

Vietnam

It's just getting light outside and I'm woken early by a strange noise of shuffling, heavy breathing and snorting. No it's not Hayley in one of her deep sleep stages, it's right outside our small, but perfectly sized ecolodge. Our latest stop off is in the Ninh Binh province of Vietnam. It's a pretty unspoilt area and there's not that many tourists knocking about. Other than the confusing early morning cacophony, it's quiet, tranquil and ideal for a short stay to recharge after day long bus rides and busy cities. I do all I can to reach out of the bed and pull the curtain slightly so I can cast my bleary eyes and investigate where these noises are coming from. If I am able to keep the majority of my body in the warm under the covers, everything will be alright regardless of the threat. Keep your feet under the covers so the monsters under the bed don't get you, type of thinking.

To my surprise and wonder, a herd of six pigs are meandering around on the grass outside, barely two metres from our glass sliding doors. The herd look like they consist of three adults and three babies, the one making all the noise is slightly more, shall we say, fuller than the rest and it has a group of dark spots on his or her light grey body. Two of the smaller ones are pink but the other infant, the more excitable of the bunch, shares the same spots as the noisy one. The other two adults are black in colour and are more interested in keeping the younger ones on track. The team work looks good and they don't spend too long in one area, clearly knowing the patch and where to find the good stuff. Although I am two thirds still in the bed, reaching over my now half empty backpack, I am stretching to keep the curtain open and grab my phone so I can take a picture or grab some video. I do all I can to keep as still as possible so as not to startle our visitors. They start feeding on a few bits and pieces in and around the trees, I can only guess they have found some insects and are enjoying their breakfasts. Their noses take them further away from the lodge and into longer grass and a few more trees, they've not looked up once to see where they are going, straight across pathways and wetter, more dense terrain, their noses are definitely leading the way and I've been completely ignored. Next to the trees and where the pigs have wandered off to is a small bridge, which acts as the quickest route to the base of the Hang Mua peak. Strolling across the bridge like he owns the place is a loud and obnoxious rooster who has been waking everyone up since 5am. I knew he'd be a problem as soon as we checked in. Within a few seconds of him crowing, Hayley starts to wake and releases a huff of annoyance as she turns on her side to try and ignore the noise. All the activity outside has well and truly woken me. Nature has woken me. It couldn't be any further from the TV alarm and morning breakfast TV shows that broke me out of my slumber a few months back.

Our approach to tackling the growing list of things to do in each place has slowed recently. We are ok with missing out on some things so we can enjoy the

activities we invest our time and energy in. There have been a couple of occasions where we have tried to fit lots into limited time only to then be absolutely wiped in our next destination. Today we are getting out early, earlier than planned because of the rooster, and looking to achieve two things, walk to neighbouring Trang An to enjoy a peaceful rowing boat trip meandering through beautiful scenery, temples and mysterious caves followed by scaling the 500 steps to the top of Hang Mua peak. Our hour long walk to the boats is through villages and even though today is a little cloudy, we take in the lush green scenery and smile back at locals going about their daily routine. A few tourists cycle past us heading to the same destination but we are quite content taking our time.

The boat ride is fantastic and we both take loads of pictures, all the rowers are female and they ask us where we are from by pointing to themselves and saying 'Vietnam' and then pointing at us so we can do the same. We say 'London, UK' and they smile and giggle to each other as we carefully step back onto their boats. Our walk back to our lodge is only interrupted by Hayley stepping in dog shit which I immediately record a video of as she scrapes her trainer on the grass.

We choose to power on through from the boats via shitgate and stroll past our lodge and over the small bridge to the base of the Mua Cave mountain. The rooster is nowhere in sight, probably napping. Bastard.

We begin our ascent up the large stone staircase and pass other visitors struggling their way going up and see the more smug faces coming back down. Each step upwards is slightly different from the last, either by size or shape, some require more effort than others but it's definitely working the calves. Every 50 steps or so we stop to rehydrate and take in the view of rice paddy fields and the Ngo Dong river winding through Tam Coc. It's not an easy trek and it doesn't take long for the humidity and exertion to bring a sweaty brow and aching muscles. It takes us about 45 minutes to reach the summit and really appreciate the sights beneath us. Also at the highest viewpoint is the lying dragon, a superb little pavilion and a whole bunch of people taking selfies and aiming to get that perfect instagrammable pic. It's almost like there is a queue to get that ideal picture and that becomes the goal rather than reaching the top and then just taking it in. I'm not against taking pictures and the culture of 'doing it for the gram' but on this occasion, Hay and I take a couple of shots and just try to be present, absorbing the achievement and enjoying the view.

