

Letters to Friends Vietnam & Cambodia October – November, 2017

October 16, St. George: Letters from Vietnam Coming Up

Hi Friends,

We're about to depart on another trip — a month in Vietnam, ending at Angkor Wat — and once again I'll send daily emails chronicling our adventures. You're on the list, so look forward to the first when we arrive in Hanoi on October 19. We return on November 21 and then almost immediately head south to Borrego Springs for the winter.

I had the opportunity to travel to Vietnam at government expense some 50 years ago, but a high draft lottery number let me stay home and finish college. Several friends recently recommended SE Asia as a good place to visit, so I searched for trips to Thailand, China, and Vietnam — and eventually settled on the one we booked. Vietnam was never on Barbara's list, but I'm the one with the real travel-bug.

We've enjoyed "small group travel" in New Zealand, Crete, and Egypt, so signed up with Insider Journeys for the same in Vietnam. But no one else signed up for these dates, so "small" means just we two! That's not what we wanted but it meets their minimum, so it'll essentially be a private tour. We'll be driven in a car and will have a local tour guide at each destination. We saw South America this way and the novelty of traveling for days on end in the back seat of a car without shocks soon wore off, but it is what it is.

One advantage of traveling alone is I won't slow down a group. My ability to walk normally is declining and my range decreasing, so we'll have to see how well I manage getting around. I'm taking two new ultra-lightweight trekking poles for stability and we'll see how it goes, but I don't visualize going on many more overseas trips in the future. Getting old isn't for the weak, but it beats the alternative.

Our trip will take us via shuttle to Las Vegas on the late afternoon of the 17th, and we begin with a short hop to Los Angeles. Then a long "hop" to Hong Kong — and we're not looking forward to 15 hours in tiny seats! After an 8-hour layover (!) we continue on to Hanoi, arriving on the afternoon of the 19th. We have a day to recover and adjust to a change of 13 time zones (or 11, depending on how you look at it), and see Hanoi, before our official tour begins on the 21st.

Vietnam is 1000 miles long and we'll travel it by van or car, chauffeured all the way, with many stops in 3 weeks. Our itinerary looks great and we'll see the highlights at a reasonable pace. The full detailed itinerary is attached; perhaps hang onto it to refer back to as we go. There were serious floods in the north earlier this week and we'll see how that impacts our schedule.

We finish 3 weeks in Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City / Saigon and then transfer to the Mekong Delta where we board a small ship and head up the Mekong for a week's cruise,

again with many stops. Here we'll have company, and that'll be a welcome change from traveling solo. I've attached a picture of the ship, which is not your typical cruise ship.

Especially in 3rd-world countries I ask locals what they think of their government, but I'll be careful in Vietnam and won't in Cambodia. I understand that Vietnam is one of the most corrupt countries in the world (and ours is becoming more so — start with Big Oil and Citizens United) and criticism is frowned upon (sort of like here), and in Cambodia criticizing the king is a capital offense. So I'll mind my own business. The average age of a Vietnamese is 30, so The War is history; we'll see some war museums and it will definitely be interesting to hear what they have to say about it.

I have no idea what kind of internet service we'll have in Indochina (slow when available?) but I'll write when I can. As always when we're overseas, please don't return photos when writing back.

So off we go again ...

- John (and Barbara)



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October 19 (I think): Hong Kong

Hi Friends,

I hadn't planned to write from Hong Kong, but we have an 8-hour layover and plenty of time to kill. And free wifi.

Our trip this far has been unexciting. The shuttle to Las Vegas had smaller leg room than the aircraft! I wouldn't have thought that was possible. On the long flight LAX - Hong Kong I slept, very fitfully, for the first 10 hours, so the flight was bearable; Barbara watched a series of movies and consequently is somewhat tired.

We were given a bowl of noodle soup as an inflight snack — with chopsticks, and as much as I respect other cultures, that makes no sense. The Chinese fellow next to me held the bowl up to his lips and used the chopsticks to somehow get the noodles into his mouth and then drank the liquid, and I did the same, using the Cathay Pacific blanket as a bib. How about a spoon! They have an ancient culture but the concept of spoons has been around some time now too.

We had a bowl of noodle soup for lunch and they gave us a spoon! So they can learn new tricks. Actually I brought a plastic spoon from home in case the novelty of struggling with chopsticks wears off. But I quickly learned that you can't eat foot-long noodles with a spoon, so I was back to chopsticks with soup. The red bean drink was excellent — I'll be looking for that ahead.

Hong Kong International is, of course, exactly like any major airport everywhere, except the primary signage language is Chinese (the only other one is English) and there are a lot of Chinese people wandering about. I had my first Starbucks coffee since retiring and only my second ever; Starbucks is absolutely everywhere but I've managed to avoid them.

Our layover is so long because apparently there's only one flight a day to Hanoi. I had time to watch two episodes of Ken Burns "The War" before my travel laptop battery died.

On to Hanoi!

- John (& Barbara)



Our view of Hong Kong. We had time to take a taxi into town and do a whirlwind tour, but didn't take advantage of the opportunity. The sea is out the other side.

October 19: Hanoi

Hi Friends,

I'm back in a familiar routine — sitting in a bar writing an email. This is a rooftop bar in Hanoi with an expansive view of rooftops all around and a local Bia Ha Noi beer by my side. Barbara is in bed.

So the trip was very long but equally uneventful — mostly just sitting in airports or on airplanes, waiting to get on a plane or waiting to get off. I was dreading being in pain in cramped seats, and actually lost sleep over the possibility, but it was just one long trip.

We flew an airline we've never even seen before -- Vietnam Air — and arrived in Vietnam at 5:00. We were greeted and taxied to the Golden Queen Hotel in downtown Hanoi, perhaps a 40-min drive, and we'll be here several nights. From now on we're in others' hands and just have to show up on time to be whisked and taken on adventures, and we like that. We like it a lot. Insider Journeys seems quite competent, so we'll relax and enjoy our vacation and let others work out the logistics and details.

We met our guide for the next 10 days — “Joe” to Americans but actually Nguyen — who ran down the schedule and gave us a preview of what's ahead. Then he walked us several blocks to a noodle shop for a simple dinner of noodle soup with pork chunks. I've resigned myself to eating soup with chopsticks — there's no avoiding it — and it made a nice light dinner. We ate at a tiny table on the sidewalk with traffic and noise all around; see the second photo, below.

Joe left us and we walked back to the hotel. I stepped back outside to take a few snaps just to have some night pics to show. The place is bustling! It's busy! We've seen this elsewhere but nowhere in the States,

First impressions:

- * The standard of living seems to be slightly below Greece and about on a par with Mexico or Peru, and far above Egypt. There are some high-rises but not that many.
- * In the city center mopeds outnumber cars 10:1 or so, and traffic laws are guidelines (maybe slow down for a red light). I thought we'd hear constant horn-honking but it's rare (unlike Peru, where it's never-ending). We see families of 3 on them, drivers talking on the phone (illegal in the States but apparently not here), and improbably huge loads. I'll get some photos when it's light.
- * Sidewalks are broken, so I'll always use one trekking pole (two on uneven ground in the country) and am glad I brought them.
- * Street vendors sitting on the sidewalk remind me of Bolivia. We see, for example, a lady sitting beside a basket of bananas or carrying a bunch of balloons, and I'll get photos as we go but in the daylight. In this part of town they're everywhere, trying to make a meagre living.

* A few signs and store names are in English, but otherwise it's all Vietnamese. There are no cognates with English. French is nowhere (both the language and the colonialists).

* Prices seem to be cheap. My beer served in a nice bar cost \$1.80.

Tomorrow is the first of two free days, and we'll just walk around the town center and absorb it all. We may plan a formal activity for Saturday. Our excursions officially begin on Sunday — with an all-day city tour of Hanoi. And then it will be the two of us and "Joe".

- John (& Barbara)



Our visa, pasted into our passport.



Our hotel is the gold building at far left. Mostly I wanted to photograph the shops, and the one at right sells clothes. The vehicles are in focus because the light turned red and these are the ones that stopped.



Street scene a block from our hotel. Note the couple at left eating at a small table while sitting on smaller stools — just like we did. A moped shop is at right, and the mopeds are displayed on the sidewalk. You often have to walk in the street.

October 20: Ha Noi search for elusive cash

Hi Friends,

(We're in Ha Noi so ought to use the local spelling (minus the accent marks — most vowels have an accent mark, often two, but I don't feel obligated to figure out how to add them. I'll meet them half-way.)

Breakfast was at the hotel buffet — very nice. More on food another time.

We had a frustrating and exhausting morning in search of cash. To make a very long story short, we went from ATM to bank to ATM and more banks but all rejected our Visa and MasterCard, so we searched long and hard for one that would accept American Express (one we located on a map was closed; another we couldn't find). Eventually we found one and Yea! they took my card (but not Barbara's). So now we have cash and can eat, etc. We've had this problem elsewhere and almost expected it, and once in Norway American Express bailed us out with a wire transfer to Western Union, so I always carry American Express abroad although no vendors will take it. But after 4 full hours (!) of increasing frustration we were both beat. We should have just brought a small wad of \$100 bills because those you can exchange anywhere, and next time we will. Thank you, American Express!

We had a great lunch back at our hotel. Barbara was tired to the point of non-functional, so she immediately went to bed for the rest of the afternoon. Big mistake in my opinion, but we each have our own technique for adjusting to multiple time zone changes. (I've completely adjusted and feel fine.)

I walked around town again for a few more hours with my camera and shot both stills and videos. I've not shot much video on previous trips largely because I don't want to edit it, but I am this trip. I'll not look at it until a series of rainy days in Borrego when I'll string it all together and edit it down to something useful. But taking interesting photos is a snap — just stand in one place and watch the parade pass by.

On my walk I felt justified in pausing for an hour massage. The tiger really worked me over; she found some tight spots in my back and put her heart and biceps into them, and I figured I'd walk out either feeling better or not be able to walk at all, but luckily she did no damage. I was wondering if there would be an option for a "happy ending" but no; apparently that's Thailand, not Vietnam. The cost was almost \$10 including a very generous tip. Tomorrow a foot massage for sure.

Barbara was still sleeping soundly at dinner time, so I walked to a sidewalk cafe for — guess it — a bowl of rice noodle soup. I finally figured out what's with chopsticks and soup, mostly by watching the locals: they have no idea either, and the idea is to somehow get the food in your mouth by whatever means works. Use the chopsticks like any random stick, put your face down on the bowl or hold the bowl to your mouth, sort of shovel the noodles in, and drink the broth. Forget the concept of table manners or etiquette and do what you have to do. Chopsticks are useful for picking out chunks of meat or other graspable food items, agreed — but so's a spoon. Enough on chopsticks and soup, but I've been baffled that something so poorly designed for the task can somehow be made to work, sort of.

I walked about 6 hours today and did fine, although I was glad to have a trekking pole to stabilize on broken pavement and dodge pedestrians. Also for stairs — handrails are unknown and are absent even where absolutely needed. There must be no liability laws, or perhaps no lawyers.

Now I'm back on my rooftop bar with a Ha Noi beer. BTW, wifi is much faster here at our hotel than at home in St. George! (That won't last.)

Tomorrow is another free day. We'll make better use of it. I'm recharging my camera battery now.

More things I've noticed:

Every two minutes I'm approached by a young man with a small kit that includes glue and he attempts to "fix" my new Keen sandals. We've been warned about the scam and I hop and skip away, saying "no, no" before he can apply some, but they're quick too. They're more common than noodle shops.

We see some impressive loads on bicycles and mopeds, and I'll get photos. One guy was carrying 25 of those 5-gallon water-cooler water bottles. The most people I've seen on one is four.

We figured out how to cross the street — go slow and steady and trust them to miss you. Bunch up to make a small target, and follow close to a local when possible. And I figured out what the crosswalks are for — if you're hit when you're in one, it doesn't count.

The ratio of thin Vietnamese to fat is roughly 30:1. In contrast, in French Polynesia it's very roughly 1:8 and back home at best 2:3. Could it be because they haven't (yet?) adopted a western diet, and for some reason prefer rice and veggies to processed food?

Speaking of which, the amount of cooked food available on the street is astounding, and I suspect most people eat on the street rather than at home. And by "on the street" I really mean "on the sidewalk." Set up a little stove to boil a pot of water or a little stove to fry things, put out a few foot stools, and you have a literal sidewalk cafe. It can't cost more than a dollar or two at most for a meal, and it looks good and fresh. Your typical small restaurant with real tables and chairs and a menu is half the size of our garage.

- John (& Barbara)



What we were in search of for 4 freakin hours (almost wrote a bad word). This bill, which features Uncle Ho, is worth just under \$5 US. Too many zeroes. One of these will get you a bowl of noodle soup in a restaurant; two bowls on the street.



Our lunch at the hotel (just under \$20). This is not American fast food. I ate mine (foreground) with chopsticks; Barbara was given a fork!



Street scene.



I assume they're empty.



A hat vendor on a bicycle makes a sale! I wonder if one of these would be good for hiking.



A banana vendor on a bicycle. They make sales or they wouldn't do it. Perhaps he's making deliveries to small shops.



You just stand in one place off to the side and watch the parade pass by.



Sidewalk cafe. Those little “foot stools”, which are everywhere, are a bit low for me.

October 21: Ha Noi walkabout

Hi Friends,

Yesterday morning was frustrating and aggravating; this morning was considerably more relaxed as we just wandered around Old Town without a specific goal or need. We meandered to Hoan Kiem Lake; the roads are closed to motorized traffic on weekends so it's families enjoying a relaxed atmosphere with picnics, ice cream, sidewalk food, etc. Then back into Old Town with its traffic and noise. Barbara began to suffer from noise-and-crowd overload, so we hired a pedicab to cycle us around for an hour, and that would have been great if the seat had been wide enough for the two of us. But we were off our feet and I shot video as we toured. I'll never again complain about peddling my 65-pound e-bike after having this little fellow (120 lbs, like most Vietnamese men) peddled the two of us at far over 300 lbs plus his huge bike. We passed some police, who wore sidearms, and I asked our pedicab peddler if the police were good, and he said maybe — sometimes they just give a ticket but other times they only want a bribe. I didn't tell him that in America they sometimes shoot you, but he probably knew that. Here the police are armed but nobody else is. Why do I feel less likely to be shot at random walking around Ha Noi than, say, Las Vegas? (I Googled “Vietnam Police Shooting” to compare statistics and found Vietnam veterans shot by police in the US.)

We returned to the bank that accepts American Express and withdrew more cash while we can (I'm not sure we'll have the option once we leave the big city). A note from yesterday: I asked at one bank if they could direct us to a bank that takes American Express, and the teller said to go to “Viet Cong Bank” as I heard it. OK — whatever; we

lost the war, get over it. It was actually “Viet Com Bank”. My bad. (But we couldn’t find it using her directions.)

Feeling flush with two million dong (pronounced “dng”) in cash in my pocket, I purchased my first Vietnam souvenir: genuine Oakley polarized sunglasses for \$14. That’s even cheaper than the pair I brought which came from Walmart. Actually you can use sunglasses here — only a week ago there were rains and terrible floods that killed more people than the California wildfires, but the rain stopped for our arrival and it has been mostly cloudy with highs in the mid-80s and humidity to match. So we carry sunglasses instead of umbrellas and are grateful for it. And we wash our shirts in the sink each night (Barbara brought a bottle of laundry soap).

No soup for lunch (rice dishes instead) so I have no additional comments on eating soup with sticks.

After lunch Barbara was again overwhelmed by the crowds and noise and opted to retreat to our quiet hotel room while I walked a few more hours. Then a treat: an hour-long foot massage. I’m surprised I’ve been able to be on my feet so many hours the last two days, so felt I’d earned a massage if anyone has. It was \$6 US plus a tip — can’t beat that!

On one street corner, when I was waiting for a break in traffic before crossing, an old lady (not as old as me, but still old) noticed my hesitation and motioned “did I want to cross”. Yes. She waved me to walk with her and we crossed while traffic flowed around us, almost holding my hand, until we got to the other side, and waved me bye as she went her way. A new experience! My cane (= trekking pole) probably helped get her sympathy, but I’m not used to wading into a mass of mopeds with the expectation that they’ll all miss me. But the streets aren’t littered with bodies, so most people live to cross the street again another day. Or it could be Darwin in action: unaware and over-confident tourists are all dead or in the hospital but not out crossing streets and getting hit.

Dinner included a before-dinner drink, beer, asparagus-crab soup, and the main courses, all wonderful, for \$14.50 US. I ordered a B-52 cocktail and was surprised that they don’t have a collective memory that prohibits the name, sort of like the Germany having a cocktail named “D-Day,” but apparently all is forgiven. I was served both chopsticks and a fork — and chose chopsticks! Go with the flow, I always say. But my noodle-less soup came with a spoon and I used that.

I’m on the rooftop bar again with 100 photos to sort through. I don’t have the energy.

Tomorrow is the official start of our tour — a city tour with our guide. You can refer to our printed itinerary.

More things I’ve noticed:

I had thought that we had bombed Ha Noi so thoroughly that no old buildings remained, but not so. Quite a few do in Old Town, where we’re staying, and the architecture is complex, interesting, and exotic. In complete contrast to Athens, for example, there are many balcony and rooftop gardens.

We revise yesterday's estimate, not having seen an obese Vietnamese yet. There must be a reason why they're all thin with only a few who are heavy, but not fat and certainly not obese. They admire western culture but let's hope they resist western diet.

Everyone but everyone has a cell phone, even the ladies selling bananas off their bicycles. While waiting for my foot massage I noticed that I was the only one of about 10 in the waiting room who wasn't looking at a smart phone.

The government wants to ban mopeds and motorcycles and force people to use public transportation instead. Good luck! The desire is to cut down on pollution and noise. They might have success if they switched individual vehicles from gas to electric, but I won't be asked for my excellent advice. BTW, as far as I've noticed none of the millions of mopeds are produced in the US; Japan has that market.

We've seen two beggars, both badly crippled, and one homeless man sleeping on the street. Does Vietnam have fewer homeless than in the USA?

Human-powered (as opposed to gas) cycles are in the minority, and we've yet to see a recreational cycle or a bike path or bike lane. Public busses are quite rare. So are derailleurs.

I finally figured out the Traffic Rule: try not to hit anything. Everything else, like "keep to the right" or "stop for traffic lights", is an advisory.

- John (& Barbara)



Interesting architecture from former times in Old Town, Ha Noi.



A vendor on her way to work.



Armed police on the prowl.



My assumption is that she can't actually ride the bike, but just uses it in place of a wheelbarrow to get her produce to where it wants to be. Maybe she rides it home when it's empty.



I assume she's delivering these to restaurants rather than trying to sell them one-by-one, but I don't know.



Halloween has made it to Vietnam, sad to say. You can barely see the lines of small pumpkins at right.



Barbara in our pedicab — which is not entirely wide enough for the two of us. But fun anyway.



Another chicken goes into the pot at this sidewalk cafe. Soup is on! Soon the little stools will go out for the customers.



What is her profit if she sells everything? Every so often someone would buy a bag of fruit. We're seeing enough of these vendors to not need to take more photos of them.

