

**ASCENTS  
&  
DESCENTS**

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Ascents & Descents: Through Vietnam by motorbike

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**JEROEN VOGEL**

**ASCENTS  
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*To Krijn, of course.*

## PROLOGUE

A DUTCHMAN CAN only expand his horizons if he climbs over the dikes. The landscape within is cultivated and the nurture of ethics and integrity has shaped a people that tolerates each and every culture in its enclosed backyard but constantly vents about such irrelevant issues as the weather. The wide wild world awaits exploration. It's why the likelihood of encountering a Dutch person in any random village in any accessible country is fairly high; it's where the nature is real and rough and the cultures are pure and true. A man who lives within the dikes has a natural keenness to learn about the world beyond them, but often finds this desire muted by society's expectations.

In the wake of thirteen working holidays abroad, I had become a backpacker and hadn't been within the Dutch dikes for over two years. Of course, sometimes I missed that tiny land. Its fried snacks, its tolerance, but nothing I missed more than friends and family. It was, therefore, a real pleasure to meet up with a good friend from home who also wanted to see more than windmills and green farmland. Krijn (pronounced as Crine) happened to be in Malaysia at the same time as me and we decided to meet up in Kuala Lumpur. We came from the city of Hoorn (roughly 35 kilometers north of Amsterdam and famous for lending its name to Cape Horn) and had known each other for about

eight years. Mostly, we were pub buddies who also shared the tendency to be the last ones at a party, causing the party thrower to become the party pooper. Seeing each other for the first time in the capacity of solo travelers was like seeing each other naked for the first time in the sauna, that kind of awkward moment.

At the bus station in KL, I only recognized him by his physical posture. His hair had grown wild: from tiny spikes it had transformed into huge curls that were long enough to make an angora goat feel sick of jealousy. His clothes were ragged and dirty. Before his travels I wouldn't have associated him with a deep and sincere approach towards spirituality, but in KL he spoke of a reading experience in India which had been so intense and personal that he absolutely refused to go into detail. To travel is to gain life experience. From a common Dutch student working hard on his Bachelor degree, he had now evolved into a traveler. A steep promotion: going to school happens within the comfort zone of society's expectations, going abroad alone is a brave choice that purely comes from within oneself. And he suddenly had a tattoo, too, on one of his calves.

It was a sort of wave, a line that curved up and down and back up again.

'It symbolizes life,' Krijn told me. 'In life, you've got your ups and your downs, your highs and your lows. But no matter how down you are or how low you feel, you'll always climb up again.'

This was a beautiful meaning for a tattoo, the ascents and descents of life. Yes, he had become a rather worldly person. We spent four awesome days in Kuala Lumpur and were then on our way again. Krijn was off to Singapore and I was off to the Malaysian Central Highlands. We wouldn't see each other again, for we traveled in opposite directions.



But one week later, Krijn and I were in Cambodia simultaneously. He was in Sihanoukville, in the south, and I was in Siem Reap in northern Cambodia. While I sat on the balcony of my guesthouse room, coming to terms with the fact that a street prostitute had just randomly attempted to get a hold of my nutsack, Krijn started talking to me on Facebook.

“Want to go to Vietnam together? Buy a motorbike and go from south to north?”

I stared at the screen and had that reluctant feeling that precedes enthusiasm when a bold idea suddenly surfaces. “I’ve never ridden a motorbike before. Do you want go into that traffic untrained?”

“Isn’t hard. Easy shit.”

“How much would it cost?”

“Nothing. We sell the bikes again. Petrol...”

“True.”

“And it’s fun to travel together.”

Only once in my life had I traveled together with someone else, which was nearly seven years earlier. I preferred to travel alone because it makes it easier to get in touch with the local population. Two people can be overwhelming, one person is vulnerable and a little sad. Being the single individual that enters the village increases the chance to get in touch and learn firsthand. But Krijn had a pleasant and fun personality and I instantly abandoned all other plans, whatever they were, for his proposal hit a spot.