Half an hour or so later, the sun starts to set on another excellent day in Vietnam and we return to the base of the mountain. Our feet are a little sore and I've got those shoulder and middle of the back sweat patches where I've been carrying the backpack. It's a bit rank but they tend to be an indicator that we've had a decent day. It's not long before night draws in and the place is eerily quiet, no

more visitors, no pigs, certainly no rooster, just a couple of dim lights indicating a pathway to the reception. We have totally earned our dinner followed by bed and film night. Bed and film night is exactly what you would expect, watching a film whilst relaxing in or on the bed, maybe including snacks. The iPad we have bought with us has been invaluable for being that multipurpose bit of tech where we can read, listen to music, watch films, do puzzles and stay connected with people whilst going from place to place. We're also booking things as we go, hotels, airbnbs, experiences, we are literally paving our way a couple of weeks in advance. Luckily the ecolodge area has acceptable wifi so we get an opportunity to peruse the latest options on Netflix.

Hay spends the next 10 minutes swiping left and right to find the optimum programme for us to watch, something we can probably both tolerate. The ultimate compromise.

Down the Netflix rabbit hole she selects one film and hands me the tablet;
'Minimalism: A documentary about the important things.'

'Fancy that?' She asks
I read the blurb that comes with it to see if it peaks my interest.

'People dedicated to rejecting the American ideal that things bring happiness are interviewed in this documentary showing the virtues of less is more.'

'Sounds interesting, never heard of minimalism but yep i'm up for that' I respond.

Once the film selection has been made, we then really turn up the comfort level, cups of tea are made, bottles replenished and lighting adjusted. Now we are in peak chill mode. I hit play and turn the volume up to an acceptable level, Hayley then turns it down a couple.

Within the first minute we are presented with waves of people outside some department store in the US, rushing to get in to grab whatever deal they possibly could. The clip cuts to a group of people fighting with each other over a heavily discounted flat screen TV. It looks like people are rioting and looting but its clear its something like a black friday event.

'Fucking Hell' we both say whilst simultaneously shaking our heads. I am in.

This guy comes on the screen with long brown hair and looks like a bit of a hippy. My hair and beard right now are pretty wild so I appreciate his look. On his feet is what looks like a piece of cardboard held together by string. He then walks

outside and steps on his skateboard and rides off on the road weaving in and out of traffic.

He then just drops truth bomb after truth bomb.

'I was attempting to buy my way to happiness. I had everything I was supposed to have. I was spending money faster than i was earning it'

It resonates immediately.

'Eventually happiness had to be somewhere around the corner. I was living paycheck to paycheck. Living for a paycheck, living for stuff but I wasn't really living at all.'

Holy shit.

The guy with the long hair and cardboard shoes is Ryan Nicodemus, he is one half of The Minimalists and within seconds I relate to him as well as the rest of the people we are introduced to within the first five minutes.

I watch and listen intently as each individual shares their story of reaching a point in life and then deciding to ditch their stuff. The trend seems to be that a major event or a collection of events impact these people's lives which then prompts them to re-evaluate everything they have ever known, or at least ever purchased!

The less is more message is powerful and I can't help but be inspired.

Half way through the film, I start to connect what these guys are saying to some of my own practices leading up to this point. The large Osprey backpack that holds the majority of our lives is on the floor by the bed, its contents have significantly reduced as the trip has gone on, however when we first started it was super heavy and included excess that we just didn't use or 'need'.

Everything I had done in the past few months leading up to this point had all been connected. Selling the dvds and facing in to the emotional attachment, ditching the clutter we had accumulated, donating the clothes I hadn't worn in ages, taking that career break, letting go of whatever stories I had told myself about my next role, discarding the things that drained my energy and stopped me curating this part of my life, stepping out of the comfort zone and into the unknown. Everything that felt strange and different but empowering, it all had a name. Minimalism.

This lifestyle being presented to me focused on the important things, whatever that is to us. It's the pursuit of living a meaningful life with less. I resonate with the feeling of freedom and having a weight lifting off their shoulders by having less, thats similar to how I felt whilst I was decluttering. They spoke of being intentional and having control, I felt that when I was making tough decisions that were aligned with the trip. They spoke about simplicity, again, I felt that over the last few months by having focus on saving money and curating the journey.

Right now, we are bang in the middle of it. This is what we are doing. We were the epitome of what they labelled as 'minimalists'. We have removed the excess and are living with less. A lot less! We are in an amazing country, far away from everything we have ever known, we only have limited cash, our backpacks and each other but that is all we need right now. We are collecting memories and life changing experiences rather than things.

All those feelings and thoughts I had whilst decluttering, the shift in mindset from drifting to taking ownership and the subsequent actions following all of that I could now package up into this whole new 'minimalism' lifestyle and it was so comforting to see these guys point the way.

The documentary ends and I make a mental note to go back and watch again soon to absorb some more. It's a mental note I won't forget this time because i'm clearer now, there's not as many disruptions and this positive approach to life is something I would very much like to continue.

'We should have stayed here longer' Hayley says as she pulls her backpack over her shoulders.

'Yep' I respond. bending down looking underneath the bed, making sure we haven't forgotten anything. A habit ingrained in me since losing a plug adapter in a San Antonio hotel.

