

FROM SAIGON TO HANOI: NINE TOWNS IN NINE DAYS

TRAVELLING BY ROAD ACROSS VIETNAM IS AN EXPERIENCE THAT GROWS ON YOU. HUGE STRETCHES OF ROADS HAVE STILL NOT RECOVERED FROM THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY 30 YEARS OF WAR. DRIVING AT A SNAIL'S PACE WITH BODIES AND LUGGAGE TOSSED ABOUT INSIDE VEHICLES, HEAT AND DUST ARE YOUR CONSTANT COMPANIONS. DON'T FORGET THE RESOUNDING PRESENCE OF THE HORN, WHICH IS OFTEN NEEDED TO CLEAR THE ROAD AHEAD. THE MAGIC OF THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE AND THE ABUNDANCE OF LIFE UNFOLDS SLOWLY, AND IT BECOMES A KIND OF DRUG THAT YOU INVOLUNTARILY GET HIGH ON. THE COUNTRY HAS A SPIRIT OF CONTRADICTION — FEAR AND ECSTASY, HARDSHIP AND GENTLENESS. DAY BY DAY, AS YOU GET A MORE COMPLETE PICTURE, THE DIVERSITY AND RICHNESS OF THE LAND STARTS TO EMERGE AND YOU BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITY OF THE VIETNAMESE MIND. THE COUNTRY HAS BEEN PLAGUED BY WAR SINCE THE EARLIEST OF TIMES. RECENT DOCUMENTATION OF THE HORRORS OF DEATH AND DESTRUCTION IS AN ECHO OF WHAT VIETNAM HAS GONE THROUGH MANY TIMES. THE TRAGEDY OF WAR HAS TOUGHENED THE MIND OF THE PEOPLE. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, IT HAS STRENGTHENED THEIR NATURAL OPENNESS AND GENUINE KINDNESS. IT TOOK VIETNAM A LONG TIME TO BECOME ONE NATION. NOW THAT IT IS FINALLY UNITED, IT HAS OPENED ITS DOORS TO THE WORLD. IF YOU LISTEN HARD ENOUGH, YOU MIGHT LEARN FROM THE PEOPLE HOW TO ACCEPT BOTH UGLINESS AND BEAUTY IN ORDER TO BECOME YOUR TRUE SELF. TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY GILLES MASSOT.

TUESDAY, SAIGON.

I meet Kim Hue and Lin on my very first afternoon in Vietnam as I stand at a road junction with my guide book, not really lost but not knowing which way to go, either. Right away, they decide to take my destiny into their hands. They invite me home for lunch. However, along the way, the happy occasion is marred. I have my wallet picked, I am fined for driving with no headlights, and my shoes are stolen outside their home. But it is not

that bad. My wallet is returned, but without the money. The policeman is not too "greedy", he gives me a rather light fine. And Kim Hue manages to catch a little girl who is seen sneaking around outside her courtyard, and makes her return my shoes. Lunch is a hearty affair of simple homecooked food. After a mouthful of the steaming hot delicacies, I soon forget about the unfortunate incidents. If I learned anything today, it is how ambiguous the Vietnamese are.

New as I am to the country, my conversation with Kim Hue and Lin gives me a rather interesting insight into what life can be like, nowadays, for two young women

there.

Apparently, they had befriended me in order to practise their English. Now that the country's relations with the outside world are turning the other way around, Russian isn't compulsory in school any more, and English has become an essential asset for anyone who wishes to get a good job. Especially so if she is a young woman. Women, who proved to be a powerful force in the country's struggle during the war, now find themselves back in a much more traditional situation.

Out of the eight million illiterates in the country, two thirds are women. With one million youths joining the country's work



Meeting Kim Hue and Lin in Saigon gave me the opportunity to enjoy Vietnamese hospitality and them the chance to practise their English. (The author is not pictured.)



Restaurant owner Phan Thai in Dalat has a live-and-let-live attitude — Buddhist faith mixed with French education.



At a big family gathering in a restaurant in Nha Trang, I was the only foreigner. Why was I invited to this lavish party?



Danang used to be called Tourane during French rule, and some streets still carry French names.



The Nine Holy Cannons in Hue now serve as a perfect rendezvous for a quick nap.



