



CLASSIC CAR JOURNEYS



Road to redemption

Along the Ho Chi Minh Trail from Hanoi to Saigon

GEOFF HILL

I've finally realised why US pulled troops out of Vietnam. They got fed up waiting to cross the streets. So relentless is the flow of scooters in Hanoi that after two days I give up, get into a Jeep and drive 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 British comedian Kenny Everett, not in the best poss-

ible taste. The truth, remarkably, is the opposite, as 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: a top job as managing director of a car leasing firm, a company-provided Porsche and a 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 Hindustan Ambassadors, the Indian equivalent of 1950s Morris Oxfords.

He's still doing that, as well as tours around southern India and the Himalayas, and in 2012 added the Vietnam tours, making his the only company to do self-drive tours in that destination. It is my first time in Vietnam, and my immediate impressions as we drive through Hanoi to meet Steve's fixer Cu'ong Phung (the man who sorted out the Top Gear team with transport for their 2008 jaunt through the country) are that the city has a shambolic postcolonial charm and that its people manage to look

Following the Ho Chi Minh Trail by Jeep, above; War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, top right; lanterns adorn the streets of Hoi An, above right

simultaneously serious and optimistic. The former, presumably, is because of centuries of suffering under the French and the Americans, and the latter because they hope all that is behind them.

The US left thousands of Jeeps when its troops pulled out in 1973, and although no one could use them until petrol became freely available in the late 80s, the canny Vietnamese stored them away, and they are now worth up to about \$30,000 each.

And since the route we are following is known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it seems appropriate to call at the museum celebrating the path 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, bicycles, horses and elephants. Compared with that, all we have to worry about are the charming idiosyncrasies of 60s Jeeps. The steering is vague, the gearbox needs a gentle hand, and the brakes a firm foot. In short, it is the

Tales of the Reunification Highway

Mr Kang and Mr Ri glance at each other, eyes rolling, barely concealing their exasperation. They've been assigned another dumb foreigner. My only offence is a flip-pant observation and it's not a very good joke, admittedly, but merely intended as a monotony-breaker.

We're barrelling south from Pyongyang down Reunification Highway with North Korean rice fields to our left and right. Mr Kang and Mr Ri are government-appointed minders. I spot successive road signs of the familiar white-against-green style used across the world. These count down the distance to Seoul, capital of "US puppet" South Korea (with its own chunk of Reunification Highway). Our destination is Kaesong, just north of the border where the Kaesong Folk Hotel is located.

The freeway is decidedly odd as there's barely any traffic. We reach tunnels, one in each direction. South-bound is closed for repairs. Our Volvo bounces across a grassy median strip to the "wrong" side. We speed through the tunnel with me silently praying there's no northbound traffic. Emerging unscathed, we again cross the grass to continue our journey.

It's time for my joke. "Let's have lunch in Seoul? It's so close!" I say with a chuckle.

"It's not in the itinerary," an expressionless Mr Kang responds. "Not possible today. Perhaps next time."

Mr Ri explains: "Only after reunification."

My third minder, the stony-faced driver, says nothing. He is, I'm told, unable to understand or speak English. Diplomats familiar with the so-called "hermit kingdom" tell me this trio is additionally tasked with keeping tabs on each other. I've no idea whether or not this is true.

THE CULTURAL TOURIST

CHRIS PRITCHARD



We lunch well at the Kaesong Folk Hotel to which we'll return later to spend the night. Its restaurant showcases naeng myeon ("cold noodles"), a northern delicacy that deservedly has spread throughout the peninsula and beyond. The 50 traditional-style hotel's guestrooms are furnished with thick floor mats rather than beds. Pillows, filled with rice husks, are a tad crunchy.

Old-style underfloor heating ensures adequate warmth even on chilly nights. Its geographic location means Kaesong, a light industrial hub, hosts occasional meetings between officials representing the communist north and the capitalist south.

After lunch we are at Panmunjom, which headline writers are fond of calling the world's most dangerous border. I've visited previously, but from the southern side. Most Australian visitors do likewise, day-tripping from

Seoul to peer into the forbidden north. Nobody crosses the border at Panmunjom and lives to tell the tale, except for occasional official delegations and family reunions. Armed-to-the-teeth troops menace each other. But to me it's misleadingly laid-back, with showpiece administrative buildings on each side, blue-painted bungalows straddling this tinderbox frontier. Tourists from each side are allowed to enter the bungalows, although not at the same time.

