

COVER STORY

The Journey

"I travel not to go anywhere, but to go," said the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson. "I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move."

But how many of us truly find a simple pleasure in moving? And how many of us get more excited about the journeys we take than the actual destinations we're heading to?

From the arduous 30-minute ride to work, to the long-haul overnight flight that we use sleeping tablets to knock ourselves out for, journeys often seem like wasted intervals in time, periods of necessary but unwelcome transit that move us from one scene to the next. For most of us such journeys are about saving time.

It is no surprise, then, that we no longer see bicycles, buses, trains and ferries as convenient. Instead we just want to get there, to that new scene, and are prepared to miss out on everything in-between.

But as Stevenson would be glad to hear, it's not always that way for everyone.

What follows is an insight into the lives of many of this planet's travellers. From the myriad of passengers found waiting at Hanoi's central train station to against-the-grain globetrotters, long-distance truck drivers, pilgrims and travelling performers. It's not just about the final destination, but the journeys themselves.

So, time to stretch out, put your seat back and enjoy the ride. Time to enjoy what's in between.



Stories from the Station

Words by **Debbie Clare**
Photos by **Francis Roux**

A French colonial building built in 1902, Gare Hanoi, also known as Tran Quy Cap, Hang Co or Le Duan station, takes pride of place at 120 Le Duan. It stands like a proud being with a protruding, puffed-out chest, but it didn't always look the way it does today. December 1972 saw the central building become flattened by American bombs. And so, in 1976 the grey concrete structure that there stands today was built, dividing the two remaining yellow buildings.

Outside of the station there is a hive of activity; bikes are being parked or driven away, taxis are picking up and dropping off, confused tour groups are congregating, *banh my* sellers are fanning themselves down, stall owners are topping up glasses of cold tea and adjusting their displays of Oreos. Everyone here is doing something or going somewhere; with every move a journey is beginning.

The beige hue of light inside the bustling station makes every scene seem like a moving version of an *Instagram* photo. Corners of these rooms have been

left unchanged from days of old, yet smatterings of modern comfort in the form of vibrating massage chairs and luminous green butcher's grass don't seem too out of place in this room full of curio. Buzzing LED boards display times, platforms and destinations, and are bookended by large yellowing illustrations of old trains in coastal Vietnam settings. The timetables that are dotted around the building are curling with age, and above them, flat-screen TVs advertise vitamin supplements and beauty products. Lines of plastic chairs are bolted to marble-effect floors that are peppered with sunflower seed cases and plastic bags.

Children yawn, men stare, women fan.

The station's waiting rooms are crammed, everyone has somewhere to be; under the relentless clattering of oscillating fans, and the abrupt, incomprehensible voice of the tannoy, crowds of people weighed down with baggage move in different directions.

Where are they all going?



Tham Van Nhan, 78

Nhan sits cross-legged on the hard plastic chair and counts the cotton buds that a generous *xe om* driver has just bought for him. His standard-issue military helmet casts a shadow over his grave and tired face.

"I fought in Dien Bien Phu," he says.

A member of the Tay ethnic minority, travelling home to Binh Phuoc after visiting his wife and two sons in Cao Bang, Nhan's trip does not begin and end with just a train journey.

"It takes two days and one night to get home," he says. "This morning I took a bus from Cao Bang to Hanoi, now I'm going by train from here to Binh Phuoc, and then after that it's a 60km bus journey to my house."

Nhan's luggage consists of a large green sack, packed with clothes, a mosquito net and a blanket, "just in case it gets cold on the train."



Nguyen Thi Chuyen, 50

"Most of the preparation for my journey is in convincing my husband to let me go — that and travel sickness pills." Chuyen laughs so much when she speaks that one would be forgiven for thinking that she could keel over at any moment through an overdose of sheer joy.

Surrounded by her colleagues with whom she is about to holiday with, school teacher Chuyen's journey started earlier in the day when she left her home town on the outskirts of Hanoi and travelled into the city by bus. With three days of downtime planned for the break, this is Chuyen's first visit to Hue.

"This is the longest journey I've ever taken," she says, "but I've reserved a reclining chair so it should be quite comfortable."

Milliseconds after saying this, Chuyen collapses into another fit of uncontrollable giggles and can no longer speak through her laughter.



Nguyen Viet Dung, 23

Dung's relaxed appearance defies his anxieties about leaving his friends, his family and his girlfriend in Hai Duong. He sits listening to music on his MP3 player, and looks smart and street-cool in his green Versace t-shirt and shiny new jeans. His concerns about the journey ahead are a mixed bag of emotions.

"Train travel in Vietnam is interesting because you get to meet and speak to people from all over," he says. "But, the trains are noisy, and the journey is really tiring. Today the hardest thing for me is leaving the people I love behind."

