

VIETNAM

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Historically, geographically and ethnically, Vietnam has traditionally been divided into three major parts. Around 3,000 BC the Viet tribe became dominant over many other tribes, in what is now North Vietnam. The Champa from India originally settled in Central Vietnam and the Khmers in the south and west. Viet kings reined until the Chinese colonized the country for 1,000 years up to 1100 AD, when the Viets conquered the Chinese and pushed south, taking over from the Khmers. That situation remained until the French colonized what was called Indo-China – Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia – in 1860s.



The North shares a border with China and is mountainous and starkly beautiful with steeply terraced paddy fields and villages. Central Vietnam borders Laos and Cambodia, where there is a Hindu influence from the Champa people. Hue in central Vietnam was once the capital of Vietnam, now of course it is Hanoi. South Vietnam takes in the Mekong Delta with Ho Chi Minh City, once Saigon, as the major city. Political divisions cut right across this three-part division.

Today's population is 89 million, 86% Viet, 14% minorities of which there are 57 different ethnicities. The Government is keen to establish an integrated Vietnam, so unlike China there is no differentiation between ethnic groups. There is a two child policy although minorities often exceed that. 65% of population is under 30 years. Parents want to give their children beautiful names, but they don't want to incur the jealousy of the gods, or to tempt fate so they use bad names, filthy names, like Shit, our guide said. His son is called something nearly as bad as that but he wouldn't say what. Another guide butted in: "Yes, my name in my village is 'Cock'".

Hanoi

Approaching Hanoi the view from the air presented a stark urban rural contrast: a hundred houses or so huddled together then large paddocks, most flooded with water, others in careful rows of different vegetables in light green, dark green, yellow, multi-coloured stripes. The drive from airport to our hotel takes us past distinctive, tall narrow houses, up to 4 even 5 stories, many with green wooden shuttered windows, a clear bow to the French occupation of some hundred years. The reason for this unusual verticality is simple: houses are taxed on their frontage, so you build narrowly and upwards. Hanoi was sultry and overcast but we were told by our guide that



we lucky: torrential rain stopped only yesterday, so bad that the previous group couldn't take the junk cruise around Ha Long Bay, which is on our must see list.

Hanoi itself may have been badly damaged in what they call the American War and ruled with a hardline communist government but it is going through a boom now: modern skyscrapers alongside quaint old Frenchified houses and very clean, said to be the cleanest city in Asia. Hanoi's population is 6 million.

We visit the nearby Vietnam National Museum of History but it seems that the Museum was only interested in military history starting from around 1840, when the French bombarded Da Nang in retaliation for the Vietnamese being nasty to French missionaries. But we don't get very much as most of the notices are in Vietnamese.

We do however learn the Vietnamese way of crossing major roads. Occasionally there are traffic lights, which seem to be advisory rather than mandatory, but basically you cross wherever you want to, walk slowly at a constant pace *through* the traffic. Like schools of tropical fish, the cycles, motor cycles, cars and buses steer around you. Stop, or speed up, or turn back, and you are dead. It works here, the traffic is smoothly flowing like a great rolling river but I don't think the walk-slowly-whenever-you-want-to-cross strategy would work in Australia.



Let me say a little more about traffic. In Vietnam the main vehicles are bikes and scooters. Despite the heat and humidity many girls don't leave any skin exposed. The paradox of beauty fads: white



skinned girls want to get a tan, dark skinned girls want to be fair skinned. A possible explanation for this is that, many years ago, the emperor went to his harem to make his choice for the night. One enterprising girl whitened her face, so it would stand out in the gloom and he would choose her. Thus, white skin became synonymous with the emperor's choice, with attractiveness. These girls are up for the emperor's choice. Scooters are amazingly all-purpose, providing transport for the whole family, towing heavy trailers, transporting cows.

But sometimes the animals are turned into lorries.

There used to be 15,000 deaths a year from motor accidents. When compulsory wearing of crash helmets for scooter riders was introduced the death rate reduced to its present rate of 11,000. However the only accident I witnessed in Hanoi's amazing river of traffic was a no-damage bingle between two rickshaws.

In a park we find a magnificent statue Ly Thai To, an emperor who in 1010 founded Hanoi and relocated the capital there. In 2010 the city honoured the 1000th anniversary of this event. In front of his statue is a different sort of traffic hazard with even fewer rules: hundreds of kids from toddlers to adults hurtling around on roller skates. Cross the road to a lakeside footpath. We walk around the lake, and cross a bridge to an island where there is a Tin Hau temple. A favourite place for lovers and children.



The Opera House is an imposing building built by the French in 1902. The French had settled in Vietnam in the 1850s, attracted by minerals, coal, spices, whatever the Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam had that the French wanted: the usual colonial deal. They divided Vietnam into more easily governable protectorates: Tonkin or N Vietnam, Annam as Central Vietnam and Cochinchina ,

incorporating a large chunk of south Cambodia as South Vietnam. The last merging of Cambodia into Vietnam reignited centuries old enmity between Cambodia and Vietnam.

