



Helmet? What helmet?

If you think driving on South African roads is a risky business, try navigating the streets of Vietnam on a motorbike, says **Nicholas Dall**. Just make sure to leave home with a sense of humour.

Hardly a day goes by in South Africa where you don't hear someone moan about the terrible state of the roads; overcrowded taxis; reckless, underage, unlicensed drivers; or corrupt traffic cops.

In Vietnam, nobody complains.

The roads, littered with sunken portals to air-raid bunkers left over from what is known here as the American War, are what they are. "Overloaded" isn't part of the Vietnamese lexicon: Five is an acceptable number of adults on a Minsk scooter; eight

is an acceptable number of live pigs on a Yamaha Sirius; 100 is an acceptable number of ducks on a Honda Cub.

Vietnamese road users are so reckless that the mere fact of their recklessness is barely worth mentioning.

"Blind spot" is a catch-all term that describes everything other than the patch of road immediately in front of your vehicle. "Underage" means your feet can't touch the ground when you're stationary... so you'd better make sure you stop next to a high curb at all times. Licences are superfluous.

And the cops? Well, it's universal –

they're pretty much the same as ours.

I got my motorbike, a 110cc Honda Wave, a few weeks after moving to Hanoi to run an English-teaching school. I had only ever ridden a bike on a deserted Zanzibar beach and a Karoo plain. I planned to ease myself into it – I would only brave the open road once I was comfortable riding around the alleys and empty parking lots of my neighbourhood.

Or so I thought. Within minutes of getting the bike, I took a wrong turn and was swept up by the convulsive Gulf Stream that is Hanoi traffic. Whenever I found myself in a tight spot I accelerated and pulled the brake

at the same time. I left my road map at home because I knew I wouldn't be going far. My helmet was too small for me and my head was aching. By the time I had found my way back (after a few phone calls to my wife, who was at home with the map) I was, for what it's worth, a Hanoi driver.

The rules of the road in Hanoi are simple. Rule one: The bigger vehicle has right of way. Rule two: Each driver is responsible for evading whatever is immediately in front of his/her vehicle. I assume that there are also rules about which side of the road to drive on, what to do at traffic lights, how to signal your intent to turn, and when (not) to use your cellphone, but these are steadfastly ignored.

The reality is that riding a motorbike in Hanoi is a lot like playing a computer game. Except you only have one life. This makes it more exhilarating. With the exception of riding in rush-hour traffic, which is awful, I think I actually prefer riding in Hanoi to driving in Cape Town. It makes me appreciate my mortality. At home I feel as if I'm losing years of my life in traffic; in Hanoi every minute I survive seems like a bonus.

The Vietnamese learn how to ride at a young age. Kids receive their first bicycle while they're still learning to walk. By the time they are six or seven they are unleashed onto the roads. In the brief traffic lull before the whole city shuts down for lunch, the streets are awash with teetering, six-abreast posses of school kids – and not a helmet in sight.

Most parents here believe it's not safe to put a child in a helmet (something about the skull of a child still being malleable), preferring daily exposure to the very real prospect that their children will experience a run-in with the tarmac.

Babies resemble miniature beekeepers as they perch in specially designed high-chairs that rest on the floorboards of scooters, clad in tailor-made muslin shrouds. Pollution, you see, might result in a chest infection. Helmet? Not a chance.

In fact, helmets were only made compulsory for adults in 2007 – a ruling still viewed with scorn by the general populace, and which is ignored whenever the cops are not likely to be around.

Besides, there are loopholes: The term "helmet" has been defined to include any headgear that has a chinstrap. A favourite among young men is a shiny plastic baseball cap with the words "I LOVE LIPSTICK" emblazoned across the back and a big pair of smackers on the front. For the girls there are helmets with

a space for a ponytail, and glorified canvas bonnets featuring strategically placed posies.

These "helmets" are fashion accessories. It's not unusual to see a helmeted couple – he in dress shoes, she in stilettos – walking on the beach promenade or even commuting on the bus.

A British friend of ours, to prove a point, put his fist through his Vietnamese girlfriend's helmet, but she still wouldn't replace it with a real one. If she got a helmet like his, she explained, she wouldn't be able to hear what he was saying when she rode pillion, nor would she be able to speak on her cellphone.

Of course accidents happen. All the time.

Here too, rules apply. Rule one: The bigger vehicle is always at fault, and as such should pay an on-the-spot cash settlement, depending on the damage done and the relative wealth of the parties involved.

Rule two: Unless there has been a fatality, the police should be avoided at all costs. Insurance hasn't reached these shores and the police would only complicate the issue by demanding a cut for themselves.

Disobey the rules at your peril. An Australian teacher at the school I manage was

involved in a serious accident. She was riding an electric scooter and therefore didn't require a licence (not even officially). So, according to Vietnamese law, she could never have been deemed responsible for the accident.

Not that it mattered, because the accident wasn't her fault. The unhelmeted teenage rider who broadsided her at an intersection was well enough to run away from the accident, but his passenger would never walk again.

By the time the unconscious victim with obvious spinal injuries had been bundled into a taxi (not an ambulance) and the police had arrived, there was a throng of onlookers but still no sign of the other rider. The cops impounded both vehicles and arranged a meeting with our teacher for the following Friday. She should bring her boss and a translator.

At 9 am sharp we reported to the address she'd been given. "Next door," the disinterested officer behind the counter told us. Next door was the impoundment lot: a sea of mangled motorbikes, although there was no sign of the bike we were looking for. Nor any sign of the officer we were supposed to meet. Phone calls were made and superiors were summoned, but eventually we were advised to leave.

That was that. Or so we thought. Our teacher – happy to be spared a grilling at the hands of the authorities in exchange for losing her bike – completed her contract and returned home. A few weeks later we got a call from the investigating officer, who had been deliberately absent from our first meeting. The injured passenger was going to die, he said, and our teacher should pay "compensation" to the victim. He wouldn't tell us where the victim was, though – we should give the officer the money, and he would pass it on to the family.

Sounds like home, I hear you say, but it's not quite the same. Yesterday I saw two guys riding next to each other enjoying a chat on their way to work. The thing is, they were also both speaking on their cellphones to other people at the same time! Beat that.

In South Africa there's general consensus among all upstanding citizens that the situation on our roads isn't peachy. In Vietnam they embrace it. People laugh at small accidents (even when they're involved) and stop to snap pictures of gorier scenes.

Just yesterday I saw a man on a scooter clutching a 200 kg block of ice behind his back as he overtook a conical-hatted cyclist whose bike was adorned with hundreds of see-through bags, each containing a frilly-tailed, iridescent goldfish.

I was the only one staring. ■



ILLUSTRATIONS TONY GROGAN