With the aim of studying English in Da Nang, Dung will live with his aunt in Vietnam's third largest city.

"I packed some presents for her from my family, but other than that, I just packed necessities — a year's worth of necessities."



*Sean McMahon, 24
& Daniela Scarampi, 23*

Daniela's earliest memory of train travel is the tube journey she took as a child from London's Harrow-on-the-Hill to Norfolk Park station. And although that memory is a far cry from the journey that she and her partner Sean are currently on, the pair anticipate their voyage from Hanoi to Nha Trang to be an enjoyable one. "We haven't heard any horror stories about trains in Vietnam, so we're expecting it to be quite good — especially compared to travel in Laos!"

Having endured a gruelling journey from Vientiane to Vang Vieng in a non-air-conditioned transit van, and then witnessing a fatal road crash en-route to Hanoi from Ha Long Bay, the couple were surprisingly upbeat about the next stage of their three week holiday.

"We've got eye drops, medicine and an iPad with free Wi-Fi — we'll be fine!"



Fran Duc Cuong, 65

"The only way I can get to see the world is through my work," explains Cuong, who is on his way to Vinh University in his role as professor. "When I went to France, I felt like I already knew the place — through literature and through France's influence on Vietnam, it felt really special being there, and really familiar."

Cuong's work takes him away from his home in Hanoi every two to three months, and he enjoys travelling by train. "You get to see the beautiful landscape of Vietnam, and have interesting experiences. That doesn't happen so much on airplanes."

Having studied social science in Washington and New York, Vinh is keen to see the rest of the world. "I'd love to go to the Middle East or Africa, but I just go wherever my work takes me."



*Dinh Thi Kim Quy, 32
& Dinh Thi Lan, 23*

At the end of their five-day holiday in Hanoi, sisters Quy and Lan sit opposite the ticket counters in one of the station's wings, and pass Quy's fidgeting baby between them. A businesswoman who manages a furniture shop in Quang Binh, Quy is keen to get back to work, and is not remotely melancholy about this being the end of her holiday.

A celebrant of train travel in Vietnam, Quy states matter-of-fact that "the staff are friendly and the journey is comfortable".

The longest trips Quy has ever taken include a train ride from Quang Binh to Ho Chi Minh City, and a bus ride from Quang Binh to Dalat for her graduation exam.

On what to pack to make the journey go quickly, Quy looks down at her healthy son.

"Definitely a baby," she says. "They make the 12-hour journey a lot more interesting."

The Great Escape

Words by *Rose Arnold*

Flying (unless of course you're scared of it) is a fairly pleasant and very quick way to get from one place to another. Nothing is required of you, other than to turn up on time, sit, watch films and eat the neatly packaged food and drink that's brought to you. Apart from seeing the route map on the screen in front of you or, occasionally, the lights of cities far below, there is no connection between you and the places you're flying over. Stepping off the plane can be a strange and disconnected feeling, like you've appeared in the country of your destination by falling down an *Alice in Wonderland* rabbit hole.

There are, though, more steps to enlightenment than a train ticket, a few spare months and a *Lonely Planet* guidebook. At times, long journeys can be as boring as hell, not to mention uncomfortable and tiring. There is a certain truth, however, that there is a relationship between what you put into something and what you get out. Travelling by train, bus, bike or boat cannot guarantee adventure or a meaningful experience, but being actively involved in your journey and being open to what comes along seem like good first steps.

And so now to the stories of those who have braved the open road and dived headfirst into the unknown.



“After a 35-hour train journey down India to pick up their Minskis in Calcutta, Tomas, Chema and David found that their motorbikes were nowhere to be seen”

Tomas

Hanoi to Barcelona by motorbike

Tomas Pujol-Xicoy Valls, 'Chema' Jose Maria Costa Anadon and David Graupera Fabregas travelled 17,000 kilometres from Hanoi to their native home of Barcelona. They did this trip for no other reason than for the joy of being on the road with good friends. They agreed, over a bottle of whisky, that it was a trip that needed to be made. And they were going to do it by motorbike.

Planning was fairly minimal; they bought Minskis in Hanoi, made a list of the countries they thought they would cross and headed north. As it happened, not everything went according to those minimal plans — they had intended to ride through Myanmar, but the borders were closed, and so instead they had to go across Laos and Thailand. They shipped their bikes to India and then journeyed by boat to The Philippines where they stayed for a month.

The next stage of the adventure saw them travel through China on the Qinghai-Tibet railway line, with a stop-off in Nepal

where they went trekking in the Himalayas' snowy peaks of Annapurna.