October 22: Ha Noi city tour

22 OCT SUNDAY HANOI

Hanoi has been the political and historical center of Vietnam for over a thousand years and has a wealth of sights to explore. Heavily influenced by French colonial architecture, Hanoi is both historically beautiful and vibrant. Begin your Hanoi experience at Ba Dinh Square, site of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and where Ho Chi Minh first declared independence from French rule in 1945. Ho Chi Minh is without question one of the great figures of 20th century history and 'father of modern Vietnam'. Visit his humble house on stilts which 'Uncle Ho', as he is affectionately known, ruled Vietnam until his death in 1969. You can also view the nearby Presidential Palace, One Pillar Pagoda and the intriguing Ho Chi Minh Museum, which houses an almost surreal exhibition of the life of Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam's struggle for independence. Next you will visit Hanoi's first university - the Temple of Literature - dating back to 1070. This historical center of learning is dedicated to Confucian worship. After lunch continue on to the Ethnology Museum. Here you will get a fantastic introduction on the customs, traditions and beliefs of the people who inhabit Vietnam. Finish with a walking tour through the bustling Old Quarter - 36 ancient streets where you can observe the daily bustle of life around the markets where peddlers continue to trade as they have done for centuries. Insider Experience - Taste: the walking tour takes in the backstreets of the old quarter to visit some local markets and specialty food stores. You will have the opportunity to try some local dishes and in the process learn more about daily life and culinary customs and habits of the Vietnamese people. Sample "Che" a local dessert type drink made with sugar cane, green bean, black bean, glutinous rice, and lotus seed. Maybe try Banh Tom or "shrimp cake", a local Hanoi specialty, in a small food alley. Sit at a local street side bar for some refreshing local beer "Bia hoi" and before sampling the very delicious "Banh Cuon", a pan cake made with chicken and pork. Breakfast included.

Hi Friends,

[I'll begin each day by pasting in the day's itinerary from the official schedule. We won't necessarily follow it in order or even follow it at all.]

First: withdraw more cash from the ATM. With a limit of \$75 per transaction we need to visit it often, thinking that we may not see many more ATMs that accept American Express once we leave Hanoi. Tips alone will set us back a tidy sum.

We met our guide Nguyen at 8:30 and occupy the back seat of a standard-size car while a driver and our guide are up front. More on riding in the back seat of a car later, but it got us around town.

First stop: a Confucian school founded in 1070 for nobility and soon anyone who could pass the civil service exam (way ahead of Europe). Nothing original is left but it's a pretty setting.

Then the Ethnology Museum. Viet Nam is made up of 54 distinct ethnic groups (Viet

makes up the vast majority) and thankfully the museum grouped them together, but to us it was a bit redundant. Lots of primitive hunting and gardening tools, looms, etc. The French are major sponsors so captions are in Vietnamese, French, and English. I thought it odd that none of the old artifacts had a date associated with it.

It wasn't on the schedule, but we were taken to a lacquer-ware shop where we were totally impressed with the detail work involved in producing delicate paintings, dishes, boxes, etc. We came with no thought whatsoever of purchasing anything but ended up with a little square dish for nuts or the like that is quite attractive in addition to being affordable and also portable. You'll see it when you come visit us.

On to walk around the Old Quarter, which is less touristy than the area around our hotel where we've been walking. More paint stores, for example, and some interesting wholesale shops with, for example, 50kg sacks of mushrooms and dried shrimp. We sampled food at four different sidewalk cafes, and at three it was excellent — food we don't have at home but I'd be delighted to eat regularly. The fourth was a baguette sandwich and here I'll editorialize — French is the worst bread in the world, just processed-to-death tasteless and nutrition-less white bread — and the sandwich had a dab of meat and something else inside. To think that the Vietnamese picked that up and think it's good! Barbara didn't finish hers and I shouldn't have mine. But the local Vietnamese dishes were wonderful, and I won't even try to describe them. I balked at sitting on one of those little blue foot stools that is only 10 inches high and stood instead, and our guide found us chairs from then on.

I was having trouble getting around. My feet have swollen (too much salt?) and I wouldn't have gotten far without my cane (trekking pole). Tomorrow there's little walking on the agenda and I'll be happy for that.

Next stop: the Hanoi Hilton, actually the old French prison from the 1890s where political prisoners were held under brutal conditions. The Japanese took over the prison in 1940 and the Vietnamese in 1945, and it's famous for housing hundreds of American airmen during "The American War." Only a small portion of the original prison, which was once quite large, remains as a museum (I should have asked Nguyen where they keep political prisoners nowadays, but forgot). Only two small rooms are devoted to the American War; the rest to nearly a century of resistance against the French. I asked, and no — the French are not major sponsors of the museum.

Our last stop was the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and living compound. From what I've read, Ho was a real hero who deserves the praise the Vietnamese heap on him, and he was on the right side of history while we were on the wrong. Every nation needs heroes and origin myths, and Ho serves well. He was pickled upon death and normally is available for viewing in his mausoleum, for those who stand in line for an hour, but presently Uncle Ho is "on holiday" and the tomb is closed. He originally traveled to Moscow once a year to be re-embalmed, but the Soviets got out of that business when Lenin got the boot, and at the moment Ho is undergoing his rejuvenation somewhere in Hanoi. We would like to have seen him and paid our respects, but had to settle for looking at his last home, nearby, now a national shrine.

That was the end of our day, so back to our hotel at 3 to put our feet up, and then a short

walk out to have a simple dinner in a nice restaurant (\$9). Then the rest of the evening in our room.

Comments and Observations:

Everyone we've encountered in our tourist dealings speaks passable English. I ask, and most of them learned a bit in school but mostly on their own and from tourists. TV may be a big help. I'm having difficulty understanding Nguyen because of his accent and a few conversations end without full comprehension of what was said.

We did see a few chunky Vietnamese, but only a few.

People are quite happy to smile at us if we establish facial contact and smile ourselves. People seem happy, and they're certainly industrious. Everyone's busy, even if it's just hauling away old pieces of cardboard on a bike to recycle.

A common green fruit we see in baskets on bicycles is persimmons. I don't recall the last time I've eaten one.

Food seems plentiful and it certainly is cheap, so I think few go hungry. Vietnam is a food-exporter.

Some scooters are manufactured in Vietnam, under license. Also some Ford cars.

- John (& Barbara)



The sales lady in the lacquer shop displaying the little dish we bought, while behind workers carefully fashion more.



Dried octopus and other seafoods in huge bags in the main wholesale market.





I'm not sure what these were, but they are absolutely delicious. In the upper photo two ladies are making them — on the sidewalk, of course; in the lower they're ready to serve.



Clothes American airmen wore in the Hanoi Hilton. According to the captions, they were treated very well.



Uncle Ho's final resting place above, and his desk in his home below.

October 23: Halong Bay

23 OCT MONDAY HANOI TO HALONG BAY

This morning you journey east (approximately 170km/105 miles or four hours) to Halong City, the gateway to Halong Bay. En route you will pass fields of busy workers farming their rice using traditional methods of cultivation. Halong Bay achieved international fame as a key location in the French film 'Indochine' starring Catherine Deneuve. The bay has assumed an important position in Vietnamese legend for many centuries and continues to capture the imagination of visitors. Insider Experience – Special Stay: On arrival transfer to the port and board your deluxe Indochina Sails boat for the cruise out to the Bay. Insider Experience - Taste: Enjoy a fresh seafood lunch as you begin your cruise. Considered Vietnam's greatest natural wonder, Halong Bay boasts over 3,000 islands that rise out of the sea to provide a spectacular natural environment. Spend the afternoon cruising this beautiful part of Vietnam. Breakfast, lunch and dinner included.

Hi Friends,

We started the day by hitting the ATM again. With a \$75 maximum withdrawal and the possibility of none again until Saigon we don't pass up the opportunity.

I took a few photos at breakfast, omitting several of the noodle dishes. This is not your traditional English breakfast of deeply fried everything except undercooked bacon. Everything is tasty, lots is greenery, and the coffee (which is grown locally) is strong.

A big-screen TV plays in the dining room. All programs are American with Viet subtitles, and the station is FoxAsia. Again we're exporting the best we have to offer! We're told that the Vietnamese admire American culture. Ultimately maybe we did win The War after all.

Three years ago I booked our custom South American trip with a travel agent, and for days we traveled in the back seat of a car with a driver and guide up front. It would be slightly too much to say we hated it, but we vowed never to do it again. In New Zealand we were in a 18-passenger van with leg room and big windows and that's been our ideal. That's what we had in mind with this Insider Journey's "small group tour". But we are the only two to book this particular tour, so we're traveling in the back seat of a car again. There's a bit more leg room than on an airplane and we both have a window seat, but there's no tray table. We wouldn't have considered booking it if we'd known — and wish we'd been given a chance to move our dates back and join a larger tour.

The first portion of the day was a 4-hour drive out of Ha Noi to Halong Bay. The drive was OK but the novelty of sitting in a back seat will wear off long before our trip ends. But there's no use bitching — it is what it is.

We stopped at an institute where 3rd generation young people who are disabled by genetic defects from agent orange work (and some live), creating extremely intricate artwork. They stitch all day and the proceeds benefit them. Seeing this roomful of disabled kids, some in wheelchairs, was about as moving an experience as I want to

have and it brought tears to my eyes to think of the unspeakable horrors that we brought on this small nation that never did any harm to us and that only wanted to be left alone. I was really choked up. We'll stop again on the return to Ha Noi tomorrow and we'll buy something then.

On to Halong Bay to board a ship with 5 cabins and 4 other guests — so we have company! They gave us the deluxe room on the main deck when they saw my mobility issues, so we have a largish room with a walk-in shower in addition to tub! This detail is important. The tub at our hotel has 2-1/2 foot high sides and no grab bars (there's no concept of them in Vietnam where even handrails on stairs are virtually unknown), and getting in and out of it is 20 times more dangerous than crossing the street. Then there's a dining / lounging / bar area and an upper sun deck. We'll overnight here and enjoy it tremendously.

We "set sail" into the South China Sea (how romantic!) and enjoyed a 5-star lunch. Some vacations are pretty neat, and so far this one rates high. We passed among the towering limestone formations that make the bay so scenic (it's a UNESCO site) and took it all in. It's a very warm day and the sky cleared, so I needed my new Oakley sunglasses. (And soon I'll need the walk-in shower.)

We docked at a cave and Barbara and the rest tendered to shore and hiked thru the cave while I remained aboard, enjoyed a beer, and got started on this email. She says it's nothing special; limestone doesn't have much color.

We docked for the night in the bay, and after a sunset with dramatic lighting we were treated to a demonstration of how to carve decorative fruit. Dinner included a whole crab as one of the appetizers.

Now I'm in the "bar / lounge" with a cocktail finishing this email. I've highly compressed these many photos to a total of 1 mb in the hope that they'll go through from this rather remote spot far from any town in the South China Sea. If not, they'll go when we return to our Ha Noi hotel.

- John (& Barbara)



Hotel breakfast. Not shown are all the noodle dishes. No stewed tomatoes or baked beans, but the only bread is French.



Many houses are surprisingly narrow and tall, and I should find out why. It's a curious style of architecture with influences from France and China.



We see such signs from time to time, always with yellow text on a red background.



The center where youth affected by agent orange are given skills and employment. All have an obvious handicap and it is sad beyond belief.



Halong Bay. Our ship resembles the big one at right but ours is a deck smaller.



Barbara showing our guide Nguyen how to make origami boxes. I'm writing here after dinner.



Sunset over Halong Bay in the South China Sea. We wish you were here.



The scene a short time after sunset with unusual romantic lighting. Note the sampan at center.

October 24: Halong Bay; Return to Ha Noi

24 OCT TUESDAY HALONG BAY TO HANOI

Today, rise early to make the most of Halong Bay's stunning scenery. After breakfast, continue your exploration and discover what makes this area so unique. On the cruise back to Halong City, enjoy a tasty seafood lunch. This afternoon travel to Hanoi and enjoy a free evening.

Hi Friends,

We awoke before sunrise on a beautiful morning in the South China Sea (or the Eastern Sea, as the locals call it; the Vietnamese are not very fond of the Chinese). The lighting is amazing and I enjoyed a few cups of strong coffee on the sun deck as we watched the light change as the sun rose higher. The sound, unfortunately, is of engines and the breeze is tainted with diesel exhaust from all the boats around us idling their engines, so romance and reality collide once again. But it is pretty.

Barbara and the others did the morning Tai Chi exercises, and we could see the same happening on nearby boats, so it's what you do here before breakfast.

Then they were off to an island where 425 steps take you to a viewpoint where Ho Chi Minh and Yugoslavia's Tito held an informal conference many years ago. Once back down our group rested on a small beach; swimming was optional but Barbara passed on the chance to get wet. I don't do hundreds of steps without handrails or even sandy beaches so rested aboard ship and enjoyed just being here. It's a very warm day with a light breeze — perfect.

Then back to port and back to Ha Noi with a stop at the Humanity Center again to buy some place mats and a small bottle of rice wine as souvenirs. The rice wine won't make it very far, but if you are our guests in St. George you will eat off Vietnamese place mats.

Our new room at the Ha Noi isn't the Hilton, but it's a huge room with a view (and street noise) and, best of all, a walk-in shower! Wonderful! You often hear that the bathtub is the most dangerous place you'll visit and that's absolutely true for me. With the walk-in shower I feel confident I'll live to shower again another day.

After a rest we walked the noisy streets for an hour and then had a nice meal on a balcony overlooking the street, then to the hotel early for an evening of rest (and fast internet). I was stumbling a lot, partly because the sidewalks are uneven at best and often broken, but mostly because my legs are too stiff to bend to walk normally.

Tomorrow we're in the back seat of our Nissan again as we leave the big city, heading southwest into the country. Tomorrow night we'll stay in a private home (a B&B?).

- John (& Barbara)

Conversations with guide Nguyen:

Our guide Nguyen is very free to tell us about Vietnam and its history and government, but he is also curious about the USA. I had thought that he'd talked to hundreds of tourists thru the years and we couldn't tell him anything new, but Insider Journeys is an Australian company and (a) almost all of his customers are Australian and (b) he invariably has a group and doesn't talk to individuals much. So we can exchange information.

Nguyen doesn't care for the government because it is so corrupt, but says it is getting better. We compared corruption here with the USA, and the scale is different. Here you bribe a low official to get something done; in the USA major industries bribe congress to pass legislation favorable to them but not to the people. We didn't decide which is worse.

Nguyen compares Kim Jung Un and Kim Jung Trump and doesn't like either. He really likes Obama, so no disagreement here.

He says the only websites that are blocked are of groups that criticize the government, mostly originating in foreign countries, but not major sites like BBC and Facebook. I noted that Huffington Post is blocked [incorrect] but not Aljazeera or Reporters Without Borders.

To be a "leader" in the government including the military you must be a member of the communist party, but there's no benefit to you if you're just a typical civilian. Party membership is not open if you have a religion, so you must renounce religions to join. He was surprised that if you have no religion in the USA you are *very* unlikely to be elected — the opposite of here -- although it's not against any US law. He's not asked us ours. I think most here are Buddhist or Catholic.

Fifty percent of workers are farmers. His mother can read but not write and literacy has improved dramatically in the last few decades. In 1950 few could read or write but now most can. His father was a rice farmer, and Nguyen is the first in his family to go to

university.

We Americans killed one of his uncles in the '60s and another was killed by the Chinese in a more recent border war. Nguyen escaped the draft by being a university student, which are exempt. Otherwise service is for two years and in the final six months they teach you a trade, like mechanic.

Learning English is compulsory in schools; other languages are taught in universities. Russian used to be studied but no longer is.

He was astounded that our house cost 10 billion dong (he asked; we didn't volunteer). Dong is written VND (Vietnamese Dong).

Other Observations:

Vietnamese do Vietnamese breakfasts better than they do American. Omelettes are runny and have a teaspoon of amendments; "hash browns" are like large tater tots, bacon is medium-rare at best, and sausages are like hot dogs. But why would I want an American breakfast when I could have Vietnamese? We see a lot of pizza shops and I'm curious to see how they mangle it, but not curious enough to waste a dinner finding out.

The energy in Ha Noi is impressive. From early until late people are hustling, doing whatever they must to make a living. The place is still going strong the latest we've been out. The only people we see sitting around are vendors waiting for a customer. When we smile at them they give us a big smile back — very relaxed and friendly.

The yellow line down the middle of a highway means "stay on the right except to pass". Our driver is good: we're still alive.



Enjoying morning coffee in Halong Bay, East China Sea.



Tai Chi on the sun deck. The Vietnamese flag is in front of Barbara.



The view of Halong Bay from the top of Tito's Island.



Note the yellow centerline at right. Please excuse the driver's do-dads, but you get the idea — you go into oncoming traffic to pass, and presumably they get out of the way, like they have for that big truck ahead. But then they do the same to you.



We learned that houses are so narrow (and we've seen 5 stories this wide) because when the communists did land reform in 1954 everyone got 4 meters width to build a house, and although that limit was relaxed long ago the 4-meter width remains common thru tradition. And yes — there's a lot of trash around; not nearly as bad as Cairo but bad enough.



Have you seen such a narrow shop? It's about 5 feet wide. If you pause to look in she'll jump up to help because you might be a rare customer. Shops are packed with merchandise.



A street-side restaurant on a 3-wheel bicycle. Enlarge to see how complete her kitchen is — it's quite amazing.

October 25: May Chau rice fields

25 OCT WEDNESDAY HANOI TO MAI CHAU

Today you journey 150km to Mai Chau, a minority village situated in the beautiful and remote Mai Chau Valley. The journey is through sparsely populated mountain areas, providing some awe-inspiring scenery. We drive out of the city and visit the Ho Chi Minh Trail Museum - a museum dedicated to this amazing feat of human and military engineering. Travel further west and visit a Muong ethnic group near Hoa Binh. The Muong people, one of 54 ethnic minorities or "hill tribes" that inhabit Vietnam, retain a traditional way of life, and there is time to walk around their village and amongst the rice fields. Arriving in Mai Chau mid-afternoon, enjoy a cup of tea or rice wine before exploring the local village. Mai Chau is inhabited by the Thai people. This ethnic group like all others in Vietnam has its own unique identity, with their own unique dress, language, and customs. Insider Experience - Special Stay: Tonight you can try the local food and sleep in a traditional family guesthouse.

Hi Friends,

Breakfast was spring rolls, salad, pork & mushrooms, chicken stir-fry, very strong coffee, and a tiny piece of "fromage" — the first I've seen. A Japanese fellow next to me was eating his omelette with a spoon; did I say they are runny? But he ate his salad with chopsticks. Go figure.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail no longer exists — it was just a narrow track and the forest reclaimed it decades ago — and the Ho Chi Minh Trail Museum is unfortunately closed for renovation & repairs. But we substituted the Army Museum instead on the way out of Ha Noi. According to the captions we were the aggressors in their patriotic war for liberation, which is correct, and of course it's a humbling experience to be shown as the bad guys, which of course we too-often were (and still are).

Then on southward into the mountains to a rice-growing region in a valley surrounded by mountains to stay at a guest house in a tourist village. We are lodged in a simple square room on the second floor that has only two mattresses and an overhead fan; the toilets / showers / sinks are on the first floor along with the dining area. It's interesting architecture in the old local style but I'd be just as happy to have a private bath. I'm less adventurous as I have trouble getting around.

This is rice harvest time, and for 2 hours we walked around the rice fields watching the various stages of the harvest. I won't begin to describe it. Amazing: forever I've heard about rice in the Orient and here we are in the middle of the fields watching it happen all around us. And because this is a tourist area photography is not a problem. Again — it's just amazing to be here. Photos are below.

Dinner was family-style with our guide and driver. Nguyen brought home-brewed rice wine which he shared and we all were happy (including Barbara who's naturally happy w/o chemical assist). I learned a lot about the evolution of communism in Vietnam; In the '50s to early '90s it was about land reform and improving the life of peasants; now it's about accumulating power and wealth. Interesting: communists originally confiscated land of wealthy landowners and moved peasants onto collective farms, but that failed (no incentive to work hard) so in 1994 they broke up and re-distributed the land of collective farms to individual farmer families and allowed them to sell their rice and pocket the profit.

Then to sort thru the nearly 200 photos we took today (the many short videos are saved for later; I have no time or interest in dealing with them now) and write this email with a Bia Ha Noi (Beer Hanoi). Because this is a tourist area our guest house has wifi so I'm attaching quite a few compressed photos.

Not counting the many hours in the back seat, it ended up being a fascinating day in the rice fields.

- John (& Barbara)



This is our stash after a half-dozen visits to the ATM. It totals about \$450. For scale, a beer in a restaurant is about 50,000 VND, an hour massage typically 200,000 VND, and dinner up to 400,000 VND. There are 22,000 VND to the dollar.





