

Deranged Old Git or Local Hero?



It raised a wry smile when the poster dropped through the door. Suburb resident, David Heard, had taken on what he called the Million Metre Challenge. The prospect was a cycle ride through the mountains of Vietnam, and the 62-year old had prepared a not too serious poster alerting us to the fact that he was doing it and trying to raise funds for the charity Sportability.

However he did prepare seriously for the event and now he shares his adventure and the ups and downs.

It started as a novel way to mark a friend's fiftieth birthday – do something different. His idea a bike ride from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi, and, hey, why not raise some money for charity on the way?

So eight crumpled individuals de-planed at HCMC airport, leaving the drizzle of an April London behind and came blinking into the sweltering sunlight.

First stop Saigon. This place buzzes with stores selling everything from statues of 'Uncle' Ho to Hoovers, and from sidewalk food vendors and T-shirt stalls to silver service restaurants and designer label boutiques. All liberally laced with literally thousands of mopeds coming at you from every angle, like a shoal of petrol driven piranhas.

In some aspects it's very Asian and others, like the ancient colonial buildings and broad boulevards, are remnants of the French influence.

But it was sadly just a one-night stand, as the next day saw us collect our bikes and take our first ride. First shock: the riding conditions were unimaginable – 90 degrees heat and 90% humidity. None of the training – and we did loads – could have prepared us for this. But we got everything checked and adjusted, and then we were ready for the Big Off.

The next three days would see us heading roughly north

and inland to Bao Loc, climbing high to Dalat, then east to the coast and Nha Trang.

The terrain started as gentle undulating hills, the road rolling through acres of cashew and rubber trees. Through bustling villages, where the kids run out and shout "hello's" and the moped riders come alongside and smile waving like mad. They seem intrigued, and highly amused, by these mad Europeans.

Then more serious mountains, with craggy peaks, dense bush and sheer drops. Up to 850 metres and Bao Loc. And I have to tell you, the downhill bits are bliss.

Then on and up, through tea, coffee and cocoa plantations. Dalat at 1,500 metres is much cooler in more ways than one. Very French colonial and living up to its nick-name of 'the Paris of Vietnam'.

More climbing until at one point we were actually above the clouds. From the peaks the valleys looked mystical and lovely. At over 6,000 feet the breathing was harder, but maybe I was gasping at the beauty of it all.

Then a long hairpin-bended descent of over 20kms. What an adrenaline rush. Then literally down to earth, on to a huge fertile plain, and it was like cycling in a furnace. Through fields of tobacco, cotton and sugar cane, to the coast at Phan Rang and the long ride along Highway 1 into Nha Trang.



The original route would have taken us along Highway 1 for much of the journey. This is pretty much at sea level, saturated with huge exhaust-belching trucks and is in a state of re-construction.

We wanted to see more of Vietnam and the hinterland, so the itinerary was revamped to reflect this. It meant a tougher, more mountainous route, but we got to the parts of the country that tourists rarely see.

So after a rest day that saw us grounded as a cyclone come in from the South China Sea, we were back in high-sided ravines with thick bush that became rolling hillsides and grasslands. Through Buon Ma Thuot – the coffee capital of Vietnam and on to Lak Lake.

This was one of the great moments of the trip. We spent the night in a traditional long-house – no tourist village, but a working community. Pigs snuffle around your feet and chickens strut about oblivious to your presence. The locals work the surrounding fields and harvest weed from the lake.

With no hot water or electricity it is simple living that we were privileged to witness. A breeze off the lake keeps the long-house cool at night and mosquito nets keep out the unwanted. So at an unprecedented 8.15pm, eight heavy heads hit the pillows.

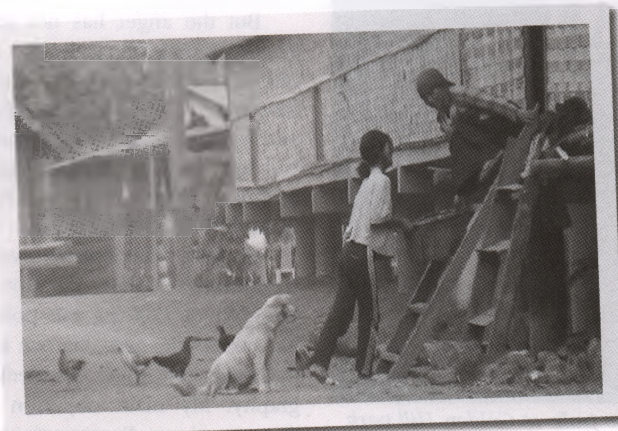
Up at dawn and we cycled out through film set Vietnam – water buffalo in padi fields, mountain peaks peering through the early morning mist, workers already busy scything the rice harvest.

Up the spine of Vietnam, following the border with Cambodia, through acre after acre of pepper vines. Then a change of crop and huge rubber plantations ran from our eyeline to the skyline. Then more coffee plantations and on through cashew, acacia and jackwood forests.

one had to walk the last few hundred metres to the summit. And all of us were wrecked!

