



**T**he old man's mouth, full of almost a century's worth of betel-nut-stained teeth, widened into a smile. Sitting on the floor of his house in Ban Don, a remote village near Vietnam's Cambodian border, 91-year-old Mngong tribesman Ama Cong broke into a laugh as he recalled his days as a wild-elephant catcher.

"I started catching in 1933. We would go out in groups and stay in the forest for around 20 days," he explained, proffering a potent herbal wine of his own concoction. "My first catch was one elephant and five buffalo; I earned ten *dong* [now less than 1p]. I also caught two tiger cubs in 1938 and gave them to

Emperor Bao Dai who bought them for two *dong* and kept them in his villa at Buon Ma Thuot."

Bao Dai, the last imperial ruler of Vietnam, had a penchant for hunting sorties. Much of the country was crisscrossed by his private hunting grounds as he ventured out to bag tigers and elephants. Until 1992, when a national park was established here, some 400 Mngong and Ede tribespeople were wild-elephant catchers. They tamed the beasts for domestic service and sold them abroad.

N'thu Knul was the first elephant catcher in Ban Don. In 1861 he presented a white elephant to the Thai king who anointed him Khun Sa Nup ('Elephant

Hunter King'); Ama Cong is Knul's nephew – and the country's last survivor of the trade.

Now, amid luscious flowering hibiscus, the villagers grow crops and work in tourism. We managed to gain a feel for this ancient profession, though, while wandering around an old house containing all the pachyderm paraphernalia of a real pro – lassoes, buffalo-hide ropes, bamboo leg traps and a neck-catcher studded with thorns. Their owner caught and trained 444 elephants.

I'd come to this remote slice of Vietnam not only to learn about the redundant elephant trade but to catch a glimpse of the life and death rituals of this region's

# Highland fling



Away from the coastal tourist trail, Claire Boobbyer heads to Vietnam's Central Highlands – a little-known land of hilltribes, herb wine and the last of the elephant catchers

All photos by Claire Boobbyer



little-visited hilltribes. I'd turned my back on the well-trodden coastal road from Saigon to Hanoi to embark on an eight-day road trip through the Central Highlands. Here, tracts alongside the Truong Son Mountains have been devastated by Agent Orange and deforestation, but on the untainted land, amid flourishing plants and trees, ethnic minorities carry on regardless.

Ban Don was halfway along our easy road route through the Central Highlands, which began in the southern town of Dalat. Perched in cool climes amid pine trees, Dalat was favoured by the French, who climbed the steep Ngoan Muc Pass to escape the heat of Saigon. The former hill

**Above:** Watch pirogues paddle back to land with the day's catch on Lak Lake

**Above right:** 91-year-old Ama Cong is the last of the former elephant catchers

station is an incongruous blend of Surrey town and alpine village: arranged around Xuan Huong Lake are a golf course, the charming colonial Sofitel Dalat Palace and a thread of handsome, French-style villas with honey-yellow walls, porthole windows and red roof tiles.

But we didn't linger, and drove out of town past fields of flowers, sweet potatoes and coffee bushes. Our first stop on the road north was Lak Lake, a serene pool of water creeping to the edges of low-lying hills. Here, the Mngong survive by fishing, growing rice and running tourist longhouses nearby.

We arrived close to sunset and wandered down to the shore. Pirogues

were paddling back to land with the day's catch and children splashed over to their fathers, eager to haul in the goods. Baby buffalo sank in the shallows, enjoying the cool-down hours, and dozens of squealing piglets were monitored by mammoth, mud-bound mama pigs.

At a rustic bar by the lake we sat back, ordered beers and watched the sky bleed from pink to burnt orange. Then it was off to a Mngong gong performance, where rice wine was poured down my throat through a bamboo straw – ensuring an undisturbed night bedded down in a local longhouse.

The next day, after a stroll to Bao Dai's former hilltop hunting lodge, >



## ‘Weasel coffee is actually civet – the civet eats the coffee berries and then vomits them up’

◀ we continued north towards the regional capital Buon Ma Thuot, stopping en route for a peek at a trio of thunderous waterfalls. Close to the cascade lookout stood a traditional Ede house. The stilted structure was reached by a carved ladder, used by the women of the house.

“The ladder steps are odd-numbered as these are lucky numbers for the Ede,” explained Ngoan, my guide. “Above the steps are two breasts indicating their matrilineal society. The young curved moon at the top means they are looking to the future.”

Buon Ma Thuot itself is certainly forward thinking, cashing in on the planet’s caffeine addiction: it’s the headquarters of the ubiquitous Trung Nguyen coffee empire. There’s not a corner of paddy field or industrial zone in the country unaffected by the rise of this giant. We stopped at a café to taste the trade’s most unusual offshoot – weasel coffee.

“It’s called weasel, but it’s actually civet,” explained Ngoan. I was still none the wiser, so he elaborated: “The civet eats the coffee berries then vomits them up.” The barely-there digestive process alters the flavour, and I confess the regurgitated tinge was too bitter for me.

After our detour to Ban Don’s world of elephant catchers, we motored north to Pleiku. Surrounded by rubber, tea, coffee and pepper plantations, and sitting in a valley dominated by the butter-slab-shaped Ham Rong (‘Dragon’s Mouth’) Mountain, Pleiku is the capital of Gia Lai province.

Here, and in Dak Lak and Kontum provinces, tourism is controlled by the government, so we spent the afternoon arranging official visits to the surrounding villages.

