

This is an excerpt from Chapter 1 of “Travel Bites” © 2012 by The Hungry Traveller

We pick up the story where after a long-haul flight, The Hungry Traveller has arrived at Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam to begin his travels. He is hot, grimy and exhausted, having spent hours haggling with local taxi drivers and wandering the streets trying to find somewhere to stay.....

I closed and locked the door behind me, remembering to switch on the light so that I would not be in complete darkness. There was barely enough space for me to stand in the room. I sat down on the bed next to my pack. It felt even hotter inside the room than outside on the street. I switched on the fan, which only managed to circulate the hot air, and took a shower. At least that was cold!

Lying back on the bed afterwards, I tried to get some sleep. But after a fitful hour, the heat of the room was too much, and now feeling hot, tired, thirsty, and hungry, I decided to go for a walk around the area.

It was now around midday and although the sun was hotter, walking around without a backpack did make a huge difference. I also found that if I walked at a slow enough pace, like the locals were doing, it also reduced the impact of the humidity. Before long, I walked past a shop selling chicken pho (noodle soup). I only really knew this because there was a price list in English in the window. In the front of the shop there was a huge cauldron of steaming broth and I noticed that as people placed their orders, the cooks would put some noodles and chicken pieces into a wire cage and drop it into the pot. After a few minutes, the basket would be lifted out, the noodles and chicken would be placed into a bowl and some broth from the large pot would be ladled over the top.

Most of the customers were Vietnamese, and the shop offered a choice of what part of the chicken you wanted: breast, leg, thigh, wing, liver, or offal. I had enough friends who had grown in South East Asia and China to know that offal, liver, and meat on the bone would be preferred to breast meat locally, so seeing most of the baskets being cooked with chicken livers, offal, or the occasional thigh, came as no real surprise. However, what surprised me was the popularity of these cuts, given that they cost up to fifty per cent more than the cheapest part of the chicken available, the breast.

The food looked good and the place seemed to be rather popular, so I went in. I walked up to the counter and ordered my food by raising four fingers, the number on the menu that corresponded to noodle soup with breast meat. Given that the shop was so close to the back packer area, the people who worked there were no doubt used to clueless tourists, and the lady taking my order seemed to understand what I was trying to ask for with a minimum of fuss. I also grabbed a large bottle of water and paid for my lunch.

A few minutes later, a steaming bowl was handed to me. I chose a stool at a bench that faced the street so that I could people-watch while I ate. As I expected, the broth was quite tasty but I struggled to pick up the vermicelli noodles with my chopsticks. However, given that everyone around me was busily slurping on their noodles, I did not feel so bad having to do the same.

After eating my food and drinking a lot of water I felt much better, so I continued with my walk. However, I soon found myself in trouble, as I came to my first busy road, where there was a constant stream of traffic. Although I was at a crossing that occasionally showed a green pedestrian light, traffic would continue to flow past. A cyclo driver, who had been watching me for a few minutes, took pity on me and came up to offer some advice.

“You cannot wait for no traffic. There is always traffic. You just walk and don’t stop.”

The look I gave him in response to this piece of advice, probably gave the impression that I thought he was insane.

“OK. Come with me.”

Waiting for a small gap in the traffic so we would not be immediately run down, he stepped off the curve and began pushing his cyclo across the road. I started walking with him. I noticed that once he started to walk across the road he no longer paid any attention to the traffic around him. I was not so blasé. However, as we moved across the road, I noticed that the motorcycle traffic just weaved around us. Once we had passed halfway and the traffic was now coming straight towards me, he saw my hesitation and called out,

“Keep walk! Keep walk! You stop. You get hit!”

That was all the motivation I needed to keep going. Then, and I thought rather unnecessarily, he added,

“They more scared of damage hitting you”

I turned, expecting him to be laughing at his joke, but surprisingly, he seemed to be quite serious.

Once we had safely crossed, I thanked him for his help. Then came the sales pitch I had been expecting.

“Have you been on cyclo before?”

“No.”

I tried to appear slightly uninterested. In reality, as soon as I had first seen one in the taxi trip over, I had wanted to have a ride in a cyclo! For the uninitiated, the cyclo looks like a reverse tricycle. A single passenger sits in a low, open front seat and the driver pedals the cyclo sitting to the rear and looking over the head of the passenger.