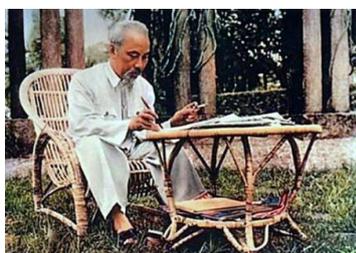


The French tried to make Hanoi the Paris of Asia. Hence the massive building in the late 19th early 20th centuries, in what is now the French Quarter, and the Opera House. More French legacies were to find all over the country and in Cambodia: French buildings, Gothic churches often made of stone imported from Europe, baguettes, and exotically flavoured crême brulee.

We visit Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum in Ba Dinh Square. Like Lenin, whose statue we pass on the way, with arms shoulders and knees respectfully covered, we view the mummified body of Vietnam's nearest to a deity. No photos allowed. I note that some male Westerners of a certain age don't cover their knees and wonder if their failure to pay due respect was an oversight, laziness or a deliberate snub to Ho Chi Minh. While the west saw Ho Chi Minh as a Communist bent on dominating Asia and further south, Vietnamese saw him and he saw himself as a nationalist. He wanted to unite Vietnam after the deliberate three way division of the country by the French.



Ba Dinh Square, the site of Ho's mausoleum is where Uncle Ho read the proclamation of independence of the Democratic republic of Vietnam in October 1945. Unfortunately, the French and almost everyone else ignored it. It was only after a series of revolts and the conclusive battle of Dien Bien Phu in mid-1954 that despite US help, the French backed off, only for Vietnam's troubles to reignite. In the Geneva Accord of 1954 dissolving French Indo-



China, elections were to be held, which as Eisenhower himself admitted Ho Chi Minh would have won by 80 per cent of the vote. Accordingly, Vietnam was artificially turned into two separate countries, north and south of the 17th parallel: Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and Emperor Bao Dai's right wing State of Vietnam in the south. This was intended as a

temporary measure but in fraudulent elections in 1956 Ngo Dinh Diem toppled the emperor and declared himself president of the Republic of Vietnam and was backed up by the United States. Diem's regime was harsh, especially on non-Catholics, collapsing after massive Buddhist protests involving self-immolation by Buddhist monks. A succession of military governments followed, all violently anticommunist. In effect, interference from outside had divided Vietnam and civil war was inevitable. After two incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964, involving exchange of fire between North Vietnamese and American warships, the US started increasing its support for South Vietnam, despite Marshall Ky and General Thieu squabbling over who was ruler. In retrospect, and in view of the terrible toll of the war, it seems so futile and unnecessary.



After the mausoleum, we visit the administrative centre of Vietnam. A new parliament house is built across the way: here is the Presidential Palace. However, rather like Ben Chifley, the humble Ho refused to

live in the Palace. Here are his sparse offices, a car donated by the Russians he used as little as possible. Ho Chi Minh was adored by his people for his frugality and care. He lived until the age of 75 because as a guide explained, he was single. He lived out the last of his days in this humble hut on stilts as one of the people.

Ho Chi Minh was a poet, author and was fluent in 6 languages, so it is appropriate that after visiting his mausoleum we visit the Temple of Literature, dedicated to Confucius whose political philosophy was absorbed by the Vietnamese during the 1,000 year Chinese hegemony and became a religion. Here we see the symbol of longevity: the crane to fly the heavens standing on the earthbound tortoise. Students act as guardians and keepers of the temple,



The Hanoi Flag Tower was built in 1812 and used by the French as a military post.



The Military Museum is here containing relics from the Vietnam War. Here is the plane that brought Ho Chi Minh back from Paris in 1945 where he went unsuccessfully to broker a deal for the French: immediately after, he declared independence, also unsuccessfully

A rickshaw ride through the Old Town is an excellent opportunity for some close up photography.

Vietnamese water puppetry is an ancient art where puppets dance and play on the surface of a large pool, telling the story of Vietnam, from the beginnings whereby a swan and a dragon mate and have a large egg, out of which pour the Vietnamese people. A woman tells the story in Vietnamese, subtitled, to the accompaniment of ancient instruments. We see village life, dancing, lovers, and finally the uniting of the Vietnamese people. As the patriotic hymn soars, the back flaps open and we see how it is done.



Duong Lam

We have a day in the countryside, an hour's bus ride from Hanoi. Soon out of Hanoi we are in the countryside where we see an age old scene. The second planting



of rice – by women. They are paid about \$10 a day. Their husbands keep an eye on them. To be fair, men do the ploughing with buffalo or on larger farms with tractor, women the less arduous work of planting and transplanting. It is necessary to clean the mud from the seedlings' root so most work barefoot. leeches notwithstanding. Those queasy about leeches wear clumsy wellies. By middle age most rural women have back

problems. Average weight of peasants is 45kg, yet they frequently carry 50-60kg on long poles when harvesting.