Two street vendors early in the morning, selling a handful of packages of cigarettes. This redefines "small business". The fellow at top is eating a breakfast bowl of rice with his chopsticks. Everyone works.



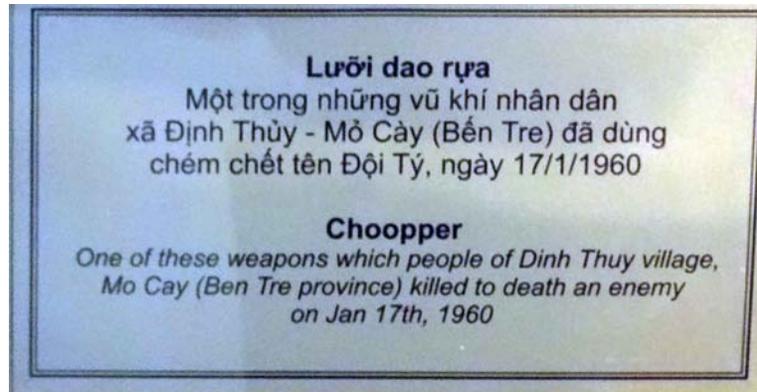
Tai Chi by a lake and public park in Ha Noi. The music, which you'll hear if you watch our video, was Tennessee Waltz. This is why you travel.



A mother and three kids on her scooter, probably going home from school for lunch.



A sculpture of downed US aircraft at the Army Museum. Some engines from B-52s are center left.



A caption in the Army Museum below two large “chooper” knives (small machetes).



How many statues of Lenin still exist in the world? I think only a handful. This is in another public park.



This is for sale at a road-side cafe. Our guide said “Rice wine with snake. Men drink, make wife happy. Ha ha.” We bought some corn nuts instead (sweet instead of salty, like back home).



Rice fields near our guest home in a valley surrounded by mountains. Much of the haze is fog and the rest is smoke from burning stubble.



Cutting the rice by hand and then binding and setting it to dry. Yes, they do wear those conical hats. I've resisted buying one for my hiking hat.



Carrying dried rice bundles from the field to be threshed; she'll load them into a hand-cart or onto a bicycle, or perhaps will carry them. We're told her neck muscles are awesome. Mechanical threshers now do the next step.



Barbara testing how to carry a load of rice bundles to the thresher. The locals are very tolerant of us well-meaning tourists with cameras. Nguyen arranged the deal and took the snap.



A house in the country with a largish garden.

October 26: Trang An rowboat cave experience

26 OCT THURSDAY MAI CHAU TO NINH BINH TO TRANG AN

This morning wake up early with the rest of the family and, after a leisurely breakfast, enjoy a walk through the beautiful valley to neighboring villages. This is a great chance to learn about hill tribe methods of cultivation and their way of life - a world away from Vietnam's frantic cities. This afternoon drive to the town of Ninh Binh. This beautiful area

is often referred to as "Halong Bay on land" due to the many limestone formations rising from the landscape.

Hi Friends,

Breakfast was French bread and fried egg — not my favorite. And strong coffee, grown in Vietnam. I would have been happy with veggies, rice, and pork. I actually ate the bread (I was hungry) although I hated myself for it later.

Then in the back seat again. One more person and we'd have a van! I definitely recommend that you see Vietnam, but not necessarily from the back seat of a standard-size car.

We hadn't seen a scooter crash until today — and then we caused it. Actually it was the scooter's fault, but according to Vietnamese law if a scooter and car collide it's the car's fault. We were traveling rather fast, as is the custom, down a one-lane secondary (tertiary?) road when a scooter going definitely too fast down a narrow lane met the front fender of our car at an intersection. He was knocked down and into the bushes, and he hurt but didn't break his foot. Our guide and driver helped him reload his bundles on the back of his scooter and gave him some cash to defuse the situation, and we all went on our way. The brand-new Nissan now has a baptism scratch on the fender.

Lunch at a roadside restaurant was spring rolls, deep-fried rice, and grilled goat. The goat was rather tough — they have that reputation — so I don't have to try that again. The rice had to be softened in a type of soup to eat. All good (except for the goat). And a definite change from the ham sandwich or chicken burrito I have at home.

The highlight of the day was a two-hour rowboat tour of the Trang An caves. This area closely resembles Halong Bay, but it is inland and is flooded with a shallow lake. A middle-age lady I would not care to arm-wrestle rowed the two of us in a narrow boat around the lake between the towering limestone formations and especially thru eight caves. The narrow caves were as long as 1000 feet and the ceiling was so low in four of them that I sat in the bottom of the boat while Barbara sat on a seat and ducked as low as she could. Very scenic and interesting and a popular tourist area. Insider Journeys has done an excellent job of planning our vacation.

Then to a brand-new 5-star fancy all-marble too-ritzy hotel in an area where they are building a row of huge new hotels in hopes of capturing high-end tourist dollars. That's definitely a goal of the communist government; they know the score. We prefer 3-star and maybe 4-star on occasion, and we definitely don't feel comfortable here; it's for rich people. It is sterile. It has nothing to do with Vietnam, and other than the staff's accents we could be in Chicago or Vienna or anywhere neutral. And there's nowhere to walk outside, so it's a long night in. I'll watch another episode of "The War", our neutral name for what they call "the US sabotage war of aggression against the peaceful people of Vietnam".

So now I'm sitting in the all-marble cafe, sipping a B-52 cocktail — because I can. My little souvenir bottle of rice wine awaits in the room.

The temperature continues with highs in the mid-80s and lows in the 70s with fairly high humidity and mostly cloudy. I use my new Oakley sunglasses some of the time. We expected some rain and there must be some ahead. This is the change of seasons from wet to dry and we lucked out.

Observations:

It appears that most adults smoke. At least they grow their own tobacco; if it came from South Carolina that would be further aggression.

No bugs. We brought two spray bottles of mosquito repellent and some suntan lotion and have used none of either. We'll need the repellent farther south. We've seen virtually no flies or bugs, to our surprise.

The countryside is as dirty as the city with too much trash everywhere. And it looks like most construction projects were abandoned mid-project and the building materials lie scattered around in forlorn piles. We've seen that elsewhere.

Children learn to cling to their adults like monkeys while they're on their scooters.

Unleashed dogs do not appear to have been neutered.

I typically have 2 tall iced coffees each afternoon. They don't do iced drinks here other than smoothies, so I've been drinking a lot of beer. Beer is safe and cheap. I may acquire a taste for it, but will be very happy to return to my coffees. The back seat is a sleepy place after two beers.

- John (& Barbara)



Our guest house, built on the old style (on massive stilts) but for tourists. Now the dining room is on the first floor instead of the animals.



Animals can be a hazard, especially since there seems to be little effort to keep goats, chickens, and water buffalo off the roads. The lady behind has fruit for sale.



Boats heading off to the Trang An caves.



Photography doesn't work inside the dark caves, and this is my best effort. The ceiling is only 3 feet above the water in many places and you almost need to lie flat in the boat.

October 27: Ho Chi Min's home

27 OCT FRIDAY TRANG AN TO VINH

This morning take a small boat ride along the beautiful waterways of Trang An, enjoying the striking scenery along the way. Trang An is part of a national park in Vietnam and offers some superb views of temples, numerous water caves, natural scenery and

wildlife, including wild ducks and goats - who manage to get themselves in very precarious locations on the steep mountain walls. (Please exercise some patience as the local vendors can be persistent). In the afternoon check out and journey south to the town of Vinh.

Hi Friends,

Breakfast at our 5-star international hotel where the waiters basically wear tuxedos included: minced pork porridge; several kinds of steamed veggies and rice; stewed goat (I tried it again, and this was much better; went back for seconds; pho noodle soup (made to order, like the omelettes); black rice in yogurt (excellent!); for desert mango and dragon fruit. The same as your breakfast? Many fellow guests were French, and I wondered if they felt as bad about what they did to this little country as I do about ours.

We seem to be ahead of schedule; we did our Trang An boat ride yesterday. So take the official itinerary at the top as a suggestion only, since it's almost meaningless, but I'll include it faithfully for what it's worth. We trust our guide Nguyen to make good decisions and to rearrange the schedule as he feels best.

So back into the car to drive quite awhile to Vinh, the birthplace and early home of Ho Chi Minh and now, of course, a shrine. He was born in a "log cabin" of thatched bamboo that's about the size of our motorhome, and his grandparent's home and the family shrine are adjacent. Bamboo lasts a maximum of 20 years and he was born in 1890, so we suspect a fair amount of renovation has gone on. It's as humble a home as a log cabin with a few sleeping platforms, a raised mat for students to sit on (Ho's father was a teacher), and a tiny kitchen. One has to watch one's head throughout, and I skipped the kitchen because of the 4-foot ceiling. I had intended to buy a souvenir shirt at the souvenir stand on the way out, but they had none large enough for me.

While waiting for Uncle Ho's birthplace shrine to open after "siesta," we walked around the town, and all the kids in a school we passed yelled "hello" and waved to us — a thrill all around. Everyone is quite friendly and we feel comfortable and safe.

Speaking of "safe," our guide would like to travel but is afraid of going to Europe or America because of the violence and lack of safety. "Vietnam no problem; Europe very dangerous." He's probably right. I've walked around Hanoi after dark and felt quite comfortable but wouldn't dream of doing the same downtown after dark in my home city of Detroit.

Then to our fancy (but not over-the-top) hotel in downtown Vinh to rest, take a short walk before dark, and then walk to dinner with Nguyen and our driver. He ordered eel soup which might have been great but it was too spicy hot. Another experience. Now I'm ready to try their pizza, which is everywhere.

It seems to be more humid. The air is not clear; Nguyen says it is fog only plus some smoke from burning fields although it looks like heavy air pollution to me. But again I'm sure he's right. The distant mountains are ghostly and we don't see the sun. Our rain-coats remain tucked away but sunglasses are important.

Comments and Observations:

Nguyen described his life under communism when his family lived on a collective farm. They worked the rice fields and raised chickens, but everything belonged to the state and was collected; they were given coupons and stood in line but the shops were bare. They had far too little to eat and were always hungry, had no new clothes (his mother sewed patches on top of patches), little fuel for cooking and none for heat, and not even blankets in the winter. The government realized this North-Korea-style of communism wasn't working and divided the land, to their credit; now you farm your own land, can own anything you can afford to buy, sell what you grow to whoever will buy it ("free market") and only corporations pay taxes. "Much better!"

It's rather obvious that we're not locals so we do get some looks as we walk by. Nothing hostile — just curious. We say "hello" or "xin chao" and smile; they repeat what we said and smile back. Barbara prefers "xin chao" so they'll think we're trying to mix in; I prefer "hello" so they can practice their English (they all know hello). See next comment.

They answer the phone with "alo", accent on the "o".

Thinking again of safety, the only thing I do here that is really dangerous is get in and out of tubs with high walls and without grab bars to take a shower. Even Barbara doesn't feel entirely safe. We really like it when we have a walk-in shower.

It's OK to travel in the wrong direction on the highway if you stay on the shoulder.

There was a huge (and noisy) wedding at our hotel. According to Nguyen, Vietnamese believe in "try before you buy" and many brides are pregnant at their wedding. Weddings are lavish and expensive.

Beer tastes exactly the same here as back home; Tiger beer or Ha Noi beer could be Budweiser. I'd really prefer a wheat beer, but no dice. I haven't seen any rice beer — if there is such a thing.

Watching the locals eat with chopsticks, again it is clear: shovel it in however you can and forget about etiquette. I wish we had video of some shoveling techniques we've seen.

They'd have full employment if they paid people to repair the sidewalks.

Army-style clothes are popular. I'll resist the temptation to bring some home.

- John (& Barbara)



We were on HiWay 1 heading south much of the day, but “hiway” here means something different than back home. It is very much *not* limited access, with homes and shops right on the road as shown by these two snapshots out the window. The speed limit is about 100 km/hr but 60 is a more practical limit. Much of the time we were also passing fields.



School kids on recess waving and calling "hello." Somehow they figured we are not Vietnamese.



Ho Chi Minh was born in this house in 1890 and lived here until he was 18 and went off to college. This is the first snapshot of the trip with the two of us in it. We learned at least as much about his life as we want to know.



I'm trying on shirts as we "exit thru the gift shop", but none were large enough. Most said "made in China" and I can get those at Wallymart.



Street scene in Vinh, a city with a population of half a million. You're not supposed to hit them, and they sense that.



A stairway in our hotel. Count the handrails. That's how many grab bars are in the shower/tub.



Dinner: eel soup. It was probably very good but all we tasted was the chili peppers and we went thru a lot of napkins as tissues.

October 28: paddling thru a wonderful cave

28 OCT SATURDAY VINH TO DONG HOI

Vinh is the birthplace of Vietnam's national hero Ho Chi Minh, and this morning you will visit the small village of Kim Lien on the outskirts of town where he was born. Insider Experience - Unique: Drive further south to Phong Nha. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2003 the Phong Nha - Ke Bang National Park boasts stunning limestone karst mountains, caves and grottoes. Along with the areas stunning natural beauty the national park is home to the largest dry cave in Asia (Paradise Cave) and the largest single cave passage in the world (Son Doong Cave). Travel through the beautiful Quang Binh countryside to the small village of Son Trach, where you will take an open boat journey to the Phong Nha and Tien Son caves. Continue by boat into the spectacular Phong Nha cave which the Cham people used as Buddhist sanctuaries in the 9th and 10th centuries. Afterwards walk up the 300 steps to Tien Son Cave which you can enter before returning by boat to Son Trach village. Afterwards continue on to the seaside town of Dong Hoi and your beachside resort.

Hi Friends,

Breakfast (always an adventure): two kinds of pork (many toothpicks required); shrimp dumplings (excellent); three kinds of rice; lotus leaves; taro cake (infinitely better than the French bread; bao dumplings. I skipped the American section and the “pig tripe porridge” although I might have tried it had I not found plenty of other things (I doubt I’ll see pig tripe at Denny’s back home). I broke into my stash of Splenda brought from home and half a packet makes the demitasse of strong coffee drinkable; the locals add a heaping tablespoon of sugar per half-cup and that does the trick too, but I have enough Splenda to see me thru the trip. The dragon fruit wasn’t as fresh as earlier; we’ve become connoisseurs.

Yet another long day in the infamous back seat. My legs are so stiff from sitting a long time that I have a hard time walking when I get out of the car and I’ll be happy to get back to a more active routine with less sitting in a cramped space. Nguyen is knowledgeable and we keep up a running conversation before wearing ourselves out and nodding off.

We saw Uncle Ho’s home yesterday, so today we were directly off to Phong Nha - Ke Bang National Park. The highlight was a two-hour boat ride to and into a long cave. A river originating in Laos flows out of the cave, and you motor to the cave entrance and then are paddled 1.2 km into it and back, and motor home. To continue further into the cave you need a kayak. The cave is simply amazing and we’ve seen nothing remotely like it. It’s huge — something like 100 meters wide and 100 meters high in places and tastefully lighted, and the only sound is the paddling. It’s a memorable place.

Then another hour in the car to our hotel. Before checking in we walked around a dock area where squid boats are tied up, and thru the adjacent tourist-free neighborhood where the kids again got to yell “hello”. A few added “How are you?”

Our hotel is another of these huge 5-star palaces that is 2 stars above what we would book ourselves. Maybe in time we could be comfortable in them, but in the meantime we get to see how rich people live. The sound of the surf from the South China sea in the bar is pretty special. At sunset we sat in the poolside bar enjoying the sea breeze (wonderful) while I sipped a Ho Chi Minh Trail cocktail — because I could; where else is it on the drink menu!

Then dinner; Barbara had stir-fried veggies with shrimp and I had “ocean soup” followed by fried mackerel with fish sauce (the sauce was wonderful — wish I could take a bottle home) while the band played Besame Mucho and other traditional Viet favorites. After dinner Barbara returned to the beach to sit in a glider and enjoy the warm ocean breeze from the South China Sea and the soothing sound of the surf while I slaved over this email. We enjoyed the remainder of the evening in our room with high-speed wifi — and more rice wine for me.

Comments and Observations

Nguyen says that there is no corruption in the wonderful communist government of Vietnam. And the conversations that happen in the car remain in the car. So talk to me about it later.

The railroad parallels Highway 1 for some distance, and we saw two freight trains. They look vintage; perhaps 50 years old. Nguyen tells us the railroad was established by the French and hasn't been upgraded, only maintained, so it is old and not used much. People travel by bus. They're way behind China in this regard.

A section of our highway was used as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The trail was really a network that totaled thousands of miles of trails and roads. Nguyen described how teams of workers, mostly volunteers and many women, were stationed along the trail to fill the bomb craters immediately after they were created so the trucks could continue southward on the next night — and how many were killed. I gather that in places the Trail became modern roads but in the jungle it was only a track and it quickly went back to nature once it was no longer used.

We haven't seen a RV and doubt any exist here. Nguyen was impressed as we attempted to describe ours. I think our RV is not much smaller than his house.

We see cigarettes sold by the pack by old men and ladies on the street corner. I haven't told Nguyen that if you tried that in the USA you'd be arrested, and if you tried to sell cigarettes individually and especially if you were black you could be “shot and killed to death” by the police. He wouldn't understand and it would only reinforce his irrational fear of traveling to the US.

I check the news from back home nightly, but can't bear to read it — far, far too depressing. If I was younger and if I didn't like our summer and winter homes so much I'd flee the country. I glance at the news headlines, cringe, and do something else.

I've gotten so darn good with chopsticks that I can now pick them up with my right hand

and position them in the eating position without using my left hand to arrange them properly. Pretty impressive for a boy from Detroit! I usually use chopsticks instead of a fork just to impress the locals (even though they're basically stupid — chopsticks, not the locals).

We now have over 200 videos, most only 15 seconds or so long, to deal with when we return home. Ay caramba! That will take much of December and I'm not looking forward to it. Right now they're out of sight and out of mind.

- John (& Barbara)



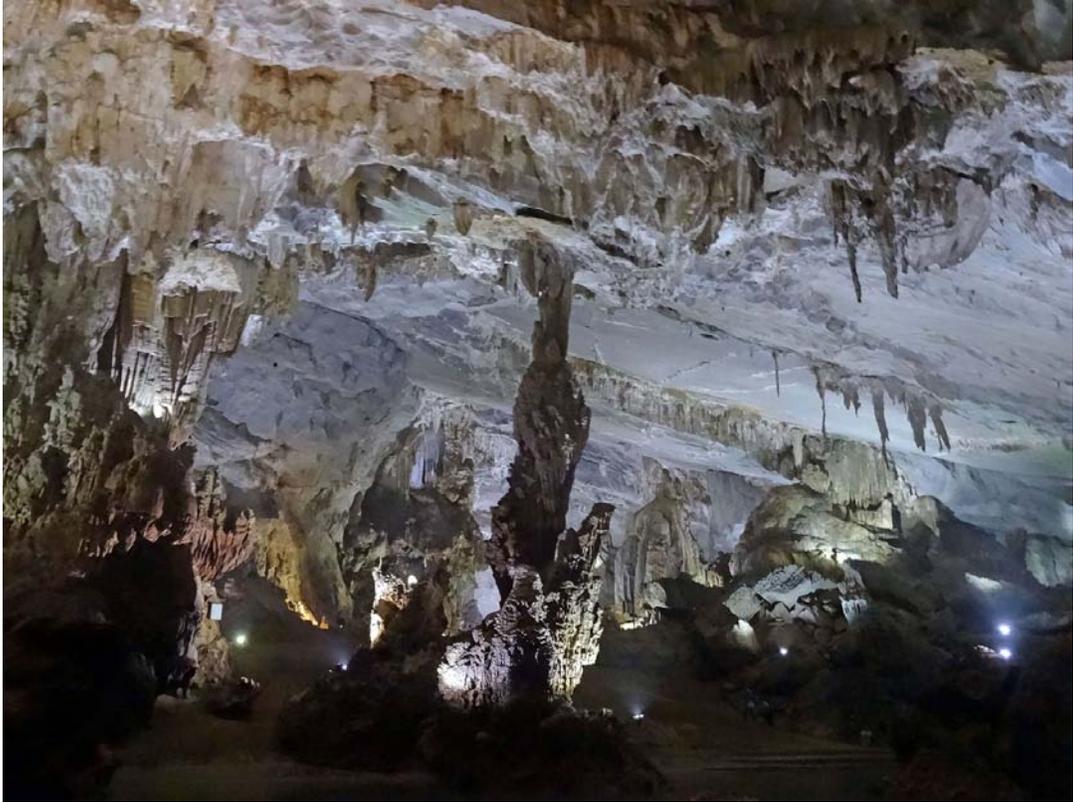
A shot out the window as we head south on Highway 1. This section was once part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we're told, and that's part of popular lore that is publicized in cocktail drinks, among other things, like we do Route 66. There's no "typical" scene but this will do. It's in contrast to yesterday's, which were shot as we passed thru towns.