“Yeah, I agree.”

“This adventure...”

“Vietnam...”

“Awesome!”

“When do you want to be there? In five days?”

“So four days from tomorrow?”

“Make it 7, so I can make it, too.”

“Seven, you got it.”

“25<sup>th</sup> Of April.”

“In Saigon.”

And then the following story unfolded...

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE TOUR TO HO CHI MINH CITY**

THE MIGHTY MEKONG River is not so much a river as it is a 4,909 kilometer long lifeline that meanders from its source in the Chinese province of Qinghai through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The boat that I was on, covered only 130 kilometers of it—but even within this relatively small section the Mekong River reflected its importance as a crucial source of income and survival. We started the journey in Phnom Penh, where the river functioned as the wet dream of developers with plans for hotels, theaters or office buildings that—of course—had to face the river as part of their prestige. The city was developing rapidly and the greatest projects were either planned or under construction along the river's shores.

This all changed within minutes as the boat started to gain speed and entered the rural areas. The relevance of water as a primary condition for human life showed more than ever before; the river was now a true lifeline. Here and there people washed themselves or bathed their water buffalos. The fishermen worked from low, wooden boats or stood up till their waist in the water with a net. There were floating houses of corrugated iron, small cargo ships of wood. And then, suddenly, there was a huge, concrete pillar in the middle of that wide river, with twenty construction workers working

on this important element of the bridge that was going to make many lives so much easier. From that sneak-preview of what modern times were about to bring, we went straight back to a country where time seemed to stand still. Houses on wooden stilts. Naked children that splashed around. Women that did the washing up.

This was, by all means, Southeast Asia as we know it from the images. Progressive and bustling cities that contrasted with the idle and apparent unsophisticated way of life in the rural areas. Asia was the show, the Mekong River was the theater and our eight meter long passenger ship was the seat from where we watched. The small group on board consisted of three Dutch backpackers, a Canadian couple, a Vietnamese tourist and an Hispanic, who just sat there and enjoyed the ride from behind his sunglasses without any interaction with his fellow passengers. I was the fourth Dutch person on the boat, but the other three were not to know that and I did as the Hispanic did: I refrained from interaction and watched the scenery.

The boat ride from Phnom Penh into Vietnam was part of a two day tour which would eventually bring us to Ho Chi Minh City. We would spend the night in a floating hotel and visit a temple and a floating village in the morning. Three of the five crew members hadn't done anything since our departure from Phnom Penh and sat in the cabin, on the passenger seats. One of them took the opportunity to lay down with his legs across the aisle and sleep. The steward and the captain who steered the ship were the only two crew members working. The steward would sometimes come out onto the aft deck, where our group had taken place as it at least provided a nice cool breeze in an otherwise hot and humid climate, to check on us or to provide some information.

About ten minutes before the border, he came out and told us to give him an American dollar. 'Fifty cent for the Cambodian customs and fifty cent for the Vietnamese customs.'

'I've already paid 58 dollar for my Vietnamese visa,' I said. 'What is this for?'

'This is for passing the borders.'

He went over to the other passengers who obligingly gave him a dollar note each. Then he came back to me to collect the money. I gave the steward a dollar and he disappeared into the cabin. Minutes later, the three boys that hadn't done anything so far, got up and helped moor the boat at the Cambodian border post.

It was hidden behind a row of trees, with the decayed and tiny police boat laying in the mud banks of the Mekong River and one working customs agent who hastily put his shirt on when our curious faces wandered through the gate into the courtyard. We had to stand in line in front of a concrete shed with two service windows while the officer put exit stamps in our passports.

