



LEVI BOUGHN

Losing My Hue

STORY BY LIZ SINCLAIR

I stood ankle deep in mud on the corner of Phan Dinh Phung and Hung Vuong streets, feeling like a poor excuse for an adventure traveler. Five hours in Hue and already I'd managed to misplace my tour group. Worse, my guidebook was back at the hotel. I was lost and alone in Vietnam, and I spoke exactly six words of the language. Considering that two of those words were "tea" and "beer," I stood a very good chance of not going thirsty.

There were nine of us on a cycling tour from Hue (pronounced "way") to Saigon, and the wet season was running late. We were dismayed to learn that our tour leader intended to take us riding around Hue despite the rain. Mark, a six-foot-plus ex-pat Australian with a flat-top military haircut, curtly reminded us that the "adventure" in adventure travel stood for just that. We piled on waterproof anoraks, covered them with a local brand of plastic poncho, and reluctantly headed out to see what sights a dreary, drab Hue had to offer.

A few hours later, at the tail end of the group, I came speeding out of an alley onto a main road and stopped short.

I couldn't see my fellow cyclists anywhere. I peered intently at poncho-clad figures, looking like plastic-sheeted ghosts, who rode by me in the rain on rasping bicycles, hoping to spot a familiar face.

I heard a shout and turned my head. A woman stood behind a steaming soup cart by the side of the road, gesturing. She pointed to my right. "That way!" she yelled in English. I careened off down the road, dodging slower-moving bicyclists. The people around me became a blur of colored plastic. I pumped faster, splashing heedlessly through puddles. There was no sign of my group.

For the first time that day, I was oblivious to the cold water dripping steadily down my neck and the rain stinging my eyes. Reaching a crossroads, I stopped and glanced each way. I heard another shout. I looked across the road at an old man standing under a tree, yelling something and pointing on ahead down the main road. He bore a remarkable resemblance to the late Ho Chi Minh, with the same wispy white beard and long, narrow features. I stared at him.

The old man suddenly pointed to his head. Of course, my helmet! Westerners are (usually) the only ones who wear bike helmets. I pedaled on furiously.

I reached another crossroad. This time no one called out to me. Dismounting, I wheeled my bike toward a group of four wiry cyclo drivers huddled under a tarp spread between two trees, their red cyclos lined up neatly in front. The youngest braved the rain and sloshed his way over to me. Between pointing at my helmet and my bike, and then pointing farther down the road, I conveyed to him that I had lost my group. He walked back to the tarp and conversed briefly with the other drivers. The four men began to shout to others passing on the street. The replies were clearly all in the negative.

Without language skills or even a guidebook, I had no choice but to wait on the corner and hope that someone would come back for me. The minutes ticked by like hours.

Searching in my pocket for a cough drop, I found the hotel business card, thrust there earlier and forgotten. When I showed the card to the drivers, two of them pointed down a side road. I realized they were trying to give me directions. I shook my head and pointed to the cyclos. The youngest driver responded first: "One U.S. dollar (about 20,000 Vietnamese dong)," he said firmly, setting his price. "Fifteen," I said just as firmly, suspecting my hotel was close. He paused, grinned, and then nodded. "Okay," he said. He wheeled his cyclo over to me and I clambered in gratefully. Heaving my bike up out of the mud, he rested it gently against my legs and then hopped onto his seat in one quick motion. I leaned back and flashed him the universal thumbs-up sign, anticipating hot tea and a hot shower.

Suddenly, a shout went up. The other cyclo drivers ran quickly to the edge of the street, yelling and gesturing to me, and then pointing up the road. My driver, speaking rapidly in Vietnamese, dismounted, grabbed my bicycle, and set it back in the mud. Puzzled, I climbed out of the cyclo. Looking up the road where the men were pointing, I suddenly saw a bicycle approaching, ridden by a shape much larger than those around him. He was wearing a helmet. I started yelling Mark's name. My cyclo driver watched me intently for a second, then began calling "Mahk, Mahk." Mark casually glanced at the shouting group and rode past, oblivious.

The men grabbed my arms and gestured for me to follow. I knew Mark had to come back my way so I decided to stay

put. Slowly I mimed a figure riding up the road, stopping, and returning. I pointed next to myself and then at the ground. With much vigorous nodding of heads, the cyclo drivers agreed.

I didn't have long to wait. After 10 minutes, the drivers again began to shout and point. This time I was waiting in the center of the road. As motorcycles and bikes dodged and swerved around me, Mark braked to a halt inches away. "You all right?" he asked. Shaky with relief, I couldn't think of much to say. "Yes, now," I replied. I turned to thank my rescuers and shook numerous hands. The youngest driver grinned at me, not appearing upset at losing his only prospective fare for the past half hour.

I turned to see Mark disappearing ahead of me. I followed him down a road that gradually ran out into rice fields. The rain was now coming down hard enough to strip paint. I was soon dripping wet, following Mark's receding figure along a twisting, snaking dirt lane a few meters across and over tiny wooden bridges barely wide enough for two bikes. The landscape was from a Japanese print: slate skies darkening to dusk, rain falling in sheets, distant huddled figures in the fields. Mist crept across the road. Mud hissed and spat under my tires.

We caught up with the rest of the group by the Thanh Toan covered Japanese bridge, where they were taking photographs in the fading light. I hung my dripping poncho inside an adjoining teahouse and collapsed, sodden, onto a rickety wooden chair. Within minutes, I was sipping hot, steaming tea and listening to the rain pound on the tin roof. Mark leaned back in his chair, beer in hand. "This is my favorite spot in all of Vietnam," he told the group. I looked around at the 10 of us packed into the tiny teahouse, all in various states of dampness, at the landlord's children chasing each other around the crowded chairs, at a dog lying — snout on paws — on the ground, watching the children run, and over to the exquisite wooden bridge with its delicately carved lintel. I was filled with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. I borrowed a *Lonely Planet Vietnam* and read: "Finding (the bridge) is a bit tricky, but tolerable if you consider getting lost part of the excursion." Perhaps I had a future as an adventure traveler after all. **AC**

Liz Sinclair is a travel and feature writer who divides her time between Bali and Melbourne. She writes about solo travel in Southeast Asia and Australia. She frequently gets lost.

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TO BE SPENT,
NOT TO
BE SAVED.**

D.H. Lawrence



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