

Note to the color-impaired: try reading the latter half.

12. Crazy Da Lat

Three 100 km days later, and I am now in Da Lat. Was it worth it? Actually, yes. Da Lat (Days 18, 19) is my favorite place so far in Viet Nam. It's no substitute for Sai Gon or Ha Noi; it is decidedly a tourist resort; maybe 95% of its visitors are Vietnamese. But it just reeks charm as well as camp. First, there's hardly a piece of flat ground in the town and, second, I don't think that any two streets meet at a right angle. These two factors make for a really delightful place. You're always lost but never that lost -- the town is just not that large. The tourist spots are around the perimeter -- suburb does not seem the appropriate term to use -- so that the bicycle comes in most handy. Da Lat is Viet Nam's artist community, hippy hangout and honeymoon retreat. Plenty of restaurants and accommodation for tourists of all economic persuasions. But it is through and through Viet Nam. With all the foreign tourists -- hundreds right now and it is off-season -- you'd think I wouldn't be helloed at. But I am. Kids who must see thousands of Caucasians a year still give me a smile and a kindly hello when I pass by. It's a delight.

As for Da Lat's tourist spots, they are the strangest in Viet Nam, probably the single most intense clutter of absurdity on earth. First is the Flower Gardens which would more appropriately be named Chachka Botanicals or Nick-nacks for Sale Gardens. Granted, there are plants and even a few flowers here, but these serve only as backdrop for nick-nack selling kiosks. With a lot of effort, one can find orchids, a specialist of Da Lat (which bills itself as City of Flowers), but the best place to find orchids here is in one of the orchid books which are for sale.

A second must-see tourist spot, a phenomenon created in part by Lonely Planet publications, is the Lam Ty Ni Pagoda. This is the fefdom of Monk Vien Thuc, who is foremost an art entrepreneur. Da Lat is without a doubt the most commercial, unrepentantly capitalist place in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, and Monk Thuc is reputed to be one of Da Lat's leading money mongers. He has tens of thousands of original artwork for sale in his pagoda, which looks more like an art showroom or warehouse than a place of worship. What he lacks in quality, he makes up in quantity. With 50 km/hr brushstrokes, he may just be the world's fastest artist, a term I use most loosely. The pagoda, a front for his art market, is a bunch of rooms crammed with canvasses of landscapes and portraits, calligraphic scrolls in French, English or Chinese and imitations of the masters. Monk Thuc seems particularly partial to Van Gogh, probably for French tourists who find him through the Guide Routard. Backpackers are enthralled with Monk Thuc and his inspirational art, as told to be by *Lonely Planet Vietnam*, and buy whatever can be stuffed into a backpack. As prices are not marked, I wonder if it is kosher to bargain with the monk. I never find out as I give purchase a pass.

Another of Da Lat's quirky tourist spots is a functioning hotel, the Hang Nga Guesthouse, which is funk at its funkiest. This place charges US \$.25 admission to anyone who wants to wander

around its grounds or have a look at a room. The place looks like the architect dropped one tab of acid too many. Concrete giraffes, metallic spider webs, all wound into a gigantic tree house. The designer has a Ph.D. in architecture from Moscow where she spent 14 years. This visual zoo should be the hotel of choice for anyone with children who don't suffer hallucinations or nightmares induced by weird surroundings.

Another Soviet-related tourist attraction is the little train that goes to the middle of nowhere. It actually carries tourists willing to spend US \$5 (this is a lot; my hotel in Da Lat with a hot water shower is only \$4) about a dozen kms to the village of Trai Mat, where there is a splendid temple in the midst of restoration. The train was built in the former Soviet Union, but the control panel, which has probably been replaced, uses English language wording. If there are only a handful of passengers, as when I traveled, one rides in the engine, and the coaches are left at the station. It provides a pleasant, if short, ride on the narrowest gauge railway I've ever seen. The rest of the line, which used to go to the coast, was destroyed by war.

A final tourist attraction is the summer palace of Bao Dai, Viet Nam's last emperor, who abdicated and fled to Paris a half-century ago. The palace is preserved as if Bao Dai still lives here, and it is one of the few remaining former real estate holdings of the erstwhile monarch that has not been converted into guest houses for foreign visitors. In sum Da Lat is camp with Vietnamese characteristics. Oh, I almost forgot: the garbage trucks while they load curbside rubbish play Disney's theme, 'It's a Small, Small World.' Da Lat is a place that is not to be disbelieved.

As it comes to leaving Da Lat, I face a dilemma. The untrustworthy guidebook instructs me to go back the way I came, i.e., from the southwest, for 25 kms, then take a connecting road to pick up QL 20 to get to the coast, which is east. But the map book (same publisher as the guidebook) shows that QL 20 continues east from Da Lat, which means that backtracking is not necessary. I ask the receptionist at the hotel. She shows me the map for Da Lat that is printed by the Da Lat Tourist Company, the state-controlled authority on Da Lat tourism. The map also directs me to backtrack. I have an extended discussion with the receptionist -- the whole staff joins in -- who is convinced that I must not, under any condition, take QL 20 east. Is it not paved?, I ask. It is paved. In fact, I saw a piece of QL 20 at the terminus of the tourist train; it looked in good nick. Then, why not take it? She gives me many reasons: the road passes through an isolated pine forest, with few people, no services or vehicles. Busses, trucks and everyone else uses the other route, which is better because QL 20 east has too many winding downhill. What if I get lost or stranded, she worries. There are no roads intersecting QL 20 east; it would be hard even for me to get lost. The fact that this route saves me 25 kms, and I miss vehicular pollution, and I get to see and smell a pine forest does not matter to her. Like so much bicycling advice given to me by non cyclists, I ignore this well-intentioned, but totally ignorant counsel.

(Day 20) QL 20 east out of Da Lat proves to be one of the most enjoyable roads I've ever cycled. Despite the mist and intermittent drizzle, which engravit me and the bike, despite another

flat that convinces me here and now to change to a new tire (I carry two foldable Kevlar spares), despite my general abhorrence to downhill for safety reasons, despite QL 20's becoming QL 27, a route that doesn't appear on any of my maps, despite my consequently not being sure where I am heading for a bit, despite the replacement magnet (which up to now has been 94% accurate for it fails to compute at high speeds) which falls apart in the rain, and despite another part of the Cateye flying off -- which fortunately I recover -- today is a pleasant 111 km glide into Pham Rang on the coast. I do in one day as descent the 1.5 km ascent which took me three days -- one should definitely not bike the reverse. I reach page 500 in M Proust.

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