

## Monday: Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City)

We've done it again – hit a limited time and some primary tourist attractions are shut!

Walked out of our glittery/chandeliered hotel with simple bedrooms into busy central Saigon – two chaps with cyclos enthusiastically offering a ride .... fun while it lasted but when they repeatedly refused to be in photos alarm bells rang. We decided to end the arrangement and consequently paid well over odds! Not nice! Good thing was, as Nick sat with a beer getting his head around things, the 'dong' damage was half as much as he feared tho' still far too much!



We are now becoming seasoned crossers of these crazy streets. We did pick up some advice from some Ozzie travellers ... “don't walk out in front of cars – they are less likely to go round you”, unlike the thousands of bikers (some families!) who buzz around you if you walk resolutely forward and don't stop! Aaaagh! One attraction (tho' it can barely be called that) was the museum commemorating/exposing the Vietnam War. There were US tanks, helicopters and planes outside which might have given a gung-ho impression, but

inside the info and photos detailing that barbaric and disastrous war and the eventual global pressure which ended it. At one point I did feel physically ill and I'm pretty certain people must have thrown up there. Now back at hotel where Nick is absorbed with internet business and we await taxi to station – no more crossing of the crazy streets.

In transit ... Mon/Tues

..... tho' the trip *through* the streets was instructive to say the least, the driver, sensing my anxiety laughing and shouting 'whoa' like horse. (praps he was an American Western fan!) Our train awaited us along with some Vietnamese who were on way to work and one, Sy, had some schoolboy English and we were able to establish a level of communication. We had upper berths but they readily volunteered to do the clambering and allow us a bit of dignity! I'm not certain how I



would have coped with a visit to the loo in the night. Once the sun was up I did my usual gawping at the Vietnam world ... flooded paddy fields; water buffalo; tree-covered dramatic outcrops then quarries: muddy paddy fields and scarecrow with Nazi-style helmet; isolated homes, towns, water, boats, fishermen: clapped out, over crowded buses, no windows or doors; emerald green paddy fields: a glorious sandy beach with breakers; communication masts; banana plantations; temples, brick works: no signals at stations, but smart chaps in Daz-white shirt and military-style lapels, holding up stick! Learned a few Vietnamese words.

Tuesday



When our companions left the train in the early morning, a mum and her six year old son joined us and Nick soon established a relationship with him. We travelled together for several hours, his name Nyuyen (Wee am) and he surprised us by writing his name in my special book in beautiful cursive script and helping Nick with a codeword puzzle we amuse ourselves with on long journeys. He worked out what was going on and was quick to point out letters Nick had missed ... an intelligent little chap, extremely inquisitive!

Last bit of journey on our own and arrived in Danang.

Tuesday: Hoi An

.....and took taxi to our guest house which is great – a family run affair with four generations, one with excellent English, and more than acceptable food – such fresh veg and fruit and green aromatic herbs ... and much appreciated (we hadn't eaten for 18 hours apart from an unusual coffee served on train – extremely syrupy and chocolatey). How lucky we felt to be here rather in one of the glitzy 5 star jobbies we saw on our way into town. Walked into town, a hotch-potch of temples, ancient restored houses, galleries, street markets and eateries. I was suddenly, suddenly, craving a good old English cuppa and the best we could do was a Lipton's teabag with strict instructions for no lime and **cold** milk. We just made it back, slightly damp! There is so much to do, excursion-wise, but the weather is distinctly unsettled so going off for the day is risky!

Wednesday Hoi An



Continue to be impressed by this place. After great breakfast with huge choice – again, Nick persuaded me to set off on bike and off we went in weather which was improving, some blue sky and quite a lot of sun. I managed an hour before I was flagging and we stopped for one of those exceptional coffees and a drink (not ordered but cooling and refreshing called negtah) for next to nothing, I think ....Nick will correct me. The heavens opened in town and we were both drenched as we arrived back to our hotel – an ideal time for up-dating this blog!