We finally had the opportunity to experience a classical squat toilet at a truck stop. The large bucket of water has a scoop (an old plastic bottle cut in half) in it so you can dump water in the toilet to "flush" it.



Boats entering the cave; at the entrance you switch from 2-cycle gas engines (whew) to paddles. That's an entire river that flows out of the cave.



Two shots inside the cave.



We're leaving the cave as this boat enters. Insider Journeys booked us an entire boat to ourselves, so we were the two passengers (plus Nguyen, who accompanies us most places).



A ferry about to cross the river as we return to port. It's a super-narrow home-made boat with room for up to 4 scooters and some baggage.



Squid boats tied up. Note the rows of lights, which is how they attract the squid. I should have ordered squid for dinner — it would have been fresh.



A 90-degree or so view out of our hotel room window, looking over the olympic-size but unheated pool (barely visible) to the narrow beach and the South China Sea (not visible).

October 29: Villagers' Tunnels and DMZ

29 OCT SUNDAY DONG HOI TO THE DMZ AND HUE

At one time the unofficial border between the former North and South Vietnam (1954-1975), the 17th Parallel was perhaps the most hotly contested piece of territory on earth. We spend today traveling through the former North-South border area, with a chance to see the North Vietnamese tunnels at Vinh Moc, and the Hai River. In the afternoon we travel along the road once known as "the street without joy" south to Hue, Vietnam's former imperial capital. As the capital throughout the Nguyen Dynasty, it was the center of Vietnamese Buddhism and scholarship and finally the setting for some of the Vietnam

War's most bloody fighting, Hue provides a unique window into Vietnam and its complex past.

Hi Friends,

We began our day with a walk along the South China Sea after sunrise. A few fishing boats completed the scene. We very much enjoyed the warm breeze and the sound of the crashing waves. This is Barbara's favorite hotel because of its location on the beach.

Breakfast: The new item was sushi — hadn't seen that before. Lots of rice, noodles, and steamed veggie choices. I prefer muesli to steamed cabbage for breakfast. You know how they do the custom omelettes where you pick the ingredients? — they do the same here, but also with noodle soup; pick the ingredients and they stir them in for you, so Barbara's main course was pig knuckle noodle soup. Something else we won't find on the Denny's breakfast menu.

While going for a coffee refill I slipped on the slick floor and landed on my butt. A dozen wait-staff converged on me quicker than I can tell about it and helped me up (and cleaned up the smashed cup). No harm except to my pride (and the cup). I really don't care for polished marble floors.

Then rain! We've avoided it until now, but it was time to break out the rain hats, rain coats, and umbrellas (except I forgot my umbrella — rather stupid of me). The rain was heavy at times as we continued south down Highway 1, making it hard to see the cattle and buffalo standing and sitting in the highway. It ended before we stopped for lunch but I'm afraid substantial rain is in our near future.

The highlight of the day was a tour of the tunnels at Vinh Moc. We'll also see tunnels farther south, but I may not be able to go into them (too cramped), but I was able to navigate these; they're about 1 meter wide and 2 meters high so only moderate ducking was required plus attention to the slick floor. The area was carpet-bombed by B-52s and totally destroyed, so the villagers dug underground to survive and came out only to farm; slit trenches let them seek some sort of safety when they were caught in the fields by the "American terror pilots in their savage war of aggression." The army didn't use the tunnels much; they were primarily for the villagers. Some were as deep as 90 feet and they went on for miles, with tiny rooms smaller than our bedroom closet for sleeping, meeting, etc. We carry headlamps instead of conventional flashlights to keep bedside, and we wore them in the tunnels; we got that right. Another highlight of the trip.

Next stop: the DMZ and a museum devoted to the American war of terror against the patriotic freedom fighters. We tell Nguyen to not sugar-coat it; we were the bad guys and we admit it. Actually there were bad guys all around, but we were the ones with B-52s and napalm. Nguyen was surprised that I voted for bad-guy Johnson and once even shook his hand (campaign rally in Detroit), but when I told him the other guy wanted to drop an atomic bomb on Hanoi he understood.

Then on to Hue, arriving at 3. After a rest Nguyen took us for an hour walk around town. We're at the Moonlight Hotel (star and planet theme throughout) in an overwhelmingly

tourist district downtown. All the signs are in English and our street is a series of bars and cafes. Nguyen said good-bye; he flies back to Hanoi tonight and we were handed off to Long, who will be our guide for the next 11 days as we continue south to Saigon.

With plenty of time to kill I had another full-body massage: \$12 plus tip. Tomorrow I'll get a foot massage.

Barbara declined to walk around town to find a dinner spot, so we had a drink (or two) in the rooftop patio bar/restaurant ("Sirius") which overlooks the city; I sorted thru and Photoshopped today's photos. The sound is of several discos and bars blasting music up and around. Then a simple dinner.

After finishing this I'll resume Ken Burn's The Vietnam War, with some rice wine. Coincidentally I'm up to the section on the Tet offensive and the battle for Hue in 1968.

Tomorrow we tour Hue with our new guide Long.

Comments and Observations

You nod slightly when saying "thank you" and many other times. And you don't hand somebody something casually like we 'Muricans do; you "present" it to them with both hands, like when offering a credit card to pay a bill.

We're in the south now, and there are several differences, most too subtle for us (skin color a shade darker, regional accent, food spicier, etc.) but the main one is that the south wasn't carpet-bombed., although cities like Hue were destroyed by ground fighting during the American War and in the civil war that followed.

- John (& Barbara)



Barbara enjoying the sounds of the South China Sea before breakfast — and almost getting soaked by a wave crashing against the sea wall. Note the sun! We've gotten used to seeing a totally white sky with no sun, but it broke thru for this photo.



Fishing boats in the South China Sea.



Entering a tunnel. The Vietnamese might have been able to stand up inside them, but we had to stoop.



Inside the tunnels. The rock was soft and easily carved, and it held its shape without the need for shoring. It was dripping wet and we were soaked with sweat when we exited.



An "apartment" in the tunnel for a family. There was a little dead-end side tunnel like this every 5 meters or so to house the entire village. We think the smell must have been horrible.



A maternity tunnel. The lady even had a bed to lie on — what luxury!



Rubber trees (shot out the window from Highway 1).



A diorama in the DMZ museum showing the capture of an "American terror pilot" while another plane falls in the distance. All crewmen were called "pilots."



Nguyen and me crossing the 17th parallel at the DMZ with the north in the background. 50 years ago it would have been immediately lethal to stand here.



Lunch in Hue. L to R our driver (never really got his name), guide Nguyen, and me. I broke down and ordered a pizza just to see if they got it right, and they did; it was quite good with enough cheese. Mine was a squid and shrimp pizza, of course.



The lady is setting up a lunch counter on the bank of the river in Hue. She's adding spices to a huge bowl of snails, and a fire is burning in the bucket atop 3 bricks. Snails are on! A souvenir shop is spread out on the ground behind. These small businesses aren't regulated or taxed.

October 30: Hue

30 OCT MONDAY HUE

Begin the day with a visit to the impressive home of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors (1802-1945), the Citadel and Imperial Palace. Much of the Citadel was destroyed during the Tet Offensive in 1968 but it is gradually being restored. Continue on to the much revered Thien Mu Pagoda, Hue's oldest and most beautiful religious monument. In the afternoon continue your exploration of the city with a visit to one of the magnificent Royal Mausoleums that surround Hue; the tomb of the fourth emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, Tu Duc. Insider Experience - Local: Visit a local incense workshop, a major trade in Hue, and test your craftsmanship skills! Insider Experience - Local: Enjoy a unique visit to the Spiral Foundation to meet the deaf-and-mute workers as they guide you to make your own souvenir from 100% recycled materials. The S.P.I.R.A.L. Foundation's operations are inspired by the principle of "Aid from within the Country". Since 1999, The S.P.I.R.A.L. Foundation has financed humanitarian aid projects with the proceeds generated by income producing handicraft workshops. All workers are employed with fair wages based on an hourly rate and not on piece-work. All proceeds from the handicraft sales are returned to fund primary health care, medical and educational projects, giving to those involved in the production process a sense of pride that comes by helping and sustaining many others, in even greater need than themselves. In the evening sample some of Hue's famous cuisine.

Hi Friends,

(It took 20 minutes to send last night's email, so I was over-confident about the "great" connection. It should be much worse in days ahead when we're in the Central Highlands, so if you don't hear from us we weren't captured by terrorists; we're in a remote part of the world. And I did watch Ken Burns episode #6 which brought back memories; I was in college then. The series has extra meaning when you're watching it from where it happened!)

It rained, sometimes hard, overnight, so we were dreading getting soaked on today's walking tours. I was prepared to get wet and thought I would tough it out, but the rain stopped at breakfast and didn't resume until immediately after we returned back to our hotel. Barbara reminded me that I decided to leave my umbrella home because it might be hard to carry it in one hand and my walking pole in the other and opted to bring a rain hat and light raincoat instead, so I feel less stupid. The humidity is so high that we were soaked by lunch anyway, so it wouldn't have made much difference if we had been rained on. Long says there are two seasons in Hue; hot & wet and hotter but not so wet. The humidity was 85% this afternoon, rising to 97% tonight.

Not much new at breakfast. "Home made potatoes" are what I would call German fries. I'm having enough steamed veggies to look forward to good old American breakfasts when we return to civilization. But we'll eat Viet until then.

We began with a tour of the Emperor's compound at the Citadel. This was the home of the Emperors from 1802-1945, but most was destroyed by the French in 1947 and the

rest was destroyed at Tet in 1968. The ruins were then abandoned for 25 years until the communists thought it would be a good idea to rebuild it for tourists. So it's slowly being resurrected, and they're adding a newly reconstructed building every few years. They're doing a good job and it gives the feeling of what it was like back when. We won't see the Forbidden City in China, so this is the next-best thing. Do a Google image search for "hue citadel" for loads of pictures.

The last Emperors were "puppets of the French," as Long says, and are not remembered fondly. We later visited the tomb complex of one Emperor in a beautiful man-made setting outside town, so it wasn't destroyed and is original from the 1850s. Then as now, the 1% lived rather better than the rest of us.

Our second stop was a Buddhist temple, not destroyed by wars but rebuilt and expanded as needed, in a peaceful contemplative setting. We'll both quickly tire of oriental temples and palaces but these are the first we've visited so it was good to see them, and Long interprets them for us. I miss some of what he says; his English vocabulary is better than his accent. He does a good job of guiding and it's quite nice to have our personal guide with us everywhere. Our driver is "the driver" and he's anonymous; we don't know his name and don't think he speaks English.

Our new car, BTW, is a Toyota SUV with plenty of leg and seat room. I step down to get out rather than up as in the previous car, which was a standard Nissan. We're only missing a fold-down tray table, and there's room for one.

Then to a small shop where ladies make incense sticks by hand using a technique that probably goes back a thousand years. We don't know if our guide gets a commission for taking us to such places, but it's easy to make a small purchase — and everybody is happy. I brought my large suitcase so we have room for souvenirs. When we have an opportunity to make a purchase or a donation I always think that we likely killed this person's father or uncle back in the day and feel my contribution is poor atonement.

I had a special local dish for lunch — sort of deep fried seafood blintzes, but that's only a poor approximation. And an iced coffee! Barbara had steamed noodles and veggies with shrimp.

Our last stop was the SPIRAL Foundation, described above. Barbara knows a bit of American sign language and got in an animated conversation with one of the deaf workers, so to a degree sign language is universal. I wish I had that exchange on video. George Clooney and Steven Spielberg among others shopped at their gift shop, and that's a good enough recommendation for us, so we came away with two baskets woven from recycled materials. Their website is www.ogcdc.org.

Then to the hotel at 2:30 to watch the rain pour down! Wonderful timing. We weren't motivated to go out in the downpours that followed the rest of the day.

I had planned to have a foot massage down the street, but all hotels have their own spa, so I talked Barbara into each of us getting a full-body exfoliating salt massage followed by a foot & leg massage for 1 hour 45 min total. We haven't been so clean or so relaxed in recent memory!

Rain continued hard, so instead of walking our touristy street we were back to our roof-top restaurant for drinks while working on photos followed by dinner. Mine was traditional Hue noodle soup with beef and pork among other ingredients, and Barbara had a traditional Hue salad with spicy beef. I was humiliated at dinner: our waitress saw me struggle to eat my salad with chopsticks (I thought I was showing off) and brought me a fork, but I declined to use it and struggled on.

Comments and Observations:

There are Halloween decorations around our part of town, but I'm sure that's strictly for us tourists.

We're told that quite a few American vets of the "Vietnam War," as we call it, come here on tour, but they come as big groups, presumably organized in their original military formation. Some vets work (or contribute to) building schools, etc., as restitution. I feel guilty enough without having personally killed any of these friendly people. Remember the slogan "Join the army, travel to exotic distant lands, meet exciting and unusual people . . . and kill them"? I do. I think I saw it on a T-shirt.

A teacher's salary (my prosperity gauge) is \$6,000/year not counting the extra they make by tutoring. Teachers are paid more and given a housing allowance if they go to the mountains, where there's a teacher shortage.

Bike rental is \$1.25/day; I don't know the quality of the bikes. A taxi ride is 90¢ for the first 2 km. A beer or coke in a restaurant is also 90¢. The hostels start at \$5/day. This could be a cheap place to live.

"Oy choi oy" means what it sounds like: "Oh my god," which our guide says each time we barely miss hitting a scooter. The younger school kids all have electric scooters (Chinese, about \$500) because they go slow so no license is required.

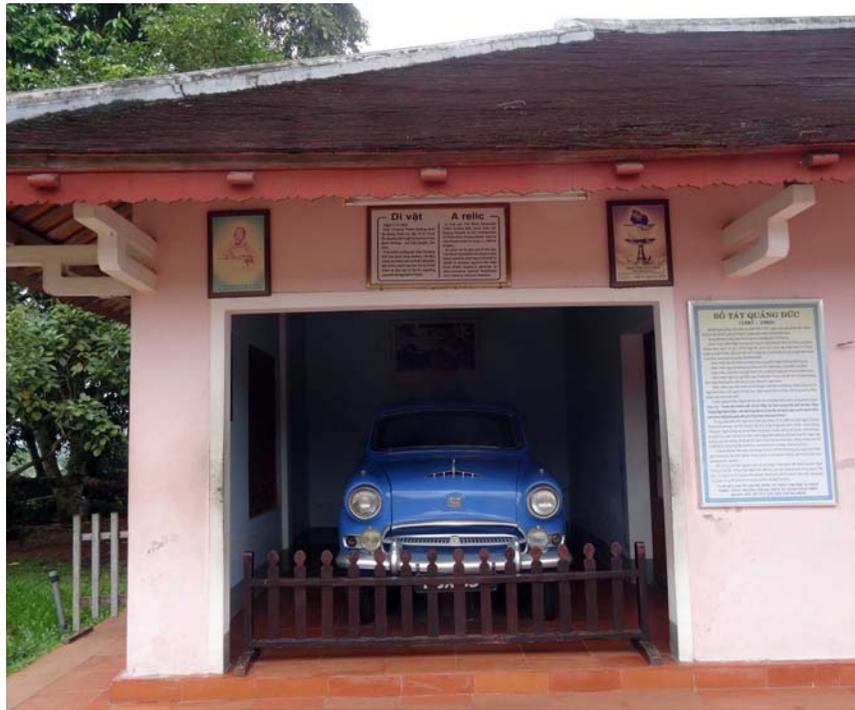
- John (& Barbara)



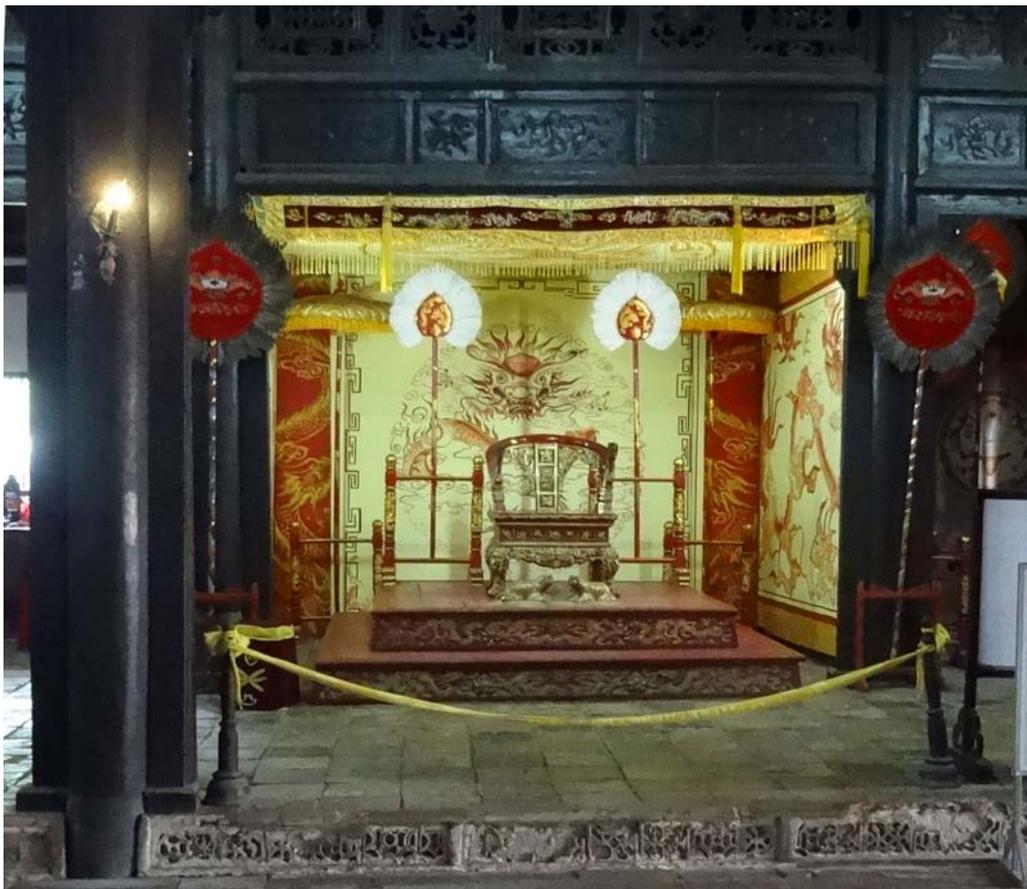
I came across this and thought it might be useful: 21 days in the backseat of a car.



A small part of the Citadel in Hue, home of the Nguyen Emperors for almost 150 years. Ho Chi Minh took over when the last Emperor abdicated in 1945. Vietnam was one country since forever except 1954-1975.



The car that the monk drove south to Saigon and set himself on fire. His photo is at upper left. He is now the equivalent of a Buddhist saint.



Emperor Tu Duc's throne in his tomb.



Also in his tomb and directly above his throne is this interesting ceiling showing stars and constellation. I'm ignorant of their meaning. Note that 19th century emperors used Chinese writing. It was a tremendous improvement when they switched to a western-style alphabet.



Barbara has just made a purchase in the gift shop. This is the fellow she conversed with in sign language — to his surprise and delight. The items are made elsewhere but sold here, in the tourist district.

