

# **MOTORBIKES,** **A DOOMED** **AFFAIR?**

The motorbike is an iconic piece of Vietnam's aesthetic. But for how much longer? By Joshua Zukas.



**WHAT WILL VIETNAM'S** future cities look like? To get a sense of the hopes and dreams of city planners and property developers, look for the gigantic street-side 3D renders that shield the monstrous construction projects in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In these advertisements, suited urbanites walk on pristine and uncluttered pavements. Sleek cars zoom past biophilic office buildings. Perhaps a helicopter hovers on the horizon.



## **Two wheels bad?**

Just as telling as what these images do show is what they don't, and chief among the long list of no-shows is the two-wheeler. Where are all the xe may (motorbikes)? Given the Vietnamese infatuation with their two-wheeled darlings, not to mention the ever-present roar of them in every corner of the country, a Vietnam without motorbikes is unimaginable.



And yet Hanoi, a city of almost six million motorbikes, is set to outlaw them by 2030. In 2017, bigwig officials voted for the ban almost unanimously, apparently believing that it will transform the city into one of orderly streets and clean air. Ordinary Hanoians scoffed at the idea, pointing out that the government often makes statements outlining aspirations for the future, but they rarely come to pass.

Several years after the announcement, however, there's been no backpedalling. On the contrary, there are whispers that HCMC, Vietnam's biggest city, is mulling a similar ban, though officials deny this. Nevertheless, HCMC, which has at least a million more motorbikes than Hanoi, has still been asked by the national government to curtail their usage. So have the country's three second-tier big cities: Hai Phong, Danang and Can Tho.

Is Vietnam going to divorce the motorbike? Probably not. One reason is that these announcements were made when public transport developments looked bright). Inner-city rail was once peddled as a viable alternative to the motorbike, but the Hanoi Metro network is limited and expansions are behind schedule. The state of the Ho Chi Minh City Metro is even worse; construction progress keeps getting stuck in a web of corruption scandals.



## **Four wheels good?**

Unless public transport improves significantly before bans come into effect, city dwellers will be forced into cars and taxis instead, leading to even more congestion and pollution – not less. Motor-bikes are one reason why Hanoi and HCMC have, for the most part, dodged the soul-destroying, city-wide gridlock that afflicts South-east Asian megacities like Jakarta and Manila. In 2011, the World Bank theorised that if the Vietnamese were to drive cars as frequently as Malaysians, Hanoi would be perennially gridlocked.

Despite glaring warnings from neighbouring countries, car ownership continues to soar in Vietnam. It's difficult to know if the threat of bans is dismounting people from motorbikes and pushing them into cars, but it's easy to identify other appeals of four wheels. Unfortunately, as car ownership grows, so too do the reasons to buy one, a kind of exponential version of what economists refer to as the tragedy of the commons.

As automobile numbers increase, so does the risk of collision with one, which is more likely to be fatal for motorcyclists than for car drivers. Likewise, as cars increasingly clog the roads, journey times lengthen and pollution worsens, and being stuck in traffic is preferable in a dry, air-purified and air-conditioned car. The result of more cars on the road? More cars on the road.



## **Unlock the countryside**

While the future of motorbikes in Vietnam's big cities is unclear, in the countryside their reign remains unchallenged. We tend not to recommend that travellers drive motorbikes in urban areas as there are usually better and safer ways to get around: by foot in Hoi An, by bicycle in Hue, and by taxi in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Danang.

But when it comes to exploring the countryside, the capacity and confidence to ride is often the key to unlocking the finest experiences.

Note that driving a two-wheeler over 50cc without a local or international motorbike license is illegal, though this is rarely enforced.

It's also important to know that travel insurance is unlikely to cover medical costs if you're without a license and you get into an accident. Remember that you can always enjoy the benefits of a motorbike without needing to drive one. Just hire a driver.