



- **Full name:** Henning Hilbert
- **Nationality:** German
- **Time in Vietnam:** Almost 15 years
- **Job:** Lecturer at the Vietnamese-German University
- **Current residence:** HCMC

# Saigon: The City Of Contrast

Into his 15 years in HCMC, German lecturer Henning Hilbert remarks that Saigon is a city of contrast. According to the German lecturer, since Saigonese are jumping on a fast-development bandwagon, it is important to preserve some of the typical aspects of life—the municipal daily life and alleys, for instance.

By Trung Chau

Three times a week, early in the morning or in the evening, Henning Hilbert, currently a lecturer at the Vietnamese-German University in Binh Duong Province, spends 60 minutes going for a walk around his block in Phu Nhuan District where he is living with his Vietnamese wife and their daughter. His familiar path is along streets and in small alleys. “The morning daily scenes fascinate me,” he says. “Alleys are small. People get together closer. Adults sip coffee while

children play. I think 70% of people in HCMC live in alleys. They [alleys] are somewhat like ‘villages’ in a city. Everybody knows each other well.”

## Fascinating things in HCMC

The labyrinth of alleys, especially in Phu Nhuan and Binh Thanh districts, is one of the differences in HCMC Hilbert has seen. Sidewalk life, modern high-rises and big development zones on the outskirts also make what Saigon is now. They all together create a “city of contrast,” as he puts it. Hilbert likes riding motorbike around town to take pictures,

which has helped him discover the contrasts.

“Personally, I am interested in tourism in HCMC. The city needs alternative tourism,” says Hilbert. He explains that it is more interesting to show tourists the normal daily life of the Saigonese. Hilbert says city tours should include such activities as sipping coffee and trying some street food. Tours of Ben Thanh Market, Notre Dame Cathedral and War Remnants Museum are essential, but not all-inclusive. “What makes HCMC distinctive is the daily life,” he says. “I have lived in this city for some time,

## BOTTOM LINES OF HENNING HILBERT

### Q: What do you say about your profession?

A: I came to Vietnam in 2001 as a lecturer of the German language at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities and as a representative of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), in charge of informing Vietnamese students of study-in-Germany programs. Since 2008, I have been working at the Vietnamese-German University which is offering German standard university study programs directly in Vietnam. Now that we are bigger, my main focus is the language department, where we offer English and German language classes.

### How are your typical day and weekend?

I go swimming in the early morning, and then I go to Binh Duong New City in Binh Duong Province for teaching. I return home in the evening. Sometimes I go out with some professors and friends and back home at night.

I spend a half day on weekend to show some guests about the city by motorbike, take pictures and sip coffee. I also usually go out with my family.

### What is your motto?

Be yourselves. I love the life I want to live. Interestingly, 20 years ago and today are completely different. But, I see that I am still myself. I basically live in a German-Vietnamese life. I like to live in Vietnam.

### What are your tips for those who want to work and live in Vietnam?

Don't isolate yourself too much and ride a motorbike. This is the best way to get a feeling for the city and its atmosphere. The beauty of HCMC is not in its official sightseeing spots but in the daily life of its people, its diversity and its traffic. Just walk for an hour through one of the alley quarters or just cross a normal street in the city center. It will give you a very good impression about how this city lives.



German lecturer Henning Hilbert

COURTESY OF HENNING HILBERT

but it is still very attractive. HCMC should underline its distinctions.”

Hilbert says he is surprised that almost all travel companies offer the same products to tourists whereas there are so many more things to discover. Sometimes he thinks about how to show tourists the different aspects of this “city of contrast” as he and other authors have done in a book.

Hilbert has revealed part of the municipal fascination in the photo book *TP. Hồ Chí Minh MEGA CITY* co-authored with Dr. Michael Waibel. In the book, Hilbert once again took the same pictures that had been snapped eight years ago. In some cases there were 20 houses on one picture, but only one window structure was still the same as in the other photo. The rest changed in size, color and structure. “Our approach is mostly documenting, therefore we don’t use Photoshop to manipulate pictures and colors significantly,” Hilbert says. “We just want to show all perspectives of the city in its natural beauty and raise awareness for the diversity of the city and its huge contrasts.”

The hobby of riding a motorbike around the city also helps Hilbert capture a complete view of the city’s sustainable development. He also talked with several German professors about the topic during which they agreed that the city has to be better managed. Metro lines should be constructed, but too many trees have been felled to make room for them.

### Changes, fast changes

Hilbert started to ride a motorbike and take photographs when he came to Vietnam 14 years ago. “After a time

living in Vietnam, I have had a lot of changes,” he says. “For example, in Germany I did not ride a motorbike. I learned how to manipulate the motorbike handlebar in Vietnam and I really enjoy it. In Germany opera and classical music were among the best choices. But, it’s different in Vietnam.”

Hilbert says he takes pictures in areas under construction. For instance, in District 9, when he first arrived there, only a few houses existed. A while later, when he came back, he saw changes. “HCMC is changing really fast,” he says.

The city has changed a lot, becoming more alluring but also more commercialized. A host of shopping centers have mushroomed, Hilbert says. According to him, since Vietnamese—including Saigonese—are jumping on a fast-development bandwagon, it is important to preserve some of the typical Vietnamese aspects of life.

Elaborating on difficulties in Vietnam, Hilbert says he does not feel really difficult to adapt to life. However, unfortunately, he says, he is not able to learn Vietnamese. He still has trouble pronouncing correctly even basic Vietnamese. Yet Hilbert says he is proud to live in this city and to know most of the districts quite well. This is partly the reason why he may stay for a long time. “I am now working at the Vietnamese-German University, but I am also open to do something else in the future,” he says. “I will not have enough time to really be a co-publisher for the Danang book authored by Dr. Waibel, but I have already been in Danang to take pictures and I will go there again.”



### FIVE AMERICANS ON A 21-DAY TRANS-VIETNAM MOTORCYCLE TOUR

A group of five bikers from Chicago, the U.S., has spent three weeks touring Vietnam by motorcycle. Chris Force, Dave Mucci, Juan Francisco, Laura Heidenreich and Catherine Pham, calling their trip the Hilo Project, started the journey from Saigon in early April and made their way up north to Hanoi.

Chris Force said they were chosen to be the first tourists to ride across the country on Ducati motorcycles. It was also an important trip for Catherine Pham because Pham is Vietnamese American who has only been to the country once as a child, reported *VnExpress*.

The bikers experienced a home-stay in the mountainous village of Mai Chau in Hoa Binh Province. The accommodation was simple, but the villagers were amazing and were good hosts, said Force. “After getting us thoroughly drunk on home-brewed liquor that they served in old water bottles they dragged an ancient karaoke machine out into the middle of a rice field,” Force said. “It was a great night.”

During the trip in Vietnam, the group and some local bikers raised money and donated clothes, bicycles and blankets to children at a poor orphanage in the capital city of Hanoi.

Force said the terrain required special skills while there was not much support on the road. The bikers needed some maintenance which they had to do themselves—a trip not for beginners.