Not much further, we moored again to see the Vietnamese customs agent. This time round, the facility wasn't hidden but laid like a modern bunker on the water. Police boats were ready for action; not if, but when necessary. Like all structures on the Mekong that weren't on stilts, the border post bunker could move up and down with the water level. In Phnom Penh I had estimated that the water was at times six meters higher than it had been this morning by looking at the traces on the shore's wall. From this low point, it was almost unimaginable that the solid-looking concrete building of the Vietnamese border police could rise. One would rather imagine the customs agents stamping passports on the wave-shaped roof top when the water level is at

its highest towards September and October.

Our passports were taken and we were told to take place in a waiting room, that doubled as a dining area. A lady at the door gave us menu cards. I bought a bottle of water and went outside to smoke a cigarette on the terrace. The Hispanic stood there, too, still ignoring everyone, but clearly enjoying the view of the Mekong River. I turned around and looked through the open door into the waiting room. The three Dutch backpackers were having a meal near the Canadian couple and the Vietnamese tourist. It looked like sweet and sour pork with steamed rice, but it could've been anything. Sweet and sour dog. Sweet and sour cat. Sweet and sour rat. Who, by the way, said it was sweet and sour? It could've been anything. Bitter. Salt. Flat-out tasteless.

As we received our passports and walked back to the boat, we all started going through the pages to see what the Vietnamese entry stamp looked like. Obviously, the landscape didn't change after the border crossing, but the number of stilt houses, floating huts and wooden ships, often decorated with bright colors and dragons painted on the bow, increased, as did other river-based activities. Women stood in tiny boats, which they pushed forward with long poles, braving the waves of our motorboat. Inside their little boats were mainly vegetables and here and there they would meet up with another little boat to exchange goods for money and part again.

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THE BOAT RIDE had taken about five hours and ended at a floating hotel in Châu Đốc, a city with 110,000 inhabitants not far from the border and about 250

kilometers west of Ho Chi Minh City. While disembarking the ship and stepping through an opening into the common area, I noticed that the hotel stayed afloat thanks to empty metal drums. It was held in place by iron rings that went around to long poles, so that it could go up and down with the water level. It was a big structure. There was the common area with a bar, pool table and tables and chairs, to the right was a large restaurant and to the left were the rooms. An attached ship moored in front of the rooms had open living rooms, where people watched television or slept in random places on comfortable cushions. It was a very strange set-up.

The Hispanic was the first to check in at the “reception table” and stormed off without looking around. I gave the receptionist my passport and saw to my dismay how he put it in the same folder of transparent plastic as the Mexican passport of the Hispanic. The folder carried a sticker with a “1” on it, which, of course, corresponded with hotel room number 1.

The receptionist said, ‘Your room partner has the key.’

‘How convenient.’

I was directed towards room number 1.

The Mexican just came out of the room and pulled a face. ‘We are sharing?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ I said. ‘Hopefully just the room.’

‘Yeah, there are two beds. I took the one on the left; you just grab the other one.’

The Mexican handed me the key.

‘Two strangers that share a room also get to share the one key,’ I said, holding it up.

‘I’m sticking to the hotel for now, though. What about you?’

I gave him the key back. 'Going out exploring.'

'I'll do that later on. When I go out and you're not back, I'll just hand the key to the staff.'

'Sounds like a solid plan. Well, catch you later.'

I deposited my bag on the unoccupied bed and went out. My mysterious roommate was now sitting in the common area, taking photos of the standing ladies in their tiny boats on the Mekong. I asked for a map of the town at the reception table and crossed the gangway to the street.

Châu Đốc's city center was to the right, according to the map, and then to the left at the end of the boulevard. I passed an expensive looking hotel and walked along the boulevard, with shiny tiles and a small playground for the kids, that provided a great view of the river. In the middle stood an impressive work of art: a twelve meter high sculpture which consisted of several fish. There were two large fish, one horizontal Mekong giant catfish near the top, and one sticking out vertically as the topping of the fish cake. It had curly ornaments that complimented the square lower part of the pillar and smaller fish attached to it. In the background was the river with its width of a few hundred meters and the mouth of a side-fork. This huge water surface resembled a small lake and about two hundred meters from Châu Đốc's river bank was a floating village of houses with wooden platforms and walls and roofs of corrugated iron.

