



Classic VIETNAM

THINK ALL BIKES IN VIETNAM ARE SCOOTERS?
WELL, YOU'D BE WRONG.



THERE are few places in the world where the motorbike has thrived as much as it has in Vietnam. Sure motorbikes are popular the globe over, but in Vietnam, the two wheeler forged a rural revolution, gave the masses a cheap people carrier and wove its way deep into the very fabric of society and culture.

And yet there is more to the motorbike's story in this ever-changing land, that once, not so long ago, was closed off to most of the world. Sit on any street corner in Hanoi, Saigon or Danang and I guarantee you will see classic bikes go zooming by in staggering proportions – Honda 67s, CD Benlys, Lambrettas, Vespas, a Minsk here and there, a Ural, Mobylettes, Cubs. Vintage bikes are quite abundant.

Each motorbike has its own story, each its own reason why it came to Vietnam, how it survived through the various wars and the economic disasters that followed, and why each remains to be loved.

Most famous and enduring out of all the motorbikes would be the Vespa, and to a lesser extent, the Lambretta. Much like the need for a cheap people carrier in Italy, Vietnam also embraced the scooter revolution. By the mid '50s, nationals as well as French servicemen stationed here were importing Vespas into Southern Vietnam. Saigon was an affluent city and these bikes, like other beautifully designed bikes (think 67s and Mobylettes) were a dichotomy for consumers at first. The bikes were both a prized possession and had to be 'used.' What transpired was a sizeable split in the population – one keeping the bike and all its parts in pristine condition, the other, quite literally driving the bikes into the ground.

As motorbikes and scooters began to flourish, Vietnam's well-documented wars occurred, and the country closed. Inside Vietnam there were no mechanics, no spare parts and no gasoline. Bikes were put away or left outside to rust and rot. The guys who loved their two-wheelers continued to keep their bikes pristine if they could, some even disassembled their bikes and wrapped each part in plastic to protect the 'entire' bike from the elements. It was a hard time, for sure.

From the ashes

Yet as one motorbike storyline was placed on pause, another was created, built from the country's hardship. As Vietnam forged ties with other communist countries, its citizens began to go to East Germany and the USSR for school and work. These people were able to buy goods unavailable or inaccessible to the everyday Vietnamese, motorbikes included. Thus, bikes like Urals, Minsk and Simpsons began to enter Vietnam with those returning or sending them to family as gifts.

One man who had a firsthand experience of the country's post-war turmoil was Mr. Vinh, owner of Classic Moto Café and the founder of the country's Harley-Davidson Club. From an early age Vinh showed an aptitude to understand and fix anything mechanical. He never had a chance to go to school and thus taught himself everything he knows. After the Vietnam War ended, Vinh, who had started a business fixing sewing machines (a hugely important commodity to any family who owned one) would drive between Saigon and Hanoi selling his services. Surprisingly, he was so talented that he quickly made a fortune, and it was at this time, as Northern service men began to drift back to Hanoi from Saigon, that Vinh started buying scooters.

He was able to understand the mechanics of the bikes and started modifying them to be either more reliable, or as it is with most youth's wishes, he made them faster. He changed 50cc bikes into 65 and 70cc ones, using essentially the most rudimentary of tools. They were immediate hits – everyone wanted one. He relates one story, "There was one time when I was driving back to my parents' house outside Hanoi and I had someone stop me halfway there and ask to buy my bike. I stood to make a good profit, so I did and took a bus back home. I grabbed another modified bike and again, about halfway to my parents' house someone offered to buy the bike from me. I sold this one as well and went home to get a third bike. Again, I left home and someone stopped me and asked to buy this bike too. Needless to say I was very late arriving at

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my parents house, but I made a lot of money that day.”

Vinh now owns over 200 classic bikes and each one has a story behind it. He collects anything that he considers has a good design or is rare. He states that there is no single bike or model that is his favourite, for each one has its own memory or moment. He simply likes all of them. When pushed to name his first love, Vinh jokingly says “my wife,” until he opens up about his Mobylette AV 89, which he still owns and has restored to perfection. “The only people who had these were the Vietnamese who came back from New Caledonia. The design is incredible - only 50cc, but it can reach up to 70km/h. The fastest bike we had here at the time was 70cc – but this bike overtook them on the highway. It’s fast, rare and looks stunning.”

Memories of youth

The Mobylette too has a fascinating story behind it. During the time Vietnam’s borders were mostly closed, one young man, Mr. Cuong, decided one summer’s day in 1977 to bring down his father’s two Mobylettes that were simply hanging on the walls of the family house. The French introduced the Mobylette into South Vietnam, and it was, at the time, the luxury scooter to have. Only those with money could afford them. They all but disappeared after the war.

Cuong had fond memories of the scooter, for his father used to drive him around town on one. He became dead-set on learning how to repair both bikes and get them running again. Much like Mr. Vinh, Cuong found it easy to understand how they worked and restored both. Cuong believed that given enough time, the Mobylette would make a comeback and become popular once again. As a hobby, he began to fix his friends scooters, and would venture out into the countryside seeking out parts and buying up broken bikes.

