



# It's 'Nam good fun

History, culture, cold beer  
and working aircon.

**Mary Bolling** goes on a  
tour of Vietnam that  
stops at all stations



»  
cover  
story

**G**OOD morning, Viet-NAM! The bellowing wake-up call sounds down the sleeper carriage and cuts through the frantic chug of the train.

At 4.20am, this unhuman being could beat a morning-TV host for enthusiasm.

From the rows of our two-bunk cabins, muted sounds of life can't match such emotion.

But everyone is getting up. We've been in Vietnam for five days and we're strongly advised that waking early is worth the effort.

Our unsympathetic sergeant-major is Frank "Franko" O'Brien. Convincing in the role, the Geelong tourism operator was a lieutenant-colonel before he promoted himself to Vietnam tour escort.

We first experience the full force of his pre-sunrise enthusiasm on day two.

On this day it's closer to 3am and still uncomfortably warm in sticky southern Vung Tau, a pumping coastal party town for wealthy Ho Chi Minh City residents.

Our tour group is here to catch a bus.

As the temperature climbs to the mid-30s, we wind along dirt tracks through uniform groves of rubber trees. No signage or fanfare marks our destination when we arrive, only a row of silent buses and a still-dark path into eerie lines of skinny, still trees.

In a small clearing about 300 people — Aussies and Kiwis, many relatives of Vietnam veterans — have gathered around a white cross.

No uniforms, no medals. The *Last Post* crackles from a tape deck, then Anzac Day dawn service is over at Long Tan, where 18 Australians were killed on August 19, 1966.

Now in daylight, and moved to wakefulness, we make the hot walk back to the bus, and the bemused local tree-tappers go back to work.



Franko served in Vietnam in 1969-70 and has been coming back since 1989.

Along with local guide Zen, he takes six tours a year — from Ho Chi Minh to Hanoi on the 1726km stretch of railway known as the Reunification Express.

General train passengers often suffer long delays, unreliable airconditioning and crowded conditions. Franko makes sure the carriages for his customers are comfortable, and he runs them with military precision.

The sleeper cabin and dining car have their own staff and own airconditioning.

When the group stops, the carriages are disconnected from whichever train they've been hitching a ride with and stay in the station's shunting yards. Even better, when we've had our tea and it's time to reboard, scouts at the station mean we can stay at the pub until the train's actually ready to leave.

Vietnam's military history is an important focus of the trip.

Ours is a small group. There are nine on our tour — the maximum is 20. Only five of the 18 nights are spent on the train. The rest of the trip is spent in four-star accommodation.

In Ho Chi Minh City — Frank still calls it Saigon — the Saigon Continental hotel is the perfect window into a crazy world.

On paper, a scheduled lesson in crossing roads looks a bit ridiculous. But after standing helpless on a kerb for 10 minutes, this tutorial bestows the power to part the relentless swarm of scooters, even if life does still flash briefly before your eyes.

A bit of local knowledge goes a long way in these parts and exuberant Vietnamese will flood you with it.

Surrounded by curling smoke at the first of many temples, storyteller Zen dumbs down Buddhist beliefs for our benefit: "You've seen *Ghost*, the movie? Demi Moore? That's what Buddhists believe."

Other helpful advice involves making an offer at the market (if your first price isn't a third of what is being asked for, you'll be ripped off) and saying hello — "xin chao". It's pronounced "sin jow" and said with an upwards inflection. Downwards, and you're ordering soup. (Not necessarily a terrible thing, it's quite delicious.)

Fed and with a couple of Tigers already in the tank — Tiger beers, that is — we've survived five days in Vietnam — from Long Tan to the Mekong Delta and around Saigon.

Boarding the train at 8pm, a few more beers and a dining carriage karaoke session later, and most of us have forgotten where we are.

And it might be just as well — the next morning we're in a different world.