But I was going to enjoy the view later, for I was most of all hungry at this stage. I crossed the road and walked through what one would call a city center. The depressive sight of the single-storey buildings capped with corrugated steel roofs was interspersed by bright colors on the walls of higher buildings. Nothing here seemed to be old. They all contained shops on the



ground floor and apartments if they had a second, third or even a fourth floor.

The streets had wide sidewalks, but these seemed mainly in use as an extension of the business to either showcase the merchandise or to park the residents'/employees' scooters and motorbikes. Walking in a straight line was nearly impossible. The sidewalks were lined with tall trees that obscured the higher buildings and the bottom 1.5 meter of each tree was painted white so they would reflect headlights in the dark. Looking up, the eye was caught by hundreds of wires that went from pole to pole along the street and across the street. Lampposts seemed popular places in particular for cables to come together and become tangled. These were not only electricity wires, but also telephone and television cables. It was just up to the electrician to decide which were his.

A lady approached me and showed me some sort of Vietnamese lottery ticket. I started laughing. What did she think a foreigner was going to do with a Vietnamese lottery ticket? But then I realized that she didn't care about that aspect; she just wanted to sell and earn. 'No, thanks,' I said and moved on. She slapped me on the arm, probably out of desperation. A man across the road stood there watching.

Being a single foreigner on the loose in a random Vietnamese town attracted mostly smiles and gazes of bewilderment. Near hotels on the river bank these looks were absent, but the moment the foreigner ventures into town he becomes the equivalent of an escaped zoo animal. The locals didn't seem used to a Westerner strolling their streets and were probably not sure what to make of it. Was I lost? Was I sightseeing? Why didn't I stick to the hotel or the boulevard? What was my business in this part of town?

If I'd had any knowledge of the language, I would have said it. Food. There hadn't been a place to eat between all these shops. I turned right into a street lined with schools on the left and houses on the right. And then, suddenly, there it was. In one of the houses on the right. Chairs, tables, fans, a counter, a fridge full of soda, some sort of kitchen behind the counter.

I walked in.

And beside the French fries, I didn't know what I'd ordered. It was thin meat, with a grey-ish color. It wasn't enough to satisfy a Western stomach, so I ordered another portion of French fries. Four school children stood still in front of the restaurant and stared at me. I smiled at them with a nod, they smiled back and ran off. And then I realized I only had American dollars, because Cambodian ATM's dispensed that currency and I hadn't changed any money yet. Did I really have to pay for my meal in dollars? Most Asians don't mind, because they can earn a bit extra by adding value to the exchange rate, but as a visitor, you just can't go waving your green dollar notes around. The cute waitress hesitated for a second, then nodded. I paid for my meal in dollars, two of them. As I walked out, I wondered whether a local Burger King restaurant in, say, Illinois or Nebraska would accept Vietnamese dong, as well.

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AS MUCH AS they wish they could, the Dutch can't escape the Dutch. Out of the eight passengers on board the ship from Phnom Penh to Châu Đốc, four were Dutch. And when the bus arrived with people going in the opposite direction, guess what nationality got off?

At night, everyone was hanging out in the lobby.

Playing pool, having a few beers, socializing. The place had no walls and I happily sat by myself, feeling a slight evening breeze touch my face while I worked on a travel narrative about my time in Australia. Writing goes really well in a lively environment when working on a piece with lots of dialogue and action, just like writing in a quiet and non-distractive environment works for the deeper and perhaps more intellectual parts of a story. That's why I sat there happily by myself, until I went to the bar to order a beer and got cornered by an 19 year old Dutch backpacker who detected a Dutch accent the moment I spoke to the bar lady in English.

'Hey, you're Dutch!' he said with a smile in our mother tongue.