People own the land on which their houses stand but otherwise all land is owned by the government. Each adult over 18 in a farming community is awarded 300-400 sq m. which they may lease for 5 years, renewable for as long as they continue working it. Rights to land and house are passed to the oldest son, never to daughters, which of course leads to what we see as huge

inequities. The allotment of 300 sq m yields around 200 kg per planting. In fertile regions, they would take three crops, that is 600 kg of rice a year. Vietnam now is one of the world's largest exporters of rice. Farmers also grow corn, flowers and papaya.

Next stop is at a temple where the monks look after children that have been left as babies of unmarried mothers: the universal sad story of young girls seduced, pregnant, and the boy flees. The monks have adopted 18 just born orphans so far and we see them being lovingly brought up: here some 2-3 year olds learning how to use a computer. They are kept at the monastery until they are 18 and then they have the choice: go into the wide world as an educated adult or stay in the monastery. This is rather unusual, as we later come across monasteries where over 99.9% of novices stay on as monks for their whole life.



Duong Lam was a village first settled in 1200. Here is the village hall, which is looked after by an annually elected village elder: the current elder is over 90 and is delighted to greet us. This house has belonged to the Huyen family for 400 years: the present owner is the 18th generation of Huyens. Outside is a rice grinder that produces rice flour. It is very hard to operate, with all that weight and friction, but we are told that during the American war, when married men were conscripted, their longing wives got up in the middle of their depleted nights, and released their pent up energy in grinding rice flour.

We walk through the village to an artist's house for lunch. He also brews soy sauce in large pots fermenting away for 3 weeks. His daughter shows us how to roll up some spring rolls, two layers of rice paper, a plain one and a lacy one, and chopped vegetables, crushed peanuts and bits of meat and herbs.



For those who are willing, we are lent bikes to tour the neighbourhood. One old chap of 91 wants to go. Mike our guide does his best to dissuade him, but the old chap's mind is made up. So off we go, the air stream from riding a welcome relief from the heat. The old bloke steers a wobbly course, hits the edge of the road and falls off. He insists on continuing and this time lands in a thorn bush. The bike ride is called off. For the short time on the road, we see some nice scenery, a tethered cow, a huge lily pond grown over, and a paddy field that has been in the family for years. When the elders die the custom is that they return to the land that they had been nurturing: graves are a common sight in the rice fields.



On the way back to Hanoi we call at a crafts workshop run by amputees and other people damaged by the American War. Social welfare is virtually nonexistent but this way they form a cooperative and make extraordinarily delicate and beautiful art: paintings, silk work, clothes, jewellery. We find a lovely river scene that fits perfectly with our living room decor.

Sapa, the Northern mountains

We go north overnight by train to Lao Cai, then we take a bus to Sapa at 1300 m, high in the Vietnamese mountains near the Chinese border. In this region there are dozens of different tribes, each with their own language and culture. It is rather cooler, misty and very beautiful, rice paddies seem to be soaring to the summit hacked into the mountain side by hand but the terraces are actually built from the top down. In the wet season, vast supplies of water are trapped, and piped down to soak through each layer of the terrace.

Sapa is a picturesque hill town with old houses set amongst towering pine trees, a manmade lake in the village, dramatic valleys – and well on the way to becoming a major resort, which Mike admits is a shame. Federal Hotels, eat your heart out.

We check in at Victoria Sapa Resort and sit down to a sumptuous mixed buffet breakfast, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese and European, take your pick. Vietnamese pancakes are especially delicious. We are to face many more sumptuous breakfasts, but after a week of such pigging out it has to be back to muesli and fruit.



As we leave the hotel to go to Sapa town and the markets, a dozen or so Red Dao women who have been lying in wait, pounce. The Red Dao migrated from China 800 years ago and live in the hills where they grow rice, and do fine arts and crafts to sell to tourists, at which they are experts. One or two women attach themselves to a tourist and smiling, ask in good English: What is your name? Where do you come from? How old are you? How many children do you have? Two girls attach themselves to us, chatting freely as they accompany us around the Market, where we see handcrafts and much food, including the especially bred black chicken. The reason for this superfluity of friendliness becomes apparent an hour later: “We have been walking with you, you my friend. Now you buy from me.” Out comes a range of hand crafted things like mobile phone holders, scarves, squares of cloth. There is now a strong compulsion to do the decent by our new-found firm friends. “Now you buy from my friend. She has not sold anything for a long time.” The situation rapidly becomes silly, Catherine and I agree.



It becomes sillier still in the afternoon. After some breathtaking views, we stop at Ta Phin. Immediately about 2 dozen Red Dao descend on us like a swarm of laughing wasps. Mike has warned us: the only way to avoid being swarmed is to say nothing. We try that but it doesn't work. How can you not reply to questions like: What is your name? Where do you come from? How old are you? How many children do you have? All asked with disarming friendliness. They take us about 2 km towards a towering mountain to a house belonging to a Red Dao. On the way we cross a bridge over a rivulet and a small boy pokes his head out to be photographed. Wherever we go in the country, however poor, the children always seem to be happy and friendly. We enter the lady's house and Mike explains about the lifestyles, marriage customs and gender divisions of the Dao. The women make handicrafts, sow and harvest the rice, cook for husband, who now and again does the hard work of ploughing, but if it's not the ploughing season



he does the hard work of drinking powerful rice wine with his friends. Our hostess's husband told her only this morning, "I go to town on my scooter, I may not be back until tomorrow." She says she doesn't mind, that is what men do and we must accept it. The middle room merges into the kitchen area where a slow fire smoulders. Outside are her animals.



