

# For Pete's sake

While working as an English teacher in Vietnam, **Nick Dall** adopted a cat and brought him all the way back to Cape Town. There were more than a few hiccups along the way.

ILLUSTRATIONS  
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I'd been looking at some cute kittens in the abandoned lot opposite the house my wife and I were renting in Danang, Vietnam, when one of our neighbours walked up and thrust another far less cute kitten into my arms and said: "You like cat. Here."

I took the tiny, petrified, filthy handful home, and my wife and I bathed it. As the water turned blacker, the cat slowly revealed himself to be ginger and white. And then he went stiff. We took him out of the water and rubbed him dry with a towel. Some movement returned, but he was still hypothermic in spite of it being the middle of summer in the tropics.

We called a taxi, found a cardboard box for the kitten and phoned a friend for the address of the nearest vet. We'd been living in Vietnam for more than a year but nevertheless the animal "hospital" came as a shock. Tiled from floor to ceiling in what might have once been white ceramic tiles, the open-plan room featured a row of shallow troughs beneath an aluminium grate to which the patients – a motley assortment of cats and dogs – were tied by their feet.

The room was at once the reception, the consultation room and the recovery ward. The surgery itself was tucked away in a corner but fully visible behind floor-length windows with no glass in them.

"Your cat," said the white-haired vet in a pyjama suit, "is easy die."

"It's not our cat," we remonstrated. "It was just given to us."

Unperturbed, he went on: "If tomorrow your cat have 36 degree, it can live. If 35, it can die. Your cat..." He waited for his grandson to find the right word on Google Translate. "Have dysentery."

He gave the cat some shots and tied each of his paws to the metal grate with pink plastic twine. Then he went to the back room, his living quarters, and returned with a bedside lamp that had been modified by the addition of a red globe. This was to be the cat's incubator for the night. We left a paltry down payment and promised to return the following day.

Pete, for that is what we christened him, did recover and he did become our cat. Those first few weeks weren't easy, as dysentery doesn't disappear

overnight, but soon enough we couldn't remember life without him.

He was a shy boy who found some miraculous hiding places, the best being a cavern beneath our bathtub accessed via a missing tile. We had to lure him out with tuna and seal the hole with cardboard and duct tape.

From the very first, he hated the Vietnamese language: The mere sound of the landlord greeting us would send him running, often resulting in him getting stuck in the mosquito net that shrouded our bed. We don't know why this was, but in a country where dog is commonly eaten and some people even eat cats, it wasn't hard to imagine what his previous life had been like.

When Pete was six months old we took him to be neutered. Our Vietnamese friends thought we were mad. After all, he was a man, therefore he must make babies. Maybe this mentality explained why there were so many strays on the streets.

The vet was happy to do it, though, and his assistant even showed us the evidence: "One. Two," she counted as she threw his oysters into a wastepaper basket. The price for the procedure: R17.

**About a year later**, Pete pounced from behind a door and attacked my foot. I barely felt it, but Pete was in instant agony. As is always the case with such accidents, it was late on a Sunday night.

Our usual vet was closed, so we went to a guy whose surgery was literally on his dining room table. He diagnosed the injury as a sprain and gave Pete an anti-inflammatory.

A few days later we were back at our real vet, with a cat who could barely sit, let alone walk. This vet gave Pete a very strong sedative and had me ride pillion on his scooter with a comatose cat in my arms. We went to a radiologist (for humans) in a shed next to the railway tracks and an X-ray was done of the offending leg. It was broken in two places – above and below the knee.

The break could be fixed, but it would require the insertion of a metal pin. We were faced with two obstacles: One, there were no such pins in Danang. And two, our vet had never performed the operation.

But Pete was way too precious to us by now for such trivialities to stand in the way.

A few days later the operation took place. A pin had been flown in from Saigon and our vet had persuaded a retired army orthopaedic surgeon to lead the procedure. The surgery was scrubbed up quite

impressively by the vet's wife and an electric drill wrapped in a shopping bag was produced.

The operation was not pretty to watch, but it was a success. I had to take Pete in every day for two weeks – strapped in his box to the back of my motorbike – for jabs to stave off infection. He now walks as well as he ever did.

**By the time** I came to the end of my teaching contract in Vietnam, there was little doubt about Pete's fate. He was our boy, and no one in Vietnam would ever look after him like we had. He was coming home with us.

Vietnam surpasses even South Africa when it comes to red tape, so a lot of time was spent procuring vaccination certificates and government health checks. There were times when it didn't look like we'd succeed, but finally the day arrived when all three of us boarded our domestic flight to Hanoi, the capital. We had to check Pete in as baggage and when we arrived at the other end, there he was, in his basket, spinning round and round all alone on the conveyor belt.

A bit more paperwork was required, but we were helped by a Danish vet at one of Vietnam's two "real" animal hospitals. Due to cargo restrictions, Pete had to fly to South Africa via Doha, while we went via Singapore.

Pete left about 12 hours before us, with his water dispenser and food bowl cable-tied to the mesh of his box, and an absorbent mat on the floor.

He got home before us too, although only just, and my father-in-law fetched him from the airport. So nervous was he that for the duration of his 36-hour journey he didn't even pee! He made up for that when he got home. Five minutes solid must be some kind of cat record.

**We've now had Pete** in Cape Town for a year, and he's far more relaxed and confident than he ever was in Vietnam. He likes South Africans, and has even purred on a few strangers' laps. His latest challenge is dealing with our eight-month-old puppy, Basil, and this is where his prowess at finding unique hiding spots comes in handy: He spends most days in the stormwater drain outside our house, and returns every evening to eat, and sleep on our bed, smelling vaguely of mildew.

Yes, it seems that Pete was destined to be a South African cat all along, proving that sometimes you have to travel a long way to find your real home.

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