After a 35-hour train journey down India to pick up their Minskis in Calcutta, Tomas, Chema and David found that their motorbikes were nowhere to be seen. Towering piles of paperwork suggested that the bikes could be lost forever, but 15 days later the bikes reappeared and they were able to continue on their journey. They spent one month in India, which they found to be full of fascinated locals and cricket-playing children, of dust and poverty, of eye-poppingly bright saris, sunbathing sacred cows and perfect sunsets.

When they reached the Pakistan border they were again separated from their motorbikes. Customs officials insisted that the bikes could not be ridden there, and so the Minskis went by train to the Iranian border while Tomas, Chema and David waited for their visas. During those ten days of waiting, they hired a jeep and a driver and went north. They were

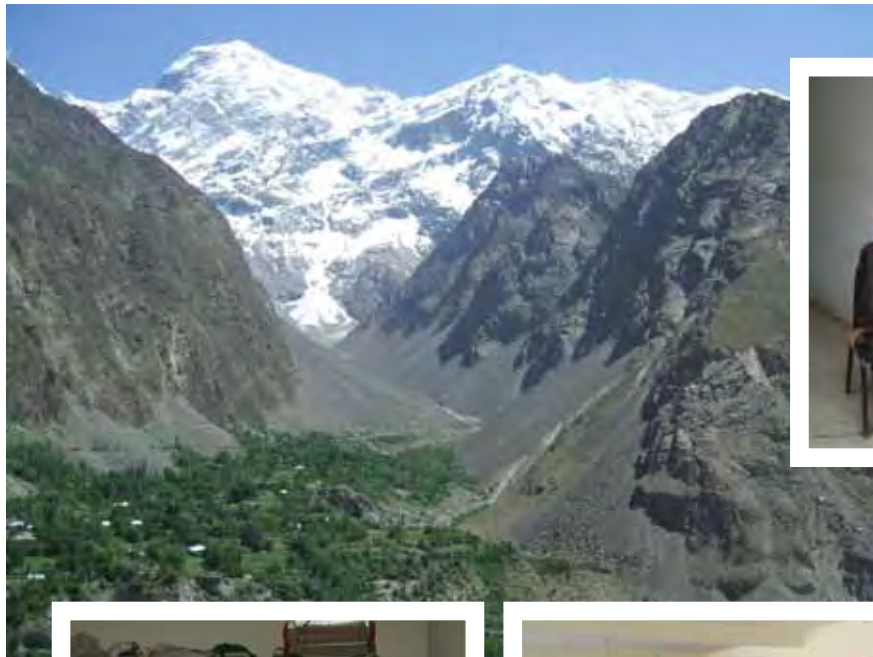


blown away by the wild beauty of the surrounding mountains and also struck by the “incredible Islamic hospitality”.

When they did finally get to Iran they had to be escorted by the military police (riding pillion on their bikes) for the first 500 kilometres. At this point they decided to abandon the original plan of going through Saudi Arabia and up to Spain via Morocco. They realised that problems at borders would likely mean more money and paperwork and, preferring to have more time riding, headed back to Barcelona via Europe.

The journey took them nine months in total. A life-affirming video exists; there's mud, banter, lots of motor biking, beaches, showing off for the camera and new friends made along the way — it's essential viewing for anyone about to embark on a similar adventure, or those just in need of inspiration.

www.oncealive.shutterfly.com
www.yamadventures.com



“I didn’t want to be stuck in the mud, like everyone else back in Holland. I felt a pressure; you plan out your life, you buy a house, get a proper education, get a proper job. If you fail you are deemed miserable”



Reinoud Weirs

Everywhere by every mode of transport available

Reinoud Weirs seems a bit bemused by questions about his ‘journey’. “Well, first I go here and here,” he shows me on the map I have printed out, “then here, and another time I go through here.” Reinoud, it turns out, has spent much of the last 10 years of his life travelling. “I wanted to see some places in the world. I didn’t plan, I just went.”

Originally from Holland, Reinoud, now 31, made his way from his home country to Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Turkey. He has lived and travelled in Iraq, has travelled through Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Nepal, China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. These journeys were made overland, on foot, by bus, by train, by hitchhiking, and at some points cycling. Very occasionally, if there was no other way of making the journey, and if he had enough money, he travelled by plane. “I try to avoid planes if at all possible. I want to have this continuation.”

Reinoud found the expectations at home restrictive and stifling. “I didn’t want to be stuck in the mud, like everyone else back in Holland. I felt a pressure; you plan out your life, you buy a house, get a proper education, get a proper job. If you fail you are deemed miserable.”

Reinoud learnt to speak Farsi while working in Iran as an English teacher, and while he was there he decided to visit India and crossed into the country via Pakistan. At the time there were a number of very dangerous, tribal areas, which he had to pass through, and so, to ease his journey, he travelled as a Muslim.

