

the final say

o the xe om diaries o trivia buff & sudoku



The Xe Om Diaries

What happened when two westerners hit the streets to become xe om drivers for a day? They learned not to quit their day jobs. Words by Will Peach and Nathaniel Liedl. Photos by Khoa Tran.

IN CONJUNCTION WITH OUR COVER story this month, we decided to research the public transportation industry in Saigon to find out employment opportunities for foreigners, how to get started and where to find potential clients to build up business.

o I Am Will, Your Xe Om Driver

Ever since I'd arrived in Vietnam (a grand total of twelve months ago) I'd noticed a particular niche market.

What would happen if a frail-looking white boy took to the streets offering rides to all the tourists walking around? It was a



“The xe om drivers outside Allez Boo take notice and walk across the street to sniff us out.”

question that had nagged at me for a while, always rearing its ugly head each time I took a ride with the men in blue jackets.

Then came the day. My assignment – find out what it’s like to be a *xe om* driver and, if you can, try to make more money than Nathaniel “Chet” Liedl. So I started out the day scoping out the competition by taking a few rides myself (or, more truthfully, getting to work after having my own motorbike repossessed by the authorities).

Early impressions were that this would be easy. I speak better English than this guy, I thought, as he began to litter the streets with fluid from his mouth and nose. I’m maybe a little more presentable, too.

So we’re off, out of the starting blocks and hitting the streets. My steed? A sleek silver Yamaha Nouvo. An upper-hand, how many *xe om* drivers have this?

◦ Location Scouting

A spot is chosen opposite Allez Boo and my comments book (any good *xe om* must have one) is out in force. I have a single entry forged from the imagination of my editor. She writes: “He didn’t know where to go, but was patient enough to look at the map.” With a comment as endearing as this, how

could I fail?

Standing alongside my muscled brute of a competitor, I suddenly realised I’m going to have to hustle like there’s no tomorrow. A tourist bus rolls in from Phnom Penh, to which I welcome two newly arrived Americans with ferocious enthusiasm. “Where you wanna go?” I scream, my voice retorting to a freakish caterwaul. “Nowhere with you,” they reply. That hurt.

Soon after, the freak show that had been congregating around us began to play out their sordid games. I’m fooled into taking a *xe om* driver masquerading as a customer to Ben Thanh Market only to have him scream at me to stop 15m down the road. Another person asks me where my blue jacket and insignia is to which I point hastily at my home-made label reading, “Hello, my name is Phuc, how can I help you today?”

The first few hours go by without any takers. Time for relocation opposite Go2.

The sun’s beating down and the boredom’s excruciating. Suddenly the Sozo cookie lady walks by, I give her the old English charm and I’m in. I’ve got my first ride and I’m elated. I whisk her off and deliver her back at Sozo’s door. I’m beaming like the chivalrous knight who delivered his damsel two minutes down

the road. I have VND5,000 in my pocket and I rub it in Chet’s face.

The rest of the day, however, plays out like time in purgatory. I take a rather plucky young English journalist out to Phu My Hung (for free as something to do), almost perishing in the path of an oncoming truck. Later I return to the same spot only to engage in long and tiresome conversations with shoe sellers, sunglasses salesmen and hookers.

This gig isn’t so sweet. A seven-hour day and only VND5,000 to show for it.

Then it’s home time and I’m left to reflect on the day and my loss to Saigon’s “premier English-speaking *xe om*” Chet. But not all is lost as a dream has finally been lived and it’s not the untapped goldmine I thought possible.

My final advice to any half-interested motorcycle entrepreneur? Trim your nails and don’t quit your day job. The boys in blue have it covered.

◦ Xe Om Chet Says...

As I’m mentally preparing for my one-day career as a *xe om* driver, a friend sends me an internet link that reads: “*Xe om* driver stabbed to death.” It’s not like I wasn’t feeling apprehensive about this gig before.



Motorbike, YOU! Will (left) determined to show Chet there can only be one...

Fatal stabbing was not one of my concerns. But *xe om* drivers can be rather territorial about their turf, I'm told.

"Call me if you're in trouble," are my editor's last words. That's reassuring.

At 1pm, Will and I set up our hustle on the park side of Pham Ngu Lao, across Allez Boo. I'm donning a sign on my back that reads: "Vrrooom! Vrrooom! Where you go? Motorbike you!"

I promptly enter *xe om* mode, signaling and shouting to potential passengers. The tourists barely acknowledge my existence. Apparently, nothing about a big white dude offering motorbike rides is strange.

The Vietnamese are much more curious. The *xe om* drivers outside Allez Boo take notice and walk across the street to sniff us out. The first guy asks me for a price quote to Cholon District.

"*Nam muoi nghin* (VND50,000)," I tell him.

He scoffs and informs me, "*Ba muoi nghin* (VND30,000)" is his price. He proceeds to inquire if I know where there is a "lady massage" or "boom boom" to take prospective clients to. I confess my ignorance. Since I don't know where the "boom boom" is at, I'm ostensibly no longer a threat. He returns to his corner.

After an unsuccessful hour, "Saigon's only two English-speaking *xe om* drivers" head to the corner of De Tham and Bui Vien. The highest concentration of the city's gullible tourists has to be right here. This is my best hope for a victim, er, passenger.

There are two other *xe om* drivers already on the corner. One immediately confronts us, boasting his official button-up blue shirt and *xe om* patch. Will shows the dude his home-made t-shirt, advertising his services and I point to the sign on my back. Initially, he doesn't seem impressed, but pointing to the four of us, says, "Friends." We've achieved acceptance into the community. A small victory.

We attract a peanut gallery comprised of book sellers, a *banh mi* lady and other curious passer-bys. Every time Will or I try to coax a potential customer, they collapse in laughter. But no one is biting. People seem more perturbed than anything.

◦ Dejection and Rejection

"It's not funny. It's stupid," yells one tourist. Dejection from all the rejection sets in. There's nothing glamorous about this vocation.

Will gets a rider. It's just VND5,000 and it's just a block, but I'm still envious. My

spirits are raised when a local who's been watching our circus show asks for a ride to Bui Thi Xuan. It's also a paltry VND5,000, but more importantly, I have my first customer. The guy seems equally elated.

"*Xe om! Xe om!*" he repeats the entire four-minute journey, pointing at me and notifying everyone within shouting distance.

Later, I drive a teacher friend to Vasco's for VND20,000. It doesn't feel so authentic as we are colleagues, but it's a customer nonetheless. Upon my return, a member of the peanut gallery asks for a ride around the Pham. It's a short ride, but another VND5,000. She informs me she is a better driver than me. I don't disagree.

I spend my final hour on Bui Vien, too discouraged at the day's denial to hustle much more. Time drags on. I begin to understand why drivers wile away the hours napping, chain smoking and popping pimples in their motorbike mirrors. This is boring and depressing. I end the day with VND30,000, but a new respect for *xe om* drivers. My self esteem is shot, but I haven't been stabbed, so I got that going for me. It was enough to do it for an afternoon; I can't imagine hustling every day. 