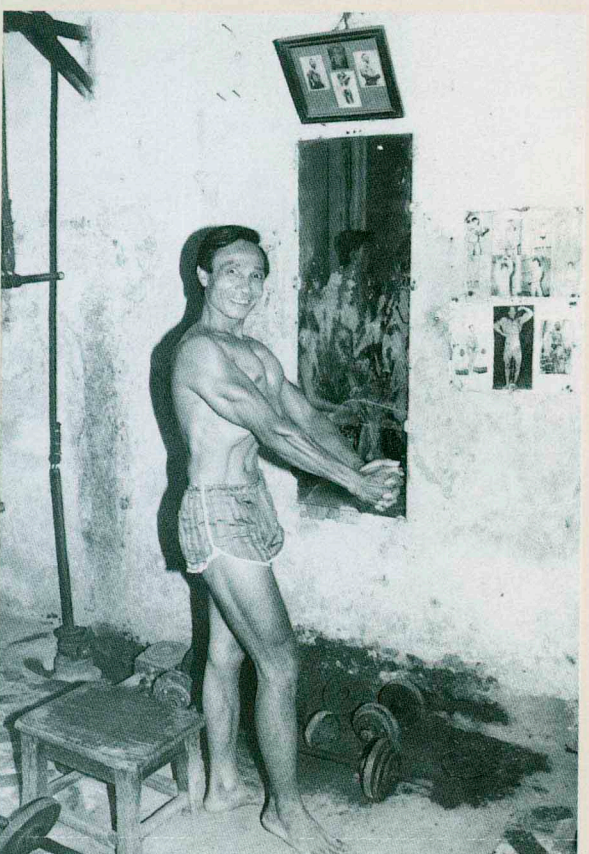
Sa Huynh and the rusty American truck showed how wrong things could be in Vietnam.



Unscarred by the war, Hoi An had arguably the best food in Vietnam, and gave me faith in nature again.



The fact that Ho Chi Minh was born in Vinh, does little to recommend a visit to this north-central town.



Hanoi is flexing its muscles. Visible progress has been made in the city, and more shops are opening up.

force every year, whenever a woman can find a job the chances are that it will be the hardest and for the lowest pay. Thus the importance of English for Kim Hue and Lin, young and pretty girls full of hope for their future and working hard for it.

WEDNESDAY, DALAT.

The hill resort town of Dalat is one of the most relaxing stops of the whole trip. Located 1475 metres above sea level, the town enjoys a very pleasant temperate climate amid a region dotted with lakes and waterfalls in evergreen forests.

On arrival, one feels that the place has a different rhythm from the other parts of the country. Indeed, even during the war, Dalat was spared the trauma experienced in the plains. By tacit agreement, all parties used it for their officers to relax, away from the fighting zones. Spared the ravages of war, the magnificent villas built during the French colonial era are still intact.

There is plenty to do and see here. This is also the place where the best fruit and vegetables can be eaten. Dalat's strawberries are a real treat.

My best memory of the stay here is meeting Phan Thai. One evening, as I stroll along Dalat's quiet streets in search of an inviting restaurant to have dinner, I come across *Restaurant de Famille*, recently opened by Phan Thai in the centre of town. It has become a favourite haunt for both locals and tourists because of its homely food, decor and service.

His conversation proves equally pleasing and interesting. Phan Thai used to be a philosophy teacher at the French *lycée*. And he has this wonderful live-and-let-live attitude — Buddhist faith mixed with his liberal French education.

After being isolated for so many years, Phan Thai is glad to meet me.

He sees it as a blessing to be in touch with both a Frenchman and an artist. We talk way into the night, and his wife's strawberry wine keeps us in a merry mood.

He tells me how, for many years, he has remained shut in his house of his own accord. His previous link with the colonial power wasn't so easily forgotten in socialist Vietnam. Although not really threatened, he chose to remain quiet, devoting a lot of time to meditation and the cultivation of his own little "secret garden", a roof filled with bonsai trees.

A keen photographer before the war, he shows me some prints he has managed to save from a search once conducted by the police in his house. One shows a man in a raincoat walking at night in the mist, his shadow painted by the glare of a streetlight

ahead of him — a lonely soul struggling for the inner strength of faith. It almost brings tears to my eyes. It says a lot about the artistry and the spirituality of Phan Thai.

When I have to leave, it is an emotional farewell.

THURSDAY, NHA TRANG.

It looks like a big family gathering, the table laden with mouth-watering dishes and a wide variety of drinks. I am the only foreigner in the restaurant, and stand out like a sore thumb. Many curious people come forward to ask where I come from.