We wanted to buy cushion covers from the Red Dao but they didn't have any here. They did at a minority run shop next to the hotel, a typical minority design: vivid colours, and geometric designs symbolizing the square earth, fire, water, trees and sun.

We drive back to Lao Cai via a new road that winds up high and higher into the hills, at 2,000 m we see a fish farm for salmon and sturgeon. We walk from there to a house that is a kilometer down the road that it has been arranged for us to visit. The old bloke, having recovered from his bicycle mishap, walks ahead of the group and goes too far. We have to catch him on the bus. We find him okay but the road is too narrow for the bus to turn back to the house we are supposed to visit. Mike says we'll call on the next house, they won't mind if we just walk in. Hmm, I think I would mind very much if 30 Vietnamese tourists came to walk through our house unannounced. Or even announced, come to think of it. But always we meet with friendliness and smiles.



On the way we pass a boy and girl pulling at each other, with much giggling. Mike tells us that is a courtship pattern. Boy likes girl, he tugs her arms. If girl likes boy she allows him to draw her to him. If she doesn't like him she stands firm. This girl stood

firm, but there is no ill feeling. They walk laughing through the fields to their homes. Two boys pass who have been gathering wood for charcoal.



We arrive at the next house. Outside a Black Hmong woman, the owner, is dying indigo cloth. The indigo plant is innocuous looking plant but when soaked in water for a week and when cloth is soaked in it for another week it comes out purplish black. They make their clothes from this: hence they are the Black Hmong tribe. The Hmong also came from China originally. The Black Hmong are one of at least two other tribes, one of which of course settled in Tasmania to the great benefit of our vegetable supply.

Our hostess allows us inside, where we meet her two young sons: he older son is at university. The house has two rooms and in the center is the altar to the ancestors. As we leave, a boy leads a herd of cows into the yard where they are corralled.

We drive past the highest point, more and more dramatic scenery, then down, down to Lao Cao. We detour 3 km to the Chinese border: across the river is Yunnan



Ha Long Bay

A cyclone is over the Philippines and heading towards the Gulf of Tonkin and Ha Long Bay in particular – one of the highlights of our trip is to be a night spent in a junk in Ha Long Bay. We go nonetheless with a much less attractive Plan B: to see the Ha Long karst formations from the river, much less dramatic. But the cyclone changes its mind and hits Hong Kong instead: and we board our junk at midday in calm seas and in beautiful clear sunshine. As it turned out, just as we'd left Ha Long, the cyclone tracked back to the Gulf of Tonkin. We were lucky: a day earlier or a day later we wouldn't have made the trip.



We drive by bus to Ha Long and on the way we stop at another and much larger crafts workshop run by people disabled by war, and more by the aftermath of Agent Orange. We are told not to photograph, for copyright reasons, but the work is similar to the other one we visited on the way to Sapa. Intricate jewellery, craftwork, painting and outside, marble sculptures which being on public view I do photograph from the safety of the bus window.

Ha Long Bay is famous for its 1,967 dollops of limestone karst, pushed up from the seabed millions of years ago. Now they are the home to poor fisher folk, and to rich tourists. All along the coast, huge resorts and hotels have sprung up in the last ten years or so.



My experience of junks is from Hong Kong days: clumsy, top heavy and fun. We board a junk shaped 5 star hotel. After boarding we sit down to a 6 course lunch, the last thing I want after my usual travel induced constipation, and then we go to Titop Island, named by the Russians after Yuri Gagarin's space shuttle companion. We climb the 400 steps to a pagoda at the top, take photos, climb down and wash the sweat off in the lukewarm sea.



We are taken to the largest floating fishing village in the bay. I am a little uncomfortable with the fact that we are rowed around for an hour by a little old lady, but she doesn't seem to even raise a sweat despite being hermetically sealed in layers of clothing. The villagers are dirt poor, rather sea poor, but very hospitable. We are shown into their house, stepping over their fish tanks. Ladies row out to our boat to sell stuff that nobody wants. A tough life even if it is set in such a beautiful place.

In the morning we explore Surprise cave, a series of huge caverns in one the limestone rocks, that the Viet Cong used as a hideout.



Hoi An

We fly to Da Nang airport in Central Vietnam, quite different we are to learn from the North. Da Nan was a huge US airbase during the war, and is now rapidly becoming Vietnam's second Gold Coast, Ha Long Bay being the first.



Ananda Resort is an amazing place: beautifully laid out, our suite tastefully decorated. We are taken through the astonishing market, fresh fruit, vegetables, fish, meat but there are no flies and no smell. The reason is that the animals are slaughtered in the early hours, butchered and sold in the market, any leftovers boiled and eaten by the family.