I already knew about him that he had ruined his education, what his age was and that he came from a town called Voorschoten. I also knew that he had been motorbiking in Vietnam, with two friends who had flown home from Ho Chi Minh City. I knew all this, because he had been the Loudmouth of the Night.

'Yes,' I said. 'And so are you.'

I paid the bar lady, grabbed my beer and went back to my table with a friendly nod. I was in the middle of a writing flow and had to finish it. When I was done, about an hour later, I turned to the 19 year old who sat at the table across, seemingly bored as the other Dutch backpackers had gone to bed. He stared quietly at the blonde girl that was goofing around with pool balls on the pool table. We were the only three guests still awake, along with two staff members.

'Well,' I said, 'tell me about motorbiking in Vietnam.'

'Are you going to do the same?' he asked, turning to me.

‘That’s the plan. With a friend from back home.’

‘Where’s home for you?’

‘Hoorn.’

‘I’m from Voorschoten.’

‘I know.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, I may have been writing, but that doesn’t mean that my ears stopped working.’

He laughed. ‘Ah, right. You’ve been sitting here listening.’

‘Mate, you’ve got a voice that can reach for miles. So, motorbiking in Vietnam...’

‘Well, it’s really the coolest thing to do. You’ve got to buy a Honda Win.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if your bike breaks down, you’ll find a repairman in every small village. There’s always a Honda specialist, anywhere. Honda is huge in Vietnam. All the backpackers ride Honda Wins.’

‘Honda Win it is. How’s riding in this country?’

‘It’s so much fun, but traffic is insane. They don’t look, they cut you off, buses and trucks know that they can force you off the road and that’s what they do. I crashed once. Not badly, though. And then there’s the honking of all the horns, constantly.’

A pool ball shot off the pool table, hit the floor with a bang and rolled towards the water. One of the staff members ran for it in an instant, but was too late and the ball fell in the water right beside the gangway.

The staff member was furious. ‘You must pay! 100,000 dong!’

‘Can I pay tomorrow?’ the blonde girl asked. ‘I don’t have any money on me.’

‘What is your room number?’

‘Eleven.’

‘Tomorrow you must pay for loss of ball. 100,000.’

Her game of pool was over and she sat down on the other side of the Dutch backpacker’s table.

‘That’s five dollars for a pool ball,’ I said to her. ‘I thought Vietnam would be cheaper than that.’

‘These fuckers always overcharge!’ She looked at me. ‘Where are you from?’

‘Holland.’

‘I’m from Sweden.’

‘You’re American.’

She lit up a cigarette. ‘Swedish.’

I fell quiet for a second. She was blonde and had blue eyes, so it was unlikely that she was Spanish or Sudanese, but her accent wasn’t Swedish. Eastcoast American? It wasn’t hard to find out where she was really from since I spoke some Norwegian. People from Sweden understand it as though it’s their native language. ‘*Du er Svensk?*’

‘Ja.’

‘*Vor i Sverige kommer du fra?*’

‘Okay, okay! I’m from New York State. But you’ve got an Australian accent!’

‘It’s Dutch to me,’ the 19 year old backpacker said.

‘Yeah, I know you’re Dutch,’ she said to him and then pointed at me, ‘but he’s not.’

He said to me, ‘Let’s speak Dutch.’

‘Ja.’

‘Fuck this shit! He’s Australian!’

‘May be I’m Norwegian,’ I suggested.

‘Everyone can learn a few sentences of *knäckerbröd*. I’m off to bed. Fucking Australians...’

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‘WHERE’S THE GIRL?’ the employee asked me.

‘What girl?’

‘The girl that must pay. Where is she?’

‘I’ve got no idea.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘No.’

While I ate my breakfast, the guy went around the tables but everyone just shrugged their shoulders. The Mexican, who had taken a seat at my table, frowned at him and laughed.

‘What is that all about?’ he asked.

I quickly explained what had happened to the pool ball the previous night.

