

# PURELY PERSONAL



...and now for something completely different...

It was all Drexel's fault, he was the man who talked us into it... Drexel and Pat Gillespie had already been on one of Steve McCulloch's Classic Car Journeys to the Himalayas; Steve is the man behind those tours of India in Ambassadors (Morris Oxford circa 1958 to you and me), writes *Paul Wignall*.

Steve's latest jaunt was to have us drive ex-US army Jeeps down the Ho Chi Minh trail in North Vietnam from Hanoi to Da Nang. The trouble is that the Vietnamese authorities won't issue Vietnamese driving licenses to foreigners, which is why Clarkson and his two fellow imbeciles had to use mopeds on their Top Gear Programme on Vietnam.

Steve managed to convince them otherwise, which is why 20 crews set out from Hanoi on 24 April, the first foreigners to drive in Vietnam under the new license system. This obviously appealed to the rallying fraternity as seven of the Jeeps were crewed by regular historic rally people, Mark and Sue Godfrey, Paul and Jayne Wignall, Drexel and Pat Gillespie, John Bateson and Tina Lowe, Peter and Helen Morris, Neil and Sue Revington and Paul and Eira Davis.

I must point out there was no element of competition about this event, other than avoiding the kamikaze mopeds that came at you from every direction! The standard of driving, is, shall we say, different; in Steve's view, more dangerous than India. Within 10 minutes of getting our Jeep we had two mopeds collide right in front of us which isn't surprising as the moped riders, and there are millions of them, have tunnel vision and don't look to the right or left, just assuming the other person will give way. Driving in Hanoi was brilliant, very competitive, we worked on the theory that if you can't beat them join them, and the Jeep was stronger than a Honda 50 anyway. Steve provided a Tulip road book which was quite easy to follow, even if the Jeep didn't have a working speedo. We stayed in the best hotels where available, including the Grand in Saigon and the Hotel Saigon Morin in Hue, both hotels dating from the French Colonial era, but completely updated, wonderful.

The Jeeps in question were all left overs from the Vietnam war (or as the Vietnamese call it, the American war) I suppose it all depends which side you were on. Many of them have been modified with replacement Toyota engines and gearboxes, some have wide alloy wheels and low profile tyres, just a few retained their original drive train, most had period accessories like field telephones, axes on the running board, snorkels for river crossings and so on. In the heat of Vietnam the fact that they were open was a definite benefit as once on the move you had a cooling breeze. You may wonder what did the North Vietnamese think of us 'whities' driving around in the 'enemy transport'; in a nutshell they thought it was great, waving at us as we drove by, each time we stopped we soon had a crowd of interesting

onlookers.

There were a few problems, on the second day we had a cam belt break, but the resident mechanics were summoned on the local mobile phone provided by Steve for each crew, we took over their Jeep whilst they fixed ours, turning up at 9:00pm that night with the job done. One Jeep had a big end go, that was terminal, but apart from a few minor problems that the cheerful mechanics sorted out, on the whole they were quite reliable and surprisingly comfortable

What about the driving? As already mentioned, in towns you had to pay serious attention to what was happening around you, quite often people would be riding their moped on the wrong side of the road towards you, this happened even on a dual carriageway, mopeds would frequently pull out from the side roads without looking or veer across the road without any form of signal, but it is surprising how quickly you get used to it, amazingly enough, no one gets angry. The roads are good tarmac, some with a few potholes, but then when you live in the UK nowadays we are used to that!

The Ho Chi Minh trail is a bit of a misnomer. There were many Ho Chi Minh trails cut through the jungles and forests across Vietnam to enable the North Vietnamese Army to transport supplies to the war front. At the time it was precarious, often very muddy, and bombed to oblivion by the USA. Despite all this they carried on. Today it is a good tarmac road with very little traffic. Vietnam is a long narrow country, most of the traffic stays on the coast road, our route ran close to the border with Laos for much of the time so we were in a remote area. The scenery became monotonous at times, acres and acres of rain forest and bush, but it would not be long before there was a village, the route took us across the demilitarised zone and along a wonderful coastal road with many interesting villages with women in traditional dress

You can't visit this area without seeing many of the remnants of the war. We visited several museums in Hanoi, including the famous Hanoi Hilton prison where US aircrews were held and the one at Khe Sanh, site of the former US marines base where they held out for 77 days, besieged by the NVA. These museums all told the Vietnamese side of the story, not surprisingly, and often with exaggerated claims of the numbers of planes shot down and tanks destroyed, whilst the heroes of Vietnam are glorified, whichever way you look at it, the Vietnamese are a very tenacious race and proved to be an unbeatable enemy.

Amazingly enough there was absolutely no sign of animosity shown towards us, despite being in the US Jeeps, even when we turned up at a big war memorial at the famous Dong Loc junction on the Ho Chi Minh Trail on what was obviously a special day, with many Vietnamese war veterans in attendance.

Away from the war we visited the world heritage site Phong Nha, where some of the world's largest caves are accessed by boat.

Reflecting on the trip, it was firstly very good value at around £5,000 per couple, which excluded air fares but included lunches and most evening meals. Steve pushed the boat out more than once on the drinks front, and each day your Jeep's cold box was stocked with cold soft drinks. The insight it gave into the lives of the Vietnamese people was tremendous, you really learnt something on this trip. The group were all like minded people who really got along well.

Steve McCulloch and his team are to be congratulated on doing a first class job, so I would highly recommend this trip if you want a motoring adventure with a difference and no regularities. Have a look at [www.classiccarjourneys.co.uk](http://www.classiccarjourneys.co.uk).

Above: Lunchtime in Vietnam for the Jeep convoy. Below: Jayne Wignall in her 'pimped' Jeep - check out those alloys! Photos: Paul Wignall



Below: Drexel makes friends wherever he goes! Photo: Paul Wignall