We take a dilapidated boat that painfully chugs upstream to the Red Bridge Restaurant and Cooking School. The chef takes us around his wonderful herb garden with Asian basil, lemongrass, and various other herbs whose names I have forgotten, that make up that elusive Vietnamese flavour. He then demonstrates several dishes, and we go to our cooking stations to produce our own efforts for our lunch. Many Vietnamese dishes are wrapped in rice paper, so the first thing is to learn how to make rice paper, which is amazingly simple, as long as you hold your mouth right when ladling out rice paste onto a wet muslin cloth and smoothing into a thin disk. Steam for one minute. The final dish is an eggplant claypot, with the right spices, really quite easy. The chef is a little too smug, making smart arse remarks: "If you haven't any cucumber you can use carrot instead, and if you haven't any carrot use cucumber. Otherwise go home." Ha ha. I later learn he is rich, owning restaurants in Vietnam and Australia.



We walk through the Old Town, World Heritage listed, where different ethnic groups have their own temples: Cantonese, Shanghai, Japanese. In an old house, that belonged to a rich merchant, we seem some very nice needlework. APT has arranged a tailor to make a free shirt for everyone, and if you want more you pay \$45. So off we go to the tailor near our hotel and are given a hi tech measuring up with digital shots, transferred to a computer. Perfect fit we find next day.

We visit several Chinese temples, built from 400 years ago when the Chinese were the main business people, with a few Japanese and Vietnamese. After the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, religions were targeted and by 1979 religious property was confiscated. Today these temples serve three functions: worship, community hall, and to exhibit their artifacts and splendid they are. Vietnam is a secular country, as sort of communist-cum-capitalist, but three major religions exist, Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, and Cao Dai, a new composite religion we meet in the South. Hoi An is the city of lanterns.



We see an ambiguous sight: a woman washing empty plastic water bottles. Was she washing them to refill with hazardous local water to resell as clean bottled water? Or was she going to sell the empty bottles back to the water bottling company? Good questions but either way it is badly needed recycling, given the huge problems that plastic bottles are a major source of pollution, as we saw in Ha Long Bay floating around. China has

their own way of recycling: they transform the plastic into long fine threads, and weave them into silk garments, indistinguishable from real silk.

The hotel provides complimentary bikes to guests so I ride to the seaside. On the way I see a Buddhist temple, a Taoist temple, a man fishing. I discover that riding a bike follows the same rules: ride slowly, keep to the right, don't stop; weave through the traffic as the traffic weaves through you. Rather stimulating when doing a left hand turn across the traffic.



We have dinner in the Old Town on a balcony overlooking the river. By the banks, young women are selling paper boats with a candle. If you buy a boat and light the candle place it on the river, it is meant to represent the soul of an ancestor on its way to the hereafter. As we leave the restaurant we find the candle sellers are very young indeed.

Hue

Hue was for a long time the capital of Vietnam and the seat of the Vietnamese kings for 4-5 centuries. We retrace our steps to Da Nang, the stretch between Hoi An and Da Nang an upcoming resort, the Norman Empire is a resort and 56 hole golf course designed by Greg Norman, another by Peter Thompson. Opposite the Norman Estate are badly run down hangars and air strip left by the US, Da Nang being a huge airbase during the war. China Beach as it was then called, but not any more, was used by US servicemen rest and procreation, or recreation. The story of half American babies, born to Vietnamese mothers but rejected by the Vietnamese, is a sad one, many finally being adopted in the US.

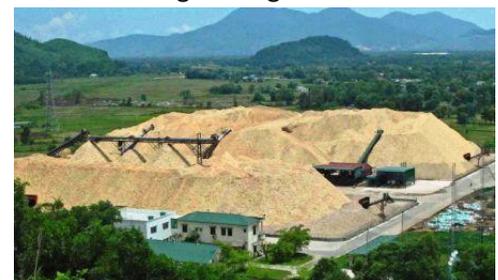


We cross the river at Da Nang and up the coast, seeing resort after resort. We have a 'happy stop' at a pearl factory, where many Japanese pearls are processed. Mother of pearl shell makes a great medium for Chinese style artistry, like this Vietnamese girl.



On the way, Thanh our guide tells us about health care. Hospital space almost anywhere in Vietnam is so scarce that patients have to share beds Thanh's mother had a stroke, and was taken to hospital and was forced to share a bed with two other patients. A friend was in a motor accident resulting in a broken thigh. He was in great pain but told to wait 2 days. On the 3rd day he was told to wait another, so they bribed a doctor to do the necessary surgery secretly in a suburban surgery.

We turn inland, and the scene changes. The coastal area where we travelling through used to be paddy fields but they were destroyed and the land degraded by sand. Now they grow eucalyptus trees in plantations, harvesting for timber every 6-10 years. They also uses the leaves for distilling eucalyptus oil, which is sold by the roadside. Forestry is one of the major industries, shrimps and oysters in lagoons the other. Here is one reason why woodchipping failed in Tasmania: we couldn't compete.



