

# ECONOMIC CYCLE TURNS AGAIN

By

**Esmer Golluoglu**

It's a warm summer's evening in Hanoi, and Nguyen Chu Hoa and her beau are zipping through the Vietnamese capital's tree-lined alleyways using Nguyen's favourite pair of wheels : an electric bicycle.

"Do I love my electric bike? Yes", exclaims the 21-years-old student. "It is fast. It is so easy".

Long fashionable in China but slower to take off across Southeast Asia, electric bike sales have recently surged in Vietnam, thanks in part to higher fuel prices. At Asama, a central Hanoi bike shop where posters of pretty Vietnamese girls on 'e-bikes' adorn the walls, sales have risen fourfold in five years, says Nguyen Cat Nhat.

"Our clients are mostly students – people who don't want to ride a bicycle or buy a car, or can't", he says. "If we sell 10 electric bikes, five are for students, three are for older people, and two are for commuters. You have to be 18 to get a license for a motor-bike, so an electric bicycle is the easiest way for high-school students to go to and from class".

And yet, the e-bike still has a long way to go to oust the motorbike as the favoured form of two-wheeled transport. So-called image problems such as poor performance and low quality, have kept sales significantly lower than in China, which produced nearly 31 million e-bikes last year and provides the bulk of e-bikes for sale in Vietnam.

Because of a longstanding image problem, and little in the way of government incentive, it often serves as a temporary stepping stone until higher status can be achieved.

"Our clients usually replace it with a motorcycle when they get the money", admits Nguyen.

It is providing tough to create a green cycle-conscious culture in Vietnam, says Barcelona native Guim Valls Teruel, founder of the Hanoi Bicycle Collective, a café-cum-bike shop specialising in fixed-speed, vintage Peugeot and electric bicycles. "When I opened the shop, the whole neighbourhood was looking at me like, 'What is this guy doing? No one buys bicycles anymore, they only buy motorbikes and cars'," says Teruel, who opened the shop in West Lake this year. "Here, people who ride bicycles are considered poor. It's a lower-class form of transport because as soon as anyone makes any money, they buy a car".

It was said the bicycle determined not only the success of a household in Vietnam, but the nation as a whole. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers pedaled so many supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail that a New York Times journalists reportedly told a US Senate committee: "I literally believe that without bikes, they'd have to get out of the war".

Nearly 40 years on, Vietnam shines as an Asian Tiger. Its thriving middle class, booming economy and steady industry have resulted in a purchasing power noted most simply by the 33 million motorbikes swarming the streets. Hanoi recently ordered the cycle, the iconic rickshaw, to operate only at certain times to limit traffic.

"The natural scenery of the nation is best seen by bicycle", says Ngo Trong Huy of Vietnam Bike Tours. "But we don't see many [Vietnamese] riding bicycles now. I think we will in the next decade, when each family has a car. Then I expect Vietnamese to become our primary clientele".

That most Vietnamese wedding portraits still snap the couple next to a bicycle shows how ingrained the bicycle is in the national culture. But today they evoke a greater sense of nostalgia than the promise of use. As Nguyen Chu Hoa's boyfriend said : "Hoa says she loves her electric bike, but all she wants is a motorbike like mine".

– *The Guardian, London*

Note : Esmer Golluoglu is a pseudonym