I am also stricken with curiosity. Why was I invited to this lavish party? This is a celebration of the visit of some relatives who have migrated to Canada. I have witnessed many tearful reunion scenes, especially at airports. But this one takes the cake.

The relatives have brought back whatever new affluence they have earned. They are, indeed, the Boat People who left the country 10 years or more ago and are coming back with money in their purses. The most successful now think of joint ventures. Some others buy expensive imported motorbikes and cars, and leave them behind for the family once they go back. They also leave behind television sets and other imported electronic goods.

In return, the Vietnamese party goes all out to paint the town red by hosting a lavish dinner in one of the best restaurants. One which has a wall decorated with a mural depicting a winter scene. I wonder what their Canadian guests think of that. Have they become used to the harsh Canadian winter?

Not really, apparently. I understand that they consider themselves lucky, especially now that they are allowed to come "home" — even if it is for a holiday.

FRIDAY, SA HUYNH.

My guidebook mentions a prosperous little seaside town with a crescent-shaped beach bordered by padi fields and coconut palms. The only accommodation is a small beachside hotel. As my driver and I have to travel overnight between Nha Trang and Danang, we think it is wiser to break the journey here.

Our stay is a perfect example of how wrong things can be in Vietnam. Heavy showers greet us when we arrive. To make things

worse, the hotel keeper asks outrageous prices for a scruffy little room with rundown facilities and no electricity after 11 pm.

The rain gets heavier, and we have to eat in the sad-looking hotel's dining room, which serves sorry-looking food.

I am up half the night, wondering whether the roof will be blown off. Next morning, the storm subsides, but it is still raining. So much for an early morning dip in the sea before hitting the road again. I end up walking around the hotel compound and finding a petrol tank from an American truck left to rust in a corner — the remainder from another kind of disaster.

SATURDAY, HOI AN.

In marked contrast to Sa Huynh, Hoi An gives me faith in nature again. Known as Faifo to the early Western traders from the 13th to 18th centuries, Hoi An went to sleep in the late 19th century, when the Thu Bon River that links the port to the sea silted up, and it was eclipsed by Danang as the main port and centre of commerce for Central Vietnam. As a result, the town remains unscarred by the war. Little wooden houses, centuries old by now, still line the streets. This architectural heritage is a unique legacy, and the pride of Vietnam. The people in this town are more friendly to foreigners as their ancestors have traded with the world. The streets are empty, with hardly any signs of motorised vehicles. The hotel I stay in is comfortable, unlike many previous ones in other towns. And the food is, arguably, the best I have eaten so far. Indeed, Hoi An represents how right things can be in Vietnam.

SUNDAY, DANANG.

The fourth largest town in Vietnam and one that is most aggressive in its economic reforms. Walking down a street, you sometimes see the past and present merging at an odd tangent just round a corner. The Cham museum has a remarkable collection of old relics. The cathedral, with 19th century French stained glass windows, is charming.

Danang used to be known as Tourane under the French. When the country gained independence, all the streets with French names — with the exception of Pasteur and a few other French scientists highly regarded here — were changed to names of war heroes, the brave Vietnamese men who have fought for independence

throughout Vietnamese history.

In Danang, those distinctive street signs made of cement and dating back to the times of French rule are still around. Metal plaques bearing new names are placed over the old signs. But every so often, these white-on-blue plaques fall off and, for a while at least, Nguyen Tri Phuong becomes Rue Guillermin once again.

MONDAY, HUE.

The Imperial city of Hue saw the heaviest fighting during the 1968 Tet offensive. For two weeks, there was intensive fighting as the South Vietnamese Air Force and the US Artillery tried to dislodge the North Vietnamese army which had occupied part of the city.

The Allied forces succeeded in the end, but at what cost? More than 10,000 lives were lost (many of them civilian) and, judging by the few remaining splendid-looking pavilions, a stupendous palace was almost completely destroyed.

The Thai Hod palace is a spacious hall with an ornate roof of huge timbers supported by 80 carved and lacquered columns. I learn that it was used for the emperor's receptions. The throne remains there under an intricately carved wooden canopy. The exquisite pavilion of the Royal Library is another gem of a building, with lavish woodwork and colourful mosaic.

Restoration work is now going on, albeit slowly. UNESCO has declared the buildings and the compound as a part of world heritage, but the financial help promised has been slow in coming. The construction of the moated citadel, whose perimeter is 10 km, was begun in 1804 by Emperor Gia Long, and the city remained the country's political capital until 1948 under the 12 emperors of the Nguyen Dynasty that followed.