October 31: Da Nang and the Old Trading Town Hoi An

31 OCT TUESDAY HUE TO HOI AN

From Hue you travel to Danang via the spectacular Hai Van Pass. This drive is considered one of the most beautiful in Vietnam and takes you through a combination of both rural and coastal settings. In Danang, visit the Cham Museum. The Cham people occupied this area of Vietnam from the 4th to the 16th centuries and in the museum you will find the best examples of Cham sculpture anywhere in the world. Continue south to Marble Mountains, a series of large marble outcrops that have acquired mythical significance over the centuries. The caves of the Marble Mountains have a number of sacred Buddhist shrines and served as a Communist guerrilla hospital from the Vietnam War. From the Marble Mountains there are great views across the ocean and the surrounding countryside. From there you will travel further south to Hoi An, Vietnam's most active trading center over many centuries that has been largely preserved. The architecture of the city reflects the influence of Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, French and British traders. Hoi An is also the town where French Missionary Alexandre de Rhodes introduced Catholicism to Vietnam as well as the Romanized script that has become the standard Vietnamese script. This afternoon take a walking tour of enchanting Hoi An visiting an old merchant house, a Chinese Assembly Hall and the Japanese Covered Bridge. This evening dine at one of Hoi An's appealing restaurants or take part in an optional fun, hands-on cooking class and learn how to prepare some of the local delicacies.

Hi Friends,

(If I read the log correctly, my laptop tried 247 times before successfully sending yesterday's email. Oy choi oy! And that's in a modern hotel in a big city. We've learned to expect this.)

Breakfast: I tried an omelette — introduced by the French colonials — but can't recommend it. They do them without milk or cheese, and an omelette without cheese is like a pizza without cheese. But they don't do cheese here (except for pizzas — they get that right). Most of the guests today are French and I can't say I'm overly fond of them; my bias comes in part from bicycling French roads without a shoulder decades ago and being angry that the truck drivers didn't give me an inch when they just as easily could have, and this was in a country that celebrates le Tour de France. That memory sticks with me. An unfair bias, I know, but it's based on real experiences. Anyway, there were a lot of French breakfasting with us.

It rained overnight and most of the day and is forecast to continue indefinitely, alternating between drizzle and heavy rain. We expected this but don't welcome it, and it certainly puts a "damper" on our activities.

We left Hue after breakfast and continued south down Highway 1, skipping several scenic stops because we wouldn't have seen anything in the rain and fog. At least the back seat was roomy.

We got to see how the locals dress for rain as they ride their scooters. Some ponchos are like tents that fit over the entire scooter including the headlight and handlebars and

rear-view mirrors and sometimes even the second passenger and/or cargo. We guess they've had time to perfect the technology for scootering in the rain.

We drove thru Da Nang, a familiar name from the "American War", and saw many posters that welcome the world leaders who will converge here in two weeks. We've been warned that DT will be among them, if he's not in prison by then (too much to hope for), but we'll be long gone and safe. Da Nang is a modern city totally unlike Old Town Hanoi, and it's rather sterile. We passed mile after mile of posh beach resorts and new fancy hi-rise hotels with golf courses. There's not much there for us and were happy to make only one stop — at the century-old French ethnology museum which specializes in the Cham culture. For over a thousand years the local Cham people were Hindu, so the museum featured Hindu artifacts including large sandstone sculptures from as far back as the 2nd century. I've seen such in other museums, but it was interesting to see them in the setting where they were found.

Then on to Hoi An, a UNESCO site for architecture and culture. The architecture is still here but the culture has totally vanished; it's an endless row of over-priced tourist shops in wooden buildings that date from 1600-1800 when this was a major port. The interesting architecture is largely hidden by the displays of merchandise. I need a new wallet when we return home and now have one that I'm told is made of water buffalo leather. VND bills are considerably larger than US bills but I found one that is small for our small-size money, so I'm happy — and so is the vendor. I probably could have gotten it for half that in Saigon.

We walked around town in our ponchos in a drizzle but were quickly bored and have no intention of returning in the evening, which is what was expected of us.

Our guide Long walked us out of the historic district to an authentic local cafe for a wonderful lunch of local noodle soup. There are many regional specialties and they do rice noodles different here than elsewhere, so of course we tried them. Very good, along with a Tiger Beer. Long complimented me on my agility with chopsticks but I don't know if he was just being nice. I told him we're professional tourists.

Then to our hotel which is built around a 200-year-old house the owners live in. We have a huge room for two nights with — wait for it — a walk-in shower! Barbara immediately hung our ponchos in it to dry. The hotel has a huge 5,000 square meter beautiful garden with pools and lots of tropical plants and chairs to sit and enjoy harmony with nature — but it's raining hard, so we can only look at it out our window.

With 8 hours to spend in our room I got antsy, so walked across the street for a massage. Spas aren't hard to find; there are two closer to the front door of our hotel/resort than we are from the front door, so they're everywhere and you don't have to wonder what to do to think "Aha — I'll go to a spa." And they're super-affordable. Barbara watched the dreary news from the US on CNN.

Then a big dinner of home-made local food (noodle soup and pork cooked in coconut) with big Tiger beer at a nearby restaurant for \$10. We're not on a budget but this would be a great place to visit if we were.

Comments and Observations:

I like some of the names. The main building at yesterday's Citadel is the "Hall of Peaceful Harmony". How harmonious it was in practice I don't know and I'm prepared to be cynical, but it's a nice gesture toward civility. Apparently one of the Emperor's functions was to insure harmony between heaven and earth. Maybe when DT is here he'll pick up on the concept and take it back and we'll have a White "House of Peaceful Harmony." Could happen.

Long would like to visit the USA. His uncle is a retired policeman in Orange County, but it's very hard to get a visa (almost impossible now with DT at the helm) for fear they will "jump ship" and not return home.

Speaking of policemen, here they save you the trouble of having to go to court to pay your fine by taking the money and arranging it for you, especially if you don't need a receipt. Your family has to have been communist for 3 generations to be hired as a policeman (test results don't count), and they live in some of the nicer homes.

Smoking in restaurants is permitted. We won't get used to that and it's hard to believe we ever allowed it. Tobacco here is grown locally and I'm told cigarettes are cheap. They would have to be.

- John (& Barbara)



The view of Hue with two of its bridges over the Perfume River from our 13th floor hotel restaurant. High rises are in the other direction.



A scooter-rider with proper rain-gear in Hue. Note that it covers his handlebars and headlamp while the mirrors stick thru it.



Many roadside shops here offer eucalyptus oil (yellow) and fish oil (orange and other colors) for sale. All are produced and bottled locally.



The sign confirms that we're on national Highway 1. It rains a lot here and has rained recently, so many fields are flooded. Note the beautiful view of the mountains.



The museum of Hindu sculpture and other items in Da Nang. There were lots of lingam and yoni. We now know the names of the major Hindu gods.



A public beach at Da Nang. All the beach chairs were empty, and we drove on.



Hoi An and its many souvenir shops. The merchandise looks to be good quality but we're not shoppers. The interesting architecture of these homes from 1600-1800 is largely hidden. [This street flooded the next day.]



Lunch in Hoi An. Yes, my chopsticking skills have improved and that's noodle soup and a Tiger beer. Note the pull-tab; I haven't seen those in a while. They found me a chair so I'm not balanced on a little plastic stool. The lanterns are handmade in shops in town.

November 1: Free Day in Hoi An

1 NOV WEDNESDAY HOI AN

Insider Experience - Unique: Enjoy a local market and backstreets tour of Hoi An to learn about local produce together with some students from 'Streets cafe'. This will help them improve their language and interaction skills as part of their accredited training with the New York Culinary Institute. Enjoy a small tasting menu of some of the products when you return to Streets Cafe. The rest of the day is free for you to explore this beautiful town with its many clothing shops, colorful fish market and river life. You may wish to relax by your pool or venture to the nearby beach.

Hi Friends,

(Last night's email took only 6 minutes to send, so life is good. I'm told we'll have internet each night of the trip including in the remote Central Highlands. How fast is unspecified.)

The rain paused last evening when I went out for my massage and when we went out for dinner, but it began raining hard soon after we were safe in our room and it poured all night and thru breakfast. Then it stopped and we could walk around town without umbrellas and ponchos. This is the monsoon season here. I hadn't appreciated that the climate

changes so dramatically as you go only a few hundred miles, but it does, making planning for good weather impossible if you plan to move around much. Streets that we walked yesterday were under a foot or so of water today. The temperature and humidity are both 80. Here it'll rain 'most every day for the rest of the year.

The only novel item at breakfast that I recognized was steamed cabbage with oysters (I tried; not great); there was much more that one does not see at McDonald's but it was inscrutable. The best item is the excellent muesli which ia for their German visitors.

Our guide drove us back downtown to the local market where we were handed off to a young STREETS lady who showed us around, explained the unfamiliar fruits and veggies, and then gave us a pitch on their program; we ended the tour by dropping some bills in their oversize donation box. Insider Journeys, our Australian-based tour company, partners with organizations like STREETS and we're taking it at face value that they've done their homework and these are worthwhile causes. They seem to be, so we're happy to go along with it and be responsible tourists.

An amusing event (maybe you had to be there): At the market Barbara gave an ancient hobbled lady, bent over with age, who was begging, a US dollar bill. She accepted it with a quizzical look, and we watched her show it to three vendors and only when the third had assured her it was legitimate money and worth something did she turn to thank us with a broad smile. She can spend it in the market so won't have to take it to a bank.

Then our guide walked us back to our hotel, so we got to see the tourist district again — nicer without rain — and the very slightly less touristy street leading home. We stayed dry the entire time, to our surprise.

From 10:45 on it was a free day, and we might have rested in the hotel's beautiful garden if everything weren't so wet. We were back out later for a walk and small lunch.

Later I went for my daily massage. Just walking around is losing its novelty and there's a massage spa on every block (sometimes two), so it's the thing to do. I had a 2-hour body massage for \$30 including 25% tip while Barbara flipped channels in the room. Once we leave Vietnam my next massage will be ... almost never. In the meantime I'm happy to support the local economy.

Then back out for dinner. I had octopus with ginger and rice in a crock pot and it was superb. Some Vietnamese foods don't work for me, like the hot dog they call "sausage" at breakfast, but most of it is just wonderful and it's been an important and exciting part of the trip. Our restaurant owner saw us return and said, "me very happy."

I picked up another little bottle of rice "wine," which is actually a liquor, on the way home. The rice vodka was tempting but it came in a large glass bottle; maybe next time. Rice wine helps me think I'm being clever when I write these emails.

Tomorrow will be a full day in the back seat as we drive to the Central Highlands where, we're told, there are few tourists.

- John (& Barbara)



Our STREETS lady shows us a dragon fruit in the main market. We had wondered what it looks like. There's quite a bit behind her that we don't recognize; Costco carries a very small selection of the many kinds of fruit in the world.



Most people including restauranters shop every day. This lady is buying a kilo or so of rice noodles. It has just stopped raining.



A shopper passes obscure veggies that, when steamed, do not make for an excellent breakfast.



A meat stall. None of it is behind glass or otherwise covered. it's hard to tell, but that's meat from a pig skull at front left. Fresh food is the game in Vietnam.



Ladies making rice noodles for their restaurant. The cooked paste is pulled up on screens like the way handmade paper is made, then cooked on these domes (there's a fire inside), then placed on the bamboo racks at right to dry before being cut into noodles. We're told most noodles in Vietnam are made by hand in a similar way although if you're lazy you can buy them ready-made like in the snapshot above. Who knew! it's amazing what you can learn when you travel, and so far Vietnam is one of our favorite countries.



The logo looks legit but I doubt that they are an Authorized Dealer. They do have the earplugs, adapters, cables, etc. that you might need — all made in China, I presume. Or in one of the little shops off the main street.

November 2: The Central Highlands from a back seat

2 NOV THURSDAY HOI AN TO KONTUM

Depart Hoi An early in the morning for a full day's driving as you leave the coastal plateau and head towards the Central Highlands. The drive is truly spectacular and takes you through beautiful rolling hills, many small villages and past cotton, rubber and cassava plantations as well as small terraced rice paddies. You will head higher into the mountains, literally driving amongst the clouds to pass Kotu and Coho ethnic minority villages, finally arriving in Kontum. On arrival take a stroll along the banks of the Dak Bla River or into town to get your first feel of the relaxed atmosphere of the central highlands.

Hi Friends,

Breakfast: nothing new, but Barbara pointed out that what I assumed to be weak breakfast sausage is actually labeled "hot dog". So I wasn't being unfairly critical yesterday! But it's not something I would normally eat at breakfast. BTW, they bring your first cup of coffee or tea but don't do refills; I was on my way to the coffee station for a refill when I slipped a few days ago. Also, about half the time the table is too low to get our legs under it so we sit "side-saddle". We're not giants and these are tourist places so we're surprised they haven't figured out the clearance needs. But they haven't.

No rain! In fact, the sun came out, on and off, with the first patches of blue sky we've seen in recent memory.

We began by retracing our route thru Da Nang. They're sprucing up the city for the upcoming conference, painting street signs and cleaning and repairing the sidewalks, and we're told 10,000 police have descended. Big signs welcome the international delegates. We now see Da Nang when it's not raining, and it's a huge modern city with a miles-long row of huge hotels with more under construction. If you ever visit Vietnam — and you should — definitely give a miss to Da Nang — unless you come to play golf and sip cocktails in an international hotel.

Today was 8 hours in the car with one break for lunch (an excellent plate of rice noodles with veggies and beef plus a coke for exactly \$2 in a "local restaurant" with chickens wandering about underfoot, something else you don't see at Denny's). So we sat and looked out the rear windows. We climbed to the Central Highlands and saw many rice fields about to be harvested (later here than elsewhere), coffee trees, rubber trees, and tapioca trees, plus your standard tropical fruit trees. I'd never wondered where tapioca comes from (CostCo!) but it's an important cash crop here and huge bags of it are piled on the shoulder of the road to be picked up by trucks and taken to the central factory. Cattle feel free to sleep in the road. Other than the fact that we're in the country and pass thru small towns, it looks like Vietnam elsewhere.

The road is the main highway and it's two lanes with sometimes a shoulder. Much of it was part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, expanded and paved at the end of the war. Some sections were paved by hand before I was born and haven't been repaved since, so it was an "automatic massage" and Barbara became somewhat nauseous.

We averaged less than 30mph, and from the way other cars and even scooters passed

us I believe our driver is paid by the hour, not the mile. I would have got us here in 5 hours.

The Central Highlands are less than a thousand feet above sea level. Some sections are steep and rugged and others gently rolling hills with flat spaces for rice paddies. Very green and tropical, and cooler and dryer than down by the sea.

At 4:00 we rolled into a 1-star hotel that we're told is the best in the city of Kon Tum (population 150,000). Some of the places we've stayed are above our comfort level; this is at least 1 star below. Barbara thinks the stained carpet has never been cleaned and the place is kind of dirty, scratched, and run-down. But it doesn't matter.

After settling in, our guide Long took us on a walking tour of downtown which is actually a continuous open-air market lining the sidewalks and extending well into the street where they sell everything from flowers to fruits, live fish, live hens and geese, fresh meat (unrefrigerated) and hot food cooked on the street. Amazing. And endless. The place was full of shoppers who hopped off their scooters to make a quick purchase and continue on. Long pointed out what the various unfamiliar items were. I would have taken photos but we appeared to be the only non-Asians in this non-tourist town, and in fact we noticed that people were looking at *us* as if we were part of the attraction. Most strange. We smiled a lot and responded in kind when the kids said "hello".

And finally to a local restaurant our guide likes that serves only sticky rice with veggies and chicken, and I didn't embarrass myself with my chopsticking skills amidst the Asian pros, who certainly wondered who we were and why we were there. It was quite good. Dinner for two came to \$3.

Kon Tum is not a destination — for us or for anyone else. It's as far as we could drive in one day to our actual destination, which is an ethnic village farther down the road, tomorrow. Only the 3-week tours come so far off the normal tourist route — but we're not normal tourists.

- John (& Barbara)



Street scene in Hoi An as we leave town and head inland.



Typical scene in Da Nang. No reason to go there.



A cemetery in the Central Highlands. Cemeteries are out of town because land is too expensive in towns, and we passed a row of cemeteries inland of Da Nang.



Nice homes in the countryside, shot thru a rear window like most of today's. Some homes are total shacks like the ones we saw in the Bolivian Altiplano countryside but not since.



Bags of tapioca from someone's field waiting unattended by the side of the road for the big truck to come along and cart them off to the factory. In this poor 3rd-world country no one steals them. Sorry about the focus.

November 3: In a primitive village in the Central Highlands

3 NOV FRIDAY KONTUM TO PLEIKU

This morning begin the day with a walk through the colorful and vibrant town market, full of local character. Following this you shall visit the 'Wooden Church', an interesting building designed with a strong ethnic minority influence and French architectural style. You will then visit an old French seminary set amongst beautiful gardens in the center of town. The upper floor houses an interesting museum that displays photos of the many French missionaries who have lived here and provides information on the history of the area and the cemetery itself. Later, drive past huge tea plantations on the way to the primitive village of Plei Phun and enjoy a walk through the surrounding countryside. Plei Phun is home to the Jarai people, a friendly ethnic group found throughout the central highlands. Walk through the village and visit a Rong house (a large traditional meeting house with high roof), past local houses and the cemetery. The cemetery offers a fascinating insight into the traditions of the Jarai as ancestors are feed through large bamboo poles. Afterwards continue on to Pleiku arriving by late afternoon with time for a stop at Bien Ho Lake, a large natural volcanic lake that supplies fresh water to the town.

Hi Friends,

Travelfish says our Kon Tum hotel is “forgettable and charmless”. A succinct summary, and true. But it served the purpose.

Breakfast: We were the only “Europeans” in the room among Koreans? Japanese? So no stewed tomatoes or baked beans. I especially liked the deep-fried spring rolls but neither of us could eat what we thought was a local apple. The coffee was too strong to drink even with a full packet of sweetener added (“tar-like,” Barbara said) but they grow it here so you expect that.

After a quick stop at a 1913 French church built of teak and architecturally interesting and the attached orphanage where we paid our respects to the donation box, we were on our way at an infuriating 25 mph down Highway 17 to a primitive village to walk around. We picked up a mandatory “local guide” who was our North Korean-style minder. Like Catalan, this area wants independence and the communists in the federal government don’t want us mixing with the locals and talking insurrection and perhaps channeling money to their movement. I Googled the issues and it’s pretty interesting but there’s not room for it here.

The village is populated by a different ethnic group, and I’m finally getting it: there are 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, plus sub-groups, and each has a different history, customs, language, etc. The kids here learn Vietnamese in school as a second language, and their native language is so different from Vietnamese that they’re mutually unintelligible. Viets make up 85% of the population of Vietnam. When you think of it, North America was similar prior to 1492 with many Indian tribes that were totally different from each other, from Aztecs to Pueblos to Iroquois. It’s still that way here.

Anyway, the village was fascinating — a string of primitive farms that took us back centuries. Coffee is the main cash crop but there are plenty of fruits plus some rice and lots of pigs, water buffalo, dogs, etc. I’ll let the photos tell the story. We were the only tourists we saw, but this particular village is on the short tourist list so they didn’t seem to mind

us taking photos. We were advised that without our local guide we'd have been arrested.

We hit the rice harvest just right last week, and ditto the coffee harvest which happens now but only for two weeks a year. That probably depends on elevation, but we got to watch them work and they were very tolerant of us and our camera.

Then on to Pleiku, another city that is not on the normal tourist route (but then we're not normal tourists). Our hotel is a marble palace with a huge room and walk-in shower, and we're on the 10th floor with a spectacular panoramic view of "a sprawling, charmless, nondescript town," also according to Travelfish.

