

FEATURE

Notes of a Trip to Vietnam from a Chinese American Perspective

This is dedicated to Nguyen Van Vu, a superb tour leader without peer from whom I have learned a lot about Vietnam in the two short weeks spent from Hanoi to Hue and Hoi An to Ho Chi Minh City, from north to south Vietnam.

By George Koo

Of course, the following are my impressions and conclusions and any errors and omissions are wholly mine and can't be blamed on Vu.

In many ways, Vietnam reminds me of China. In some ways, Vietnam is even more China than today's China. The most obvious is Vietnam's focus on ancestor worship, the family, patriarchy and emphasis on the sons. The pride of the Vietnamese family is reflected by how well the family shrine is maintained. A family will spend far more on the tomb of the patriarch than their own abode. Sons and daughters will do as their parents tell them, including careers to pursue and even mates to marry. If the family is financially limited, the sons will be given preference for education and career development but then he is expected to support not only his parents but his siblings and even his extended

family if he wished to be known as having really succeeded. To get rich or be well off and leave his family behind would be unthinkable.

While some of the traditions might be loosening in Vietnam, much of it has vanished in today's China, thanks to the single child policy. In China, all the parents and grandparents dote on the single child and not the reverse of child showing respect and deference to his/her elders.

Vietnam's model of economic development, whether by deliberate design, has also followed closely to that of China. China began its economic reform in 1978 and entered WTO in 2001. Vietnam began its economic reform (they called it "renewal") in 1986, though arguably only felt by the general population by 1990, and entered WTO at the end of 2006. There

isn't any doubt that Vietnam has entered a trajectory of economic growth that they will not willingly reverse. During their period of consolidation after winning the American war, from 1975 to 1986, Vietnam embarked on a planned economy (they called it "subsidized") where everybody ate from the same big pot and suffered the consequences of famine. Since 1990, the economy has been booming and Vietnam has emerged from not only





self-sufficiency but world's second largest rice exporter.

Arguably, the most obvious example of China's economic boom is Pu Dong across the Huang Pu River from the old Shanghai. Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is Vietnam's Shanghai and it too is planning huge investments across the Saigon River where it hopes to become the new economic engine for HCMC. HCMC already contributes over 20% of the country's GDP; thus, in a relative sense, is far more important than today's Shanghai is to China.

Like China, Vietnam is a communist country in name but not in fact. Like China, to remain in power, the communist party of Vietnam can not afford to admit to any other form of government. However, by investing in infrastructure such as bridges, tunnels, highways and airports that we saw on this trip, along with a stable government, the economy is solidly grounded and bodes well for the future of Vietnam. There are benefits to developing in China's shadow and let China draw the American political ire. Vietnam will be able to develop its open door, export-oriented economy relatively unmolested and on the quiet.

Both countries have a tradition of reverence for learning and hold scholars as a class in the highest esteem. China instituted a civil service examination during the Tang dynasty around the 8th century. Vietnam followed suit around the 13th century. In both cases, the

purpose of the examination was to identify the best and brightest scholars and appoint them as officials to the court to help the emperor govern. Even students from poorest families can aspire to exalted government positions if they were diligent and intelligent and were willing to overcome hardships from deprivation. The history of the two countries contained enough such successes to inspire generations. Of course, the education systems that depended on rote did not always find cream rising to the top and both countries were loaded with scholars that failed the imperial civil exam and became instead famed poets, painters, scientists and inventors, or in some cases discontented rebels. Nonetheless, the value of education and respect for learning is still deeply ingrained in today's Vietnam and China.

Both countries seem to be taking great pride in their ethnic diversity. China is 92% Han among 56 identifiable ethnic groups living inside its territories. Vietnam is 87% Viet among 54 ethnic groups, many of whom are also found in China. Considering that Vietnam is only about 1/15th of China's population, its claim to diversity is even more impressive. Hanoi has a whole museum devoted to its ethnology. I can only guess that both governments are going out of their way to recognize ethnic minorities among their populace as a way of promoting peace in a civil society.