“I take you on city tour. All afternoon only 100,000 dong”

I may have wanted to go on a trip in a cyclo, but even I could see that this was a lot of money to ask. And besides, I knew that you should never accept the first offer.

“So where will you take me?”

“Reunification Palace, War Remnants Museum....”

I interrupted him.

“I have seen these already.”

I know this was a lie, but all of these locations were within walking distance and I had planned to see them the next day. There was a pause as the driver thought of a new plan.

“Ok, I take you to Jade Emperor Pagoda and Thien Hau Pagoda”

I had no plans to visit these temples, so this seemed like a pretty good idea.

“But what is your best price?”

After a few minutes of negotiation, we agreed on a price of 50,000 dong. Even to this day I still have no idea whether this was a good price for the two hours or so spent cycling around that afternoon.

I sat down on the passenger seat. With an audible groan, the driver pushed off. It sounded like the bicycle powering the cyclo did not have any gears. Fortunately, the city is really flat. Riding in the cyclo was an amazing experience. It has to be one of the best ways to see the city, as you are sitting at ground level and are in among all of the city’s sights, sounds, colors and people. However, I will admit that every time the driver had to turn across the traffic my heart was in my mouth. Bikes and even cars would stream straight towards me, as the cyclo slowly turned across their line of travel, and I sat there in a completely unprotected, open seat hoping that they would weave around us!

The temples themselves were interesting. The Thien Hau Pagoda is dedicated to a sea goddess called Lady Thien Hau. However, my personal favorite was the Jade Emperor Pagoda, which is dedicated to the supreme Taoist god. From the courtyard pool full of turtles to the effigies and carvings, which ranged from depictions of hell to a life-size effigy of a horse, it all appeared to be fairly eclectic to someone with no understanding of the religion or the symbolism. The strong pungent smoky haze from the burning joss sticks just added to the mystique of the place.

The cyclo driver, who had been waiting outside the gates while I went in, couldn’t really enlighten me much either as to what I was seeing.

It was difficult to chat with the cyclo driver while we were on the move. As he rode through the traffic, I could hear him singing and whistling to himself. As we were making our way back towards where I was staying, I half turned in my seat and asked,

“So where is a good place to get beer?”

Out of the corner of my eye I could see his face light up as he asked,

“I take you where I go?”

The idea of a local bar sounded like a good one, and sure beat the idea of going back to my hot, stuffy, depressing room.

“OK. Let’s go and I will buy you a beer. Is the beer cold?”

I added the last question more out of conversation than anything else, and initially, did not think anything further of his answer,

“Yes, I think they have ice.”

A couple of minutes later we pulled up outside what appeared to be a mechanic’s garage. The driver hopped off the cyclo and I followed him inside. The garage had been cleared out, leaving just an oil-smearred concrete floor. As we entered, plastic tables and folding chairs were being set up to create an after-hours pub! We took our seats at a table and sat to face the evening traffic passing by the entrance of the shop. For the first time that day, the intensity of the sun began to diminish and dusk started to descend on the city. The bartender came around and offered us a plastic cup each and filled them with beer from a jerry can. The beer was at room temperature.

“Ah, you want cold beer?”

The driver called out to the bartender, who came back and, before I knew what was happening, dropped ice into my beer. I could only hope that the alcohol in the beer would kill any of the bugs in the ice (which was probably made from tap water). Furthermore, the ice only served to water down the beer. Although the beer was still warm as well as being watered down, it was nevertheless relaxing to sit back and watch the world go by.

While we were sitting there, hawkers would pass by trying to sell their wares. Most of it was junk, but one guy was selling small bags of small hardboiled eggs. I bought some, assuming them to be quail eggs or something similar. I offered half of them to the driver who happily accepted them, and for five minutes we were busy peeling and eating the eggs, which with a bit of salt tasted quite nice. After a while I asked him where the eggs were from. Rather than give me the name of a bird species, he answered,

“From bird nest around the city.”

I could only assume he meant they were pigeon eggs. I ordered another round of drinks to make sure there was enough alcohol to kill off any pathogenic bacteria from the pigeon eggs (well, it seemed like a good enough reason to me to have another drink).

Once he was onto his second drink, the cyclo driver seemed quite relaxed, so I thought I would ask him for his life story. I started with a simple enough lead-off question.

“Are you from Ho Chi Minh City?”