Once in India, Reinoud attempted a trip to Kashmir. Despite being told by police that the route was dangerous and not for tourists, he travelled across the mountains in the snow. At times he was able to journey by jeep, but a few hundred kilometres had to be done on foot. There were no facilities for tourists so he had to rest in any place he could find. At

one particularly low point a monk took Reinoud to his monastery where he was told about beautiful valleys nearby. Spirits recovered, Reinoud decided to stay a little longer and later returned to explore and set up guided tours for visitors to the area.

Reinoud came to Vietnam to find work. He travelled through China, which at the time was entry-restrictive due to the 2008 Olympics. He managed to get the relevant paperwork that enabled him to travel across China by train, and a gruelling 50-hour ride pushed him to his limits. “I went almost crazy, it was like prison.”

Despite having lived in Vietnam for the last four years, Reinoud has still managed to feed his hunger for adventure. One of the highlights includes a thigh-trembling 1,400-kilometre bicycle ride from Hanoi to Sisophon that required covering 240 to 280 kilometres per day.

“I want to experience life, have something to do. I want to escape, to live a life.”



“We saw some of the great natural and human triumphs the world has to offer, and by getting off the beaten track we really got a taste of local life”

Ben and Iola

Hanoi to London by train

Ben Ward and Iola Woodward had been living in Hanoi for 18 months when they decided it was time to return to Britain. They were going back to their families and back to the ‘reality’ they had known before. They wanted their trip to be an unforgettable experience, so 16,000km, 30 trains and two-and-a-half months later, their plan was deemed a success.

Ben and Iola planned their journey carefully. Many travellers value spontaneity above planning routes and itineraries, but on hearing about their trip it’s clear that planning had advantages. Over the course of their travels they were able to stay in interesting places, including Mongolian and Russian home-stays, rather than ending up at whichever hotel would take them. In Mongolia they stayed in the

ancient capital of Karakorum and enjoyed “eating Mongolian dumplings and playing volleyball with our host family’s children.”

In Krasnoyarsk, Russian host Julia took them on a visit to her family’s home in a local village. Here, they were regaled with incomprehensible stories, fed barbequed food, taught Russian dancing, treated to a sauna, and, of course, plied with endless vodka.

Ben says that travelling by train was a great way to meet people from all walks of life. “We saw some of the great natural and human triumphs the world has to offer, and by getting off the beaten track we really got a taste of local life. We met Russian squaddies, Soviet journalists, a compartment of fluent English-speaking Russians, Mongolian farmers, a Berliner

who saw the Berlin wall come down and who had also done almost exactly the same journey as us 30 years ago, a Slovakian guy who’s grandmother had escaped from a concentration camp. The list goes on.”

Reaching London, and the end of their journey, was bittersweet. Although they were both excited to be home and to see friends and family, it meant the end of an extraordinary experience and back to worrying about jobs. Still, Ben says, St. Pancras is a beautiful station and “there couldn’t be a better welcome home”. To mark the occasion they had a glass of champagne at the longest champagne bar in the world, and then each of them headed to get their 31st train, back to their respective families.

<http://benandiola.wordpress.com>



Darren and Jo

St Petersburg to Hanoi by train and bus

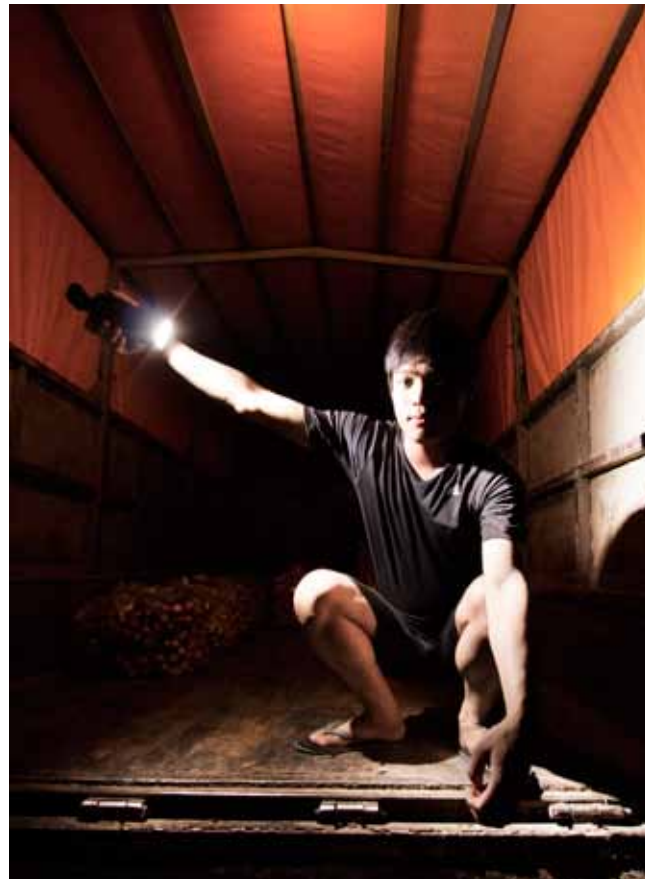
St Petersburg to Hanoi is a long way — it is, in fact, 10,000 kilometres as the crow flies, but Darren Paine and Jo Fearnley found a way to make the trip even longer. They traversed 30 Russian cities and slept in 60-bed *platzkart* train carriages, and also managed to travel on the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) — a route that few tourists have taken. “People are so friendly, so generous,” Darren says. “We were regularly given *salo* — big lumps