A female voice said, ‘I’ll dive it up for you. I’ll go in the water and I’ll bring your bloody ball back, all right?’

The Mexican turned around and we looked at the American girl near the gangway. The employee had found her and wanted \$5 for his lost pool ball or she would not get her passport back.

‘I can’t believe the fuzz he’s making over it,’ I said. ‘She could also argue that the hotel has to put a low wall around the edges to prevent this from happening.’

‘Well,’ the Mexican said, ‘that would cost the owner money. In Mexico, those balls cost less than a dollar each. So he makes more money if he doesn’t invest in a low wall. Unless the import tax per pool ball is four dollars, but I can’t imagine that a single ball would be that much if the import tax for human beings is fifty cents.’

The guy said to the girl, ‘No, you pay 100,000 dong. You don’t go in the water.’

‘Well, I am. I’m a trained lifeguard, I’ll be fine. I *can* swim.’

‘Water is four meter deep.’

‘That’s nothing!’

The depth may not have been the problem, but the

water surface between the hotel and the shore was covered with layer upon layer of enormous leaves. Their stems reached down to the bottom. The density was so thick, that jumping in the water, swimming down to four meters, searching for a little pool ball in the mud and then trying to come back to the surface without getting tangled was so foolish that you wouldn't believe any sensible person would actually go in there. But she seemed rather determined.

'Very dangerous. Not possible,' the guy said in a voice that was meant to sound tough but betrayed some hidden panic.

'I have to do this if I want my passport back,' she answered. 'I'm an English teacher in Cambodia, how much do you think five dollars is to me? It's a fucking fortune, man!'

I considered her words and said, 'It's funny. She did have the money to get absolutely smashed last night. Now she wants to risk her life for five bucks.'

The Mexican laughed and turned to his breakfast. 'Someone needs to give that girl a dive mask.' He pushed his food home. 'And a bottle of oxygen.'

The girl had another look at all the leaves, sighed, pulled her wallet out and paid for the pool ball. The employee looked relieved and brought the money to the counter.

I said, 'She just paid the man.'

'So she does have a brain.'

After breakfast we were told to put our luggage in the lobby and get on the boat to visit a floating village, the phenomenon that the Mekong Delta is famous for. This vast region, which mainly consists of flat terrain divided by branches of the Mekong River, accounts for 54.8% of Vietnam's rice production and 58.3% of the fish production. I expected to see the family members

sitting on the wooden edge of their floating house with a rod in hands, lower legs dangling in the water, patiently staring at the float. Every so often, of course, a child would be helplessly dragged into the water by a Mekong giant catfish of over 3 meters long.

‘Those houses cost about \$60,000,’ our hard-to-understand tour guide told us as we crossed the river. ‘They are very hard to get. The owners use them for fish farming. We’ll go to one now.’

The boat moored at one of the houses and we stepped onto the wooden deck. There were no people fishing here with rods. Instead, a square hole of 1.5 by 1.5 meters in the decking gave access to the water, in which a few fish were visible just below the surface.

‘These fish,’ the guide pointed, ‘are in a cage that stretches all the way to the bottom. Usually, that’s between four to six meters deep. This one is six meters deep and it’s full of fish. Watch.’

He threw a handful of fish food from a large bowl in the water and what happened next was surreal. Hundreds of fish came to the surface and fought over every bit of food. Together they turned the peaceful water into a Jacuzzi that was set to turbo. They went completely insane, diving on top of each other, instinctively going for the one thing that kept them alive. As soon as the food was gone, they submerged again with the exception of a few. The hole now looked as though it was a bathtub that you could bathe in, with an imaginary little wooden stairs and wooden benches just beneath the water surface to sit on.

The tour guide gave a handful of fish food to a few people in our group, who then took turns throwing it in the hole. The show started over again. And stopped. And started. And stopped. It was like a malfunctioning Jacuzzi that you wouldn’t want to buy, but the fish in