Alas, both countries also share the affliction of corruption that goes with one party

rule. In Vietnam, this affliction is evident at the grass roots level as indicated by the fact that the traffic police is one of the more lucrative and therefore sought after occupations. A sharp eyed police on patrol can spot violations and demand financial remedy on the spot. Such private resolution, it can be argued, is good for all parties as such transactions keep the traffic and therefore the economy moving. Perhaps, China's traffic has reached such a level that renders such petty corruption impractical. In any case, China's cases of high level corruption seem to involve the complicity of private businessmen along with high ranking officials in powerful positions. In Vietnam, powerful officials seem to enjoy the fruits of corruption without having to share. In China, government officials are not allowed to drive in overly expensive sedans while in Vietnam only the officials own expensive sedans. The middle class of Vietnamese are still at the level of comparing the luxuriousness of motorbikes, not passenger cars.

There are, of course, some important differences between China and Vietnam, apart from the obvious difference in size.

The most evident to the casual visitor is the remarkable equanimity and good will the general population seems to hold for each other, even as motorbikes create lanes out of none and pedestrians jostle in crowded markets. Absent is the rudeness and nastiness we frequently see in encounters between fellow Chinese that are strangers. I don't have an explanation for this difference. At the airport immigration line, a young Vietnamese woman cut in front of me. She did this with a sweet smile and a quick bow as if to explain that her plane was leaving soon. I did not like this any better than if I was in China, but in China I would not have gotten the smile or bow and I would have glared.

Vietnamese would not do anything important without consulting the Feng Shui master or fortune teller. Whether it's the wedding date or the year to have a baby or even the direction the tomb should face, the services of the

interpreter of the world beyond are essential. Some of the superstitious practices are coming back in China but not to this extent. Mao did quite an effective job of knocking the underpinnings of superstitious practices out of the population.

In Vietnam's classroom, the teacher is a totalitarian authority figure that gains the obedience of the students partly out of fear mixed with respect. (When Vu is trying to get his daughter to behave, he uses the teacher the way we would with the bogeyman.) The intellectuals in the form of professors were so humiliated during the Cultural Revolution, that in China the relationship between student and teacher are now less formal and stiff, albeit the respect for the teacher has survived the decade of turmoil.

It will be interesting to see how closely Vietnam will follow China's path. I would hope that Vietnam can learn from some of the mistakes China have made in its development. Judging from the rows of 6-star resort development taking place on the former U.S. beach-front base in Da Nang, to me reminiscent of China's overbuilt experience on Hainan, I am not optimistic.

**Nugyen Van Vu, Oversea Adventure Travel
Trip Itinerary and Notes, 12/2-12/15/06
Saturday, 12/2/06**

By the time we got to our hotel, it was already 4 PM. By the time Vu took us on a walking tour, basically around the block by the hotel, at 5 PM, it was already dusk and dark by the time we got back. We saw a lot of stalls serving steamed dumplings, soup noodles, pho, BBQ animals including what appeared to be two halves of a small dog.

**Sunday, 12/3/06 Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum,
Ethnology Museum, Water Puppet Show**

May and I got up early and took our own walk around, pretty much tracing the steps of the previous evening. We even shared a big steamed meat bun for about VND 4,000 or about \$0.35.

First stop of the morning tour was to pay homage to Ho Chi Minh at his mausoleum. Nearby was the magnificent state house built by



the Museum of Ethnology

the French which he never lived in but used for state receptions and his actual residences. The last is a modest two room house built on stilts. One was for work and the other for sleep. The outhouse was located away from the house. During his waning last year when he was too weak to climb the stairs regularly, they build him a small one floor residence near the stilted house and connected to the bomb shelter, used when American bombers flew overhead. Unlike Mao, Ho lived simply and did everything for himself. The people on both halves of Vietnam respected him for his austere, self-less lifestyle.

Ho's residence from across the pond

A short walk from Ho's former residence was the ancient pagoda built on a single pole in the middle of a pond. The pagoda was in honor of Guan Ying, the goddess of mercy and only female Buddha in the Chinese/Vietnamese form of Buddhism. (What Chinese would call temples, Vietnamese call them pagodas. What Chinese call pagodas, Vietnamese refer to them as towers.)

After lunch at a local restaurant, we went to the Museum of Ethnology, a relatively new museum outside of central Hanoi. Aside from depicting various ethnic groups inside the museum, a special wing was devoted to a surprisingly candid display of the difficult conditions during the period of subsidized economy, from 1975 when Vietnam unified the south with the north to 1986 when the central government began to re-distribute the land back to the farmers and gave them the freedom to do their own thing. The lesson was starkly clear: Take away personal incentive and the whole economy will tank. Deng Xiaoping learned this lesson in 1978 and Gorbachev in the late 1980's before losing power in 1991.