It's another early start as we stroll out of our lodge in Ninh Binh, tired, but relaxed. The air is a mixture of humidity and morning freshness. We walk side by side down a dusty dirt track looking across at the people working away in the rice paddies. The distinctive conical bamboo hats shield the workers from any rays of sunlight, this traditional view is not lost on me. The huge limestone rocks and mountains beyond them are dressed in January fog, which will start to clear over the next few hours. I take a big breath in, pull my shoulders back and slowly let it out. A good start to the year, I think. I am miles away from anywhere I have ever been

before, physically and mentally and I'm feeling good. We get one final opportunity to absorb the tranquility of the place before being interrupted by exhaust fumes spitting out the back of the small bus that will take us back to Hanoi airport, part one of two that takes us down south to our next destination, Hue. I take the two steps up into the bus and hit my head on the door frame, at the same time my phone vibrates in my back pocket.

We find a spot at the back of the bus and my knees push up against the seat in front. Our bags are squeezed into the overhead compartment and now they have less in them, they are easier to manipulate. The three hour ride will be a tight one so I get out the kindle and my phone and slide them underneath my leg, there will be no way of shuffling things in and out of bags for a while. Once we are on the move, I unlock my phone with my fingerprint and I see my brother has sent me five pictures via whatsapp. It takes a second to comprehend what it is but I quickly identify my mum and dad's driveway and easily recognise both their cars. Next to them on the driveway is a silver BMW on its roof, windows smashed in and covered in shrubbery.

A wave of uncertainty washes over me. Instinctively my toes curl and my body becomes tense. My breathing becomes quicker for a second.

I swipe left and the next picture shows skid marks on the road and debris from the pathway. Branches from a nearby tree are strewn all over the pavement and onto the gravel. Before I let my mind start to create its own outcomes, I continue to swipe. The third picture is a closeup of my Dad's old Nissan, the rear bumper has been cracked and one of the tyres is deflated. A small dent is in my mum's red Peugeot and I see my dad standing in the background with his hands in his pockets. He looks fine. My brother has not sent any words, just images so my worried mind tries to piece things together.

The next photo is from another angle and shows the silver BMW being dragged out of the driveway by a tow truck. Red and white cones are lined up outside cornering off a part of the road, two men in orange high vis jackets stand by. It appears bits of bodywork from the BMW have fallen off as it's been dragged away from the scene, a mangled wing mirror and bits of glass are everywhere. The front left wheel is at a different angle than the rest indicating the heaviest of damage was done on the passenger side. The axle appears to have come away and the underneath of the car looks messed up but I am no vehicle expert. Stuff looks out of place but I couldn't say what was what. In the background of the picture on the other side of the road is a red convertible BMW, the driver, clearly visible, is taking a nice long look at the damage. People just can't resist slowing down and getting a glimpse of an accident.

What the fuck has happened? I think to myself as I start to show Hayley the pictures.

The final image is of my car shunted against a fence. The back of it has virtually fallen off, reg plate on the floor, bent and covered in red glass. The lights on the right side are caved in and the boot is half open. Fence panels lean up against the car and pieces of wood are scattered around the bumper which is hanging by a thread. A dark grey piece of metal lay next to the rear right tyre and I couldn't for the life of me tell what part of a car that's from. It's an absolute mess. A car crash you could say.

As I'm showing Hayley the pictures another text comes through from my brother confirming everyone is ok, the delay has clearly been him writing a bumper message. He details that yesterday morning a young guy had been speeding down the road, lost control of his car, hit a curb and flipped it against a tree and smashed into the cars in my mum and dad's driveway. Surprisingly no one was injured, not even the driver, who apparently just opened the door and crawled out with a couple of scratches. My parents then invited him into their house for a cup of tea whilst the police and ambulance turned up. It was only by chance that my brother was driving past in the morning on his way to work and saw the damage. He pulled up and went into the house to check on everyone, who were fine, but had an opportunity to speak to the driver whilst my parents were outside looking at the damage. The driver was apparently doing 85mph on a residential road because there was no other traffic. That was it. He wasn't under the influence of anything, wasn't late to anything, he just felt like blasting down the street.

'Your car is gone' he writes in another message.

My car, a navy blue 2000 Vauxhall Vectra, was on its last legs anyway. It had been declared off the road and had started to cough and splutter its way through journeys before we left. At the time, I thought it would be a good idea to store it on my parents' driveway, so we had an option to get it repaired and use it when we got back. In truth, it should have been scrapped way before then but the mindset was to just keep hold of it so there it stayed, taking up room next to the other cars, stuck in the corner, unused and unloved. It was another just in case item that someone else had to take care of in my absence.

The car being obliterated and eventually written off was just another thing I had to let go of. The difference this time was that it was completely out of my control. I'm actually not that fussed about it, I say to Hay, maybe even a little pleased it happened. I am anticipating some upset or emotional attachment but there's nothing there. The car was just one more thing that was part of life before travel,

before growth, before discovering what minimalism was. Call it coincidence, irony or fate but that incident was just another indication that when we return, we can choose to live more intentionally and not be held back by items of the past. Maybe we don't need a car when we return, maybe we'll ride bikes, maybe we'll take advantage of rentals and taxis, who knows but whatever we decide, it will be done with purpose.