

PHOTO BY OLGA ROZENBAJGIER



Pietro Porro

The man who rode 40,000km on a Vespa to get to Vietnam

Thirty-two year old Pietro Porro is explaining his emotions as he finally crossed the border into Vietnam: "I had goose bumps. I wanted to scream something." He roars for effect. "It was full of emotion."

Pietro has recently completed a gargantuan 40,000km adventure across 20 countries on the back of a humble two-stroke Vespa scooter. The bike is an enduring symbol of his native Italy, and it's covered in mementos from his trip, with a From Italy to Vietnam sticker taking pride of place on the back.

The idea of travelling from Italy to Vietnam came after a long summer in 2015. "At the end of the summer you are full of questions about your life," says Pietro.

He wanted to make a change, and as a man who suffers from itchy feet, this trip presented the perfect challenge. He was inspired after reading the book *In Vespa* by Giorgio Bettinelli, which charted a journey from Rome to Ho Chi Minh City in 1992 on the back of a Vespa, and Pietro thought, what

better way to pay homage, 25 years on from its publication. A route was plotted and Pietro performed concerts, washed dishes, and did anything else needed to raise the money needed for the adventure — all on top of his job as a social worker at an NGO in Milan.

Meeting the Challenge

The trials and tribulations of the road were endless. A threat of kidnapping led to a police escort through Pakistan, and he was beset by constant mechanical problems with the bike itself. His spell in India saw him laid low by food poisoning, and there were multiple issues gaining access to each country at the border. But each challenge proved to be surmountable, which became one of the most satisfying aspects of the journey: "At the point of losing belief, you find a solution," he says.

One surprising aspect of the trip was the constant presence of social media and the internet, even in the most remote of locations.

"I had a strange situation in Armenia," he



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PIETRO PORRO

says. "It's full of monasteries. I was at one in the middle of a forest; nobody was there except one monk, a hermit. This austere monk and I, we don't have a common language so he took his big HTC mobile out with Google Translate. It was so strange. I asked about his life and the church and how he runs it by himself. I thought — the world is changing very fast."

Pietro doesn't hesitate when he names Iran as his favourite country on the trip, due to its combination of incredibly hospitable people, spectacular landscapes and endless vistas.

"Iran has the most beautiful and welcoming people but sometimes you are at a table having a meal with them and everybody turns silent looking at their phones. It was a problem in every country I went to — and selfies everywhere. With social media you can share with the world but it's a balance. Doing a trip like I did without it is just anachronistic. It's impossible to go back now."

He found himself in a couple of unusual situations, but these were all part of the adventure: "One night I slept in a shop of a man cooking for sailors in India. He made food through the night as we slept on the floor in the cold. Another night I slept in a cricket ground and all the people from the village came to see me."

Vietnam and Beyond

Since arriving in Vietnam he has become a celebrity of sorts as several local newspapers and TV channels scramble to hear his story. Vietnam has a large Vespa community, too, which has welcomed him with open arms. It's been the perfect end to his journey.

Looking back on the trip, he's thoughtful when he thinks about what he's learned: "I feel that sometimes people won't do something because it's too dangerous, or you may lose too much money. They ask, 'why do you need a change?' but you feel that you need something different."

"Maybe you need to work a lot to paint something, to make your opera, your sculpture, but it all starts somewhere. If you are motivated, you can arrive wherever you want."

As he leaves, Pietro starts up his Vespa scooter, which makes an earthy growl — just as it should after travelling the best part of 40,000km. It's more than man and machine and a way from getting from A to B; he has an emotional connection to the vehicle that has been his companion.

"She's like my girlfriend," he remarks, before driving off. Soon it will be sold, however, and Pietro will start planning his next adventure. — **Thomas Barrett**

To see more of Pietro's journey you can find him on Facebook at [facebook.com/pietro.porro](https://www.facebook.com/pietro.porro) 