

# The Bamboo Man

From product and furniture designer to one of the people behind The Bike Shop in Saigon's District 2, James Wolf's career has been as flexible as the material he uses — bamboo. Words by **Nick Ross**. Photo by **Kyle Phanroy**

**H**ow does someone specialising in bamboo end up in bicycles? It's the question I put to James Wolf as we sit down in the office above The Bike Shop in Ho Chi Minh City's District 2.

An industrial design graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), James first arrived in Vietnam in 1995 after an apprenticeship in Japan with a master woodworker. Having spent his youth in the US "building stuff, renovating houses, making boats and then studying industrial design, product design and furniture design", he was looking for a new challenge.

"I was a bit of an environmentalist," he says, "and I wanted to be considerate with what I did with wood. As I learned about bamboo as a sustainable alternative, I got hooked."

The allure of Vietnam was in part due to the availability of raw materials. There are around 2,000 different species of bamboo of which 56 are found in Vietnam. One species, *tam vong*, which is native to Ho Chi Minh City and a surrounding area of 100km, was particularly good for building. The other allure was the skilled Vietnamese labour, who James says "know how to craft things and are patient".

However, the direction change occurred when he attended the International Bamboo Congress in Bali. At the event he met a businessman, Doug Lewis, who had already set up a bamboo factory in Vietnam.

"He had a board under his arm, like a dimensioned board, out of bamboo," recalls James. "And I said, 'That's like wood.' And he said, 'It's bamboo.' It was amazing. It was the first time I'd seen wood made from bamboo."

James's interest was so piqued he started to ask questions — How is this applicable to making furniture? What's its rate of expansion and contraction, its hardness? What's its density, specific gravity and stability? Doug replied, "You know what James, I don't know. But you're the kind of person [who wants to find out]. You should come and work with me so when people ask these questions we can answer them and find out if we can use this as a wood replacement."

On the second day he arrived in Vietnam, James began working with *tam vong* at Doug's factory, to see what potential there was in bamboo.

## Boo Cycles

Over the following years a number of projects fell James's way including the construction of the first Allez Boo on the corner of De Tham and Pham Ngu Lao — the spot now occupied by Highlands Coffee. He was also involved in the building of Bamboo Village, a number of projects in Mui Ne and the construction of pre-fabricated bamboo houses that were exported to Hawaii.

It was after meeting his wife, Le Duy Lam, that he branched out again. Having worked for other people for a number of years, the couple decided to forge their own path. The pair built their own bamboo factory.

"We didn't have anything lined up," says James. "So I just went into design and prototyping, and I designed a few things that I really wanted to do. One of them was bike frames. At the start up time of our factory I made bamboo children's toys and bike frames. I had no customers. It was development. A calling."

Supported by his wife who owns and manages the bamboo factory and bamboo plantations, and allows James to "pursue [his] creative passions and get them fulfilled", the idea for building bike frames came from spending time online.

"I noticed that more and more people around the world were making bamboo bike frames," he says. "I know the strength of bamboo. The engineering data — strength versus weight — the durability, the resilience of bamboo. When I saw the trend I saw the possibility."

But James also knew that he wanted to aim high. And from the beginning he decided he wanted to make the highest level of bike frame there is, one that could compete in professional, elite bike racing.

"I wanted to show it in the ring racing up against what people think currently is the highest tech thing — moulded carbon fibre."

With his first prototypes completed he contacted a couple of bike makers in the

States. One of them, Nick Frey — who together with Drew Haugen is now his business partner in Boo Bicycles — was interested.

A pro racer as well as a businessman, Nick took one of James's prototypes and in 2009 entered it in a race. He finished number one on the podium.

"I was stunned," says James. But the victory also gave him a well-needed "kick up the arse". Rather than resting on his laurels he realised now was time to start learning his new trade — bicycles.

"I wasn't knowledgeable about bicycles at the level that pros use them," he says. "I had to learn a lot. And that's what led to the bike shop here. At a certain point I became so knowledgeable about [the industry] that people here were like, you know what, we live in District 2, there's no bike shops here, why don't you open one?"

In 2013 **The Bike Shop** was born.

## Poor Man's Lumber


Despite his success with bamboo and the fact that it's a viable sustainable alternative to wood, James is the first to admit the difficulties he faces working with this material.

"It's a very challenging material, but I like that," he says. "I've been trying to see what I can do with it, to elevate it from its poor man's lumber status."

The problem is image — bamboo is connected with poverty. As James points out, "If you made a map of the world of poverty and overlaid it with a map of the world of where bamboo is, it's the same map."

Despite being really good for cyclo-cross — in 2013 two members of the US national cyclo-cross team were on Boo Bicycles — bamboo is also not associated with the kind of materials used in sport.

"The problem is the aesthetic that goes with hi-tech," he explains. "As soon as some people see 'natural', they just don't believe in it. So the solution is to not make it look like bamboo. You just black it out."

He adds: "It's people's hang up with the material. It's sad to think that humans believe they can do things better than nature. Bamboo's been a successful composite for 400 million years. It's not a fad. It's stuck around for a long, long time." 



## Information

James Wolf creates two lines of bikes — Boo Bicycles and the part bamboo, part aluminium range, Aluboo. Both are available at [THE BIKE SHOP](#) (250 Nguyen Van Hung, Q2, Ho Chi Minh City) and are custom-built to order.

For more information go to [thebikeshopvn.com](#) or [boobicycles.com](#).