

THE PILOT

Taking the high route out of this city is more popular than ever thanks to improved accessibility and new ways of thinking. Giselle Whiteaker speaks to a pilot and Saigon newbie. Photo by Quinn Ryan Mattingly

ZEKE LOSCH IS A COMMERCIAL PILOT WITH a regional American airline. Moving from the US, where he found the aviation industry somewhat static, the 32-year-old leapt at the chance to be based in Ho Chi Minh City, which he says is the cosmopolitan hub for Vietnam, if not all of Southeast Asia.

While the pilot is expanding his horizons in his first overseas posting, Ho Chi Minh City residents are benefitting from broadened horizons, too — more domestic flights to more destinations and a growing number of air carriers make exploration outside the cities accessible for more people.

Zeke sees a mix of passengers during his workdays and is impressed by the number of business people he sees commuting between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Given Vietnam's geography, efficient land travel between south and north is not possible. This is not a problem for an agrarian society, but the country is changing and the increasing numbers of long distance commuters are a reflection of this change. The volume of first time flyers is an indicator of what is to come.

"It's the new and nervous flyers that often provide the laughs among the crew," says Zeke, before reciting how one passenger was so impressed by the free magazine that he extended the offer to everything in the seat pocket, taking the safety card, air sickness bags and, as the crew later discovered, the life jacket. You have to start somewhere, though, and naturally as air travel becomes more accessible for the masses, the number of experienced travellers increases, too. And as the middle class grows, the demand for air travel increases exponentially. Attitudes seem to have shifted as global business outlooks contribute to an understanding that time is money.

But it's not all about business. For Zeke, Tet was an interesting example of the changing dynamic of leisure travel. He saw more people flying and confesses this is the most rewarding part of his job. "Being able to connect friends and families during the holiday is a special privilege," concludes the young pilot; a proud piece in the jigsaw that is modern Saigon.

A WEEK IN THE LIFE

Zeke has the heavy burden of being responsible for people's lives almost every day. What he does, eats, drinks and how much he sleeps can result in life or death

MONDAY

A long day. Airport by 11am and returns at 10pm. He flies to Phu Quoc and Hanoi, then spends ground time between flights doing onboard checks, filing flight plans, setting fuel and completing paperwork

TUESDAY

Stays on the plane during trips to Hanoi and Pleiku, eating the onboard meals for sustenance. Two pilots are not allowed to eat the same meals as a precaution

WEDNESDAY

Another big one. Zeke heads back to Pleiku, and then to Hanoi. Southbound he stops in Dalat before making it home for some quiet time. It was a long day dealing with communication issues. On take-off there is a storm on the horizon. He gets clearance from the ground tower to turn left after take-off to avoid the gale. The air tower then tells him to turn right into the storm. Fortunately pilots have the final say and left it is. He heads home upon landing for some quiet time

THURSDAY

Scores the easy run with a flight to Buon Ma Thuot and up to Hanoi before returning directly. This leaves him with enough energy to head out with his co-pilots in the evening. They hit their standard haunts, Gringos and Ice Blue. Pilots cannot drink within eight hours of a flight. Legally, the limit is four, but policy states no flights under even the mildest of influences

FRIDAY

Zeke sleeps in before doing house chores, including a visit to the street markets. Heads to Saloon 17 to check out the house band. This can turn into a late one, so Saturday is "salo day," or "splurging on a USS2 haircut and a USS5 massage before lazing by a pool"

SUNDAY

Brunch with co-pilots and friends at the Equatorial Hotel. Pilots often socialise together but are warned to avoid relations with cabin crew