That night, over a leisurely dinner, it's clear Mr Kang is bursting to ask a question. What's more, he's lost a self-confidence displayed two days previously in Pyongyang. He asked me then if I remembered how many bulbs were in the main chandelier of the Grand People's Study House. After all, it was only yesterday, I immediately admitted I had forgotten. "I could see you weren't paying proper attention," Mr Kang had sniffed. But now he's altogether more deferential. "Mr Ri and I were talking earlier," he confides. "We're wondering whether you can explain any differences between two concepts we've read are common in capitalist countries. We've no idea whether they're the same."

Perhaps it's the copious quantities of North Korean beer or the soju, a popular alcoholic beverage similar in taste to Japanese rice wine, or could it have been the cold noodles? But I find myself extraordinarily keen to help. "What are those two concepts?" I ask.

Mr Kang, with Mr Ri at his elbow, asks me, "Auctions and lotteries ... is there a difference?" Beneath a moonlit hilltop statue of father-of-the-nation Kim Il-sung, I sit back and begin my explanation.

Just north of the border, Kaesong's quiet, wide streets



perfect vehicle for tootling through the countryside admiring the view.

There are 40 of us in 20 Jeeps but everyone drives at their own pace using Steve's rally-style road books, rather than in convoy. His trips are really group trips for people who don't like group trips, and you can see why 85 per cent 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'o'ng and his mechanics, and the perpetual presence of road manager Thuan Le Minh, who is like a hilarious combination of Jeeves, John "Are you being served?" Inman and the Duracell bunny. We stop in the middle of the jungle, and five seconds later he's at our side with a tray of cold drinks.

We twist up mountain roads into the clouds, past terraced rice fields and through hamlets of wooden stilt houses, from beneath which hordes of children rush to wave as we drive past and cry out: "Hello, hello!" We cry back, "Xin chào!" And thus use up most of our Vietnamese language skills in one fell swoop. From time to time, beautiful women emerge from the clouds on bicycles, wearing black pyjamas and conical straw hats.

The next morning we stop at Dong Loc where, in 1968, 10 young women keeping the trail clear were killed during a bombing raid. Surrounded by fields still cratered today by that bombardment, each of their simple white graves bears their photograph. The end of the day could not have been more different to the remembered rage and thunder of that time.

Being paddled through Phong Nha, one of the world's largest caves, the only sounds in this vast, sepulchral and beautifully lit space are the suck and gloop of the boat girl's single oar and the plink of drips falling into the dark water from the stalactites high above. In that moment, they are like the still, small sound of peace.

And then, another reminder of the war at Truong Son National Cemetery where about 10,000 of those killed on the Ho Chi Minh Trail lie beneath row upon row of white marble headstones, every single one decorated with a spray of flowers. The privations of the Vinh Moc tunnels nearby, in which hundreds of Vietnamese lived night and day sheltering from the pounding of American bombs, could not be more different from our hotel in the old imperial capital of Hue. Built in 1901, the Saigon Morin saw hand-to-hand fighting in the corridors during the 1968

Exploring a cave in Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, above; Hue's imperial Citadel, above right; Truong Son National Military Cemetery, far right; Jeeps head through a village en route, right



GEOFF HILL



IMAGEFOLK

1960s Jeeps are the perfect vehicle for tootling through the countryside

Tet Offensive, and after the war hung its head in shame as a \$2-a-night backpackers' hostel before being restored 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 1885, 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 retaliated by blasting the Citadel with bombs and napalm, leaving only 20 of its 148 fabulous buildings standing. It will be astonishing when it is finally restored, although I suspect it is even more impressive to stand before 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, beeswax, mother of pearl and lacquer. The river has been silted up for more than 150 years, and the streets ring instead with cries of: "Sir, sir, lovely silk shirt for you by this afternoon!" For this is the home of an estimated 500 tailors who for less than \$20 will rustle you up a handmade shirt in a couple of hours. 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 tourists taking selfies with their iPhones. Oh well. Same same but different, as they say in this part of the world.

And so, a tearful farewell to our Jeeps, and hello to the skyscrapers and designer shops of Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon, as most older Vietnamese still call it. I gaze down upon 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 bad it was going is to be found in the War Remnants Museum, where I accidentally go backwards around the halls, undoing decades of death and suffering as I walk. But what I could not undo are the images of the babies deformed by Agent Orange, which haunt me still.

We emerge blinking into the light, glad to be alive, and as we climb the aircraft steps for the flight home, take a last look at the long road north and wish we were back on it in our Jeeps, driving down a trail that once was a symbol of war but over the past two weeks has become a beacon of life and hope in every waving child we passed.

TELEGRAPH MEDIA GROUP

Checklist

Classic Car Journeys has two Classic Vietnam trips next year, from March 25-April 8 and April 8-22. A limited number of spaces are still available. More: classiccarjourneys.co.uk.

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