of raw salted pig fat on paper. We’re vegetarians but it was kind.”

They crossed over into China on a midnight train via Harbin, then spent two months exploring the country by train. For the final leg of the journey to Hanoi they took a 14-hour sleeper bus across the border, and then, after just one final 14-hour bus journey, Darren and Jo arrived in their new home.

www.djontheroad.com/dj/

*“We were regularly given **salo** — big lumps of raw salted pig fat on paper. We’re vegetarians but it was kind”*



On the Road

Douglas Pyper meets the men who have time and time again tried to kill him, and finds himself oddly sympathetic to these kings of the road. Photos by Francis Roux

The average motorist in Vietnam will probably cite long distance trucks as the most dangerous thing on the road. Whether stuck behind one as acrid, black smoke belches from its exhaust, when its overloaded cargo spills everywhere, when encountered driving straight at you on the wrong side of the road, or as they force you to the side in an aggressive attempt to overtake, these behemoths of the road are an ill omen for the living and those on the move.

So, who are these death-defying, harbingers of fear and doom, and the bane of the casual motorist's road trip? One such person is Hoa, who's been driving since he was 15 years old when he started his life on the road without a licence. Now, drinking tea and smoking by the side of the road, he waits for his five-tonne truck to be offloaded at the Hanoi Fruit Market. Shy but polite in conversation, Hoa makes very little eye contact, while his answers are short and unelaborate.

For Hoa, truck driving was a way to avoid going to school. He could travel the country, make some money and avoid all the things he didn't want to deal with at home in Moc Chau. This month, his routine involves nightly trips from his parent's house to Son La, where he picks up a full load of fruit and brings it down to Hanoi before driving back home. His day starts at 2pm and finishes at 6am. His life is transient, lived in the moment with no girlfriend, few friends and no idea as to

what he'll do in the future. "I'll know when it comes," he assures.

Reinventing the Wheel

With six years' experience, Hoa is at the beginning of his mobile life. But at the other end of the scale is a man 30 years his senior; a man who's been trucking for over three decades. He won't give his name, but he looks around 10 years younger than his stated age of 50. Thick laughter lines threaten to completely consume his face while he chortles closed-mouth, and as he sucks on a White Horse cigarette he points directions to passing trucks, and pauses endlessly in the middle of sentences, leaving you unsure whether he's finished or not.

For this man, truck driving was a way to see the world.

"It's not that I have a poor IQ score," he reasons. "I love adventure, I love visiting places, so I decided to learn to drive. My dad taught me that if I travel for one day, I can learn a pile of new things and become wise. So I became a truck driver."

His business management degree has never been put to use, but he's been all over the country. A typical journey is from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. Two drivers will make the 2,000 kilometre journey in 48 hours, taking turns to sleep in their seats and stopping only to eat a basic meal of *com binh dan*. "It's a job; it's boring," says

the driver, "we listen to the radio or sleep. I've trained myself to fall asleep as soon as I close my eyes."

Road Kill

This driver claims to have never had an accident during his 30 years of making deadlines on winding mountainous roads and through chaotic traffic. He does, however, have a good idea of what causes a lot of them: fines, explaining that drivers, particularly those transporting fruit, are fined per hour of lateness. A seven-tonne load of rambutans, which can earn a driver VND21 million, can carry a one-hour lateness fine of VND2 million; two hours late and the fine doubles, while missing the deadline by three hours can result in a driver losing 50 percent of the contract.

With that in mind, it's small wonder that some drivers are reckless when literally every hour counts on a 48-hour journey. "Everybody is scared of dying, but let's worry when it comes," says the driver. "The Vietnamese have a saying: 'If one can think far enough ahead, he can avoid tragedy', so I'm always well prepared."