The four gates of the Imperial enclosure remain. Visitors are welcomed through Ngo Mon gate, the most impressive one. Most parts of the inner citadel are now devoted to agriculture, and among the few artefacts left scattered around the vegetable fields are the Nine Dynastic Urns, which symbolised the power of the Nguyen throne.

What's also left are the Nine Holy Cannons located under a bomb shelter on both sides of the main entrance gate. They were once symbolic protectors of the Palace, commissioned by none other than Emperor Gia Long. These cannons were never meant to be fired. Right now, they serve as a perfect rendezvous for a quick nap. The cool brass certainly helps to make one forget the afternoon heat.

TUESDAY, VINH.

This north central town has the worst weather in the country.

And poor soil. Nothing seems to grow here. Despite such dire straits, it was in Vinh that the revolutionary spirit began in the early 20th century, leading to independence for Vietnam. Their national leader, Ho Chi Minh, was born here.

During the war, most of the armaments were shipped via the port of Vinh. Little wonder; then, that Vinh was hard-hit during the war, due to its strategic position.

In the 1950s, the town survived aerial bombings by the French. A decade later, it was almost obliterated by American aerial attacks. There was so much damage that Vinh has yet to recover from the war. And it is undeniably the poorest spot in the country.

The streets are alive at night with audio-visual entertainment. Surprising that modern technology is able to infiltrate the most desolate of places. There are hardly any decent places for food other than the restaurants in the hotels. But no shanty cafe is short of entertainment, as Hong Kong *gongfu* videos and overly loud movie soundtracks blast away — apparently to compensate for the lacklustre menu and warm Coke!

WEDNESDAY, HANOI.

Although it is the country's political and administrative capital, Hanoi is more provincial than Ho Chi Minh City. Yet it is obviously flexing its muscles. Visible progress has been made to the city over the last three years. Things started to move at a faster pace last year — countless shops have opened in a matter of a few months. More cars are on the roads, and a greater variety of goods is available.

A sure sign of the changing times is the significant number of Japanese cars in Hanoi. For decades, Russian-made cars were the only ones on the roads. Now, Japanese cars are more accessible and popular. The economic change also parallels the diplomatic reality. Russian diplomats are preparing to leave the huge building provided by the Vietnamese government to make room for a Japanese team, which I understand is prepared to pay a much higher rental.

With the implementation of the Doi Hoi, the Vietnamese *perestroika*, things are almost back to what they had been for centuries before the war. The streets are alive with crafts. Jewellers and wood carvers are

in business along with the tailors.

Spirituality and religion are very much revived in Hanoi, home of some of the most atmospheric pagodas and temples. Some of them are ancient. They are found all over town, by the side of many pleasant lakes or at the end of a maze of narrow, winding streets that suddenly open into a courtyard.

Spirituality and religion, I learn, have never been completely obliterated in socialist Vietnam. People may indulge in the practice of their faith. However now, as then, believers and clergy are still under tight control from the authorities.

Around the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, the atmosphere is as stiff as ever. Very strict rules are to be observed despite the fact that in his will, Ho requested to be cremated. Even the vast, grassy expanse outside the building feels like a no-man's land.

The long-term effect of the pervasive presence of the secret police can be felt in all walks of life — particularly when talking to people from the older generation. I meet an old man working for a government body in charge of promoting foreign investments. He speaks very good French, and fondly remembers his education in the French *lycée*.

When I tell him that at the newly opened Alliance Francaise, books, magazines and films from France are readily and freely available, he cannot believe it. He thinks such access to the outside world is restricted to a select few, like the family of the party executives; or that the consequences of mingling at a place of foreign culture will not be taken lightly by the authorities.

I also meet a few fellow artists. They say a number of private art galleries have opened in Hanoi. This is an important development, considering that, for a long time, the only possibility for them was to sell their work through established government bodies that promoted socialist art.

Now they choose their subjects freely and sell to a more appreciative public — mostly tourists and foreign residents. The luckiest among them have the opportunity to exhibit overseas. They say the new freedom feels like a breath of fresh air.

Downtown, disco clubs and bars, complete with lights, sound systems and hookers, stand out. One club is owned by a Vietnamese businessman from Hong Kong, while another has a Canadian Vietnamese owner. Both places are rather luxurious, but also somewhat reminiscent of other infamous night spots found around Asia.

Hanoi in particular and Vietnam in general have to manage their necessary and unavoidable evolution. I wonder how they will do it. Only time will tell. **mc**