The grounds of the museum contained models of distinctive kinds of housing used by various ethnic groups, such as one with a very tall steep roof on stilts and one very long house also on stilts. Perhaps because it was a Sunday, the grounds were dotted with couples in wedding outfits posing under the direction of the photographers and accompanied by assistants holding light reflectors. Vu explained that taking photos on the grounds of the museum was a lot cheaper than taking an actual trip to the mountains to see the ethnic minorities and take in the real scenery.

We took in the hour-long Thang Long water puppet show before going to dinner. The puppeteers were partially immersed in water behind a screen and maneuvered the puppets with poles. The water before the screen served as the stage. The theater is located on the old quarters of Hanoi facing the northeast corner of the Hoan Kiem Lake (Huan Jian Hu in Mandarin, Returned Sword Lake). This folk art form is indigenous to this part of Vietnam.

Monday, 12/4/2006 Temple of Literature, Old Quarters Dr. George Allen, the banana peddler

Vu led those willing on a walk beginning at 5:30 AM, well before the sunrise. In the dark, we weaved between farmers in an impromptu market selling vegetables, meats and fish and fruits. Vu had us sampled sticky rice in various flavors and some of us tried to shoulder the loads on poles that Vietnamese women used to bring their produce to the market. We walked by the restored Opera House in fine French architecture and sidewalk assembly of daily newspapers as they were being readied for distribution. By the time we got to side of “Returned Sword Lake,” there was daylight.

We watched various forms of exercise going on, and inspired by typical American exhibitionism, we also formed a spontaneous Conga line imitating one of the exercises, whereupon each person massaged the back of the person in front—I am sure—to the amusement of the local folks. I was most impressed with a form of kicking exercise, in this case two young men took on one on the other side of the net by kicking the shuttlecock over a shoulder-high net a la beach volleyball format (but no hands permitted). They were able to keep the rally going, frequently longer than in the two-on-two beach volleyball.



the Temple of Literature

Fred, Julia & May at Temple of Literature

The formal part of the morning tour took us to the Temple of Literature. The emperor of Vietnam started a civil service examination in the 13th century and names of successive winners were listed here and many commemorative stone steles were on display. In traditional Chinese fashion, these steles rested on the backs of stone

tortoises. The temple grounds and buildings were very Chinese in appearance and impressive.

Fred & Julia at the drum tower



A Cyclo is a tricycle with a front bucket for the passenger.

After lunch, Vu led us on a stroll through old quarters of Hanoi and then we each got on a “Cyclo” for another cruise through the quarters before taking us back to our hotel. A Cyclo is a tricycle with a front bucket for the passenger providing the rider unobstructed view of the street scenes and sometimes close encounters.

Tonight, the group split into two home hosted dinners. To get to the home of our host, Ms. Thuy, we had to walk past the “B52” Lake, a small body of water not much bigger than a pond where remnants of a downed American B52 landed. There was a small monument in the lake and an explanatory display board on the side. Vu told us that this body of water had been shrinking (and turning putrid, I might add). It would not surprise me if someday the lake was to disappear altogether in the name of urban renewal.

Ms. Thuy’s house has three floors with two bedrooms on the second floor. One belongs to her and her husband along with their son. The other belongs to her mother-in-law, who shares her bedroom with a granddaughter and/or grandson to keep her company. The third floor

consists of open balcony and a covered family shrine. The ground floor consists of a living room that also doubled as our dining room along with a kitchen and a bathroom. The house is typical Vietnam in that it has a small footprint and multiple floors and more than one generation sleeps in the same bedroom. Their house did have a court yard and a large covered area for her husband to teach and train his Kung Fu students.

Our host and her brother who cooked

Ms. Thuy graduated from Foreign Language University in 1990, majoring in Russian, which meant she was to be unemployed for the next three years, Russian being the language of the past. Reading between the lines, I gathered that during this low period of her life was when she met her husband who supported her. She then taught herself English to the proficiency level of becoming a teacher in the elementary school. In addition, she has taken on the task hosting OAT dinners on a regular basis. Her husband greeted us politely when we first arrived but remained with his students and did not join us for dinner.

