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Skates of Glory

Looking for a new way to get fit? Why not roll with the big boys down at Hoang Long Skating Rink?

Words by Will Peach. Photos by Khoa Tran.

"YEAH, I FANCY MYSELF AS A BIT OF a wheeled demon," I say while patting my oversized going with some newfound loving. "I'm going to rip it up like there's no tomorrow."

It's skating day and I'm plucking up the courage to hit the rink out at Hoang Long, just a stones throw from Ho Chi Minh City's botanical gardens and zoo. Not knowing quite what to expect, an early Monday evening is chosen in the hope of fewer skater boys being present. A single word from them, after all, could shatter every one of my Olympic dreams.

◦ Wheeling Past

Coming from a long and well-established line of skaters – my grandfather having once skated into a mirror – expectations are riding high. I recall the last time I strapped on a pair, a mere ten years ago, and remember those precious moments of eating driveway concrete. Not this time I tell

myself with overwhelming determination.

I decide to go it alone, fearing that any act of rolling gracefully on wheels could blow my long-established masculine exterior in seconds. A colleague also warns me that I can expect to build up a hearty sweat, so I dig out a pair of criminally small shorts to accompany me.

The history of roller-skating in Vietnam is a little hazy. Even asking about skating rinks makes way for a lot of blank faces. But interested to find that the Vietnamese refer to the sport in the same way as the French, I scream *patin* at my *xe om* driver and we're off.

◦ Time to Go Go Go

Arriving at Hoang Long I'm disturbed to find something of a relic left largely untouched since the early 1980s. Even the security guard looks jaded. Outside, rusting metal columns line the entrance and garish neon shimmers brightly

illuminating a rather ill-looking pair of skates. Appearances can be deceiving I reassure myself and venture inside stooping to avoid an English sign reading "Happy New Year."

Inside this glorified shed lies one of the more surreal scenes of Vietnam. A large glittering disco ball hangs from the ceiling shedding light on some rather hysterical scenes below. As roughly 40 young Vietnamese stumble around a large concrete courtyard I can't help but notice a five-man conga chain gathering in the corner.

Something tells me this isn't the speed test I had come to expect.

After engaging in a long and tiresome conversation with the receptionist I hand over VND20,000 and receive a battered pair of quads. As the reverberations of the ancient sound system echo around me, the stench of these battered boots hits me full in the face.



Sizing it up *With no ice rinks to be found, roller-skating isn't a bad replacement*

"No socks," I moan in disarray, crouching on a low bench to haul on the little babies. Unable to ascertain the sizes from the non-English speaking staff I figure it's a kind of you-get-what-you're-given kind of place and make no effort to swap my size nines for another pair. Screwing my feet into a tight ball I manage to get laced up, ready for action.

◦ Hitting the Floor

My first efforts see me able to amble forward quite nicely to the centre of the rink, where my moves are smoothly accompanied by the sound of the Backstreet Boys. A couple of skaters fall around me to which I mutter "lowly amateurs" under my breath. Ten minutes later and I'm a whirling, flying blur desperately ignoring the shooting pains in my feet.

Around the main rink I notice a platform of ramps and dips that a few hardened

skaters are testing. Feeling up to the challenge I join the fray, goaded by a young teenager who keeps flipping me the finger. My entry onto the first ramp is plain sailing, the second, a little higher, sees me falling onto my knees wiping out the plucky eight-year-old next to me.

Tired of the ramps and spurred on by Celine Dion pouring from the speakers I take to centre stage and do a few circuits. A small fan club starts to build and two young Vietnamese men urge me to join them for a few laps. As one clammers on to my sweaty T-shirt we glide off dangerously into the night only to return back to earth with a bang as I retire rather sheepishly to the stands.

One Enchanted Evening

Buoyant from my skating episode I remove my boots to find a few blackened toenails and swollen feet. My new found friends spy my injuries and show a small amount of concern, slightly confused by

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my exertions that it's a case of "no pain, no gain."

And so while my skating episode wasn't quite what I expected, a few dong and a few pounds later, I return proudly to my dreams of Olympic skating.

Hoang Long, 2bis Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Q1, is open from 7.30am to 11.30pm Monday to Saturday, Sunday opening hours are from 7.30am to 10pm. ☎