



So, I'm going to Vietnam. Tomorrow. For three months by [Vietnam business visa](#). With complete strangers. Or at least, almost complete strangers because I've met three of them once. Have we got a plan? Well, actually, I don't. But Shauna does, and so does the European Union and the Technical University of Delft. To be short: I will be working for a project called SPIN, which basically aims to bring more knowledge about sustainable product innovation in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. It also aims to build long-lasting relationships between 'western' designers and Vietnamese craft companies. One of the results of these quite ambitious goals is that Shauna (who does a PhD on this) set up a three-month temporary design studio, Future Living Studio, to design a sustainable interior for a small eco-lodge called Bamboo. The products that we (Thomas Pleeing, Connie Yeh, Nguyen Thanh Tan, Tran Thi Kim Yen, Trinh Ha Giang, Shauna Jin and myself) design will be made with the help of local crafts companies.

I must admit I'm a little nervous right now, my bag is packed and waiting for me to pick it up. I will do a yoga class just before I leave and then the next post will be from Ho Chi Minh City. I sincerely hope that my design adventures in Vietnam will be interesting enough for you to follow them and maybe, occasionally, comment on them.

First impressions: Vietnam is actually quite clean. Traffic is busy but no more chaotic than any other western metropole. The food is very good, I almost contemplate living here after just one meal. Turkish Airlines did a bad job caring for my luggage (they didn't which is why this post is only text and no pictures). Internet is working. The governmental Facebook block is pretty amateurship. The first pictures of the hotel we're designing the interior for seem cool. The pictures of the different companies we will be working with too. Vietnamese is impossible to understand. It is readable but still unintelligible. It is warm. We've got a swimming pool. The roof of the house can open by pulling on a rope that hangs through the staircase four floors down from the ceiling. Cycling is possible. I'm seriously addicted to internet since I've spent at least two hours checking mail/FB/ and whatever the minute internet started working. The jetlag is doable. You don't need to win the lottery to become a billionaire and the neighbors have chickens.

Transportation in Ho Chi Minh City mostly happens by motorcycle. When you're in Rome, do as the Romans do (I quote my father), so we've rented motorcycles to scooter around. Last week, when we went to visit a company named Truong Thinh, we got lost. Impossible to find on google (they don't have a website for fear of their products being copied), they were also hard to find in the real world. The journey was long, dusty, hot and a good opportunity to take a few pictures of (to me) surprising aspects of Vietnamese traffic. I never expected to see people wear gloves in the tropics. Yet the Vietnamese ladies do. Gloves, long sleeves, jeans, face mask, sunglasses and helmet are the regular outfit for scootering. I'm sure I would suffocate if I had to wear all that, but the Vietnamese ladies do everything to prevent sun tan.

Scooters are allowed on the high way, just like bicycles, cargo scooters and pedestrians. And there's a lot of them: crossing a road is like crossing a human

motorized river. Imagine the congestion when the biggest dream of all those motorbike riders comes true: to possess a real car.

The Vietnamese are king in making do with whatever means of transport they have at hand. Most of the times it will be a motorcycle that has to do the job. By now I've seen a lot of unconventional items being transported on a bike (a full-grown live goat, hundreds of goldfish in little sacks of water, complete trees to name a few), but this man is transporting more stuff on his motorbike than he could fit in a medium sized car.

We've been so busy! Making the interior for an eco-lodge while also trying to manage the expectations of six different local companies is no easy task. To relax, and to research other [hotels in Mui Ne](#), we've been to Mui Ne last week. It's a tiny fisherman village with loads of resorts. The signs in Russian made us expect the worst, but luckily, it's low season at the moment. As you can see, the scenery was great, the food was good, the resort more luxurious than I've ever experienced and the sun was shining. Perfect. And still I felt a bit weird. In a tourist place like this, the people serving you want to give you the best possible experience. Of course, that's how they make their money. But this servile attitude makes me feel even more an outsider than I inevitably am. I like to be the observer and I know I can never blend in (my blond hair is too easily noticed I'm afraid), but being treated as a colonial princess is a bit too far on the other side of the spectrum for me. Somehow, I felt more like a western money bag than like royalty, very awkward. It also left me wondering about the eco-hotel we're designing for. The client is king, but wouldn't he feel more comfortable if treated like a real person? Wouldn't it be much better if the guest felt privileged to take part in the eco-resort instead of just consuming one-sidedly? Am I the only one thinking this?

Do you buy souvenirs to bring home when you go somewhere? I do. Lots of people do. So, what do you buy? In Hoi An, a town famous for its charm and tailors, much of the money made comes from tourists buying things. Clothes of course, but also that funny object called a souvenir. In French the word literally means 'memory'. A memory to the places you've spent a day, a week, a portion of your life. A tangible piece to help you defy the forgetful nature of your brain and hold on to the memory. As a product, a souvenir doesn't need to be beautiful, nor does it need to have a function. The very act of buying it from that woman on the street (how come it's so rarely a man) seals the memory. In exchange for a little money, you have a piece of material that now carries meaning and talks to you about the travels you've made. Isn't that a miracle?