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AFP News brief

Every driver for himself on Vietnam's traffic-choked roads

by Frank Zeller

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It's a common experience for the first-time visitor to a Vietnamese city: trying to cross a road and waiting in vain for a break in the traffic, a seemingly endless stream of motorized madness. Watching on with fascination and fear, many a newcomer has been glued to the pavement marvelling at the honking avalanche of steel and plastic that is a snapshot of modern Vietnam. With the organic flow of a school of fish, squadrons of motor scooters weave past each other as their riders look for gaps, some while sending texts on their mobile phones. Honda Dream mopeds carry families of four or improbably large cargos including furniture. Women in conical hats pedal bicycles laden with flowers. And cyclo caravans steer camera-toting tourists through the chaos.

Overwhelmed traffic police typically stand by blowing their whistles while trying not to get run over, only occasionally springing into action to pick a motorist from the crowd for an on-the-spot fine. The most brazen road warriors seem to regard traffic lights and one-way signs as suggestions and choked roads as cues for impromptu pavement detours.

Even by the standards of many developing cities, Vietnam's traffic can be a sight to behold.

But luckily for the petrified pedestrian, advice is at hand. "The traffic is a flowing river," says Dutch photographer Hans Kemp. "It's one of the most important things visitors here have to learn: don't go fast, never stop, and the traffic will flow around you. If you stay on the pavement, you will never cross the road."

Kemp has spent hundreds of hours photographing Vietnamese traffic for his book "Bikes of Burden," a tribute to the motor scooters he calls "the backbone of Vietnam's economy".

His pictures prove that almost anything can be transported on a motorcycle.

The loads he has photographed include giant truck tyres, stacks of toilets, beer barrels, small forests of bonsai trees, flocks of live ducks and stacked crates of raw eggs. They range from the tragic, like a basket of dogs heading to a restaurant, to the ridiculous, like the dead shark flopped across a moped.

Two thirds of Vietnam's population of 85 million are under 30, and the motorcycle has become the centre of youth culture.

But the flipside of that fascination is one of the world's highest road tolls with about 30 fatalities a day.

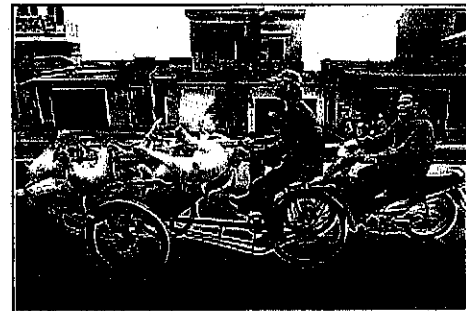
The National Traffic Safety Committee says more than 12,500 people died on the roads last year and 11,000 were injured, many suffering head trauma.

"I think it's the most dangerous traffic in Asia because Vietnam is probably the fastest motorising country in the world," said Greig Craft, president of non-profit Asia Injury Prevention Foundation. "Everyone expected that the transition would be from water buffalos



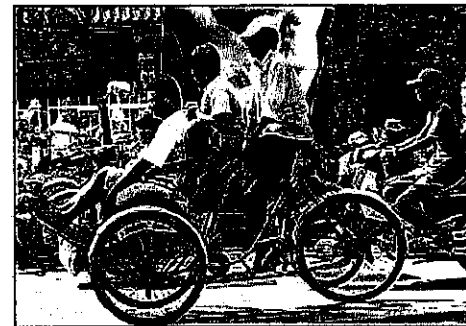
Graphic showing the rise in the number of registered automobiles and motorbikes in Vietnam in the last seven years.

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A man riding a motorcycle helps pushing a cyclo transporting live pigs as they head for a slaughter house in the suburbs of Hai Phong. Change is badly needed in booming Vietnam where motor vehicle densities are among the world's highest, with more than 18 million registered motorbikes – a number that grows by more than two million a year.

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A father and his two children take a ride on a cyclo in

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to bicycles to automobiles. Instead this truly unforeseen phenomenon of people buying motorcycles cropped up. It was a

SEARCH

"Today this is a road war, it's an epidemic. The toll on society here is just unbelievable."

Cred campaigns to make helmets compulsory in a country where the full face version is scoffed at as a "no-necker".

The foundation, which has received support from celebrities and former US president Bill Clinton, manufactures and distributes small light-weight helmets better suited to the tropical climate.

Change is badly needed in booming Vietnam where motor vehicle densities are among the world's highest, with more than 18 million registered motorbikes -- a number that grows by more than two

million a year. Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organisation last month will lift an import ban on bikes larger than 175 cc and lower tariffs on cars, of which there are now about one million.

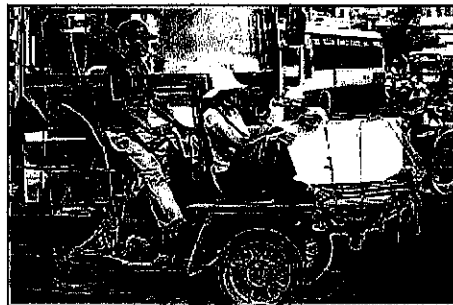
The government has taken notice of the trends, early this year announcing a national traffic safety campaign and asking for public suggestions on making roads safer.

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ent to those killed in 120 big prolonged wars. It's not an ity."

Ho Chi Minh City. Change is badly needed in booming Vietnam where motor vehicle densities are among the world's highest, with more than 18 million registered motorbikes -- a number that grows by more than two million a year.

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A tri-motorcycle transporting a woman and her goods riding on a busy street in Ho Chi Minh City in January 2007. Change is badly needed in booming Vietnam where motor vehicle densities are among the world's highest, with more than 18 million registered motorbikes -- a number that grows by more than two million a year.

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Night traffic on a busy street of Ho Chi Minh City. Even by the standards of many developing cities, Vietnam's traffic can be a sight to behold.

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