finally we manage to head off. First we were on the terrible highway with lots of trucks and busses, permanently blowing their really loud horns. We still jump every time they honk. Quite soon we left the highway. Immediately when we left the highway we were in the middle of very rural countryside with rice paddies and tiny villages. There doesn't seem to be anything in between really big 6-lane highways and tiny little roads that are very often not paved. But we had a wonderful ride, small roads turned into even smaller roads, traffic completely disappeared, suddenly the small road we were biking on came to a complete dead end right in the middle of a field. There were some tire tracks in the peaty grass and we decided to follow them. Eventually after sometimes riding, sometimes pushing our bikes through grasslands, bogs and bushes, we finally came back onto a small dirt road, that eventually turned into a paved road and we were back in civilization. Of course this sort of off road touring is fun, but really slow and we had 120 km to do. We were really exhausted when we finally arrived in Halong. There we learnt that it was some sort of national holiday and the hotels were really well booked, so of course they upped the prices. We were simply too tired to hunt around for a better deal and finally settled for a place for 25\$. Definitely above our budget, but still affordable. We then hit the streets to look for a place to eat, finally found a nice place and then also a bakery for a coconut and a banana cake that we ate together with a bunch of very friendly locals while downing delicious maracuja juice at a little street corner stall.















Sa 16.7.2016, day 370. Along beautiful Halong Bay (Halong – Cam Pha, 45 km)

We were really tired from the day before so we started the day nice and slowly. After sleeping out we headed off over the bridge to Halong proper where we hoped to find a nice place for breakfast. It was quite a hill to bike up and the sweat was pouring off us when we reached the other side, but the view from up on the bridge was really quite nice. We soon found a nice air-conditioned place to sit in, unfortunately they had nothing to eat, so we just had a couple of yoghurt shakes that were delicious. Soon hunger drove us out of the place and into the next air-conditioned place for some fried noodles followed by ice cream coffee. It soon was 3pm and we had only biked about 5 km all day! This is our bike touring style that we are working on really hard...

The ride out was first really nice with stunning views of the thousands of steep green islands for which Halong Bay is so famous. We spent the night in quite a nice town, where we took the first Nha Nghi we found. There was a very stylish café right across the street and we couldn't resist the temptation to go in and see what they had. Everything on the menu looked really delicious, but the prices were quite low. This should have made us suspicious. Neither food nor drinks were up to scratch and we left the place still hungry. So it was a case of street side restaurant for some good old fried rice. This filled us up but there was still some space left, so we ended up in another very nice café for some frozen yoghurt. Yes, this certainly was more of a day of indulgence than of biking!











Su 17.7.2016, day 371. Last night in Vietnam! (Cam Pha – Quang Tan, 75 km)

Again it was a very nice day biking. The road got less and less busy and scenery was very nice, it was also quite a tough ride as the road constantly rose and dipped. Before we came to Vietnam many people complained that they were always tried to be cheated with people asking ridiculously high prices for food, hotel, whatever. We had a bit of this, but somehow it didn't bother us too much. But on this last day in Vietnam we got a good share. First we stopped for a coke and orange juice. The lady asked for 3\$. Definitely too much, so we decided only to take the orange juice. That was 2\$. Also too much for us, so we went for the coke and were quite surprised that this was 1.5\$. Something was not really adding up. We complained and argued in vain. Finally, we paid 1.5\$. We sat down and a local joined us and offered us one of two cokes he bought saying he heard the whole story. The real price for the coke was 75 cents. For lunch we had a similar story. We sat down, had a lot of trouble explaining what we wanted and didn't ask for the price as things were already complicated enough as they were. We had a good time chatting with everyone, food was good, everyone was friendly, until we were presented the bill. 1\$ for the coffee, which was more or less OK and 10\$ for a bit of rice and tofu! Ridiculous! We finally bargained it down to 5\$ Still too much. Quite a bit later while biking and reflecting on the incident we in fact noticed that in the heat of the battle and passing bills backwards and forwards we had actually only paid for the coffee and didn't pay anything at all for the rice! The last incident was buying water that is always about 50 cents for a 1.5 l bottle. We were charged twice that, again we refused, haggled and finally paid 50 cents. If our whole stay in Vietnam had been like this, it would really have been a hassle!

We celebrated our last evening in Vietnam with a couple of Bia Hoi and some rice cakes right next door to our Nha Nghi.





Mo 18.7.2016, day 372. Into China... (Quang Tan – Dongxingchen, 66 km)

Again we had a bit of trouble getting up, instead of 7am we finally hit the road at 8am. Had a soup before leaving the village and then enjoyed a really nice bike ride through green hilly countryside. We had quite a stiff headwind, that was nice and cooling, but made the ride quite tough, especially as the road was still constantly rising and dipping. We stopped for my last Vietnamese coffee (I will miss them!) and arrived at the border town. We still had some Vietnamese money to burn, so we had some delicious fried rice and then found a place for some lemon smoothies.

We then headed out for the Chinese border. At first we didn't find it. Where it was supposed to be there was just a large closed gate. We biked round the back into a parking lot, but there everything seemed closed off as well. We were starting to wonder if the border was open. We went back to the big gate and found that it was now open to let a car through, so we dashed through. The next hurdle was a long snaking fenced off path similar to the ones at check-in in the airport. Impossible to snake my bike with trailer through it, so I had to dismount the trailer, go ahead with my bike and go back for the trailer. Then We carried the bikes and trailer up a short flight of steps into a large hall, got the stamp from the Vietnamese customs and went on to the Chinese. The young guy at the counter looked at my passport, then at me, back to the passport, then looked at me again and fired off a bunch of questions in Chinese. I had no idea what he was asking. I was asked to stand out of line and he called a senior officer. This guy was able to speak English and asked me the standard questions. Where are you going? Where do you come from? Finally, we were allowed to pass. I battled my bike and trailer through the fencing up to the security scan. There all the bags came off and went through the x-ray, including the trailer. Then all the bags went on again but only as far as a flight of stairs. The escalator was out of order so bags off again

and we carried everything down. Finally, we were out and had arrived in China! Immediately groups of people gathered round us taking pictures of us and our bikes and also posing with us to take photos. We were quite surprised by the stark contrast between China and Vietnam. Here in China most of the scooters were electric, cars were large, posh and mostly black, the roads were lined with stores and restaurants, there were neon signs up everywhere, roads were huge and wide with bike and scooter lanes and most of the buildings were new high rise apartment blocks. We quickly found a hotel that was actually quite nice and were surprised that it only knocked us back 17\$. After a nice refreshing shower, we went out to find something to eat, were relieved that we found a place where the menu had pictures of the food, ordered egg and tomato omelette, corn with some sort of meat and a bottle of beer to celebrate the beginning of the next leg of our journey.