Keeping the Faith

Some of the drivers in the southern half of the country have installed altars in their trucks for good luck, but this is almost unheard of in the northern region. Our driver chooses instead to put his faith in his

Hyundai truck, rather than the spirits. "If you love your truck then it will love you back. You have to love the truck like a son and love the petrol like your blood. Trucks are like people, they have souls." To this end he keeps his truck as clean as possible and never lets anyone smoke in it. But the truck remains stoically bare, with a radio and few personal effects such as a blanket and spare clothes, but nothing else.

Over the course of 30 years of driving, he has experienced the worst of everything long-distance travelling can offer. He's driven up to 17 hours without a break; battled the winding, potholed mountainous passes on the way from Hanoi to Lao Cai; broken down far from the nearest village; avoided the police by giving and receiving signals with the trucks indicators, drank endless cups of coffee to stay awake and slept endless hours sitting up straight in his old Korean truck as it bounces over poorly maintained roads.

For him there is now only one part of the journey to look forward to ("When I get home safely and hug my wife."), yet, for all the hardship, boredom and danger, he has no regrets. "I've learned a lot about good behaviour, and how to treat people well," he says, before revealing that the lust for travel born in his youth hasn't completely diminished. "I'll teach my children to explore Vietnam and the world — but not to be truck drivers."

Pilgrimage

One of the perks of living in Hanoi is the opportunity to travel all over Asia — it's a great base to explore onward. But sometimes you need something more meaningful than beaches, backpacker hostels and five-star luxury. **Andrew Engelson** considers the challenges of turning a holiday into a pilgrimage



I have a thing for sacred places, not that I'm especially religious. There are many travellers who, like me, feel a need to embark on a more meaningful journey. In years of travel, I've made trips to all sorts of holy places: Angkor in Cambodia, Bodhgaya in India (where the Buddha attained enlightenment), Jerusalem, and Uluru in Australia. Each experience was magical in its own way.

People have been making pilgrimages for centuries, whether to Santiago de Compostela in Spain or the Haj to Mecca. In fact, pilgrimage was in many ways the birth of travel as we know it today: travel not because you need to visit family or do business, but to

travel for the sake of seeing a place.

So what goes into a successful modern-day pilgrimage?

It must be meaningful

Maybe you're a Christian and find something moving in seeing the sites in Jerusalem. Or perhaps you admire an author and want to visit her gravestone. Whatever — it just has to be sacred to you. For example, one of my favourite temples in Hanoi is Huyen Thien, near Dong Xuan market. It's not listed in guidebooks and doesn't receive a lot of visitors. But one day I stumbled upon it, and now it's my oasis of calm in the city.

It's sacred to me because I made a personal connection to it.

It has to be difficult

Some sacrifice is required, whether it's time, money, or inconvenience. Whether you're trekking 40km in Nepal or just walking up a small mountain outside Hanoi, it can't all be easy. You've got to earn that sense of peace.

It has to involve walking

To connect with the long tradition of pilgrimage, you need to use your own two feet — that doesn't mean you have to walk all the way to Tibet, but you do need to slow



down and walk to a temple or take a day to wander the sites of Angkor. You can't get in touch with the sacred while riding in a car or checking your text messages. Stop and listen to the birds. Observe the pace of life that precedes our modern world.

It must possess magic or mystery

This is the ineffable, unpredictable aspect of a sacred journey. Going to a place that has been revered by generations can increase your chances of finding this, but it's not essential. At Angkor, when I stepped into the dark sanctuary in the centre of the ruins of Bayon, it was a quiet, moving experience. The incense, the intense dark, and the knowledge that thousands of years of history had passed through this place put me in touch with something larger than myself.

Go as Far as Tibet or as close as the Perfume Pagoda

A pilgrimage doesn't require you to venture far from Hanoi. Take a hike up to the quiet cave sanctuary at the Perfume Pagoda, a two-hour drive from Hanoi (just don't visit right after Tet, or you'll share your moment of

bliss with 30,000 fellow pilgrims!), or visit the pagoda at the summit of Yen Tu Mountain, outside Ninh Binh, where one of Vietnam's Zen sects was founded.

Plan something grand, like Tibet

Over 10 years ago, I found myself at the top of a 5,500m pass during a trek around a remote mountain in Tibet. I was tired, thirsty, and my head and heart were pounding. Buddhist prayer flags fluttered over stones carved with mantras. My feet were sore, and I was exhausted, yet immensely happy.

The experience was part of a pilgrimage I made to Mount Kailash, Tibet's holiest mountain. It required a three-week jeep journey over thousands of kilometres of barren tundra to visit a mountain few people ever see.

I had a fascination with Kailash. My wife would probably more accurately call it an obsession. I was curious about Tibetan Buddhism, and I have a thing for remote mountains. So Kailash had a pull I found hard to resist. It's holy to both Tibetan Buddhists and Indian Hindus. Plus it has an uncanny appearance, with its stupa-like

summit. To trek around the peak is to have your soul reborn. How could I say no?

