

VIET NAM – 3 COUNTRIES IN ONE -- A TRUE ADVENTURE

I was drafted into the United States Army in 1968. If there was anywhere in the world I did NOT want to go, it was Viet Nam. Fortune served me well, but time and history worked on me. South East Asia became more and more inviting. And so, 40 years later, my wife, Linda, and I spent 2 ½ half fascinating weeks including TET 2008 in Viet Nam: seven days in the North (Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Cat Ba Island), six days in the central (Hue, Hoi An, and Danang), and four days in the South (Saigon – Ho Chi Minh City). The three areas of the country could easily have been three different countries because the distinctions were so dramatic.



We were met by our guide at the Hanoi Airport who warned “Be prepared for a unique travel experience into town and in the city.” Indeed, within minutes we were amid thousands of motorbikes, traveling in every direction, paying little heed to road signs, and all blowing their horns – “the music of the streets” as our guide related. (That complex of motorbike traffic, by the way, is everywhere in the north of the country, in cities and

in the two-lane roads that connect them.) While the makeshift buildings to the sides of the roads entering Hanoi were reminiscent of the outskirts of Mexico City, everywhere there were mandarin orange trees – in the buildings, on the backs of motorbikes, in storefronts. It was the onset of TET, and the mandarin orange trees – peach blossom trees at other areas of the country – are essentially the equivalent of our Christmas trees.

The city of Hanoi is fascinating. It is an “old town” with its own “old town” in the center where each street is named by the types of goods sold there. Yes, in the city, there is the Hanoi Hilton and McCain Lake with their pangs of pain for us Americans. But there is a new day hope and feel that reminds us we are humans, we can move forward, and we will.

The streets of the city are narrow. The sidewalks are uneven – indeed you can't walk on them because everybody, it seems, has a small business on the sidewalk in front of their narrow family dwelling. Further complicating the situation is that parked motorbikes are on the sidewalks. But you can't walk on the streets either because motorbikes are going in all directions right up to the curb. It's an adventure. Oh, and get instructions on the proper way to cross the street considering that the traffic does not stop. The irony is that in the midst of this ancient "Third World City," there is an expanse of green and modernity and wealth that is the mausoleum and home and grounds of Ho Chi Minh, closely monitored by military even in its brilliance.

I asked our guide what the North Vietnamese think of Americans these days. He said his father fought for the north in the "American War" (Vietnamese War, pending your perspective) and sometimes still offers somber remembrances.

(Indeed, on Cat Ba Island, we went underground to experience hospitals impervious to bombs, allowing ourselves some somber

remembrances of our own.) But our guide further said that the younger

generations are moving ahead and with American ideas and support, they consider Americans their friends. I further inquired: "Your country is called the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, but you are Communist, right?" He said: "Yes. Anybody who wants can own or start a business – Socialist. [Thus explains the myriad small shops in the front of the downtown dwellings.] But you go to school and perform government service to qualify to become a member of the Communist hierarchy. Then you can run for office. That is Communism." We actually "celebrated" the 78th (I think) year of Communist rule in the country with thousands of our new best friends in the heart of Hai Phong. Yellow and red colors dominated the decorations where everybody came out to party. People even seemed to embrace our presence as tall gray-haired westerners who just happened to be part of the music and dancing-in-the-streets celebration. These are poor people, "moving forward," embracing their lives, with hope and temples and incense influencing their vision.

After our time in the north, we flew to Hue – that famous Imperial City overtaken by Viet Cong in '68, and where Walter Cronkite declared we could not win the Viet Nam War. It IS an Imperial City. It felt regal. Streets were much wider, trees were much greener, pace much slower, and feel much less intense than Hanoi and the north. And the remnants of the castle – the real Imperial City – are awesome. TET is the lunar new year celebration that lasts about a week in Viet Nam. But the actual new year's day is greeted with fireworks -- at midnight - - and we awoke to watch the fireworks from our hotel window in Hue.



Danang and Hoi An are a drive south of Hue. In Danang, the western influence was especially evident. We stayed in a magnificent (and inexpensive) resort on China Beach across the street from the remains of the Viet Nam War U.S. Marine helicopter base. The city was modern. The marina was artistic. The streets were wide. The bridges were expansive. And the people accommodating.

Hoi An is like an Asian hippy artists' colony with dirt streets and stores packed in. We went to a street fair and watched humans play the parts of chess pieces being moved by calls from the audience, along side games and booths in the same spirit as U.S. carnivals; we had clothes made for us (cheap), and we did a boat tour of the bay.

Then, finally on to the south. When we arrived by plane in Saigon, it was hot. Saigon (now called Ho Chi Minh City) in total contrast to Hanoi, is not an "old town." It is referred to as the Paris of South East Asia, and it feels like Paris. Yellow, big French buildings; people on the streets laughing, hugging, holding hands; cars (not motorbikes) filling the streets; we feeling totally safe and vibrant. We got some "free hugs" from people celebrating Valentine's Day; we bought rice wine, tasted it, and left it in the hotel for the next people; we walked the streets; we got lost; and loved it. The War memorial is brutal; the Cu Chi Tunnels an hour east of the city were totally fascinating – a can't miss experience. But the Mekong Delta tour was too much touristy. All of it in the south, though, was totally different from the north.

If/when you go, you've got to get a guide and driver. No sane American would attempt to drive in the country, especially the north. You've got to do your money exchange there because no one outside the country, including the United States, accepts Vietnamese dong for exchange. And you've got to eat the food, especially the different noodles. Ours was a fascinating, mind-expanding trip. There is pollution -- yes; there is poverty -- yes; it's not high-tech. But there is a spirit, a beauty, and a charm so powerful that ya gotta go. Walk and enjoy the steps into a country perhaps 100 years behind us. The people won't hassle you. But for a quick look, they may not even notice you because they seem to be enjoying their own lives. But, even with their meager accommodations, they don't mind having you around. And 40 years "later," it's a true adventure.