Further inland, vast acres of land in western Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, where the Viet Cong used the jungle overstorey as cover for their movements, are barren, and will remain so for 200 years, thanks to American saturation bombing with Agent Orange.



The old fortified city of Hue was used for military purposes also by the French. We enter the once royal palace to find two characters dressed in royal robes, but a man stands in front of them photographing. He won't move when we ask so we can take photos. Outraged we tell him to stand aside, he gives us the universal sign to rack off. We later find out these were his friends and they had paid \$5 for them to dress up. To console us, one of the staff dresses up for us, looking rather more royal.

Then it's to the Tien Mu Pagoda, the tallest in Vietnam, but we can't go up because it is feared the movement will cause bricks to fall. A Buddhist school is in the grounds, a class in session. The different hair styles of the boys are explained: those who have been here least have more hair. The abbot himself is quite bald. He tells us that only one in a thousand of these boys will not stay on as monks for the rest of their lives, unlike the other monastery we saw near Hanoi when at the age of 18, most novices went secular.



A dragon boat takes us back to our hotel. On the way pass swimmers using plastic bottles as floats. The night ends with a dress up party

Ho Chi Minh City

Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in 1976, a year after the city fell to the North Vietnamese army. As we drive in we pass old temples but the real symbol is the Finance Building: bent, a symbol of the corruption in Vietnam. In this one party system, the ministers are all powerful and nonaccountable. The planning minister for instance can grant or withhold development permissions, depending on the kickbacks. Vietnam is the most corrupt system in Asia, so we were told. Our hotel was a 5 star, yet next door were seedy nightclubs, hookers on the streets, "massage" signs in flashing neon. The population is 9 million and rising, the pace much faster than the more dignified and much cleaner Hanoi.



As we enter the hotel, we are greeted with a band of musicians, the instruments comprising a dulcimer, a sort of banjo-cum guitar, and a bamboo xylophone which is peculiarly Vietnamese. We do a walk to see the major sights: the Opera House built by the French in the early 1900s, Notre Dame Cathedral. The stones and bricks were imported from France but it is surprisingly plain. The Post office is rather more elaborate and sells even more junk than Australia Post.



Saigon recalls the war more than anywhere else. We see the rooftop from which the last US helicopter left Saigon as a VC tank crashed through the gates of the Presidential palace, now the Reunification

Palace. This famous photo of the last minutes of the war was taken by Australian photographer Neil Davis, who was later kidnapped in Bangkok: his story is told in Tom Bowden's *One Crowded Hour*, and imagined in Chris Koch's *Highways to a War*.

A convoy of cyclos picks us up from the palace to take us back to the hotel. A strange thing happens. I knock my elbow on the side of the rusty rickshaw and it starts bleeding. A man on a motor scooter draws alongside the rickshaw points to it, signaling to pull over. I shout: "It's okay thanks, just a scratch" and I keep going. He stops, goes to a street stall, buys a packet of tissues, drives up to the rickshaw again and hands them to me. Waves, and accelerates off. What enormous kindness to a total stranger, in keeping with the friendliness we have experienced. But as we near the hotel the cyclo man starts shouting a barely comprehensible "tip-for-me, tip-for-me". APT has already paid these men but we were told that if we were particularly pleased with the ride, US\$1 would be appropriate. Despite my bleeding arm, wounded on his rusty rickshaw, I pass over \$1, at which the driver feigns much disappointment. That's the other side of Vietnam.

We say goodbye to our guide Thanh. The group agrees he has been the best so far, caring, gentle but decisive, and we each chip in a \$10 tip, when the usual is \$1 each: he is so touched he weeps, and that's before he opens the envelope.

Long Tan

We can choose either a trip to Long Tan, the site of the most important Australian engagement of the American War, or to the Cu Chi tunnels, part of a vast system of tunnels the Viet Cong used to transport troops and supplies. We choose Long Tan.

The Australian contribution to the American War was mostly located in Phuoc Tuy province, the major base at Vung Tau, 80kms down the Saigon River from Saigon. Vung Tau was an R&R destination, plenty of girlie bars. One bar still exists, Jimmy's 3, much tamed now, which is our base station too. Several Australian veterans still live in Vung Tau and thereabouts, including Jimmy and his vivacious Vietnamese wife. Our guide, Paul, is another veteran. He also married a Vietnamese girl and has settled in running a kindergarten for Viet children and generally doing good works. After doing so much damage to the Vietnamese people many Australians see it is time for atonement.

We go to Nui Dat airfield, near Long Tan. The Australian forces used Nui Dat as an airbase. They forcibly removed the occupants of two villages, and set up barbed wire fences around the area. If any villagers tried to return to their homes they were shot. Today they and their grandchildren have returned, the landing strip their now main road. I see an old woman coming to meet us with a little girl, a picture that is the inverse of this one. This photo of nine year old Kim Phuk, her back ablaze with napalm, was taken by a young Vietnamese photographer, Huynh Cong Ut. He took her to hospital where he was told she was too far gone to be treated but he flashed his



American press badge and insisted she receive treatment. The photo was deemed unsuitable for publication because of nudity, but he insisted and it turned



out to be a game changer in public opinion about the war. Kim Phuc is now married and lives in Toronto.