We met plenty of difficulty along the way, including a sulking guide who did nothing but drink beer and hold on to our Chinese travel permits. But we saw incredible things: Tibetan nomads dressed in colourful traditional clothing, sublime snow-capped peaks, and an array of wildlife from wolves to chiru — the rare Tibetan antelope. During the day we baked under a harsh sun and at night we froze. The trek itself took three days and took us over a pass where the air was thin and clear. Near the summit I met an Indian pilgrim who had nearly finished 89 circuits of the mountain, one each day. I was sufficiently humbled.

Beyond the pass we stopped at a place with hundreds of mantra stones. Here pilgrims are supposed to leave behind a piece of clothing to symbolise their rebirth into a new life. I did the same. In the process I connected to a larger mystery. Even today in Hanoi, Kailash seems a remote and rare experience I may never repeat.

I'll continue to take journeys to sacred places, and hopefully be reborn once again.

The Journey of Sound

Douglas Pyper looks at the history of travelling musicians and finds people and culture constantly on the move. Photo by Aaron Joel Santos



In 16th century Europe the *commedia dell'arte* was doggedly migrating west out of Italy like American settlers would do later on. They brought with them entertainment in the form of masked stock characters representing universal themes such as mockery, sadness, gaiety and confusion; the miser, the charlatan, the philanderer, the virtuous hero, the servant and the master.

Similarly, the 16th century was also when *hat cheo* was assuming its present day form in Vietnam. Like *comedia dell'arte*, *hat cheo* is a form of musical theatre featuring melodies, plays and masked characters that are instantly recognisable to the audience.

Today, *cheo* is more widely known as the music which accompanies water puppet performances. Flute, assorted string instruments and the *dan bau* provide the bulk of the *cheo* sound along with the ever constant, plonking percussion of the *phach*. All act as support for the lead vocal – usually a female and undoubtedly the focal point of any *cheo* performance. The music rises and falls and seems almost formless as it supports the narrative of the vocal.

From its peasant roots, *hat cheo* spread far from its origins in the north of Vietnam via travelling troupes of actors, singers and musicians. By buffalo-drawn wagon they would journey from village to village, town to town in rural, feudal Vietnam; cap in hand, on the search for new audiences.

Having begun singing at the age of 15, Thanh Hoai has been performing in *hat cheo* for some 50 years. She explains the evolution of the form as it has migrated throughout the country. As troupes arrived in new villages, they would perform their routine, using rhythms and melodies that they'd learned and practiced before. But for each village they would ad-lib lyrics praising the appearance or achievements of that place. Performing in public spaces like pagodas and by village ponds, they would sing of the bountiful harvest that the village had enjoyed, or of the beautiful scenery nearby.

Through this process, *hat cheo* was passed among the villages of Vietnam. The travelling troupes would act as pollinating bees, spreading melodies, rhythms and songs around the country and picking up regional variations and instruments as they went. Today, these regional variations persist with the Nam Dinh and Hai Duong variations being particularly distinctive. Modern *hat cheo* groups still create new plays and songs, only now they sing of the history of Thanh Long or praise the achievements of Ho Chi Minh and The Party as they travel the country.

Despite the resistance of many traditionalists to anything that spoils the purity of traditional forms and the rather stolid content, Thanh Hoai believes that the modern version of the art form has lost none of its creativity. "*Hat Cheo* is developing, but we have to keep its origin. We can wander a little."

Going Global

Hat cheo has taken Hoai around the world. Touring for up to five months at a time in Europe, Hoai met other pilgrims from the Vietnamese diaspora. As she walked the streets of Switzerland and Germany in 1991, she met old Vietnamese men of 60 or 70 years old, who were astounded at the traditional headdress she wore proudly on first-world streets.

"They said it had been 30 or 40 years since they'd seen these things," she recalls. "They felt proud to see Vietnamese culture in Europe."

Like those who practise it, *hat cheo* is also on a journey. Thanh Hoai has taken part in collaborations with French composers who have brought a hint of European opera and elegance to the ancient, peasant form. Vietnamese artists, too, are starting to play. Thanh Hoai demonstrates the subtle differences that Quoc Trung brought to *hat cheo*. She sings a classic melody in its original 2/4 time, then compares it to the faster and more regular 4/4 beat that Trung gave it. All the refrain needs is a loop and a thick bass kick and you'd have a ready-made Madlib or Onra track; two other artists appropriating traditional music for modern audiences.

In this regard, *hat cheo* is not alone. Last year, Hoai collaborated with pianist Pho An My and musical director Dang Tue Nguyen. They created a conversation between *hat van* — a form of traditional Vietnamese music featuring regular and hypnotic rhythms commonly used in exorcism rituals — and modern classical piano.

