

Head First

Life or death on the roads can be as simple as wearing the correct helmet. Julian Ajello finds out how to protect your noggin. Photos by Nick Ross



The helmet production line at the Protec Factory in Noi Bai, just outside of Hanoi

NOTHING PREPARES YOU FOR THE intense experience of riding a motorbike in Vietnam. Like many, I was hesitant to take the plunge and relied on *xe oms* and taxis instead. The *xe oms* most always have a spare helmet for their fares although the quality of the helmets they provide is something that deserves scrutiny. They don't seem to offer the protection we should be using for our brains. Shopping around for a helmet doesn't always provide the illumination one seeks either. Navigating the throngs of cheap helmet peddlers and dubious safety stickers on the backs of 'safe' helmets leaves one wondering just what you're counting on to save you from serious head trauma.

This is exactly what the Asia Injury Prevention (AIP) Foundation encourages people to ask of themselves. American businessman Greig Kraft started the organisation in Vietnam in 1999. Kraft enjoyed a rewarding career that took him all over the world and he found himself consulting to companies seeking to open operations in Vietnam when he lost an employee to a head injury sustained in a

traffic accident. AIP's mission is to educate people about the benefits of wearing a helmet, especially for children.

AIP's executive director, Mirjam Sidik, proudly states that AIP helped the government to set helmet standards including those for children's helmets. Vietnam is currently one of only three nations in the world with helmet standards for children.

"10 years ago when we started there were less than five million motorbikes and now there are more than 30 million," she states. "There was an explosion of vehicles and no idea how to behave in traffic. There was no education regarding helmets and there were suddenly many head and brain injuries in the emergency rooms."

◦ Made in China

Back when AIP started the only helmets that were available were cheap ones made in China. They're still around and can be purchased for US\$3 and wholesale for only US\$1. "It's like a baseball cap," explains Sidik. "People buy them for the aesthetics." In

addition to providing little to no protection, the plastic that is often used in their manufacture is toxic and the toxins can seep into the body through the scalp.

Encouraging people to wear cheap helmets wasn't a cure. Neither was importing expensive helmets from America or Europe. Kraft solicited donations and was able to open a non-profit factory in Hanoi to produce helmets suitable for the Southeast Asian market that are sold under the brand name Protec. Protec uses the best equipment from the United States to construct their helmets and employs rigorous quality assurance testing to deliver safety. The proceeds from the sale of Protec helmets are funneled back to AIP to continue education and donation programmes.

One of these programmes, *Helmets for Kids*, is a school-based initiative that was launched in 2000 during former US President Bill Clinton's visit. Mr Clinton endorsed *Helmets for Kids*, which now operates in conjunction with a helmet donation programme in 22 provinces



Testing the helmets for quality and safety

Traffic Accident Statistics in Vietnam

— According to the National Traffic Safety Committee, official statistics reported 11,060 fatalities due to road crashes in 2010

— The Ministry of Health has stated that there were approximately 420,000 traffic accidents which led to approximately 36,000 serious brain injuries in 2009. An estimated 104,000 injuries occurred among children under 19; about 70 percent were not wearing helmets

— Helmets reduce the risk of injury by 69 percent, according to WHO – about 50,000 “preventable” traffic injuries are among children

— Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City treated 64 road crash victims

every day in 2010, reported the hospital

— Because of road traffic crashes, Vietnam loses between US\$800 million and US\$1.3 billion each year, based on research by Asian Development Bank in the ADB-ASEAN Accident Costing Report in 2004

— Globally, 40 percent of road traffic crash fatalities are children (under the age of 25) reports UNESCAP

— Up to 80 percent of road traffic deaths are among vulnerable road users (pedestrians, cyclists, or users of motorised two-wheelers) in low and middle-income countries, according to WHO



A resounding fail

throughout Vietnam. The programme trains primary school teachers on helmet use and relies on private sector donations to distribute helmets to kids. The participating companies not only get their logos on the helmets, but also participate in designing the programme.

These initiatives helped fuel the adoption of the 2007 law that mandates all drivers and passengers wear helmets. Prior to that legislation only about five percent of riders were wearing helmets. Children were exempted because they couldn't be fined. However, starting in 2010, all children older than six were required to wear a helmet or the driver faces a fine.

◦ Changing Minds

Despite these efforts there are still obstacles in getting parents to put helmets on their children. In 2008, after the law was passed, some doctors reported in the media that simply wearing a helmet could injure a child's spine or neck and could stunt their growth and development.

“Of course there was no scientific

evidence to support this,” says Sidik, “but we had to build partnerships with organisations like the World Health Organization so experts from all over the world could refute these claims. Changing peoples' minds once they believe something like that is difficult.”

Other reasons parents gave for not putting helmets on their kids included financial constraints, not needing them for driving short distances, and because they didn't want their child to be mocked or made to feel different or unfashionable.

AIP's new child campaign is set to launch in September with the goal of seeing 80 percent usage for children. Currently only 16 percent of children wear helmets in Hanoi, and 30 percent in Ho Chi Minh City.

“We aim to change the psychology at work so that parents, rather than feeling ashamed for making their child wear helmets, feel ashamed for NOT making their child wear a helmet,” says Sidik.

For those wanting or needing a safe, reliable helmet, Sidik recommends purchasing one with a solid PVC shell

and thick, foam padding inside. “Full face protection is best, but protecting the brain is most important,” she offers.

As far as I'm concerned that decision is a no-brainer. 

Protec Showrooms

HO CHI MINH CITY

18 Bis/3A Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Q1
Tel: (08) 6299 1404
248C Phan Dinh Phung, Phu Nhuan
Tel: (08) 6292 1003
394C Cach Mang Thang Tam, Q3
Tel: (08) 6672 5903

HANOI

12B Ngoc Khanh, Ba Dinh
Tel: (04) 3771 0671
630 Truong Chinh, Dong Da
Tel: (04) 3564 1710
323 Truong Dinh, Hoang Mai
Tel: (04) 3662 9052