Afterwards, he went out drinking with his students. Ms. Thuy explained without any rancor that he goes out every night and has a drinking problem. They have a teen-age son. In the West, this couple would have split long ago.

Tuesday, 12/5/06 Toha Optional tour

This morning was our optional trip to Toha (Tu He) meaning land on the river, i.e., an island. On the way, we stopped at a roadside vegetable farm and adjacent cemetery. Vu explained that the Vietnam government made it standard practice to bury fallen Vietcongs and northern soldiers on roadside cemeteries near their home village, facing the road and surrounding some form of memorial monument. We were to see many such road side "Arlington's" throughout our travels in Vietnam. The traditional Vietnamese practice is to bury their dead for around three years in a mound of dirt and then exhumed and the bones cleaned for

reburial in a proper tomb. For the fallen soldiers, the second step is omitted in their eternal repose.

We also stopped at a roadside to see how coal briquettes were extruded from a mold and made into cylinders with open channels in the core to facilitate even burning. Coal is very cheap in Vietnam being readily available in open, side of the mountain mines, rather than having to dig underground. One of these briquettes, about 6 inches tall by 6 inches round can serve as cooking fuel for a sidewalk stall or home kitchen for the entire day.

Students returning to Toha for lunch

To get to Toha, a village of about 3500, we had to take a ferry. The village is known for making rice paper and shoe-box size, ceramic funeral caskets to hold ashes. The rice paper is edible for wrapping Vietnam spring rolls and not for paintings. There are two ways to make the paper and interestingly enough, the cost is about



Halong Bay

the same. One way is hand rolled each into the final circular shape. The other is to machine cast into a large rectangular sheet and cut circular forms out of the sheet. As we walked along the narrow alleys of Toha, we were surrounded rice paper spread over bamboo mats left out to dry. Mr. Ly, daughter and wife.

Our host was Mr. Ly Van Viet. His wife and daughter were making rice paper wraps and he entertained us in their large and very traditional living room. After we all made an attempt to manually cast a rice paper wrap, we then sat in the living room for a rice wine toast and then Mr. Ly entertained us by playing a mandolin like string instrument and a flute. Some

of us joined in to the best of our ability and we serenaded him with anti-war protest songs. A good time and good will exuded among us.

In the center of the living room hung Mr. Ly's ancestor who was a famous herbal medicine doctor. Facing his house, his parents live in the house to his right and at right angles while his brother's family lives in the adjoining house on the left. This being a village, the houses were roomier than the urban homes and the land for each household more generous.

We came back to Hanoi for lunch at an old French house near the West Lake, Mansion Hanoi. The ambience, with attractive oil paintings on the wall, and the food was better than what we've had so far, I felt.

Wednesday, 12/6/06 Hanoi Hilton, Halong Bay

Today, we leave Hanoi for Halong Bay but not before lunch. First we stopped to hear a lecture by 86 year old writer and commentator, Huu Ngoc. In Chinese his name is You Yu, meaning friendship jade. Some of his talk as taken down by me follows.

During the 1953-56 period, Ho Chi Minh was pressured by Mao and Stalin to institute land reform in the communist mode, which led to disarray and bloodshed. Ho later apologized to his people. In 1954, to forestall conflict, he asked the French for independence in exchange for membership in the French commonwealth. France refused. Thus, 5 million people died needlessly in the ensuing conflict that ran from 1954 to 1975. The disastrous collectivization that followed reunification led to famine in Vietnam. The "renewal" policy was instituted in 1986 whereupon land was returned back to the farmers and Vietnam became a rice exporter in three years. The two major components of the renewal policy were open door and market economy.

The Vietnam culture is based on the Red River culture started in North Vietnam around the Hanoi area. Ethnic Vietnamese used to have northern branch inside China and a southern one

in the Red River delta. The northern one has been assimilated by the Chinese and no traces are left. The rice growing cultures of Vietnam along with China, Korea and Japan, emphasize collective/group/family, Confucian values and human duties and responsibilities. The West emphasizes individualism and human rights.

Some of us bought his 1000+ page tome, "Wandering through Vietnamese Culture," a compendium of his essays written over the years. At the end of his book was a useful summary of Vietnam's history.