The collaboration "is like a dialogue," says Hoai. "There isn't much overlap between modern piano and *hat van*, but it's still a combination and there are many ways that traditional music can be mixed with other forms."

For her, the constant journey of traditional forms keeps them endlessly fresh. As she

sat on the judging panel for a national competition of Vietnamese traditional music, she was constantly hearing new *hat cheo* songs, rhythms and melodies that had eluded her 50 years of experience. "There are still so many songs from the past, in the history [of this art], that I haven't discovered yet. I'm still finding more melodies and lyrics all the time."

The cultural journey continues for Hoai, but, being past retirement age, the physical journeys are finished. Even a trip of two months is too much of a strain. She wants to return to her home, her family and everything that is permanent, familiar and comfortable to her. Nowadays, like Vietnamese cultural commentator Huu Ngoc, Thanh Hoai wanders through culture rather than roads.

The Stage

In stark contrast is the philosophy of percussionist Minh Chi. He lives within the compound of the Vietnam Hat Cheo Theatre. Entering through the ever-open gates, visitors pass a parked tour bus and van that look ready to jet off into the countryside at a moment's notice. Chi has an almost perfectly round face. His protruding front teeth accentuate his constant smile and his eyes disappear almost completely during his very genuine laughs. He shows us a picture of himself outside the Houses of Parliament in London from a tour in 1993. Back then he had a long curly mullet and was wearing a blue tracksuit unzipped to show his white t-shirt underneath. With a multi-compartment bum-bag wrapped around his waist, he looks straight out of the former Soviet Union, a place he's never been; Soviet culture came to him.

Hat cheo has taken Chi all over Vietnam. He's visited every province bar a couple in the Mekong Delta. Vietnamese session musicians like Chi play and tour almost constantly, just as his artisan forefathers did centuries ago. For Chi, the joy in travelling is recognising the similarities and differences between the music of the place he visits and the northern style of *hat cheo* that he has grown up with. In the same vein, journeying abroad has taught Chi more about his own culture. "When I play *chau van* in Europe, people ask me where Vietnam learned the rhythm from, which European country brought it to Vietnam. It shows the similarities that music all over the world has. A strong, almost disco-like beat is universal. *Chau van* is like Vietnamese rap!"

A Band Apart

When talking about music, it's almost impossible for Chi to stay in one place, either geographically or regarding genre. "*Hat xam* also has many similarities with many types of music in the world like rock, blues or rap," says Chi. "Mongolian farmers make music very similar to *hat xam*."

Essentially a kind of busking, *hat xam* artists would perform impromptu in the street or public place and sing of misery and poverty in order to make money. Its most similar international counterpart is American hobo blues from the early 20th century. It usually has a poetic narrative based in nature and folk tales while the musician riffs improvisations between lines. The oldest and most revered living exponent of *hat xam* is Ha Thi Cau.

Ha Thi Cau has lived a transient, day-to-day, hand-to-mouth existence, surviving by busking *hat xam* like a Southern American bluesman. In one televised interview, shortly after she was awarded the status of Outstanding Artist (*Nhac Si Uu Tu*), the thick lines of Ha Thi Cau's face can be made out — pointing towards her black teeth, invisible in the darkness as she chews betel nut. "If you're hungry then sit outside the market, or sit in the street at night and make as much as you can," she spits. "That is *hat xam*."

For Minh Chi, this lifestyle — so prevalent in musicians the world over — has a powerful attraction. "It's a lifestyle I want to live one day, too. Just travel and sing, buy a truck and just go." His philosophy is to keep experiencing new things for as long as he lives: new food, new melodies, new rhythms, new styles and new experiences.

Everyone's a musician

Minh Chi's journey's with *hat cheo* represents something of a quest. He was awarded the title of Outstanding Artist 15 years ago for spreading the form throughout the country, directly training 12 different troupes. Sitting in his living room, he suddenly jumps up and declares, "I'll make musicians of you all!"

He returns later with percussion instruments made out of bamboo — an instrument he discovered on his travels to the Central Highlands. In some places people hit the open top with sticks, others bang the tubes on the ground, while others trap the tube in their feet and clap air into the tubes. After a brief jam, he sings a northern melody, and then contrasts it with the equivalent from the south and another variation from Hue. He tells his young students that they only need to learn the basics, then they can travel around the country. "Pick up on the regional variations," he teaches, "and you can play any type of music."

In an average year Minh Chi travels to play more than 100 shows. "There's always a festival somewhere," he says.

Just then his young daughter arrives, her big, beautiful smile strikingly similar to that of her father. She is invited to sing us a song. She does it brilliantly while sitting on the stairs, her foot tapping away to the rhythm. It feels like a new journey is just beginning. 