

A Couple's Guide to Motorcycling Across Vietnam

by Dan Levesque on July 22, 2019



Forget about Thailand and Bali. Vietnam is one of the best and most under-rated travel destinations in all of Southeast Asia. This country is beautiful, super affordable, and there's a ton of different things to see and do.

If you're looking for something to do that's a little bit more on the adventurous side, and you're not afraid to get a little bit lost in the process, then riding across Vietnam on the back of a motorcycle is a good choice.

A lot of people do this trip solo or with a few friends where everyone gets their own motorcycle. As a couple, we opted to squeeze ourselves onto one motorcycle, strap a bag to the luggage rack, and travel halfway across the country—from Ho Chi Minh to Da Nang.

Fortunately, we survived the trip mostly intact and didn't suffer any serious problems along the way. Here's a step-by-step guide to how we did it:

Step 1: Choose a Good Partner!

Ideally, your partner should be someone you're willing to marry. Having been engaged for just over two months at this point, Janice and I decided to do this journey sharing a motorcycle between us. Driving/piloting was my responsibility, which left navigation to her. Neither of us did our jobs perfectly, but we still managed to reach our intended destination safely.

Some of the more frequent blunders I encountered as a driver were figuring out Vietnamese traffic and slamming into unseen potholes. You can't do much about the potholes other than brace/warn your partner as you're about to hit. As far as Vietnamese traffic goes, here are a few quick tips:

- There's a hierarchy on the road. Buses and trucks are on top, followed by cars, then motorcycles and bicycles, and finally pedestrians. Generally, smaller vehicles need to watch out and make way for bigger vehicles.
- Vietnamese drivers tend to look ahead and not care what's in their periphery. This means the vehicle next to you might merge into your lane without checking, or a driver will merge onto a highway (or cross it) by cutting you off. Be prepared to brake at all times.
- Once you get an understanding of how traffic works in Vietnam, you'll generally be able to predict what the people around you are going to do. Keep in mind that it does take some time to get a feel for it, so any prior driving experience in Asia would be helpful here.

In terms of navigation, you're going to take a few wrong turns. It's important that the navigator uses common sense to figure out which of Google's suggested routes is best. It's also important that when a wrong turn does occur, the navigator is able to quickly identify the error and get the team back on course.



Sometimes the views are so beautiful that you don't care if you're lost.

Roundabouts are the bane of navigating on Google Maps. Some of the massive roundabouts we encountered in Vietnam would split off into eight different exits, so figuring out the correct exit to take in real-time wasn't always straightforward. Add to the fact that many roads in Vietnam aren't always correctly mapped out on the app, and mistakes are inevitable.

It's extra important to have a good partner to help navigate through these difficulties with. The navigator should be forgiving when the driver hits a big pothole or gets

frustrated at other drivers on the road. The driver should be equally forgiving when the navigator has led the team astray. These things are all part of the experience.

Pro tip: If you and your partner can get through motorcycling across Vietnam, you can get through anything!

Step 2: Get an International Driver's License

This is really the only thing you need to worry about before leaving your home country. In Canada, it cost around \$35 dollars (and that includes having my photo taken—it's less if you bring your own passport-style photo), and the license is good for one year. Having one is a requirement in order to drive in most other countries, although this isn't always strictly enforced (ie. in Vietnam).

It would probably be even wiser to have an official motorcycle license from your home country, too. I didn't. So, one of the "restrictions" on my international driver's license was being limited to a maximum engine size of 50cc on any two-wheeled motor vehicle (ie. scooters and motorcycles).

The interesting thing about the way this restriction was added onto my license: it was printed on a sticker, and that sticker was then put on the back page of the license. Pretty early on, I simply peeled that sticker off of my International Driver's License booklet and—shazam!—the restriction was lifted.

Having rented over a dozen motorcycles/scooters on our trip in **five** different countries, only one person ever bothered to check my International Driver's License: the motorcycle rental company in Vietnam. We never got stopped or checked by any police at any point, but we were prepared anyways.



One of the rare times ripping around without my navigator.

We'd heard plenty of stories online about people being stopped by police in various countries in Southeast Asia and being fined for not having the correct driver's license, so it's probably just wise to have it on hand just in case. At the very least, it gave us peace of mind and we really weren't worried about being stopped at all.

Pro tip: Stash your driver's license, passport, and wallet/money in separate locations. That way, if you're ever asked to present one of those things, you're not flashing all three. I also maintained a strategy of almost never handing over my passport, as I'd heard of instances where people were extorted into paying money to get their passport back (although this has never happened to me).

Step 3: Find a Good Motorcycle (NOT a Honda Win)

Most backpackers will tell you that you just need to buy a **Honda Win** from another backpacker for anywhere between \$150 to \$300 USD, depending on its condition. But they're all idiots.

The Honda Win does not exist. It was discontinued nearly two decades ago, and every motorcycle in Vietnam claiming to be a Honda Win these days is just a cheaply manufactured knock-off. Everything about this bike is a disaster—even brand new, none of the speed gauges or fuel gauges ever work, and they're subject to frequent breakdowns due to defective parts.



Taking a break on the side of the road. Not a place you'd want to break down on a crappy bike.

It's impossible to know the mileage of these things, because none of the gauges work. Most of them have probably been driven from Saigon to Hanoi and back dozens of times, being rebuilt or fixed up with cheap parts along the way. Keep in mind that these are mostly driven by tourists, not local Vietnamese people.