Hanoi Hilton, now a museum

From the lecture, we then went to visit the notorious "Hanoi Hilton." Only a small part of the prison complex has been preserved as a museum, the rest having been converted into office building and residences. The prison, made famous for holding such American soldiers as John McCain and Peterson, former ambassador to Vietnam, was actually built decades earlier by the colonial French to hold Vietnamese revolutionaries.

After lunch, we took a short walk along the lake in the northern part of Hanoi where a downed John McCain was fished from the waters.

On the way to Halong Bay, we made an unscheduled roadside (fang bian, Mandarin for "convenient") stop for Ron and me and then at a village nursery school. Vu explained that village day care and kindergarten school costs the parents about \$17 per month per kid. In the urban area, the cost would be at around \$48/month while international schools would cost around \$120-180/month.

Thursday, 12/7/06 Halong Bay

This morning on our way to the boat for our cruise, we stopped at the local market where Vu divided the group into three teams. Each team was given VND 2000, equivalent to about US 12 cents) and was asked to buy five items using only Vietnamese by sound. May's team, without Fred's help she claimed, won by correctly purchasing all five items, namely pepper, garlic,



Thai Hoa Palace Within the Citadel

lemon grass, lime and ginger. Our team bought some weird vegetable, which Vu claimed between snickers, was for consumption along with dog meat.

Halong Bay, World Heritage site

The cruise on the Halong Bay was interesting. First was the stop to visit one of the large caverns on one of the islands. Then we stopped at one of the floating fish farms surrounded by strange karsts formations, sort of like China's Guilin on water and is one of Vietnam's World Heritage sites.

The dinner at a hot pot restaurant was very average. Since I did not see any other customers, I am sure they appreciated the business.

Friday, 12/8/06 Hue, Perfume River

This morning we drove back to the Hanoi airport for the flight to Hue. Enroute, Vu told a Vietnamese folk tale about the origin of the mosquito involving a loving fisherman and a foolish but beautiful wife. We again stopped to walk around a vegetable farm along the thin strip of land between plots.

Our flight to Hue was late because the Airbus that originally was to take us became not available and we have to go via turbo prop, which meant that the flight took longer and more

importantly, some five bags from our group did not make our flight but had to be delivered later in the evening. By the time we got to Hue and into town it was past 2 PM. We stopped at a Pho 24, a Vietnamese fast food chain store located just across the hotel for a quick lunch.

At 4 PM, we got on the dragon boat and headed up the Perfume River— which ran past our hotel. The boat ride turned out to be a shopping experience for some of us. By the time we docked at the Thienmu (in Chinese mandarin, Tian Mu, Heavenly Mother) pagoda

darkness was around the corner. When we proceeded to walk to the back to see the sedan formerly owned by the monk who immolated himself in Saigon in 1963, it was dark. The monk from Hue protested the way President Diem of South Vietnam, who was a Catholic, treated Buddhism in Vietnam. (When we got to Saigon, Vu pointed to a shrine on a street corner where the monk died, thus commemorating his memory.)

Dinner was a buffet at the hotel by the river.

Saturday, 12/9/06 The Citadel, Orphanage, Dinner inside the Citadel

Early morning visit to Hue's Citadel was a good decision. Most of the tourists were still coming in as we were leaving. The front of the Citadel contained 9 huge cannons, four facing five. Four for the four seasons and five for the 5 elements Asians believed in, namely fire, water, earth, wood and metal. These cannons were made from weapons captured from the opposition by the founder of the Nguyen dynasty in early 1800's.

The front of the Citadel was modeled after Beijing's Forbidden City, the gates and the towers were similar though less grand compared to Beijing. This was the imperial palace of Nguyen emperors. The palace was also arrayed

along an exact north-south axis like that of Beijing, though the Beijing palace predated the Citadel by nearly 400 years.

Hue Citadel inner palace grounds

Much of the Citadel was destroyed by the Tet offensive of 1968. The Vietcongs held the fortress for 25 days and kept the American soldiers in check and the latter had to resort to heavy shelling in order to force the eventual retreat of the Vietcongs. The Citadel is now also a World Heritage site, and careful renovation and restoration is underway.

We then visited an orphanage run by Buddhist nuns, containing over 200 kids ranging from 5 months old to some in high school and college. The kids had lunch in shifts and the

older ones look after the younger ones. They sang and gave us a raucous welcome. This orphanage is supported by the Grand Circle Foundation.