Long took us on 2-hour walk-about thru mostly uninteresting parts of town. I did like seeing Honda electric bikes (small scooters) and dried silk worms for eating in a market. Several men came up to shake our hands and thank us for being there, and with one I got to practice a little French (he was older than I so remembers when French was still used). Actually we see French words from time to time, but it's not in their future. People are friendly and smile and wave when we say hello. Again, we were the only "European" tourists in a non-tourist town, although I think most locals figured we are American. Barbara definitely stands out with her height and silver hair and would rather not have the attention.

With a long evening to kill I had another massage, this one in the hotel spa: 90 min for \$13 plus tip. Can't go wrong.

Dinner, also in the hotel, was the first disappointing meal I've had in Vietnam. It was half a chicken in special local barbecue sauce, but neither Barbara nor I could cut it and it was too messy to pick up, so we brutalized it a bit and then left it. Plus rice that had little flavor. Barbara's soup was good.

Tomorrow another long day in the car.

Comments and Observations:

From the web: "Anti-government protests in 2001 and 2004 in Buon Ma Thuot and Pleiku over indigenous land rights and autonomy by Montagnards were brutally suppressed by the government and ever since, travelers wishing to visit minority villages must have a guide and permit. This is unfortunate since this means visitors are directed towards set tours to approved villages. It removes most hope of any sort of spontaneity and seeing a fuller picture."

As many Vietnamese have been killed by land mines since the war ended as Americans were killed during the war. At the current rate of mine removal they'll all be gone in 200 years. Tens of thousands of birth defects still occur from Agent Orange. And yet they like us!

I'd not appreciated the differences between north and south Vietnam, other than the obvious. The north think of themselves as reuniting the country and making it whole and independent; the south thinks of itself as conquered and then occupied by the north and

not liking at all the change from capitalism to communism. Ho Chi Minh is not as popular down here, and Americans are liked more — in the north we were the enemy but in the south we were allies. The south is more prosperous and modern; the north more primitive and poorer. It's been fun to learn the two perspectives and these are just initial conclusions subject to refinement as we continue further south.

I saw a sign for what I believe was a Honda Binh Phúc scooter. I'm not sure how to pronounce it.

- John (& Barbara)



Harvesting coffee by hand: you strip the beans off the branches so they fall onto tarps.



Next you pick out the leaves, bugs, etc. by hand.



Then you spread the coffee beans out to dry. This particular house is outside the village. There are additional steps, of course, but we don't have photos.



Our guide Long pointing out a pepper tree. We've eaten pepper all our lives and never until now saw where it came from. To think that fortunes were made and world history changed on account of these little corns.



Piglets crossing a country lane. The pigs — and other animals — here are so infinitely luckier than animals we eat in the USA where they are penned in unspeakably horrific conditions until they're slaughtered. Here they roam free to live their happy lives, socialize, and have the run of the place — until one day they're taken to market.



Water buffalo at their leisure in someone's backyard. Note how tropical the place is.



A typical house in the village. A food storage shed is at left and the house at center, both on stilts. Animals live under the house.



Another house. You can barely see an edgewise satellite dish on the roof; most homes have one (both a dish and a roof).



A family tomb in the cemetery with what we would think of as rather unusual wooden statues outside. This is as strange to the Vietnamese as to us. The people of this particular hill tribe are animists and women have the power. There is so much to learn about the world and the people in it!

November 4: Typhoon from a back seat

4 NOV SATURDAY PLEIKU TO BUON MA THUOT

Today, continue south from Pleiku on a drive that takes you through beautiful countryside of rolling hills, forests plus rubber and pepper plantations. Pass through several small towns with plenty of great photo opportunities along the way as you make your way to Buon Ma Thuot, the coffee-growing center of Vietnam (be sure to try the coffee at one of the many local cafes). In the afternoon head just outside of Buon Ma Thuot to explore the best waterfalls of Cum Thac. The largest waterfall (Dray Sap Falls), is 50 meters high and quite stunning, particularly in the rainy season. Follow the trails through the lush surroundings and up above the falls. This evening enjoy a hearty country meal at one of the local restaurants.

Hi Friends,

Breakfast: for the Asian crowd, so many unfamiliar steamed items. Hot dogs were labeled “sausage” so I wasn’t remembering that wrong. I especially liked the meatballs with some unidentified spicy vegetables in them. There was also a potato-noodle-veggie combo that sort of worked. And the fruit is always good. No coffee — it’s too strong for me even with double sugar.

Today we're on the edge of Typhoon Damrey, so we experienced heavy rain and strong winds as we drove south. Trees were down, some across the road, and the people on scooters looked miserable. Fields were flooded, and it looked like what you expect from a typhoon. Neither of us has ever been in a hurricane but now we can say we were in a typhoon. It’s causing a lot of trouble in the south, but today was the worst for us as it moves on inland. It was just as well we were driving from 8 to 1 since we couldn’t have walked anywhere, so we just add it to our experiences. But it made for a dull day. I couldn’t even take photos out the window — or often even see out of it.

The high today was 72, about as cold as it gets up here in the highlands, and the locals were bundled up. It’ll be a more reasonable 82 tomorrow as the storm passes.

A scenic waterfall was on our agenda, but the secondary road to it had many downed trees so we turned back. We did visit a very interesting modern Buddhist monastery made of mahogany with intricate carvings and wonderful designs. We both enjoyed examining the architecture and artwork while ducking the rain.

From lunchtime on was a “free day” in Buon Ma Thuot. Neither of us was inclined to walk out in the typhoon, so it was a very long afternoon and evening in our hotel room. You’ll not be surprised that I got the 2-hour VIP massage package that included sauna and scented foot bath (\$13 plus tip).

We had dinner in the hotel. Barbara had soup. I had stir-fried frogs with bamboo shoots, Chinese cabbage, lotus leaves, and whatever. Big mistake: I’ve never tried to eat anything with so many tiny bones. It was a “dining experience” I needn’t repeat. Stir-fried snails was my first choice, but they were out of them.

Now to watch the next episode of Ken Burns The Vietnam War. I'm up to the part where all but the generals realize we're not winning.

Comments and Observations:

It's a constant frustration to figure out which light switches control which lights in our hotel rooms and often there's no wall plug by the desk. Or adequate counter space on the sink. We're convinced that most hotel rooms are not designed by people who actually use them.

Can you name all five communist countries? To start, there is Vietnam, China ...

I'm not sure how Vietnam is "communist" in the true sense of the word. It's capitalist and socialist, like the US, but the difference is that it's a one-party system (actually sort of like the US now too, come to think of it). The Communist Party controls the country and makes the decisions. They announce the candidates and you are required to vote for them, but you don't learn who they are until they're on the ballot, and they don't campaign. Ostensibly the Party runs the country for the good of the people, but in reality it's about control and corruption — Party members end up with all the money (again, much like the US). It's a far cry from what Ho Chi Minh intended to set up when the French left after WWII. This is just my limited understanding of it.

Long's house in the city measures 5 x 10 meters and is 3 stories. He showed us pictures, and it's modern and looks comfortable, There were 500 guests at his wedding, a typical number. An astrologer picked the day and time, also typical. He has two kids and his 8-year-old son is chunky, perhaps the sign of things to come.

- John (& Barbara)



The architecture and artwork in this modern Buddhist temple were wonderful. Simple, detailed, elegant, and precise. (Contrast with an over-the-top gaudy baroque cathedral; these people value “harmony”).)



What do you do when you're in a hotel room all day? Flip channels. This is the government news station — in English. The news reader leaves little doubt that this is the official word.

November 5: Driving to Da Lat

5 NOV SUNDAY BUON MA THUOT TO DALAT

Today see how the local Buddhist monks live at the town pagoda and monastery. This working pagoda offers an interesting mix of traditional wooden housing and Vietnamese pagoda architecture. Later, head south to the former French hill station of Dalat. En-route to Dalat you shall see numerous greenhouses and other vegetable plantations. Dalat's climate and nutrient rich soil make it the perfect spot for growing various flowers, fruits and vegetables. Convoys of trucks carrying this produce can often be seen leaving Dalat to supply the rest of Vietnam.

Hi Friends,

Breakfast (always an adventure): I liked the “fried shrimp in dough” and “sticky rice with cam leaves.” I would have risked the coffee but they had no sweeteners of any kind including sugar and I can't drink it “raw”, so gave it a miss. We were the only two in the restaurant for dinner last night but had some company, all Asians, for breakfast. The wait staff does just that — stand and wait, clustered around the beverage table. We don't call them “servers.” I'm told that last night's froggies were farmed; the free range are different.

We awoke to partly sunny skies, no wind, and drying roads. The typhoon has passed on. Great timing for us It did, however, kill several dozen people and leave many homeless; it was a major storm.

Then most of the day in the back seat again, and the novelty of that has definitely worn off. We knew what we were getting into when we signed up, but enough is enough.

Our one stop (other than lunch) was at a highland village of a different ethnic group, with different architecture (long houses) but the same animals everywhere. Again people were drying coffee etc. in the street. We enjoyed a short walk.

One novelty at the village was a group of elephants. You could buy sugar cane stalks and feed them (Barbara did) or go for rides (we declined). There used to be many elephants in Vietnam but now only 42 are left, and they're employed in the tourist industry. I'd rather see some in their native habitat, but that's not an option.

The road was fine in places, but wrecked in others, and there are no paved roads in the US in as bad shape as some we drove today. I reminded Long that he had said that during the American War women lined the sides of the road to fill in the bomb craters so traffic could continue — when did they stop doing that? Apparently long ago. Now they melt drums of tar over an open wood fire, throw chunks of rock in the biggest craters, pour tar over it, pound it down, and call it good. Barbara was queasy again and skipped the simple lunch of rice and pork.

The scenery was great — actual mountains, although not quite the Alps or Rockies, with coffee, pepper, banana, and other farms extending up the sides. Very lush and tropical, and it reminds us of drives we took in French Polynesia. Vegetation extends to the hill-tops. The people are poorer, sometimes dirt poor living in shacks, and the towns do not look prosperous. But they've come from the Middle Ages to modern times in just a few generations.

Then on to Da Lat, a resort destination for Vietnamese. It sits at 4500 ft so is popular in the summer when especially the southern part of the country swelters. Da Lat was founded by the French in the 1890s as a spa town and villas remain from that era. It was raining when we arrived so no walk-about after sitting for so long, and it's another long evening in a hotel room. The novelty of that is wearing off too, but neither of us wants to wander around in the rain.

Our bathtub has a grab bar! This is the first we've seen since leaving the US and it's exciting. But the tub has fatal design flaws — between us we can't figure out how to keep from literally flooding the bathroom floor while taking a shower. Win one, lose one. There are a lot of basic things these nice and well-intentioned folk still haven't figured out.

Dinner was in the hotel restaurant. I splurged with an entire bottle of local Da Lat white wine (\$9) and a huge bowl of Snake Head Fish Soup. They lit the bowl of fish afire at our table and stirred in the ingredients (bean sprouts, cabbage, tomato, etc.) which boiled as we watched, then were served over noodles. I always go for the most exotic item on the menu, and this was good. And I got to take the rest of the bottle of wine back to our room!

After sending this I'll continue with Ken Burns. Watching his Vietnam War series really makes me angry that our leaders lied to us so thoroughly, and I feel ashamed that I didn't participate in protests. At least they learned their lesson and haven't lied to us

since. But don't get me started. A good documentary to watch after you finish Ken Burns is "Daniel Ellsberg: The Most Dangerous Man in America", available on YouTube.

Tomorrow we tour Da Lat — so no back seat!

Comments and Observations:

Long tells us cell phone reception is available everywhere and is better here than in the US. I believe it — he's made phone calls from some incredibly remote places.

There are few solar panels; too expensive, but we do see one from time to time. Rooftop solar hot water heaters are common and make a lot of sense (and shouldn't we have them too?).

There is freedom of religion, we're told, but the Party sets limits. The priests and monks know what the limits are and toe the line.

Most Vietnamese words consist of one syllable, hence Viet Nam, Ha Noi, and Sai Gon. Those that have two or more, like coffee, baby, karaoke, and mobifone, are imports. Rather a contrast to German, no? (Gu ten mor gen herr pro fes sor.)

- John (& Barbara)



Cattle in the road with a cowboy directing them — a common sight. Look closely at the tractors in the background.



View out the window. The flooding is from the typhoon.



Barbara with a new friend.



“Long house” in the common style in this highland village. Note the satellite dish.



A fish farming community. They live in these floating houses and sell extra fish on the roadside. The houses on their bamboo floats don't look very stable.



Dried fish for sale by the village (in the background).

November 6: Da Lat

6 NOV MONDAY DALAT

This morning enjoy spectacular views as you drive through the highlands to a beautiful Zen Monastery and wander through the tranquil gardens. Insider Experience - Local: Continue on to the former railway station, built by the French, enjoying the experience as you ride on this open-air train to the Trai Mat hamlet, traveling back in time somewhat to the colonial way of life. Finish the day with a walk through the central market of Dalat, an incredible assault on the senses with bursting colors of fruits, vegetables, and flowers, as well as a livestock and grocery section.

Hi Friends,

We went from sitting in the car for 8 hours (yesterday) to sitting in our hotel room for 10 hours (today). The scheduled activities took only 3-1/2 hours and then we had a "free afternoon." But we didn't really take advantage of it to explore the city.

First on the agenda was a visit to a local Zen Buddhist temple. The architecture was interesting, the gardens peaceful, and the plants — and especially the many bonsai — were great. Monks wandered about, praying and sweeping the walks. These monks only pray and meditate (and do housekeeping), so the money to fund them and their temple comes from outside donations. I contrast this with medieval European monasteries where the monks raised veggies and distilled Benedictine for their gift shop.

Then to a Buddhist Pagoda, this one overly gaudy with every surface decorated with cut glass, tile, and mostly cheap materials. I told our guide Long I really didn't care for it but was glad to see it for the contrast. There are different sects of Buddhism and I've completely forgotten the little I once knew about which sect does what and why they're different. Uncle Google probably knows, but I don't think I'll pursue it. I'm not especially interested in Buddhism but it's interesting to see it practiced where it's been part of the culture for more than a dozen centuries.

We also took a train ride! The French built the railway system, which is narrow-gauge, and apparently it has been semi-maintained but not expanded or improved since they departed (actually were thrown out). The tourist ride in a vintage car took us 20 km to a nearby town and we passed countless plastic greenhouses. This area is the flower capital of Vietnam and we could see people in conical hats working inside.

Our last stop was a visit to the local Central Market. It was like the others we've visited so we didn't take photos. The markets are amazing with everything from fruit we don't recognize to veggies we don't recognize to flowers we don't recognize and even candy we don't recognize. Barbara bought some flavored nuts as a snack food and I bought a bag of locally-grown green tea for my son. Flowers are important here (as in all the markets we've seen) and people buy them; poor people buy flowers regularly to brighten their homes — how civilized. We could have photo'd a bucket of pigs heads, a pile of lamb legs, stacks of fake money to give to the dead, and other items you don't normally see back home, but didn't bother.

It was sunny and warm all morning (!) but began to rain after we returned to our hotel to begin a 10-hour "free day". We had time to walk around a short time before the wet stuff from above drove us in. But it's not so interesting a neighborhood that walking around is much of an attraction. I did get a massage down the street to break up the afternoon and the menu is attached so you can see I'm not making up the cheap prices.

Dinner was sweet & sour squid with peppers, pineapple, and the usual, with rice. This is my favorite meal at Carls Jr and I'm surprised they have the same thing right here.

Now to watch the next episode of The Vietnam War. But I won't editorialize.

Tomorrow is an all-day drive to Saigon. We can hardly wait to get started!

Comments and Observations:

We had expected to be overwhelmed by insects and even sprayed all our clothing (since washed many times) with an insect-repellent spray before we left home, but have seen almost none. Some flies do buzz around the fresh meat for sale uncovered, and they're lazily swatted away, but I believe I've seen only one mosquito (not sure what it was) and few flies. Barbara wears long pants and a long shirt and sprays her ankles just in case, since malaria is not unknown here. I suspect it will be worse or even terrible in the Mekong Delta. We brought two bottles of insect spray and one of suntan lotion; Barbara has made a small dent in the spray but we've not touched the lotion,

- John (& Barbara)



Inside a Zen Buddhist Temple. Very peaceful and meditative. Imagine: a religion that doesn't try to conquer or even convert nonbelievers!



Detail from a Buddhist pagoda. Not my style. I'm totally unclear on the differences between the different branches of Buddhism.

PRICE LIST

Taxes are not included in the price

	Duration	VND	USD
Hair			
Hair wash and blow dry	10'	40.000	2
Hair & Face wash and mask	45'	80.000	4
Face			
Full facial care (face wash, exfoliation and mask - including massage face)	60'	220.000	11
Basic facial care (face wash, mask - including massage face - shoulder)	60'	170.000	9
Face wash, massage and mask	45'	140.000	7
Face wash and massage	30'	100.000	5
Body			
Back-Shoulder-Head massage and accupressure	45'	150.000	8
Full body massage - 2 hands	60'	200.000	10
Full body massage - 4 hands	60'	380.000	18
Full body massage with hot stones - 2 hands	60'	250.000	13
Full body massage with hot stones - 4 hands	60'	480.000	23
Full body massage with medicinal herbs	60'	250.000	13
Pregnancy massage (footbath with medicinal herbs 15' and massage with hot stones 60')	90'	250.000	13
Full body exfoliation	60'	150.000	8
Herbal Bath	30'	120.000	6
Sauna with medicinal herbs	30'	100.000	5
Dry steam with medicinal herbs	30'	100.000	5
Combo			
Full body massage + Basic facial care + Hair wash	120'	400.000	20
Full body exfoliation + Basic facial care + Hair wash	90'	350.000	18
Leg and Foot Massage			
Basic lower leg massage (from knee to foot)	30'	100.000	5
Full leg massage - 2 hands (front and back legs)	30'	150.000	8
Full leg massage - 4 hands	30'	280.000	14
Full leg massage with hot stones	30'	180.000	9
Full leg massage with medicinal herbs	30'	180.000	9
Footbath with medicinal herbs	30'	70.000	4
Footbath with medicinal herbs and exfoliation	30'	100.000	5
Combo			
Basic leg massage and footbath	60'	170.000	9
Basic leg massage, footbath and relaxing facial massage	60'	250.000	13
Full leg massage and footbath	60'	220.000	11
Full leg massage, footbath and relaxing facial massage	60'	300.000	16

Ot care
wellness home

Working time from : 10am to 10pm
Last booking : 7pm

Address: 25/10 Trại Phú street, ward 4, District city (Near by Sammy hotel)
Telephone: 02533 833893 - 0979 877337

The spa menu, useful because prices are in VND and also in dollars.

November 7: Driving to Saigon

7 NOV TUESDAY DALAT TO SAIGON

Head down from the highlands and visit a Kriang village within the valley below. With a population of approximately 500, the Kriang minority are unusual in that half are Protestant and the other half are Roman Catholics. Take a wander through the tiny community, where your local guide will be able to tell you a bit more about the life of these people. Continue down from the mountains, stopping on the way to take a closer look at the tea and coffee plantations for which the Central Highlands is renowned. The scenery then changes to rubber plantations and you can make a stop at a floating fishing village on Lake Langa before arriving in the late afternoon in Vietnam's largest city, Ho Chi Minh City. Insider Experience -Taste You will enjoy a drink at the magnificent Rex Hotel, steeped in history and offering you a beautiful view of the new boulevard in the center of District 1. A wonderful way to end your day as the sun sets on Saigon.

Hi Friends,

Today was our last driving day! Gasp. We're almost getting used to spending all day in the back seat of a Toyota SUV. We drove south from 7:30 - 3:00 with a quick stop for a pork & rice lunch and another at a very small ethnic hill-tribe village.

The village was fascinating! And very primitive. These people mostly live in shacks that are close to each other so it's an almost urban-slum. If you travel to see different places and lifestyles, then these primitive villages are much more interesting than Hanoi or Saigon, but of course we just walked thru for half-an-hour with our guide. Only Inside Journeys takes visitors to this village, and they recognize our guide by his shirt, so we were welcomed with smiles and allowed to take photos, but we wouldn't have wandered thru here on our own. The highlight was coming across a kindergarten class and creating pandemonium; they waved and shouted "hello" and became frantic when I stepped up and began shaking hands. It was fun. The pictures can tell the rest of the story.