We had all trained for the mileage, but nothing could have prepared us for the energy-sapping heat. And a beast of a climb – over two hours. So much for changing the itinerary!

Day ten saw us on a truck swerving, diesel belching, white-knuckle ride along the dreaded Highway 1. Thankfully we soon came off this tarmacadam monster and took an inland route to Hoi An. This was idyllic countryside. The emerald greens of padis, grazing cattle and a winding river give a more Constable than Coppola feel to the landscape. And the breeze coming off the river was a cooling ally.



Hoi An is known as 'the peaceful meeting place' and it certainly gave that first impression, as a very mellow group cycled into town.

Hoi An was scheduled as a rest day, but we decided to cycle to one of the great sites (and sights) of the area – Marble Mountain – five magnificent monoliths that are the source of a whole industry. The town is one big marble factory and the sound of hammering echos from almost every shop front. The produce ranges from huge Buddhas, voluptuous goddesses, fountains and eight-seater tables down to paper weights and place mats.

Day twelve and we were back on the original itinerary and this, we were warned, was the toughest day. We rode along fairly flat roads hugging the coastline. Then the mountains appeared out of the early morning mist. At this point they reach across from the Central Highlands to the sea. This is the craggy massif of the Bach Ma range that towers up at some 1,500 feet. No way forward but up!

We started the 12-kilometre climb, stopping once in a while to catch our breath and take in the incredible views. Dropping away, almost vertically from the roadside is the thick bush before thinning out to become beautiful crescent beaches.

The incline stiffened and suddenly we were on the peak. Coaches and cars crowded the viewing platforms and people were spilling out around us. They looked at us in amazement. Eight breathless, sweaty, exhaust-grimed riders, who looked slightly mad, but very happy.

After the self-inflicted peaks earlier in the week the Hai Van pass actually held no horrors for us, and apart from the roaring of the traffic and lung-choking fumes it was a very manageable ride. And can we just admit to a merest tinge of pride, as people expressed their amazement that we have cycled not only up this mountain,

but so far in the country. The ride down was a 12-kilometre breeze, apart from the odd rogue lorry; and then it was along the flat coast line for a well earned lunch.

After that we sashayed into the former capital city Hue for an overnight stay and a celebratory feast, including a bottle of very fine champagne. The French were once the rulers here remember.

It was always scheduled to end in Hue, but we made one last ride around the city and then took our (by now) beloved bikes onto the Dragon Boats for a short river cruise and the chance to re-enter Hue by a cross-country route. It was a magical moment and we did it. Mission accomplished! Over 1,000kms –

David Heard and his charity Sportability

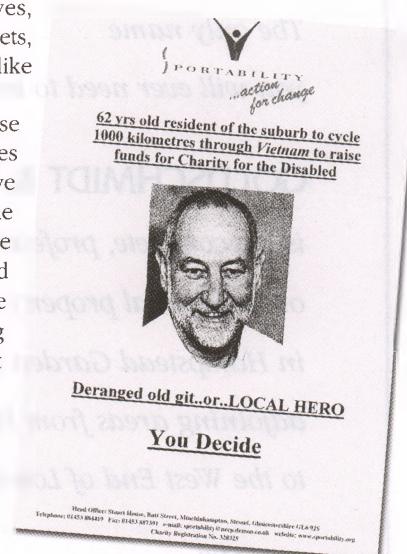
Formed in 1989, Sportability, a registered charity, organises sport and challenging events for people with disabilities. The primary objective is to help rebuild confidence and self-esteem and to broaden the concept of what is possible.

The charity's Chairman, David Heard, explains, "This is not about creating elite sportsmen and women, but it is about getting paralysed people out of their wheelchairs and into exciting and absorbing experiences. It's about trying something completely different and getting that adrenaline rush – the buzz back into life. Our aim is to give people a fun time, but also to leave them with the thought "If I can do that then what else can I do?" In short, we take the 'dis' out of disability and focus on ability."

David Heard has been a Suburb resident for some seven years. He has a special affection for the area as his partner lived here for nearly twenty years before becoming his wife. So he claims it was his courting ground as well as his home.

But his affection embraces the practical as well as the romantic. He jokes, "Many of the neighbours think I work for the Council as they only ever see me trimming the verges and knocking in the anti-parking posts."

If you would like to support David's effort, please make cheque payable to Sportability MM Fund, Stuart House, Butt Street, Minchinhampton, Glos. GL6 9JS.



David's publicity material, produced to raise awareness of his cycle ride through Vietnam, and hopefully raise sponsorship too.

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Day nine was always going to be the longest day, so we were up before it was light and out on the road at five past dawn. The first 50 kilometres to Kon Tum were through rolling hills and we made good time.

However the road east from Kon Tum was impossible to cycle – barely manageable by bus – and we boarded the support vehicle for a couple of hours.

Just before the high mountains we were back on bikes again. But the sun was by now well up in the sky, and getting hotter. This was to become a ride of attrition and the longest also became the toughest.

The countryside was stunning, but the riding was not pretty. One of the gang came off his bike, gashed his leg and was taken on by the support vehicle. Some were feeling faint and dizzy, two of us were roadside – vomiting,

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