Our vegetarian lunch was at another pagoda where lunch was prepared and served by nuns. It was quite a treat. Many members of the group claimed that they would not have realized that it was vegetarian had they not been told in advance. Compared to vegetarian meals I've had in Buddhist temples in China, the Vietnamese version do not use vegetable protein (gluten) to simulate meat and do not use soy products. I judge this meal to be more flavorful than many I've had in China and not as heavy. By rule, the meal was partaken in silence. A dramatic downpour overtook us during our meal



We left by bus from Hue for Hoi An by way of Da Nang.

accompanied by banging shutters to add to the ambiance of our meal. After the meal, Vu and the nuns sang a folk tune that was haunting and melodious.

For dinner, we went back inside the Citadel to a sumptuous home owned by descendants of the royal family, since only royalty would have been allowed to own and live inside the Citadel in such circumstances. (Squatters that moved in after the reform were allowed much more modest dwellings.) Our

hostess gave an explanation of her three-part porcelain collection that was used exclusively by the emperor, or by the royal family or by the common folks. The walls of her house also displayed

some nice painted glass art works.

Antique painted glass, Sunday, 12/10/06 Hoi An

This morning we left by bus from Hue for Hoi An by way of Da Nang. We went through a tunnel, nearly 4 miles long and newly opened that cut through the mountains and save a lot of time. The newly opened bridge that connected two parts of Halong Bay, the soaring new bridge under construction in Da Nang, new schools everywhere being built alongside old ones are all indications that Vietnam is serious about investing in their infrastructure. To me, this is the serious commitment necessary to ensure solidly based economic growth that China has been making but much less evident in India.

Before leaving Hue, we also stopped at a roadside “Ly” family tomb, one of many in Hue. Eighteen generations have followed the founder of this clan. This particular tomb and family shrine looked like it was newly decorated and very colorful. I noticed that broken pieces of blue porcelain were particularly popular in decorating the walls and animals of the shrine. The descendants caring for the family tombs, on the other hand, lived in structures more like hovels than houses.

Vu led us to a posh beach resort for the WC stop. The bungalows were large and well constructed. All this resort needed was guests other than casual visitors to their WC. I guess this was the off season for them and peeing customers were better than no customers.

About one-half hour outside of Hoi An, we stopped at a village known for their marble sculptures. The range of their display was impressive even though being a Sunday, there were no one in the workshops. After lunch and a rest at the Hoi An Pacific hotel, Vu took us into the old town. We visited a Chinese “temple,” more like a benevolent association and apparently an influential one. Even China’s president Jiang Zemin visited this temple when he visited Hoi An in 2002. We then cross the old covered bridge built by the Japanese and went into an old house where embroidery and other handicraft items were available for sale. In older days before the port got silted over, Hoi An was a busy trade center for sea going ships with large populations of Chinese and Japanese living there.

Before dinner, we made the much looked forward to visit to the tailor. Some of us even brought measurements from home to place orders on behalf of relatives. Dinner was a nearby restaurant for a “cooking lesson.” The teaching chef was quite a showman and very entertaining. The fish wrapped in banana leaf, on the other hand, turned out to be surprisingly dry and not particularly tasty.

Monday, 12/11/06 My Son Champa, Ruins, Hoi An Old Town



Covered Japanese bridge in Hoi An

My Son, another World Heritage site inside Vietnam, is where the ruins of the ancient Cham holy grounds can be found nestled in the valley surrounded by mountains. A strictly Hindu kingdom, the Chams existed from 4th century to the 14th century before being

assimilated by the Viets. Most of the ruins were destroyed during the conflict with the Americans. Bomb craters were still evident all over the grounds. The one remaining cluster of structures still worth seeing was built in the 7th century. They were built out of red bricks that seemingly were able to stick together without use of mortar. Recent research suggested that the Chams may have found some form of vegetation based adhesive that can be very thinly applied. Restoration is underway on these grounds under the careful World Heritage guidelines including one being funded by the Grand Circle Foundation. (My Son in Mandarin is Mei Shan and means beautiful mountain.)

Lunch at the White Lantern restaurant back in Hoi An was notable for the generous use of ironwood in a nicely designed two floor

restaurant with a wide spiral staircase. A young man played his guitar for us while we ate. It was not clear to me if he was part of the lunch or if he was freelancing. (In retrospect, he was probably part of the deal since many other subsequent restaurants came with entertainment.)