The French called the Central Highlanders *montagnards* (mountain people); the Vietnamese call them *ngui thuong* (highland citizens) or, more disparagingly, *moi* (savages or slaves). Norman Lewis, who penned *A Dragon Apparent* after travelling in Indochina in 1950, wrote of the *moi*, describing them as ‘bow and arrow tribes’ who, until the beginning of the 20th century, were believed to be the only human beings to sport tails. He detailed their way of life, their cultural mores and their forced conscription as labour on French-run tea plantations.

The French, as well as the Americans, recruited the ethnic minorities, and in the 1960s US Special Forces organised highlanders into



**Above:** Elephants take a dip in the waters of Ban Don  
**Top left:** The *rong* at the Bahnar village of De Ktu is the focus of community life

groups to repel the communist infiltration from the north. French missionaries also introduced Christianity, and since then evangelists have been successfully converting.

In the past eight years occasional violence has erupted in the area. Ethnic Vietnamese have encroached on the highlanders’ land and religious freedoms have been quashed. Many minorities have fled to Cambodia to escape religious persecution.

It sounded like these people were survivors, clinging to their rural ways



and animist beliefs in the face of years of persecution. I was keen to meet them, and started off in De Ktu, a Bahnar tribe village. Here, men and women are equal and life is focused on the *rong*, a communal wooden house on stilts supporting an enormous thatched roof. In front of De Ktu's *rong* sat a post.

"After a successful harvest a buffalo is tied to the post and stabbed for sacrifice," explained our guide, Hoang Anh. "The oldest Bahnar male villager stands at the pole and invokes the spirit."

We climbed inside De Ktu's *rong*. Rice wine jars, each representing a person, were scattered around the spartan innards. Next to the jars hung a buffalo head, tail and hoof; a pig's jaw was pinned next to the door as an offering to the gods.

Picking through this bizarre collection of bones, animal remains and jars was confusing – a confusion compounded by the large, red-backed portrait of Ho Chi Minh, father of the Vietnamese nation, planted on the wall. When I asked what it was doing there, I was told

simply that the government had supplied it.

Hoang Anh explained the *rong*'s function: "Single men sleep in the *rong* to guard it. Women can't come in because they are menstruating beings and, therefore, unclean. If they come in, the village believes it will be punished because the *rong* houses the gods."

Why, then, was I allowed to enter?

Female tourists are permitted, I was told. I saw the acceptance of my presence a bit like the government-imposed Ho picture – not as a >



**What a wake:** The Gia Rai's funeral ceremonies last a week and involve many rituals and sacrifices

But it's the Giarai, the largest minority group in the Central Highlands, that perform the most elaborate grave abandonment rituals. Up to seven buffalos are sacrificed and ceremonies last a week.

At nearby Plei Fun, beyond the ordered rural homesteads where villagers tilled their plots, a huge, colourful grave abandonment structure dominated. Poles of dangling buffalo remains surrounded the pen, as did carved human statues representing the living Giarai. Kapok saplings planted around the grave would, in time, smother the dead.

I looked around the clearing and wandered beyond the bright spectacle in front of us. Hidden behind leaves and branches, close to older tomb abandonments, were decaying wooden statues, some decorated with red lipstick. It was eerie, as if the statues, although a little weathered with time, weren't ready to abandon the dead.

We were about to push on north through the mountainous jungle to the bustling coastal Chinese merchant town of Hoi An, when one last statue caught my attention.

The Giarai's concepts of animism might have been mystifying but at least they had a sense of humour. Poised on the grave abandonment, a male effigy, penis erect, faced a female statue with painted genitalia. She struck a pose of non-consent, with her head turned away from the proposition. There were giggles all round.

Some thoughts, it seems, are universal. ■

## 'They kill a buffalo, dance for three days and leave a ladder so the dead can climb to paradise'

◀ begrudged one but as inconsequential. As an individual on the periphery of understanding, a non-believer in the Bahnar spirit world, I could not rankle its veneration rituals.

We then moved from life at the rong to death at the graveyard, where metal-roofed tombs were hemmed in by wooden pens. En route we passed an auspicious but blood-curdling sight: the jaw, tail and hoof of a pig swung

from a pole. The porker was slaughtered to appeal to the gods for rain.

"When the Bahnar die they kill a buffalo to say goodbye. After a period of time they have a grave abandonment ceremony and another buffalo is killed. They sing and dance for three days, leave food for the dead and a ladder so the deceased can climb to paradise," said Hoang Anh.

## Ethnography 101: Know your highlanders

### GIARAI

**Population:** 300,000

**Where can you meet them?** On the lush plateau near Pleiku

**Culture in brief:**

Matrilineal and matrilocal (husbands move into wife's home); women initiate marriage; complex funeral rites; belief in kings of water, fire and wind; very musical (play gongs and bamboo-tube *k'long put*).

### SEDANG

**Population:** 130,000

**Where can you meet them?** In the region between Kontum and Quang Ngai provinces

**Culture in brief:**

Traditionally warlike; used to make human sacrifices; villages remained isolated from each other, creating many divergent Sedang dialects and customs; patriarchal.

### MNONG

**Population:** 92,000

**Where can you meet them?** Between Dalat and Buon Ma Thuot

**Culture in brief:**

Excellent hunters and basket weavers; some live in non-stilted houses; matrilineal and matrilocal society; invented lithophone, one of the world's oldest musical instruments.

### EDE

**Population:** 270,000

**Where can you meet them?** Around Buon Ma Thuot

**Culture in brief:**

Multiple families live in large, thatched, stilted longhouses, up to 100m long; matrilineal; treasured items include bronze pots used to hold rice wine, which is drunk at ceremonies.

### BAHNAR

**Population:** 175,000

**Where can you meet them?** In the villages around Pleiku

**Culture in brief:**

Skilled farmers; villages dominated by a *rong* (communal house); stilted huts decorated with geometric patterns; build elaborate grave abandonment houses.