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VIETNAM: Jeep thrills on the Ho Chi Minh Trail

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SWIFT RIDE: Transport Tiger. Cu'ong Phung with some water buffalo and ex-US Army Jeeps, thousands of which were left behind when the Americans pulled out in 1973. GEOFF HILL

DONT even think about trying to cross the street in Hanoi. So cautious was the flow of scooters in the Vietnamese capital that after two days I gave up, got into a Jeep and drove to Ho Chi Minh City.

Now you'd think driving a former US Army Jeep down the Ho Chi Minh Trail would be, to paraphrase the late comedian Kenny Everett, not in the best possible taste. The truth, remarkably, is the opposite: the Vietnamese say that since they won the war, these are highly prized war trophies and cult vehicles.

The company behind the jaunt is Classic Car Journeys, run by Englishman Steve McCullagh, who back in 2006 had it all: the top job as MD of a co-losing firm, the company Porsche and the jet-set lifestyle. But he didn't have a life, particularly when it came to his twin loves of travel and classic cars — which is why he jacked it all in after taking 60 friends on a driving tour of southern India in Hindustani Ambassadors, the Indian equivalent of 1950s Merks.

He's still doing that, as well as tours around southern India and the Himalayas, and in 2012 he added the Vietnam tour, making his the only company to do self-drive tours in that country.

It was my first time in Vietnam, and my immediate impression as we drove through Hanoi to meet Steve's then Cu'ong Phung (the man who sorted out the Top Gear team

On the slow road to SAIGON

Geoff Hill joins a driving tour of Vietnam in a vintage US Army Jeep

with transport for their 2008 jaunt through the country) were that the city has a shambolic, post-colonial charm and that the people manage to look simultaneously serious and optimistic. The former, presumably, was because of years of conflict, and the latter because they hoped all that was behind them for good.

The US left behind thousands of Jeeps when their troops pulled out in 1973, and although no one could use them until petrol became freely available in the late '80s, the army Vietnamese stored them away, and they are now worth up to \$15,000 (about £10,000) each. And since the route we were following was the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it seemed appropriate to call at the museum celebrating the route that kept the North Vietnamese Army supplied for almost a decade.

The US Air Force bombed the trail 70,000 times, but still the Vietnamese kept coming, carrying food, guns and ammunition across rivers and swaying rope bridges on foot, by bicycle, horses and elephants. Compared to that, all we had to worry about were the charming idiosyncrasies of 1950s Jeeps. The steering was vague, the gearbox needed a gentle hand, and the brakes needed a firm foot. In short, it was the perfect vehicle for

blending through the countryside while admitting the view.

There were 40 of us in 10 Jeeps but everyone drove at their own pace using Steve's rally-style roadbooks, rather than in convoy. His trips are really group trips for people who don't like the group trips, and you could see why 80% of his customers come back for more. They love the flawless organisation and attention to detail, the adventures without the hassle, Steve's erudite and witty daily briefings, the tireless work of Cu'ong and his mechanics, and the perpetual presence of road manager Than Le Mah, who is like a hilarious combination of Jeeves, John Inman and the Buzsaki bunny. We would stop in the middle of the jungle, and five seconds later he would be at our side with a tray of cold drinks.

We twisted up the mountain roads into the clouds, past terraced rice fields and through hamlets of wooden stilt houses, from beneath which herds of children would nodd to wave and cry. "Hello, hello!" as we drove past. "Xin chào!" we cried back, using up most of our Vietnamese in one fell swoop. From time to time, women would emerge from the clouds on bicycles, wearing black pyjamas and conical straw hats.

The next morning we stopped at Dong Loc

where, in 1968, so young girls keeping the trail clear were killed during a bombing raid. Surrounded by fields still crisscrossed today by that bombardment, each of their simple white graves bears their photograph, expressing that familiar national look of earnest optimism.

The end of the day could not have been more different: the rage and thunder of that time, being paddled through Phong Nha, one of the world's largest caves. In the vast, sepulchral and beautifully lit space, the only sounds were the suck and gloop of the boat's single oar and the plink of drips falling into the dark water from the stalactites high above.

And then, another reminder of the war: the Trang Son National Cemetery in which 200 of those killed on the Ho Chi Minh Trail lie beneath rows upon rows of white marble headstones, every single one decorated with a spray of flowers. As I emerged, a group of ancient Vietnamese war veterans arrived, their chests bright with medals. One of them spotted someone in our group with a silver crescent and wearing an olive green T-shirt with Old Navy on the front. Mistaking him for a former adversary, they came over, bowed and shook his hand. It was a humbling example of forgiveness.