Thursday

Yesterday the rain lasted for a few hours mid-day and since then nothing. Now the sun is really hot, but our cossies are packed, we've vacated our room and are awaiting transport back east for another, and hopefully our last, long overland journey, north. Last eve into town which is delightful as the light fades, the shops light up and all the brightly coloured lanterns glow. In

addition, kids are selling some sort of luminous blue shuttlecock which lights up as it falls back to earth – quite magical! We ate out, but not as good as here where we will eat before our pick-up.



Although this place is reasonably priced, we have a nine foot bed – yes – two four-ft-sixers with amazing Chinese-y headboard! I am now back to spread-eagling myself and wonder however we managed on the four foot we have on the boat back home. Bathroom also impressive – black/grey and white and really a wet room with white chalky pebbles in drain-away, a roughly hewn granite table for placing shower things and sexy lighting – oh yes, and bamboo towel racks.

With the long journey looming I was persuaded to do another cycle ride – not as good today as we were more in town and I had an argument with a motorbike and fell off. This happened in a quiet spot where the street was wide and we were negotiating a sweeping left hand turn. Nick did it native style cutting straight across but yours truly pedalled round the outside and didn't hear the bike coming up on my right, wanting to turn onto a small by-way. Apart from an injured toe I was fine but a bit tearful for awhile and with little or no confidence in the busy streets. Stoically did the last ten minutes back to our hotel! Hanoi, here we come!

Thurs/Friday ..Northbound to Hanoi

....and now on train, heading north with the prospect of another 16 hours on train. Above us on the upper berths two Danish students of global development, Bjorn and Seisl, who have been



living in Hoi An for three months and are now travelling before returning to Copenhagen for Christmas. Both were tall and he was a giant; I cowered under him when he moved. The first part of the journey in the gathering dusk was spectacular, the train winding slowly along the coast with tropical forest falling away to lovely sandy beaches with spectacular surf. It was dark all too quickly and when we finally settled to sleep we slept better and actually felt fresh – perhaps we are getting used to overnight trains!

Lots more paddy fields on way up to Hanoi but also bigger towns and more industry.

The crazy traffic in Hanoi seems no different from Saigon tho' p'raps roads not as wide! We were advised to get a green taxi to hotel but none about and hailed a white one which cost us 75p! Our hotel is in the old part of the city, the smart glass doors looking out on a narrow street with shop houses and small businesses, with folk sitting and squatting around goods and foods. It is less ostentatious than our Saigon

City stop-over – staff, delightfully helpful, not in obsequious way. In our room, bed covered with rose petals and also petals floating in hand basin. Freshened up and set off for lake, Nick turning map every which way in effort to identify unidentifiable streets. We headed for food as we hadn't eaten properly for 24 hours. First street we found was the Hanoi Departure Zone – a row of establishments making coffins and floral tributes. Finally found the place we'd been recommended – a French Vietnamese place, like many places, an apology of a facade but elegant interior with option of dining al fresco or inside. We enjoyed the most sophisticated



meal of our travels to date – a three course lunch for £10 a head! We then wandered around the lake where there was little evidence of physical activity, Chinese-style, but nowhere near as much as the mornings when the place is alive with communal activities, ancient and modern (the latter, aerobics to Vietnamese Rap!) But ... the crossing of roads remains for me, a bit of a nightmare. Nick seems to think if I do it enough and learn the 'technique', the easier it should get! It does seem amazing how street-wise all the traffic (90% motorbikes) is; at junctions there is generally no right of way and the traffic just interweaves, with rarely an incident!

Back to hotel and a break from the mini-traumas of road-crossing. However, our evening plan to visit a night street market was aborted as I'm afraid I found the night time crossing worse, unable to gauge the speed of the oncoming traffic.

## **Saturday**

Staff so helpful, ensuring we had some breakfast before departure tho' restaurant not open. They politely requested we give a young man with family difficulties a lift with us which we did and were waved off by a whole group of staff. Oh ...I need to record this hotel earned 10/10 for the crispest white bed linen and comfy bed! Mmm!

On our trip to airport we passed a small park where a couple of gents played badminton and a small group doing tai chi, also the central flower market, all abloom, the Vietnamese version of the Arc d' Triomphe and ... at least a dozen bikes with overgrown bonsai riding pillion. No probs at airport and we were airborne on schedule for the three hour flight to KL where Inge-Marie met us and whisked us back to the apartment.