

The Cult: Penny Walker

The day after he got free of the cult, Jack was on a plane out of Los Angeles. He needed to get as far away as he could from everything that had happened, and he needed work.

And as soon as he landed in Hanoi, he knew he'd be OK. He loved it - the pretty girls, the cheap, fabulous street food, and the energy of the place. This was in 1995 and the US embargo on Vietnam had finally been lifted. The country was opening to the world and there was a buzzy energy that made Jack feel great.

He got a job as a cycle tour guide - a job which summed up the new, open Vietnam - and started taking adventurous bike-riding Westerners from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi.

I met Jack in October 1996 and by then he was ready to spill the beans. We had a long bike ride on a quiet road, and that helped too.

His story started in Los Angeles. When Jack and his wife Carla moved there, she got a job straight away, but he spent months in a cafe filling out application forms. He was starting to get depressed when he met some people who were funny and kind. Soon they suggested he come to their community hall and spend the days there. So that's what Jack did - he spent every day with his new friends, from early morning till late at night. He forgot about getting a real job. He thought everything was fine, so he was knocked sideways when Carla found him and told him to choose: either come home now or not at all. Jack didn't go home.

He didn't tell me what the cult was like from the inside. He just said he ended up giving them most of his savings, and that it was Carla who rescued him. She hired a 'cult deprogrammer' and somehow, after a year, Jack was free. Within two days he was in Vietnam.

Jack said he'll go back home someday. Or Carla might come to Hanoi. They were back in touch. They are two young kids who have been through a lot, but I think they will be okay.