

Cycle into the heart of Vietnam

GETTY IMAGES; WORLDBANK SAMAR

What better way to take in the sights and sounds of the country than on a guided biking tour, says **Ellie Ross**

On the eastern edge of Vietnam's tiny waist, one of the country's most famous roads coils into the clouds. The Hai Van Pass crosses coastal mountains between Hue and Danang, climbing 496m via sharp bends and switchbacks that cling to the jungle-clad cliffs sloping to the South China Sea below. In the 15th century this pass formed the boundary between Vietnam and the Champa kingdom. Today most tourists who visit ride up on motorbikes, inspired perhaps by Jeremy Clarkson, who described it as "a deserted ribbon of perfection" on *Top Gear* in 2008. I am tackling this winding route in a different way: using pure pedal power, on a bicycle.

Conquering the seven-mile ascent — with an 8 per cent gradient in places — in 38C heat and 60 per cent humidity is no mean feat. Sweat pours from beneath my helmet as I inch my bike uphill, my legs slowly rotating in the easiest gear. A tour bus overtakes me, its passengers staring curiously through the window. No matter. My sluggish pace is perfect for taking in my surroundings, and surprised locals on mopeds cheer me on with fist-pumps and cries of "very good!"

After 90 minutes and a couple of water stops, I round the final hairpin, reaching the souvenir shops and cafés at the summit, tired but triumphant — and appreciating the startling sea views so much more having worked hard for them.

This is the most challenging day in the Vietnam Heritage by Bicycle trip, a new guided tour from the active holiday specialist BSpoke Tours. The six-night trip takes you pedalling between 19 and 41 miles a day, from the ancient capital of Hue to Hoi An, with its quaint riverside setting, via some of central Vietnam's most beautiful landscapes and cultural highlights.

Our group of nine is a mixture of Brits, Americans and Australians, with ages ranging from 27 to 57. As we meet our guides, Anh Co and Tibo, in Hue, I'm glad to hear that the majority of the cycling is flat, with plenty of stops, and there is a support vehicle to transport our bags and transfer us through some sections.

Anh Co gives us his No 1 piece of advice — "use your eyes, then your brakes" — which comes in handy moments later as we set off, pedalling through Hue's frenzied, honking mass of traffic towards the Citadel. We hop off our bikes to explore its crumbling walls, galleries and pavilions, which were built by Emperor Gia Long in 1804, but were badly damaged in 1968 in the Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War.

The beauty of travelling by bicycle is that you can venture that bit farther



than pedestrians, while also reaching places that large tour buses can't. Anh Co leads us away from the Citadel, with its selfie-snapping tourists, and within minutes we are bumping down small tracks beside the Perfume River with no other westerners in sight. We pass schoolchildren who wave enthusiastically at us, men sipping *ca phe sua da* (iced coffee with condensed milk) in little cafés and villagers busying themselves with everything from shoemaking to carpentry.

Without the barrier of a coach window, we are more connected to our senses; we smell the rice drying in the sun, the incense burning outside temples; we hear tapioca trees rustling in the wind, and feel the cool shade as we stop beneath banana trees to refuel on its fruit, or to munch on juicy mangosteen and fuschia-skinned dragon fruit.

At Thuy Bieu village, on the outskirts of Hue, we cycle beneath trees hanging heavy with grapefruit-like pomelo, once reserved for royal family members of the Nguyen Dynasty and now sold on roadsides for as little as 10,000 Vietnamese dong (about 33p). We park our bikes and walk around the thick, brick walls of the Tiger Arena, which was built by Emperor Minh Mang in 1830 and hosted fights between tigers and elephants until 1904. You can still see the remarkably small tunnels where the animals would enter to meet their fate — which had already been decided by the royals.

"The elephants were a symbol of royal power and the tigers represented cruelty and rebellion," Anh Co says. "So the tigers would be declawed and have their teeth removed to ensure a royal victory every time."

We push on, crossing the river on a narrow, floating bridge built by local families, until we reach the tomb of Minh Mang. With its pretty lotus pond and sublime forest setting, it feels peaceful — a marked contrast to



the battle arena just five miles upstream.

After three days exploring Hue and its surrounding countryside, swathed in verdant rice paddies and villages such as Phuoc Tich, which dates from 1420 and was once gloriously rich from pottery production, we depart for the beach resort of Lang Co, 40 miles south.

The landscape begins to change as we head towards the coast: fishermen repair boats in dockyards; roads are paved with fish drying in the sun; men and women wearing conical hats cast nets from the bows of tiny boats. The road winds past villages alternating with shrimp lagoons and vegetable gardens, and brashly colourful, opulent graves and family temples line the beach — most of them the final resting place for the Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) who wished to be buried in their homeland. At lunch we feast on prawns served with lime and black pepper, and grilled calamari caught in the sea in front of us.

The food everywhere we go is delicious, with most meals included in the trip. I try everything from *banh xeo* (crispy folded pancakes crammed with pork, shrimp, bean sprouts and mung beans) to bowls of *pho bo* (beef noodle

soup). One of the best meals we have comes after cycling 33 miles from Hoi An to My Son, the lush jungle valley containing the country's most extensive Cham remains, although most of its temples were devastated by American bombing during the Vietnam War.

Before visiting the site we stop at Mr Nha's house, where his wife has prepared dishes including bamboo shoot salad, marinated tofu, stir-fried morning glory (also known as water spinach) and fish beautifully flavoured with turmeric and dill. As we eat, Mr Nha tells us that he lost an eye in 1973 fighting for the Viet Cong, and how in recent years he has opened up his house to hungry tourists.

He recalls one particular visitor, a US Vietnam veteran, and gets out his phone to show me a picture of the two men standing side by side. It's an image of reconciliation that says much about how far Vietnam has come since the end of a conflict that claimed millions of lives.

After each day in the saddle our hotels, though not luxurious, are comfortably restorative. In Hoi An, the Vinh Hung Riverside Resort is an oasis of calm from the busloads of tourists in the pedestrianised old town. But it's worth tearing yourself away from the hotel's palm-shaded gardens to cross the Japanese Covered Bridge and explore the 15th-century merchant houses that have been converted into restaurants, bars and tailors' shops.

Our trip coincides with the Full Moon Festival, which takes place on the 14th day of each lunar month. As day turns to night, traffic is blocked off and street lights are switched off so you can appreciate the flickering glow of thousands of brightly coloured lanterns. At the river, women and children sell colourful handmade lanterns to float downriver for good luck. I watch the moving stream of little lights as, overhead, the moon shines silver, like the biggest lantern of all.

Top: the Citadel in Hue. Above: cyclists on the BSpoke Tours six-night Hue to Hoi An trip

Need to know

Ellie Ross was a guest of BSpoke Tours (020 7471 7750, bspoketours.com), which has six-night Vietnam Heritage by Bicycle guided group cycling tours from £1,738pp based on two people sharing (single supplement from £200), including flights, accommodation, selected meals, bicycle hire and the services of a support vehicle and guides. Departures are in December and from March to August 2019