When asked what it is about the Mobylette in particular that fuels consumer appeal, Cuong answers, “they are unique, very few have them and they are antiques. Funnily enough they are even reliable antiques! In Vietnam, owning one is a way to be an individual - to be seen.” Fast forward 22 years and Cuong’s predictions have come true, especially in the North. Every fashionable and trendy youth in Hanoi clamors to own a Mobylette. They are popular in Saigon as well, and their re-emergence all stems from Cuong’s one simple action to fix his father’s bikes. His hobby turned full-time career, Cuong’s motorbike repair shop is busier than ever. “I am proud of what I have done.” Cuong says, “I knew it would happen, but did not know how long it would take. I kept all these original parts for many years, but it was like I could see the future. I’m glad it finally has come true.”

Minsk mayhem

By the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, Vietnam had started to change. In the cities, people owned scooters, mostly Simpsons, and if you ventured out into the countryside, the mighty Minsk ruled the landscape. The Minsk to this day remains popular with the scrappy backpacker crowd, especially those who venture into the northern mountains. But there was a time when it was the only bike you’d see along the barren rocky and dangerous roads outside Hanoi. But the punk rock romanticism that is associated with this practically indestructible bike might never have happened if it was not for an unlikely trio.

Markus Madeja and Digby Greenhalgh met at their unreliable Minsk mechanic one day in 1995 by circumstance. They got to talking, became friends and started to go into, the then undiscovered, land. There were no maps of the country, new roads were being built everywhere and they along with a few like-minded adventurers would just go out exploring. By 1998, both realised they were onto something, as Markus puts it, “We were experiencing a real authentic Vietnam, one that encapsulated the times. The bad roads, the unknown of where we were to eat or sleep, never knowing if you were going to get busted by some badass border cops and the immensely sublime scenery. From our trips a few hours out of Hanoi, the Minsk club was born. Our motto was ‘in the pursuit of happiness and adventure.’”

Finding a good mechanic to help fix their Minsk and get parts

was a pain, until they were told about a famous Minsk mechanic named Cuong. He was, apparently, the “Minsk Messiah”, and Markus and Digby went in search of him outside Hanoi. What they found was indeed just that. “He just knew the bikes - he had the feel. We used the club to promote Cuong’s skills,” Markus recalls. The three partnered up and the Minsk club thrived. By the mid ‘90s however, Vietnam opened its doors to trade, and a flood of Honda Wins, Dreams and Cubs pushed the Minsk out of the picture.

Yet what is the Minsk’s persistent quality, one might ask? Digby speaks of his experience, saying, “You always want to be on a bike that can be easily fixed when you are driving on hairy roads. New bikes are designed to be difficult to repair. I enjoy the satisfaction of fixing a Minsk – and they always happen to break down in beautiful places.” Digby has a thousand stories about the bike’s durability. Two such ones he relates, “Once a frame cracked on me and the whole bike bent. I was in the middle of nowhere, all alone and in trouble. I ended up using my spare clutch cables to tie the frame back together and was able to ride the bike to a place where there was at least traffic and waited all day for a cop to pass to help me. There was another time we had customers who stopped to go to the bathroom and a mining truck came by and literally ran over the bike. Turned it into a pancake. Yet we were able to beat it back into some sort of semblance and actually drove back into the nearest town.” Truly the Minsk is the AK-47 of all two-wheelers (both are made in the same factory).

Past becomes present

In recent years, Vietnamese society has taken on what is best described as a nostalgic mood. Starting in 1995, the country has undergone massive change. With all the clogged motorways, pollution and noise, it’s little wonder some people like to look back to simpler times. Patrick Joynt from Saigon Scooter Centre is the founder of the city’s Lambretta club says, “In the last 6-7 years, the scooter scene has really revived, maybe for the first time since the ‘60s. And I think that over the last 10 years 90 per cent of the bikes have either left the country or moved up to Hanoi.” He continues, “A recent event in the beach resort city of Nha Trang had 500 scooters on display. It was the first time I’ve seen something so well organised, sponsored and attended.”

As Vietnamese look to their past, it’s increasingly evident that it is the motorbike, in its many shapes, sizes, models and makes that tie this nation together. Bikes, in some form or another have helped mould today’s ever-modern society. The motorbike has influenced Vietnam’s very culture. Although rarely talked about, some families own a lucky bike – a bike that when it was bought, maybe something lucky happened that day and the owner believed the bike to be the harbinger of the positive karma. That bike sits somewhere in the house or place of business. It may look old and worn down. It may be covered in dust and rust, but no matter what, not even for a million dollars, will the family sell it. The belief goes that deeply and that strongly.

There is a sense amongst many collectors here that Vietnam’s motorbike history should be preserved. At Hung Cuong restaurant, the owner Mr. Tuan, is doing just this. All over his property there stand 100s of bikes in mint condition. Each is organised by make and model. He even has a glassed-in room with the most rare and most pristine of his collection. Why has he gone through this effort, you ask? “These bikes are a part of my country,” Tuan states. “And as such, I want my fellow Vietnamese to learn about each bike’s importance in shaping our nation. This restaurant is going to have a museum attached to it, with proper signage detailing the history of each model in Vietnam. This is our past and we should never forget it.”

So unlike almost every other country in the world, where people only wish to buy the newest and shiniest bike that rolls off the assembly line, the future of all vintage bikes in Vietnam is a bright one. They will remain relevant and sought after for years to come, which, considering the country’s recent past, is just how it should be.

– Dave Lemke

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