The driver was originally from a rural village in the south, but had come to the city five or ten years earlier (he hadn’t really kept count of the years) to make money to help support his family. When he first came to the city he used to sleep on his cyclo, but after being robbed while he slept and losing all the money he had, he decided to pay a local landlord to allow him to sleep indoors on the floor of a room with other people. He would go back and see his family once or twice a year and give them the money that he earned. He believed it was all worth it because it meant that his children could be educated rather than have to help work the land. I wanted to ask him how old he was, but looking at his deeply tanned, leathery skin he could have been anything from twenty to forty-five. Despite his openness, I suddenly felt rather intrusive asking such personal questions, so instead, ordered another round of drinks.

By now the sun had set and it was dark. Over the third drink we just chatted about fairly superficial subjects. The cyclo driver was now quite tipsy and it was probably best for all concerned that he had no more to drink. I announced to the cyclo driver that I was very tired

and was going to go back to where I was staying. Fortunately, I had found out earlier that I was only a five minute walk from there. I paid what seemed a pittance for the drinks, and perhaps out of a feeling of guilt for haggling with a man who had so little, paid the cyclo driver the full 100,000 dong. I thanked him for a great afternoon and left.

After tracing my steps back to where I was staying to make sure that I would not get lost, I decided to head down to the nearby Night Market to get something to eat. These markets are held outside the buildings that house the central Ben Thanh Market. Once the Ben Thanh Market closes for the day, the street is closed off and the Night Market opens for business. The market includes a number of food stalls which set up small restaurants on the empty road.

I chose one of these temporary restaurants at random and sat down on a wooden stool at a small wooden table. A waiter came out and thoughtfully offered me a menu in English (I was by now far too tired to try and communicate across the language barrier). Squinting at the menu in the flickering light of a candle, the salt and pepper squid caught my attention, as it was something that I had never tried before.

I placed my order and enjoyed the pleasant evening air as I sipped on my water.

The squid arrived within ten minutes. It had been cut into squares and scored so that when it was cooked it formed little curls. The plate was served with a lime garnish and for the first of many times in Vietnam, I experienced the unique flavor combination of salt, pepper, and lime juice. The squid was hot and fresh and the salt, pepper, and lime flavors tasted amazing. It definitely beat the rubbery fried calamari and tartar sauce I was normally used to.

Eventually I returned to my room. Despite it having cooled down outside, my room was still stiflingly hot. Even with the fan on maximum power and directly angled at my face, I felt uncomfortable. Although I had barely slept in the last forty-eight hours, I lay awake most of that night thinking about the day I had just had: my first day back on the road after so many years.

Already I had learned a couple of useful lessons.

Never believe half the claims made in guidebooks. Especially when it says how easy it is to find a hotel room and that it is just a simple matter of turning up and picking somewhere to stay! At least book your first night. When you are lugging a backpack and are operating on only a few hours of sleep after a long-haul flight, you just want things to be easy. You don't want an adventure. The other thing was to not be cheap when it comes choosing to somewhere to stay. It doesn't matter how cheap a room is, if you are not comfortable and cannot sleep, you are never going to enjoy your travel.

But my most important lesson of the day was a positive one.

Sure, the guidebook is useful for giving you a feel for the things to do in a new city, and its importance in this regard cannot be overstated. But when I left it behind and just walked the streets of the city with my eyes open, I had some amazing experiences. I ate some great food and during the course of a chance meeting with the cyclo driver, got to experience the

city from a completely different angle, which even included a small insight into how some of the people lived here.

I really enjoyed the taste of the salt and pepper squid. I was later surprised when I discovered just how easy it was to prepare. It has now become one of my favorite quick dishes and always evokes memories of that day in Vietnam.

The Hungry Traveller's Salt & Pepper Squid – serves 4

Shopping List

- 450g (1 lb.) Squid rings or pieces
- 2 tbsp. Coarse salt
- 1 tbsp. Ground black pepper
- ½ Cup corn flour
- Vegetable oil for frying
- 2 Halved limes

Preparation

Step 1:

Wash the squid pieces and pat them dry with paper towel.

Step 2:

Combine the salt and pepper with the corn flour.

Step 3:

Toss the squid in the seasoned flour. Make sure that the squid pieces are evenly coated.

Step 4:

Heat the oil in a wok or deep sided fry pan suitable for deep frying. When the oil is hot, cook the squid in batches, until the rings turn golden and are crispy.

Step 5:

Drain the cooked squid on paper towel.

Step 6

Squeeze over the lime and serve.