The afternoon was spent walking around Hoi An's old town. Walking around this ancient port was a lot of fun. We thought of visiting another Chinese temple, also mentioned in the guide books but found out that the attraction was part of a package of 5. Admissions were not sold separately and this Fujian association did not seem to justify the investment of paying for all five while using only one of the tickets.

We did not find good coffee in town, so settled for beer on the second floor of a restaurant facing the river and watched the sun go down and the rising tide slowly flood over the sidewalk.

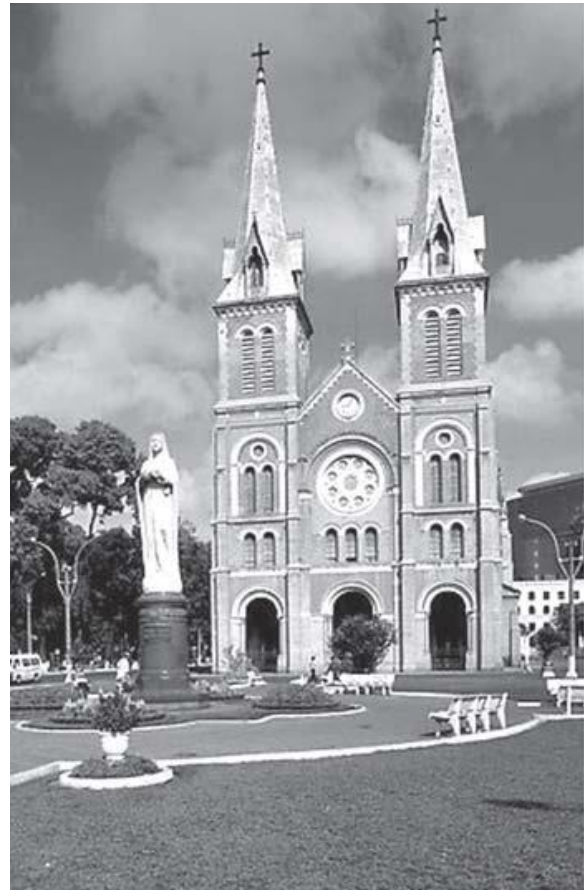
The walk back to the hotel from old town seemed longer than it should be but we made it back in time for dinner at the hotel and took in the one hour floor show, consisting of ethnic Cham, Chinese and Vietnamese dances performed by the hotel staff.

Tuesday, 12/12/06 Ho Chi Minh City, War Museum & Le'Toile

We left early (6 AM) from Hoi An for the Da Nang Airport. This time, we took the new highway along the coast which was more direct and passed by the huge former U.S. airbase where some of concrete hangers can still be seen. Most of the beach fronts were in the process of being transformed into 5 to 6-star resorts, many just fence dedo not know anything about the resort potential of Da Nang, but can't help but wonder if this is not going to be excessive investment in the making.

We arrived in HCMC on time, even with having to wait for the retrieval of a camera left on board the plane. The Vietnam Airline staff was efficient and responsive. We went directly from the airport to the War Museum. On display in the court yard were various war machines such as

tanks and planes. In the first wing were displays of photographs taken from photojournalists that were themselves killed this war. Altogether over 120 journalists were killed. Some of the photos were those that seared our memory when they were first published and we can still remember and some we had not seen before or at least did not recollect—seemed particularly sad that these people gave up their lives to tell the story of the war. Besides the My Lai massacre and others like it, there was a photo of a GI standing behind two



Notre-Dame Cathedral, Ho Chi Minh City

severed Vietcong heads, a reminder to me of the Japanese atrocities in Nanking during WWII.

We then took a quick walk around the Notre Dame Cathedral and the old post office built by the French in traditional French architecture. We probably could have spent more time at the museum; there were so much to take in. For some reason, a French guillotine was on displayed at the War Museum that would seem

more appropriate at the Hanoi Hilton, the original French prison.

Lunch at Le'Toile, recognized for its *excellent* French cuisine, was a most welcome change. We were all ready for second helpings of baguettes and the sole in two sauces weren't bad either.