Then on to Saigon. It's spelled various ways but nobody uses Ho Chi Minh City. That was imposed on them by their conquerors and appears only on official documents and maps; to everyone it's still good old Saigon.

Saigon is a big modern city. It wasn't damaged much in the war and has grown into a major metropolitan city with many high-rise office buildings, towering hotels, huge apartment blocks, and modern stores. Streets are wide and the sidewalks aren't (necessarily) blocked by scooters, and they're less broken. Street vendors on the sidewalk but not so numerous. It resembles Denver more than it resembles Hanoi. (If you were to see only one, see Hanoi.) And it's noisy, of course. Rush hour lasts all day. They're building a subway. Lots of Anglo tourists and lots of signs in English.

We checked into our hotel with a moderate-size room (we'll be here four nights) and our guide took us for a walk that ended at the top of the famous Caravalle (not the Rex) rooftop Saigon-Saigon bar.

Tomorrow we explore the surrounding delta. And we visit a place I can't go in.

Comments and Observations:

I ran across this and thought it worth reprinting here. It's entirely accurate.

Crossing the road in Saigon can be a nightmare. It is always scary, for some they will get used to it quite quickly. If ever in doubt, Saigon's "Tourist Security" officers (guys in marked green uniforms) will happily help you across. A quicker way of getting across is to simply follow the lead of a local crossing the street.

However, the true trick to crossing the road is to stay aware, and walk slowly and confidently. The motorbike riders are actually exceptionally good and will simply move to avoid you - just don't make any sudden lurches forwards, backwards, or stop for that matter. Just look for a gap or seam in the traffic, and begin a slow but steady movement. If you hear a beep coming your way it's likely a motorbike rider is about to enter your personal space. Be alert and prepared to stop putting your foot forward until he passes.

Adherence to traffic signals in Saigon is worse, and while they're not always followed, riders/drivers tend to use "best judgment". Just remember though that vehicles can always turn right at any time (regardless of lights). Motorbikes often drive in the wrong direction to make a short cut from point A to point B even if they are against the traffic. Crossing roads therefore maybe a challenge for westerners used to traffic laws and traffic lights.

A typical scenario played here, and in other big cities in Vietnam is motorcycles dash from everywhere. The thumb rule of crossing in the US of look to the left and at the median, look to the right does not follow. Look everywhere as you cross, in all directions - to your left, to the back at your left, to your right, to your right in front, even if you have the right of way, like 5 or 6 kamikaze ninjas against one, they will insist and even if you stare at them in the eye and raise your hand horizontally signaling them to stop. Even in sidewalks, they invade and will just appear next to you before you know. Sidewalks are not the domain of pedestrians, they are used for car and motorcycles for passing if not for parking, then whatever space left is for the pedestrian. That's the hierarchy.

It's often harder to note what is missing than what is new, and in the case of these huge and wonderful farmers' markets with seemingly everything in abundance, there are two categories missing: bread and cheese. When we compare Vietnamese markets with, say, Borough Market in London, we note the absence here of these two basic commodities that were in abundance and in variety in London. I thought the bread displays in London were to die for. But then Borough Market doesn't begin to have the rice or noodle selections you see here!

We saw two bonsai stores, but we were moving too fast to get a snap. The 4-foot ones are out front in huge pots and the smaller inside.

A woman born in the year of the tiger will have a hard time getting married because tigers have the reputation of being fierce. Our guide's wife is a tiger but he doesn't believe she's bad luck so married her anyway, but it's a problem for the unfortunately tiger ladies who have trouble finding husbands. Our guide doesn't believe that the year makes any difference — a superstition — but he does believe that astrologers are important and correct in picking the day and hour for a lucky marriage and good funeral.

School kids wear uniforms — white shirts with a red tie. Not a bad idea.

Animal droppings in the road are called "land mines" and we avoid stepping on them. This is ironic in a country that has so many *real* land mines!

- John (& Barbara)



A house in that ethnic village we visited. They're shacks, really, and I can't imagine the corrugated iron roof is a good idea in the sun. The kitchen is outside, at right.



A village store with a Shell gas station at right. Small scale! Some shops sell gas by the liter in recycled water bottles (with a bit of the water still in them to increase the profit a bit).



I don't know what the attraction was, but these kids don't see Europeans or Americans much and went wild when we looked in the door. It was madness when I offered to shake their hands. You should see the short video we shot! Kids are cute everywhere.



This young urchin kept touching our pockets, begging for money. She should have been in school. Our guide couldn't talk to her because she doesn't speak Vietnamese. He gave her a small note and she sullenly took it and then began feeling our pockets so aggressively that I had to swat her hand away. He shouldn't have done that, in my opinion. It's one thing to give money to an old or disabled person who needs it but another to reward kids for begging.



You can buy electric rice-huskers in roadside shops. I don't recall seeing them in Home Depot.



Tea leaves still on the plant — one more thing I've never seen, and I drink tea every day. The trash in the foreground is typical.



Our guide said these trees in the background are “tic” trees. When he spelled it, t-e-a-k, we figured it out. Our earlier guide Nguyen appreciated it when we corrected his pronunciation or taught him a new word; Long treats our pronunciation as yet another variation.



A house by the roadside. Some rural areas are as poor as we've seen.



We had just finished lunch at this roadside restaurant (pork, rice, thin soup — 95 cents each) where the black cat is checking to see if we left any of the pork, and Barbara is showing the owner how to make origami boxes. She brought some origami paper and is getting a lot of mileage out of making these boxes.



We're finishing a cocktail and a Pepsi in the Saigon-Saigon bar which was popular with servicemen during the war, and with tourists now. There are some very tall high-rises in the other direction.

November 8: Tunnels and a Tooth

8 NOV WEDNESDAY SAIGON TOUR AND CU CHI TUNNELS

Saigon is Vietnam's largest city, its commercial capital, and is a city of extraordinary energy. Nowhere is Vietnam's rush to modernize more visible, yet despite this, Saigon as it is still known, is a friendly and welcoming place whilst still containing many reminders of its turbulent past. This morning travel to the remarkable Cu Chi Tunnels located in an area known, during the Vietnam War, as the 'Iron Triangle' on account of the strength of its communist insurgency. Established as a means of waging guerrilla war against superior French and later American fire power; the tunnel network stretched over 250km (155 miles) and extended to three levels below ground. The complex provides an insight into the method and determination of Communist forces during the Vietnam Wars. Transfer back to Saigon for lunch where you may like to try 'Pho' (pronounced 'fur') the delicious Vietnamese noodle soup. In the afternoon, spend some time at the comprehensive and emotive War Remnants Museum and walk through the heart of the city seeing the Notre Dame Cathedral, Post Office and nearby Dong Khoi Street (formerly Rue Catinat). Walk past the famous Rex Hotel, Ho Chi Minh Square, and Municipal Theater. The remainder of today is at your leisure to explore this vibrant city.

Hi Friends,

Yesterday was our "last long day in the car". Today we were in it for only a brief five hours or maybe less. We'll be happy when we reach our ship on Saturday and don't see the back seat of a car again for months, if ever. But it's been OK, we have seen the country, and it would be great if we just had more leg room and a tray table.

First stop: the famous Cu Chi tunnels. To get to them we endured a traffic jam that would make Los Angeles' worst seem mild. But we got there, and spent an hour above ground. These were used by the Viet Cong soldiers to hide in during the day between raids on a nearby airbase, but they weren't lived in. They redefine "cramped" and you can't go thru them without crawling on your hands and knees. They're as tall and wide as a crouching child, and the lack of ventilation must have made them awful beyond belief. There were models of VCs doing things (cutting unexploded bombs apart to obtain the explosives for mines and the metal for traps). All very interesting. Barbara went thru one that had been widened slightly for tourists and says her 3 minutes inside was as long as she'd want to spend down there. We admire their fortitude and dedication.

At lunch on the way back into town while eating noodle soup I broke an old crown. Bummer! Here we are far from civilization — and my dental insurance. I guess I can chew on the other side of my mouth for the next few weeks.

Once back in town we visited the Army Museum. Other than some helicopters and other warplanes, tanks, unexploded bombs of a wide variety, and field artillery, it was all photos with captions in Viet and English. There was no reason to take photos and I don't really want to describe what we saw, but they didn't pull any punches in showing the atrocities of the American War of Aggression. How many pictures do you want to see of napalmed children, kids with birth defects from agent orange (think thalidomide and you have it, but here there are 100,000 victims and counting), and rows of women and children who have been shot lined up in ditches. It was just horrific. But the museum was just photos and many were over-the-top unbearable so we didn't spend much time.

We were scheduled for our guide to lead us on a walking tour but heavy rain scotched that. Instead our guide located a local dentist only 6 blocks from our hotel and arranged for me to get an emergency appointment. The dental office is as modern as any in the States, and they prepped my broken tooth for a new crown which they will make tomorrow and install on Friday! What luck! If that had broken one day later I'd of had to live with it for at least two weeks. You can imagine how relieved I was, and I now have a temporary crown and can eat 'most anything that is not sticky, including sticky rice. We'll pay by credit card and file a claim with my insurance when we return.

Rain resumed once we had walked back to the hotel (more good luck), so we enjoyed a beer & Coke on the rooftop bar with a panoramic view while we Photoshopped today's photos, and we liked it so much up there we had dinner (shrimp soup - me - and nasi goreng [Indonesian fried rice] – Barbara).

Comments and Observations:

The typhoon we caught the edge of killed 70 or more people, made more than 100,000 homeless, and flooded the port town of Hoi An we had just visited waist-deep so tourists cannot now visit it. We were lucky. Other Insider Journey trips got caught in the worst of it and people had to fly home when trips were ruined with no good alternative.

Several times we've been the only tourists in sight and Barbara has stood out (and up). Not here. This place is flooded with American and Europeans.

They touch their right elbow with their left hand when shaking hands, and bow slightly. I've not seen this before (the bowing, yes) and it seemed to have started shortly after we crossed the 17th parallel. Kind of nice, but I've not picked up the gesture to return it.

I saw a bicycle that wasn't all rust! I said Saigon is more prosperous than the rest of the country.

- John (& Barbara)



Barbara descending into a Viet Cong tunnel at Cu Chi. Some tourists wouldn't fit. The last one down pulls over the camouflaged trap door.



A rubber tree plantation. Look closely and you can see the cups used to collect the rubber and the spiral slashes on the bark.



Our lunch stop where I broke a crown. The kitchen is behind me. We like to eat local, and we suspect dining will be classier on the ship next week. Two big bowls of soup and one beer come to 80 cents.



Barbara demonstrating that you can eat soup with chopsticks. By now we wonder how else you'd do it. To start she's stirring in some sprouts — an ingredient in all soups, no?



A roadside sandal vendor. Free enterprise is alive and well in capitalist (no; communist) Vietnam and there are small vendors of everything everywhere.

November 9: Mekong Delta

9 NOV THURSDAY MEKONG DELTA

This morning you will travel south from Saigon, to the Mekong Delta. Known as the 'rice bowl' of Vietnam, the Delta is the most fertile region in the country and the area is the main producer of rice and tropical fruits. Stop enroute at an unusual Cao Dai pagoda, a uniquely Vietnamese sect that combines a mix of all the world's great religions, including Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. On arrival board your boat to begin your exploration of the area and cruise along tributaries of the mighty Mekong River. Explore some of the region's narrow canals, and gain a real insight into the lives of the local people. Visit a brick factory where old-fashioned kiln techniques are used, stop at a riverside coconut processing factory and visit a local home where the family weave mats using local materials. Insider Experience -Taste: After a delicious lunch featuring some local specialties, including Elephant Ear Fish, return to Saigon in the late afternoon. Insider Experience - Taste: Spend your last night enjoying a group dinner at one of our favorite local restaurants, a chance to farewell new friends.

Hi Friends,

Today's official itinerary is actually quite accurate. We spent two hours driving to the Mekong Delta, most of the day there, and 2 hours back, returning at 4:30. It was sunny and warm (sunglasses needed) and it began to rain just as we reached our hotel. The humidity is 90 percent (high 86 degrees) so we were dripping wet, but to our surprise there are virtually no bugs. I wouldn't have believed that before our trip!

I imagined that the Delta would be a huge unbroken expanse of rice fields, sort of like Kansas, but the part we saw was small fields of a dozen acres each with homes, tombs, and fruit orchards scattered about. It is flat and it is wet. It may be different elsewhere.

After a stop at a bizarre and gaudy pagoda by yet another sect with weird beliefs (Wm Shakespeare is one of their saints), we boarded a small boat and cruised a branch of the Mekong and then smaller branches and even smaller branches, taking in the tropical scenery and watching homes and business pass by. Very exotic with lots to see, and we took more photos today than any day of our trip.

We're 11 degrees north of the equator, which is 10 degrees south of Honolulu. Perhaps that explains why the countryside is so utterly tropical with banana, coconut, and a wide variety of fruit trees, and dense wild vegetation. The places we've been to that most closely resemble the Delta are French Polynesia, Fiji, and the Amazon Basin. We're as far from the Mojave Desert of SW Utah as we could be.

Stops included a factory where they have been hand-making bricks for several generations, a coconut processing facility (we bought yet more chopsticks, these made of coconut wood), and a home where they make mats by hand on a loom. Again, all very interesting and exotic. Ask to see the photos the next time you visit us.

Lunch was an elephant-ear fish served whole in a jungle restaurant. You scraped off portions of the fish and made a sort of burrito out of it, adding some vegetables, rolled up in thin but strong rice paper. Very good and yet another first.

Then back to town. After a rest our guide took us for a 20-minute walk thru downtown to a favorite restaurant for a final dinner, and I can't even begin to describe it, but it was good. He walked us back to our hotel and we said farewell to Long, our great guide for the last 11 days.

Walking thru downtown Saigon at night is an experience that is not to be missed (Hanoi is the same but with fewer lights). The place is jumping. There is so much energy and activity with shops and restaurants open, uncountable street vendors, and the sidewalks are jammed. The only place in the US that I can think of that compares is the Strip in Las Vegas, but this is more chaotic. It's really an experience and I recommend it. We felt completely safe although it was only 8 pm when we returned to our hotel

The first part of our adventure has ended. We now have a free day before beginning Leg 2 on Saturday. We may do a little shopping but tomorrow's main activity is to get my new crown installed so I can eat sticky rice again.

Internet is great here in our fancy hotel in Saigon and will be thru Saturday morning, but I'm sure that will end when we board our ship on Saturday afternoon.

Comments and Observations:

Sitting virtually at sea level and home to 20 million people, the Mekong Delta is experiencing both sea-level rise with associated flooding and encroaching salination, so the locals take global warming seriously.

Long tells us there are no homeless in Saigon and there are few beggars. We haven't seen any of either in our short trips out and about, and we certainly could not say that about Los Angeles (where we'd be afraid to be out and about in the evening in the first place). I don't know the reasons, if true.

So far I saw the moon briefly one night and have yet to see a star. Now I know why there are no observatories in Vietnam.

We've learned to carry both sunglasses and rainwear down here in the south. There's an equal likelihood you'll need one or the other, or actually both. Rain is forecast for tomorrow afternoon again, so we see a pattern

In the countryside people keep their dogs under control for fear that dog nappers will snatch them from the road and their pets will end up in a restaurant. We saw a scooter with a wire basket of dogs on the back and our guide speculated that they were on the way to market. I'll eat most things but would probably turn down the opportunity to enjoy "fried dog with noodle and cabbage"; just a cultural thing. Ditto cat, which they don't eat much any more, mainly because they have enough chicken.

Our first guide referred to the WC as the "happy house" and we thought he was being cute. But that's what everyone calls it. "WC" is used everywhere, usually with the words man and woman in Vietnamese and English, along with the universal symbols for man and woman, so there's no exotic creativity in the signage — which is just as well.

There are no billboards lining the highways, unlike the more civilized USA, although there are plenty in the towns and cities. It's nice to actually see the countryside as you drive thru it.

- John (& Barbara)



The main branch of the Mekong River seen from a bridge. Barges are in the foreground, behind the railing. The river begins in Tibet.



Our boat — blue, left of center. We were the only two passengers (plus our guide, who accompanies us everywhere). Note the vegetation. It's quite a contrast from the Virgin River which runs out of Zion and thru St. George on the way to Lake Mead.



Heading upstream — or maybe downstream (we did both). Visualize 86 degrees and 90 percent humidity.



Houses along this little branch of the Mekong.



The lady rows using a paddle at the end of the long pole and an interesting twisting motion. She doesn't go very fast but she gets there. Her balance is better than mine.



A fisherman tending his fish trap. This could be the Amazon. Note that boats are made of local materials and paint and varnish is rare but not unheard-of.



Barbara smacks her lips in anticipation of digging into the elephant ear fish. She's counting the tiny sharp teeth. Sorry my locally-brewed beer is in the way.



Saigon street scene near our downtown hotel. I had to wait for a while to get this shot without traffic. The energy is amazing — 180 degrees from St. George.



An Uber scooter driver. He has a spare helmet for only one passenger. He's playing a video game on his smartphone while waiting for a customer, just like Uber scooter drivers everywhere. I believe you can find where they are with your smartphone.

November 10: Saigon Free Day

10 NOV FRIDAY SAIGON

Spend the day relaxing in Saigon or exploring on your own.

Hi Friends,

Leg 1 of our tour is over. We very much enjoyed a “small group tour” in New Zealand where we traveled by van with about a dozen others, and a bit less so in Egypt where we were also with about a dozen others but on a big bus, so we wanted to do it again in Vietnam. We ended up being on our own in the back seat of a car, along with the driver and guide up front. We did this in South America but didn't like it so much — too confining, no shocks, and conversations with the guide were hard. This trip actually worked out well. We were cramped but we enjoyed our two guides and they took good care of us. So it turned out well, although we would have liked more leg room. Now we begin Leg 2 -- a cruise on a boat that accommodates 54 passengers and we'll have to adjust to talking to other people! That will be a significant change and will call for a shifting of social gears.

Insider Journeys did a great job all around and we highly recommend them for travel in Asia. And we encourage you to visit Vietnam.

Now on to the Mekong for a week-long trip upriver. The Vietnam trip ended on Thursday and the cruise begins on Saturday, so the timing couldn't be better. Insider Journeys arranged for us to keep our hotel room one additional day, so this is a free day.

Breakfast: the guests were half Anglo, half Asian. The kimchee suggests there are Koreans present; Vietnam and South Korea (and Japan) have good relations. The choice between kimchee and English baked beans would leave me stumped as which to skip first. The mango juice was thick and excellent; I again tried the coffee with massive amounts of sweetener but would have to also dilute it 6:1 to drink it.

We walked around the busy streets near our hotel for an until Barbara became exhausted by the high decibels of the rush-hour traffic, which is terrific. Then she sat at the quiet rooftop bar far above it all and enjoyed a Pepsi with her iPad while I returned to the dentist of two days ago to get my new crown glued in. Again, I am *so* grateful that the old crown cracked when we were near a modern dentist and had the time for them to make and install a replacement. I also had my teeth cleaned, as Barbara did two days ago, for slightly less than our copay with our dental insurance back home.

Dinner was at the rooftop restaurant again; Barbara didn't want to brave the noise and crowds on the street below. And the scenery was first-class. My dinner was shrimp & squid pasta, and I think I've realized that I really don't care for squid. It's something you eat when you're a hungry hunter-gatherer, not a sophisticated tourist.

Then perhaps my last massage of the trip. Prices are higher here than in the north but

it's still a deal I won't see again for a long time, if ever. I discovered that if you request a room by yourself they let you go nude, which is the way a massage should be, although you pay more. Still cheap.

Tomorrow we have a free morning and then board the shuttle bus to take us to the ship ... and in the afternoon sail away. It could be fun! (Especially the part about no back seat.)

Comments and Observations:

I finally figured out that the guy in a military-style shirt who sits and smokes on the sidewalk every so often is "guarding" the motorcycles parked there. Scooter riders pay him a small tip (or is it protection money?) to see that their scooter is still there when they return from their errand.