One Honda Win we did look at was profusely leaking oil (the guy said that was normal) and being sold for \$140 USD, which included a helmet that was "new" and "worth \$50." The guy selling it said he had to replace the engine cylinder on the thing for \$30 and that the suspension was terrible (ie. not good for those potholes). After that experience, we decided to pass on the whole Honda Win thing and rent a bike instead.

Fortunately, there are several reputable motorcycle rental shops throughout Vietnam that specialize in tourists wanting to explore the country via motorbike. We used Tigit Motorbikes, which I discovered after viewing some of their informative YouTube videos about motorcycling in Vietnam.



Getting our badass Honda Blade ready for the open road.

Renting a 4-speed semi-manual 110cc Honda Blade cost us \$10 USD per day, plus a deposit for the value of the motorcycle. For a 17 day rental, we paid a total deposit of \$1000 USD, which was easily charged to my credit card. At the end of 17 days when we

returned the motorcycle in a city 1,500 kilometers away, we were refunded the deposit minus the cost of the rental.

Tigit Motorbikes was super professional, and I'd highly recommend renting a bike from them if you're planning on a similar trip. The rental cost included two helmets, a luggage rack, and plenty of bungee cords so we could easily strap our bag on the back. Despite all of our gear and two people, this thing could easily cruise along at 70km/hr on the highway (which is about as fast as you'd want to go on a motorcycle on Vietnamese roads).

In hindsight, we wished we had rented a slightly larger/more powerful motorcycle that had a lot more padding on the seat area. This would have saved our behinds and made the trip a bit more comfortable—the Honda Blade isn't really ideal for two people on a long-distance trip.

The only mechanical issue we encountered was that the chain started making weird noises along the way. We took it to a Honda dealership (there are lots of these scattered around Vietnam) and had it replaced for \$10 USD, which Tigit later refunded us for (they cover all maintenance costs, except for flat tires and the mandatory oil change as part of the rental).

Our little 110cc Honda Blade was a warrior, and I cringed every time I saw a Honda Win knock-off parked on the side of the street somewhere. A couple of people talked about how their Honda Win breaking down was all "part of the experience" of motorcycling across Vietnam, but I don't really see the appeal...

Pro tips: Consider seat comfort when choosing your motorcycle. Your helmet should fit snug, and wear sunglasses if it's not equipped with a visor. Face masks are also a good idea, and will help protect you from inhaling dust and fumes while cruising along the highway.

Step 4: Buy a Vietnamese SIM Card

This one should be a no-brainer, but having internet access is super important if you're going to successfully navigate through a foreign country.

It's also super helpful to be able to make outgoing calls—our motorcycle company was always available for support/translation if we ever ran into any issues (not just motorcycle

related). This helped a lot when we started having an issue with the bike chain—we were able to get someone on the phone at Tigit Motorcycles to translate and explain the issue to a mechanic. Without that resource, we may have been worried about the possibility of being stranded in the middle of nowhere.



Having an internet connection also helps you find the best food options along your route.

It's important to make sure that the navigator is the one who has the Vietnamese SIM card on their phone. Part of the navigator's duties involve proactively mapping the route and looking for pit-stops whenever the need arises. Motorbiking across a country is an incredibly dynamic experience, and having internet access is crucial when changing plans on the fly.

Pro tip: The navigator shouldn't spend too much of their time on social media while navigating. It's important to keep an eye on the map and not drain all of your phone's battery doing extra-curricular activities!

Step 5: Be Incredibly Patient

Driving long-distance on the back of a motorcycle requires a lot of endurance. Doing it with your significant other requires even more.

Sure, it's an amazing and unique experience. You'll see a lot of interesting things and drive through beautiful landscapes. It'll also get super hot in the mid-day sun, and you probably will get burnt. There's a lot of dust on the roads being kicked up by passing vehicles, so you'll end up filthy at the end of every day. The roads aren't very user-friendly, and there's a good chance you'll end up lost when you exit the highway. Unexpected problems will crop up. You'll need a bathroom break but won't be able to find anywhere to stop. This is all part of the experience!



Keep an eye out for sudden obstructions on the road, like wandering cows.

Getting through it all means lots of patience with insane traffic, being resourceful in order to find what you need (ie. fuel, water), reaching your destination through trial and error (sometimes what looks like a road turns out to be a dirt path), and sometimes driving through tropical rainstorms.

Coming off of the back of a motorcycle after a 10-hour day, you'll be sore, sunburnt, filthy, and exhausted. But it'll all be worth it. Things will just work out—you'll come across a local selling fuel right when your gas tank is hovering on empty. A farmer will randomly give you a bag full of dragonfruit for free, for no obvious reason. You'll drive a smooth and pristine coastal road with incredible views and nobody else around. These are the moments that make experiencing Vietnam via motorbike such a rich experience—and all the better because you get to share in all of these moments with your significant other.

Pro tips: In trying moments, just try and remember how in love you are. The navigator should not tell the driver how to drive. The driver should not get mad at the navigator for bad directions. If you're not making mistakes, then you're not trying hard enough!

In conclusion:

Motorcycling across Vietnam is not for the faint of heart. Everyone's experience is going to be different, and the journey is going to throw some unexpected things at you. These unexpected things will also teach you a few lessons, so it's good to go in knowing that you're going to be tested along the way—as an individual and also as a partnership.

Traveling as a couple always adds a whole new dimension, and having these types of experiences together is something we're always grateful for. If you manage to ride a tiny 110cc motorbike across Vietnam with your significant other and still love each other afterwards, then you'll know you've hit the jackpot!