Wednesday, 12/13/06 Cu Chi Tunnel

The optional tour today took us to see Cu Chi (Gu Zhi) tunnel. Vu took us to the far end of the tunnel system relative to HCMC where we got a more extensive look at the tunnel system, if for no other reason, because there were hardly any other tourists. We saw the recruiting film Vietcongs used. How the tunnel system worked was explained to us, including how the system guarded against flooding and poison gas and even included underwater escape and entry to the Saigon River. We were shown camouflaged entrances and bunkers as well as command centers and hospitals underground. We were given the opportunity to crawl in these tunnels and some of us did.

Amateur tunnel rats

The exhibit of various traps, above and below ground, containing sharp bamboo stakes sent chills down our spine. During the conflict, the VC strategy was to leave the enemy injured by the traps unmolested and thus enable their being rescued by their comrades for maximum psychological and demoralization impact.

We were treated to tea in one of the kitchens which was served with baked tapioca roots with chopped peanut as the dip. The snack tasted just fine but probably not as fine as a steady diet that the VC soldiers had to endure.

What we saw during our stay at HCMC really brought home the horrors of what the war must have been like for the American soldiers that fought here. One can't help but wonder if someday we are not going to see another "war museum" in Iraq, exhibiting another failure in American foreign policy. As the refrain of an antiwar song goes, "when will they ever learn?"

Fred showing off his old home, Saigon

After we got back to the hotel, 7 of us joined Fred and Julia who rented a van to see Fred's old home; the Huibonhua residence, once the wealthiest family in Saigon, rich enough to lend money to the French government; Cholon, quarters with a current population of some 900,000 ethnic Chinese; and then we enjoyed 2 for 1 drink at the top of Windsor Tower, a 26 story store and hotel complex. For dinner, we went to Hotel Continental where some of us had pizza.



The system guarded against flooding and poison gas and even included underwater escape and entry to the Saigon River.

Thursday, 12/14/06 Mekong Delta

In driving to My Tho by the Mekong Delta, we crossed the Saigon River to the future HCMC, the area planned for new development zones and new housing. At My Tho we were met by a local guide, the first that we've had on this trip. His accent and mannerism was very similar to Vu but with less charisma. We got on the boat and cruise the banks of My Tho before heading up the river and around a number of large islands.

We then transferred to canoe-like boats, four to a boat, and were rowed through narrow channels to a bee farm on one of the islands (I believe it was Turtle Island).

“Cruising” through the canal

At the bee farm, we sampled a special honey flavored tea and fruits and a local rice wine. We also got to stick our finger directly into the bee hive for a taste of fresh honey. Some of us also wore a live python for photo op. When we left the farm, a horse-drawn buggy was waiting to take us for a short ride to the coconut candy factory. We then returned to the big boat after walking through the narrow dirt path to the shore. At exactly 2 minutes and 59 seconds, Vu said, the boat will deliver us to lunch which was on the other side of the island. The restaurant was built on stilts over marsh land and open on all sides affording a 360o view of the river and island. The lunch featured a fried elephant ear fish and a trio of folk instruments with alternating female and male singers. For a seemingly primitive restaurant built on stilts, the WC a short distance away on solid land was surprisingly clean and modern.

For the farewell dinner tonight, we were taken to Pho Co, a fine looking restaurant in an old house heavy with ambience. We were again entertained by a musical trio playing traditional Vietnamese instruments. I thought the one string instrument with a big sound box was impressive in its range and volume.

The highlight of the evening actually occurred before dinner when Vu’s wife and

young daughter came to the hotel lobby to meet us. Vu’s wife is very pretty and charming and their daughter, “Tina,” cute but shy.

Tour leader Vu and family

All of us made the observation of how well thought out the logistics of the trip have been. Every activity seemed to fit into the schedule very well, even the seemingly impromptu stops. Vu did a tremendous job in planning and scheduling. Aside from the plane and bus rides, and the train ride we did not take, we experienced the following other forms of transportation:

- A cruise on Halong Bay with lunch included.
- A cruise on the dragon boat up the Perfume River where some of us tried on and bought the attire for the farewell dinner.
- The cruise on the Mekong where we sipped freshly opened coconut milk and ate the fresh meat inside.
- The canoe ride through the canal of Turtle Island
- The regular ferry to Toha for those that took in the optional trip.
- The cyclo-ride through Hanoi’s old quarters.
- The horse drawn buggy ride on Turtle Island.

Dr. George Koo is an international business consultant with Deloitte & Touche and a contributor to New America Media.



We got on the boat and cruise the banks of My Tho.