The prisoners of the Vinh Moc tunnels nearby, in which hundreds of Vietnamese lived night and day sheltering from the pounding of American bombs, could not have been more different from our host in the old imperial capital of Hue. Built in 1901, the Saigon Martin saw hand-to-hand fighting in the corridors during the 1968 Tet Offensive, and after that served as a

The only sounds were the gloop of the boat's oar and the plink of drips falling into the dark water



QUICK STICKS: Roadside workers stack bamboo, a popular building material in Vietnam

NICK KIRKBRIDE

So a night backpackers' hostel before being returned to its former glory. That is pretty much what is happening to the rest of the city, particularly the Citadel — the vast palace complex of Emperor Gia Long from 1802 to 1819, when the French stormed it, burned the imperial library and looted everything of value down to the gold toothpicks.

After the North Vietnamese stormed the city in the Tet Offensive, the US retreated by blasting the Citadel with bombs and napalm, leaving only 20 of its 148 fabulous buildings standing. It will be astonishing when it is restored, although I suspect it is even more impressive to stand behind the emperor's throne in the ironwood and gold-leaf inner sanctum, gaze at the gilt and rubble ruins all around, and imagine what once was.

The streets of Hoi An, our next stop, once echoed with the cries of merchants from a dozen countries, who came sailing up the Thu Bon river from the sea to trade in silk, porcelain, tea, sugar, molasses, elephant tusks, beexwood, mother of pearl and lacquer. The river has been silted up for over a century and a half, and the streets ring instead with cries of "Sê, dê, lovely silk shirt

for you by this afternoon!" For this is the home of an estimated 500 tailors who, for \$10, will rustle you up a handmade shirt in a couple of hours, or, for \$160, a suit overnight.

Even better, the town survived the war unscathed, and as you wander through its narrow streets past lovely old ochre houses and shops unchanged for centuries, you expect to round a corner at any minute and come face to face with a Japanese merchant on his way to seal a lucrative lacquer deal. Instead, of course, you meet someone taking a selfie with an iPhone.

And so, a farewell to our Jeeps, and hello to the skydivers and designer shops of Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon, as most older Vietnamese still call it. I gazed down on it that night from the rooftop bar of the Rex Hotel, where war correspondents gathered every day for what they sarcastically called the Five o'clock follies — the absurdly optimistic US briefings about how well the war was going.

Instead, the truth about how badly it was going is to be found in the War Remnants Museum, where I accidentally went backwards around the halls, undrinking decades of death and suffering as I went.

We emerged blinking into the light, glad to be alive, and as we climbed the aircraft steps for the flight home, took a last look at the long road north and wished we were back on it in our Jeeps, driving down a trail which had once been a symbol of war but over the past two weeks had become a beacon of life and hope. — *© The Sunday Telegraph*

#ushudgo

Classic Car Journeys (classiccarjourneys.co.uk) has been Classic Vietnam Trips in 2017 — from March 25-April 8, and April 8-22 — for £2,350 (1995-2000) per person, excluding flights, visas and fuel. Spaces are limited for the first Classic Car Journeys dates.

The company also offers tours of India in classic Morris Ambassadors — the backbone of India's taxi fleet — as well as Ford's Hincinsey and Europe.

Geoff Hill's other unforgettable road trips

■ **TO KASHMIR AND BACK** Road Trip India (roadtripindia.co.uk) offers several 4wd self-drive tours, the most exciting being its 10-day Trans-Himalayan Expedition from Delhi to Manali and Leh, then back to Delhi via Amritsar. I have done much of this route by motorbike, and it is unforgettable. Price: £2,577 per person, excluding flights.

■ **PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY, LA TO VANCOUVER** Road Trip USA (roadtripusa.co.uk) offers several 4wd self-drive tours, the most exciting being its 10-day Trans-Himalayan Expedition from Delhi to Manali and Leh, then back to Delhi via Amritsar. I have done much of this route by motorbike, and it is unforgettable. Price: £2,577 per person, excluding flights.

■ **THE ROCKIES IN A CLASSIC BENTLEY** The first time I drove the Icefields Parkway between Jasper and Banff in Canada, I went around the first corner and said: "That's the most amazing view I've ever seen!" I then did the same at pretty much every corner on the 230km route past pristine emerald lakes, soaring mountains, tumbling waterfalls, glittering glaciers and pine-clad valleys to Banff.

Stay in two former Canadian Pacific Railway hotels along the way, Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise (fairmont.com/lake-louise), with the mountains behind and the lake in front, has a superb location and doubles from £485. The Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel (fairmont.com/banff-springs) has been known as "The Castle in the Rockies" since it was built 125 years ago; doubles from £485.

Do the Parkway in style in a chauffeur-driven 1952 Bentley Mark VI affectionately called Dorothy, booked through Highland VIP (highlandvip.co.uk).

■ **ROUTE 66** If you haven't done America's Route 66, do 50% of it still there, complete with 1950s motels, diners, gas stations and holiday attractions. Scenic Car Tours (sceniccartours.com) offers 22-day self-drive tours from £2,649 including flights, or more for a range of American classics. — *© The Sunday Telegraph*

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