Other children run alongside our bus and call for photos. Other people come to meet us, including another very old lady, old enough surely to have remembered the times they were chucked out of their homes. But all that is forgiven if not forgotten, while the Australians for their part have tried to make amends by donating a school to the village.

We then go to Long Tan, a few kms away, where the battle of Long Tan was fought. A memorial



ceremony is going on. On August 16, 1966, the 108 strong D Company of 6th RAR were hugely outnumbered by about 2,500 Viet Cong. 18 Australians were killed and 24 wounded. It was an object lesson in the difference between US and Australian military strategy. For much of the war, the robotically ruthless General Westmoreland was Commander in Chief of the Vietnam operation. His strategy, to which he could see no

alternative, was to defoliate with Agent Orange, both to remove cover from the VC troops and to destroy food supplies, saturation bombing, strafe the ground from helicopter gunships, ground troops then moving in to search and destroy villages and their inhabitants, as they did with efficiency – as in the My Lai massacre. Australian troops were aghast at the callous and casual approach of the Americans who often went on patrol smoking and singing pop songs: we used smaller, more highly disciplined forces, with much fewer casualties. Overall 58,000 American troops died compared to 521 Australian troops, with about 2 million Vietnamese deaths.

To the Long Hai hills, which were a Viet Cong stronghold. Minh Dam is a hill covered in almost impenetrable vegetation and riddled with caves going deep underground: perfect protection against attack by ground or air. That didn't prevent the US trying to bomb it into oblivion, but the VC were hardly affected for a long time. There is now a temple on the site, with a statue of Ho Chi Minh where a Buddha would normally be.



We return to Jimmy's Three for lunch, comprising western fast food. After we go upstairs to the Sports Bar, patriotically decorated wall to wall with AFL victories. A group of young Australians are watching AFL on TV, their table crowded with empty beer bottles. They move to a corner of the room, allowing us to watch a TV documentary: "The biggest blunder since WW2". The US forces developed a wicked land mine, jumping jacks or M-16s, which the Australian forces used. Brigadier Graham, against advice, created a corridor, 11 km long sown with 20,000 M-16s, so that the Viet Cong couldn't access rice: never mind that there was rice both sides of the corridor. The VCs were up to this and very carefully at night dug out the mines and used them, devastatingly, against the Australians. Brigadier Graham later received commendations for his work, including charity work after he retired, in spite of making what is now recognized as the biggest blunder in the American war.

Everywhere from Hanoi southwards, the War casts its shadow. The fact that there are 200 million unexploded bombs all ready to go off, which they do sometimes spontaneously in the summer heat, feeds that memory. I asked our guide how it is that the Vietnamese suffered so much during the

American War, in which we Australians were involved if on a lesser and more humane scale, yet they seem so happy and not in the least angry towards us. He said there was no bitterness. Today's generation didn't experience the war, American and Australian aid, and the benefits of imported capitalism, have changed all that. People look to the future not the past, he assured me." A friend of mine who had asked the same question received a different answer: "Of course we are not angry. We got what we wanted: our unified country. The Americans lost everything here. We feel sorry for them." As for the role of women in the war, here is the statue of "The Woman of Three Good Works": she is carrying a baby, a plough, and a rifle on her back.



We return suitably chastened to our boat to return to Ho Chi Minh City: a storm is blowing up and we are stuck, freezing, in front of a feral air conditioner that can't be turned off.

Excellent books on the Vietnam War: Paul Ham's award-winning *Vietnam: The Australian War* (2007) and a graphic fictional account: Chris Koch's *Highways to a War* (1993) based on Tasmanian Neil Davis's life who is also the subject Tim Bowden's *One Crowded Hour* (1994).

The Mekong Delta

We bus to My Tho, where we board the Amalotus, APT's 5 star vessel, which will take us up the Mekong River to Cambodia.

First stop is Cai Be, a busy port, which is the centre of distribution for vegetables and merchandise. We pass houseboats and boats with goods tied to high poles to say what a boat is selling. We go into a shop that turns out to be a multipurpose factory. They make rice paper on a much bigger



scale than our previous efforts in Hoi An but on the same principle: rice paste is spread on a taut cloth and steamed. Very large woks are bubbling away with coconut and palm sugar to caramelize. Popped rice is made by mixing rice with black sand and churned this around at high heat until the rice bursts, it is then poured into a tray, the sand sifted off and reused, and the rice mixed with onions, caramel and packed into trays, sliced and packaged. In a corner rice wine is being distilled: yeast is added to rice, and left for a few days, then distilled. Plain wine is very cheap, but more expensive versions include marinated snake and scorpion. We didn't try the latter.

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The village is built on two sides of the river with constant river traffic. We see that most boats have eyes painted on the bow, but not all. The eyes are meant to frighten away any perils of the deep that might attack the boat and its crew. The exceptions are – yes, you've guessed it – fishing boats. The last thing fishermen want to do is frighten away the fish. Down the narrow village main street to the French built Cathedral. Although all the decor is Catholic, other religions are welcome to use the building for prayer, a foretaste of the postwar Vietnamese



religion of Cao Dai, which incorporates aspects of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Hindu, Muslim and Christianity, an attempt to unite the people after the divisions of the war. The Cao Dai temple is bright to gaudy. We see several on our travels in this region: there are now 3 million Cao Dai worshippers in the world: mostly in Vietnam but also in other Asian countries, the USA and one in Australia.

Sa Dec is a riverside town, where we visit a brick factory, and then the scene of the novel and film “The Lover” by French writer Marguerite Duras. Her mother was a teacher in Sa Dec, her dysfunctional family usually in poverty, 15 year old Marguerite used to catch the Mekong ferry to Saigon to attend boarding school. Aware that a rich Chinese businessman is attracted to her, she seduces him. He falls in love with her, but he is forced into an arranged marriage with a local Chinese girl. Duras finds she is in love with him after all and returns to Paris heartbroken. In the film there are explicit sex scenes. Annaud, the director, put it around that these scenes were not staged, at which Jane March, who played Marguerite and lived in the town of Pinner in Middlesex, became widely known as “The Sinner from Pinner”, which upset her very much indeed. In fact, doubles were used for the sex scenes.

We walk back to the ship through a thriving local market, lots of fruit and vegetables but unfortunately frogs, skinned and decapitated but still alive, and a juicy rat or two.



Tan Chau

We visit Evergreen Island. It is school holidays, the children are very excited and greet us noisily with Hello Hello. Their village floods nearly every year: a sampan under the house is their motor scooter during the wet season. They recycle everything. They keep the husks from sweet corn and use them for firewood; children collect waste plastic and sell it for whatever they can get.

The village of Tan Chau is just 20 km from the Cambodian border. Nearby is the scene of the Ba Chuc Massacre. On 15 April 1978, the town of Ba Chuc had a population of 3,500. Two weeks later the population was 2. Khmer Rouge troops tore through massacring everything that breathed, children being literally torn apart. This was the main reason why Vietnam invaded Cambodia (or Kampuchea as it then was), resulting in the end of the Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge. But then if Nixon hadn’t bombed neutral Cambodia a few years earlier Pol Pot probably would not have risen to power anyway. These skulls are in a memorial in Vietnam, not Cambodia’s Killing Fields. But I’ll be discussing that when we come to Kampochea.



We are taken round town in rickshaws to visit a silk factory. We are shown a simple hand machine that turns out 3 metres of cloth a day but that is now replaced with Heath Robinson machines that nevertheless crank out 20 metres of cloth a day. While we are taking all this in the heavens open and we arrive back rather damp.

Then it’s back to the ship: this afternoon we cross the border to



Cambodia, somewhere around here.

Food

Vietnam is famed, as Luke Nguyen tells us regularly on Thursdays evening at 8 pm SBS, that Vietnamese food is very fresh, a balance between sweet sour salty and bitter, using fish sauce, vinegar, sugar, honey, plus that Vietnamese character given variously with lemongrass, tamarind, coconut, garlic, Vietnamese mint, Asian basil and other herbs, a little but not much chilli often with a topping of crushed roasted peanuts. Cooking is by steaming, boiling, frying or roasting, using fish, lots of fish, pork, beef, chicken, duck. In all: a vast array of permutations and combinations. Common basic dishes are pho, a noodle soup either beef, pork, chicken or seafood, and spring rolls, fresh or deep fried.



Fresh street markets display all these. Our first dinner in a restaurant advertising authentic Vietnamese cuisine was not like that: coconut rice, BBQ-grilled pork ribs and a spinach like vegetable, all rather ordinary fare and we thought Chinese rather than Vietnamese, all for 400,000 Dhongs which with Vat and service charge came to 600,000 - or US\$30. Not expensive but not what we thought Vietnamese food should be.



Another restaurant, also famed for its “authentic” Vietnamese was excellent, but with a nod towards nouvelle cuisine: mango salad, coconut shell soup, BBQ prawns, orange duck but too rare, a beautiful beef wrap around a pear, and three flavor creme caramel: ginger, tea and passion fruit. The French legacy was deliciously obvious.



Our tour coincided with one conducted by Luke Nguyen, who orchestrated a couple of dinners for us. One in a restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City, beautifully presented: three bite-sized entrées (crab soup, tamarind beef, pumpkin flower) and three course main (chilli prawn, lemongrass skewered sea bass and lamb tenderloin – but none too tender) and three bite sized desserts. Not street food that Luke’s TV programmes are about. We didn’t have any street food at all.

Part of our trouble was that we were in a party of Australians. While most meals were cooked with a nod in the Viet direction, there was always a western Plan B: every meal on our Mekong river tour offered fish and chips and hamburgers.