We saw two beggars today, both obviously handicapped. I gave my small bills to one.

- John (& Barbara)



The Saigon skyline. A new subway station is going in behind the blue wall. There's a huge subway system but we don't know about it other than that it exists.



Small-scale free enterprise. At the base of the skyscrapers in the photo above this lady is cooking something. A fire is burning in that repurposed large vegetable can, heating whatever is in the skillet while she sits on a 9-inch high stool and waits for customers. People are selling things everywhere. It's the contrast between the tall modern buildings and people like this at their bases that impresses me.

November 11: Aboard the Jayavarman

11 NOV HO CHI MINH CITY - MY THO - CAI BE

Transfer to the starting point - The Renaissance hotel - where you will register with Heritage Line staff before transferring 70 kilometers to the port town of My Tho to board your boat. You will be welcomed with a refreshing drink as the ship departs port to begin the journey along the Mekong River. Enjoy sunset on the balcony which will be followed by a briefing at the lounge detailing your upcoming journey. Later, a cruise welcome dinner awaits you. On approach to Cai Be, the ship drops anchor and moors midstream where the river is several kilometers wide. Light lunch and dinner included.

Hi Friends,

Breakfast: I tried the kimchee, and — wait for it — went back for seconds! I could easily learn to like it if they toned down the spice level, and won't buy any when we return home (where would you find it in St. George? Or Borrego Springs? Of Plummer, Idaho?) but it sure beats the English baked beans.

The morning's activity was to walk a mile to the Central Market and spend the last of our local money. The market is the size of a large city block, and its a grid of narrow —

sometimes shoulder-width — lanes through a mass of merchandise. Everyone gets a space about 6x6 feet and the stuff their merchandise is piled high. As we walk each in turn beseeches us to examine their fine wares and it's best to not make eye contact and to smile a lot. I did intend to buy a new shirt or two, and I did — I'm now the happy owner of two new cotton Tommy Hilfiger shirts made in Vietnam which I'll happily wear on the boat. And the vendor was equally happy to make a sale. The place is packed with vendors and shoppers but it's hard to figure out how they can sell enough to make a decent living. They must, or they wouldn't be there.

Oh — and the food stalls and food booths were on a huge scale too. I think most people in Vietnam eat on the street because their houses are so tiny that they don't want to be in them; it's more pleasant to be outside. Food is definitely both plentiful and cheap.

We gave out last few Vietnamese bills to a terribly deformed beggar on the way back. From now on we'll use shipboard credit.

At noon we were bussed out of town and across the Delta to a port to board the RV Jayavarman. It's quite the ship — first class in our humble opinion. Our room is big enough, is well designed (there's a place for both our suitcases!), a walk-in shower, a nice desk (although without a light), and a private balcony with two chairs. The ship itself is small for a cruise ship but there's a nice lounge on the main deck with a panoramic view, a sun deck with chairs and a pool (Barbara tried the pool immediately after lunch), and a dining room large enough to seat everyone. The staff is a combination of Viet and Cambodian with others mixed in. All is in good order, well-maintained, and quite pleasant. We haven't found the back seat yet, so we expect to be quite comfortable.

Wifi is free and unlimited but we're warned it will be slow in places and non-existent in others. If you don't hear from us it's (probably) not because we were kidnapped by pirates.

After a great lunch we "set sail" at 4 and began slowly motoring upriver. This branch of the Mekong is wide so we can't see much detail on the distant shore. Passing river traffic is mostly barges. The 10 mph breeze (from our ship's motion) is great.

Dinner likewise was excellent, and I especially enjoyed the shrimp and the duck. We will have to exert some energy to not overeat and arrive home fat. Beer and wine is complimentary with meals, otherwise overpriced.

Barbara finished the evening by watching a documentary on Ho Chi Minh in the lounge (they will show a movie every night) while I worked on this email and the photos in the main deck bar which is open to the outside air. I glanced at the sky from the "sun" deck (at night the "star" deck), but clouds and bright deck lights let me see only a handful. At this latitude the sky is significantly different than back home so I hope to get in some binocular sky observing — if they turn out the lights.

Comments and Observations:

Our hotel elevator has a sign that says "Capacity: 12 Vietnamese or 8 Americans."

The street-crossing skills we've learned, if not perfected, here in Vietnam will get us killed if we try them back home.

Barbara wore sunscreen for the first time yesterday and again today, and it was a good idea. We may not need mosquito repellent, to our total surprise.

Conversation is nearly impossible in the dining room because of all the hard wood surfaces, so we shout across the table. We've met some nice traveling companions. We're among well-traveled people who make us seem like amateurs with the few places we've been.

I've been using a trekking pole as a cane to walk anywhere but will try to give it up while aboard the ship. It's a nuisance on the many stairs and there are always railings to grab if needed.

Just kidding about the sign in the elevator.

- John (& Barbara)

[I'll send the photos separately. If you don't see them immediately following this email you will eventually, probably.]



This shoulder-pole street vendor is cooking some sort of candy in a mold over an open fire. The finished product is wrapped at right. She had a string of customers in the few minutes I watched her.



This truck driver has a small Buddha shrine on the dash in place of St. Christopher. Although highly compressed you can — and should -- magnify all these photos to see detail.



The Mekong Delta. Note the little graves scattered here and there.



Another shot of the Delta. A shrine with graves amidst the fields. People are buried above ground, probably a good idea, and on family land.



Barbara doing what Barbara does best — she found a mystery novel in the ship's library. We'll spend quite a bit of time on this open deck (it's where I am as I write).



Watching — unsuccessfully — the sunset from the Sun Deck. Note the flag — the ship has Vietnamese registry.

November 12: Sailing up the Mekong

12 NOV CAI BE - SA DEC - TAN CHAU

Start today - or any day - with an optional invigorating Tai Chi lesson on the sun deck, just as the sun begins its gentle glow. Coffee and tea are also available for the early riser. The day's touring starts with a visit to Cai Be's boisterous and colorful floating market on board a traditional sampan (a flat bottomed traditional Vietnamese wooden boat). Discover breathtaking landscapes along the river and absorb the rustic life on the Mekong Delta. The cruise will halt periodically to allow us to observe small local industries producing a multitude of rice and coconut derived products and to enjoy local life along the canals on the way back to the Ship for lunch. In the afternoon, we cruise to Sa Dec. Upon arrival, we embark a traditional sampan to tour Binh Thanh Island and its man-made canals. Here, every villager is involved in the process of growing and processing water hyacinths into natural fiber floor mats and rattan baskets. You then board the Ship for a tranquil evening cruise towards Tan Chau where the Ship will moor midstream overnight.

Hi Friends

There's nothing like waking up aboard a ship in a foreign land and seeing exotic sights out your window! We've become partial to cruising (not a hard adjustment to make). And we still haven't found the back seat.

The passengers are interesting and we quickly adjusted to chatting with other people. It's a well-traveled group and travel is a common topic of conversation. We're getting endless hints for places to go next. I have a short A List for future trips that will take another year

and a B List that will take 2 more.

The ship is full: 54 passengers and 40 crew. We got on board only because of a cancellation. The average age is around 60 with most, but not all, retired. A few are in their 40s and there's one child (who is a dwarf).

After breakfast we took a 27-passenger "sampan" on a 2-1/2 hour tour of an island that included a long stop at a rice-processing workshop where we saw them make a variety of items of rice, all very small scale in the traditional way — puffed rice, rice candy, rice paper, etc. We were encouraged to buy a souvenir, and not needing more chopsticks I picked up a small bottle of rice wine and another of coconut wine. Prices aboard ship are not cheap! A beer costs \$4; back in Saigon it was between \$1.20 in a simple restaurant and \$2 in a hotel bar. I hate to think what a Scotch on the rocks would set us back. We're a captive audience. But I'm set now — and I generously helped the local economy.

Then an hour cruise around the island — very scenic and oriental — and back to the boat for a 3-hour rest and an excellent buffet lunch. It may not be possible to avoid overeating. I enjoyed sitting on the open deck or our balcony, watching the scenery drift by at 10 mph.

Except tomorrow we'll have two excursions a day, one at 8:30 and the second at 2:30. Our second excursion today was to a small village on an island not visited by tourists (except our ship's company by special arrangement) to walk around, watch women weave straw sleeping mats (\$5/day for a long day) and be welcomed by an elderly couple in the temple their care-take; the temple is dedicated to the gods of the earth. This is a village untouched by time (except electricity with its TVs, motors for the boats, and scooters). Adolescents don't want to farm (average farmer's wage is \$3,000/year if the whole family works the fields) and they leave for the Big City, so life is changing in many ways. The men farm and/or fish. It's yet another glimpse of daily life in a primitive part of the world.

Did we need a shower when we returned to the boat! It's a given that our shirts are soaked thru and our hair matted down, but today sweat was running down my legs. The locals seem to tolerate it; they're lactose intolerant but tolerate 100% humidity — and we are the opposite. The cabins have good AC and there is a breeze in the stern lounge which is open to the air.

After our village visit we continued to slowly sail (no), steam (no), diesel (yes) up the river.

I hated dinner. It brought back memories of the worst of our Tahiti cruise — 4-star dinners that took 2-1/2 hours with a half hour between courses and each course 1 to 4 ounces of food, all served with great artistry. If you were there for the beauty of the food and a lot of sitting you were happy; if you were there to eat, not so happy. The noise level was so high that we had to shout to talk to the person next to us. I'm seriously considering filling up at the lunch buffet, possibly pocketing a banana or two, and skipping these enormously tedious dinners.

Comments and Observations:

The email of photos went in about 15 seconds last night — the fastest ever! Go figure. But I'll continue to separate them from the text because we're warned that it will be slow in places. The ship gets the signal from shore cell towers, not a satellite receiver.

We've been wearing our name necklaces while on the ship and people appreciate it and compliment us on them. Thank you Heidi!

I was immediately spotted as being unstable and needing attention (physical, not mental), and the wait staff attempts to help me upstairs and carries my plate from the buffet line to my table. They're professional. Ditto getting on and off the tender — often 4 pairs of hands help me (3 more than the optimum number).

All staff makes the Far Eastern prayer sign with their hands clasped together and a small nod whenever interacting with one of us westerners. Quite charming.

Table napkins throughout Vietnam are the size and strength of two squares of toilet paper. What are you supposed to do with that? You can pat your lips dry after slurping soup, but not much else. Aboard ship, in contrast, they provide large cloth napkins and we're having reverse culture shock.

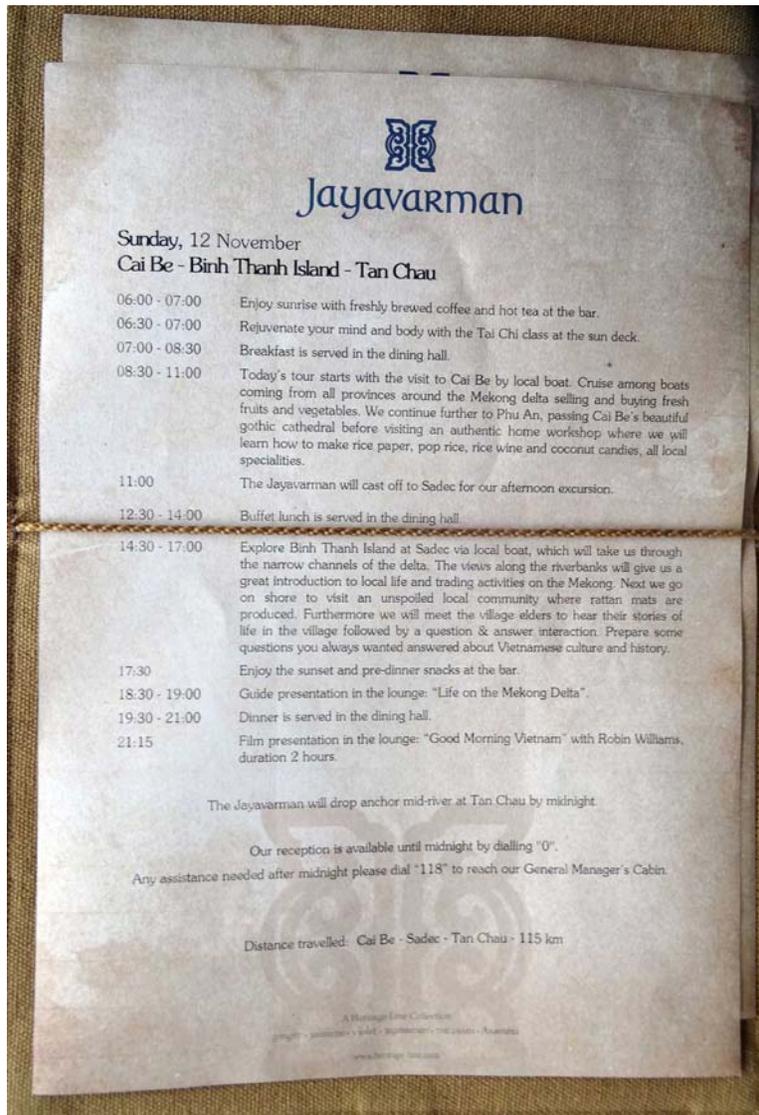
The main paint color of the smaller and older boats is "rust". There's a severe paint shortage. The color of the large barges in the main channel is green, faded with age.

We haven't seen the annoying scam of young men trying to glue our sandals since Hanoi. Apparently that's a local franchise only. Our sandals remain unglued and in fine shape. The locals wear flip-flops, sandals if they're showing off, and generally long pants.

We see a lot of dredges and barges heading downriver laden with sand. The sand goes to Singapore. Apparently moving gazillions of tons of sand is a big business worldwide.

I now have almost 400 videos, most only 20 seconds or so, to edit when we return home. I'm not looking forward to it! That will be my cloudy-evening project for December and January (but hopefully not February too). The photos are all Photoshopped, labeled, and in order; that I do nightly as we go.

- John (& Barbara)



Today's schedule, presented on parchment in a leather folder. I won't send this every day, but it gives the idea. I need a wristwatch to know how long it is until the next activity.



Our ship as seen from the tender as we motored toward shore. I like the lounge — the aft section of deck 3, open to the elements. Our cabin is the most forward one on the lowest, directly beneath the small Vietnamese flag. Every cabin has a useable balcony.



House boat on a branch of the Mekong.



Fisherman in a home-made boat. Note how the Vietnamese like to squat. I couldn't if I had to. Water hyacinths are behind — they're everywhere and they're a cash crop.



Kids welcomed us and surrounded us as we entered the non-tourist village. Two adopted Barbara and held her hand as we walked toward the temple. Kids everywhere are really cute and we were charmed by their attention. Barbara holds a straw hat provided by the ship.



Barbara points to a breadfruit on the temple grounds. Breadfruit is less important here than in the Pacific because rice is the main crop.



A small shop. The meagre merchandise is in front, on the street. The vendor is in a hammock watching TV. We're told that all homes were electrified 25 years ago and we see a lot of satellite TV dishes even in the most remote villages.



Kids playing by the river and having a good time. What an idyllic childhood! Contrast with an inner-city childhood in the USA and ask who has it better.

November 13: Good-by Vietnam, Hello Cambodia

13 NOV TAN CHAU - BORDER CROSSING - PHNOM PENH

After breakfast you shall embark on a short excursion in Tan Chau, a pleasant town near the Cambodian border with sizable Chinese, Kinh and Khmer population making for a fascinating mix of local cultures. You shall visit a fish farm located in the Tan Chau canal consisting of floating houses and the villagers make their living by cultivating fish. The hand feeding of this fish in the floating farms is quite an experience you will no doubt enjoy. Then take the boat to Tan Chau Pier, where you disembark for a stroll around this colorful local market with lots of regional products. Then it is back to the ship for lunch. Continue cruising through beautiful scenery in Vietnam and into Cambodia. Moor overnight midstream near Phnom Penh.

Dear Mike, Gary & Vickie, Joanna, Jean, Mary, Vilma, Geoff & Dorothy, Michael, and Heidi,

Breakfast: We passengers are all Anglos: Brits, Aussies, 'Muricans, and assorted Europeans, with no Asians, so the menu matches our ethnicity. We could have stewed tomatoes and baked beans if we wanted (and some must, or they wouldn't serve them), and for the first time in SE Asia they serve edible non-fluff bread! That brought back memories of good dense bread from the past. I'm continuously amused by the way the Brits and their descendants use their forks upside down, gamely trying to shovel food onto what we more civilized folk would consider the bottom, and somehow transferring it to their mouths without dropping it. They all do it! It makes chopsticks for soup seem not so ridiculous.

Cambodia was never on my list of places to visit, but we wanted a cruise as an essential part of our vacation, and the Mekong is the only one in Vietnam. The first third of the cruise is in Vietnam and the rest in Cambodia. So Cambodia it is.

There was only one shore excursion today because we pass customs in the afternoon and that takes several hours. We were taxied to a small town where we first were given a tour of a commercial fish farm. This particular farm which is in the river, produces 150,000 fish at a time for export, and I'll check the next time we're at Costco to see if the tilapia or catfish come from Vietnam. The equipment and methodology is primitive, but it works.

Then to the central market where we continued our unsuccessful search for plastic place mats like the ones we've been served on in the hotel restaurants. Struck out once again, so we'll shop Amazon when we return.

The third activity was a 20-min pedicab ride around town. I give credit to the people who plan these excursions — they pick good activities and we enjoyed all three.

Then back to the ship to remain onboard the rest of the day. That's fine with me — I enjoy cruising as much as shore excursions, and it was fun to relax and watch the shore pass by. The banks of the Mekong are dead flat as far as we can see. Usually the river is

so wide that we can't see much on shore, but occasionally it narrows down and we can see workers in the fields, etc. I brought my best binoculars, but the shore is generally too far away for them to help much and I should have left the heavy things at home.

The highlight of lunch was "ostrich in oyster sauce". I don't recall having had that before. The specialty was a Cambodian crepe topped with peanut sauce that was excellent; I called it a Cambodian burrito.

We left Vietnam behind and crossed into Cambodia during lunch. There was nothing to mark the occasion. The farms along the shore in Cambodia seems a little better organized, but this impression is based on little data. The cows are white and a different breed.

I sat on our private little balcony in a warm light rain. I was no wetter than I had been walking around, sweating, but enjoyed the coolness as the rain evaporated from my skin

Dinner took only 1h 25m because we skipped desert — a (barely) acceptable amount time; we had dinner with the dwarf and his family. But too noisy to talk. Why don't they install some sound-deadening material on the ceiling? (A rhetorical question). All four courses totaled perhaps 6 ounces, so it was artistic rather than filling. I think they're trying out for the Artistic Ship Cuisine award, and if so they're probably finalists. But dinner was for people who appreciate looking at their food rather than eating it.

During dinner we docked in Phnom Penh and we'll be berthed here two nights. After dinner I walked into town for a half-hour but it's too big and too busy to begin exploring at 9 pm. I had no idea what to expect, but visualized a somewhat dark and conservative place. Wrong! It's hopping.

Comments and Observations:

We spent the last of our Vietnamese currency before boarding the ship, where we'll pay by credit card when we leave. We won't need to exchange for any Cambodian currency — they not only accept, but prefer, US dollars, and we're assured everyone will take dollars. The ATMs here will even give you dollars. We never head of that before, in a foreign country.

- John (& Barbara)



A couple freelance fishing with a net in front of one of the many buildings of a large fish farm.



How often do you see a bicycle of this vintage? Here they are common. They use them forever.



Another shot of Barbara doing what Barbara does best, this time on the Mekong River. If you have to read a book you might as well read it in some exotic place. This is my favorite room on the ship — hot and humid but often with a breeze.



A boat we passed as we continued upriver. Note the colorful paint job — typical for small boats.



A typical farm on the Mekong in Cambodia. This is only an impression, but farms seem tidier and cleaner in Cambodia. Note the white cow – we haven't seen those before.



Another. The kid in red was waving furiously and shouting "hello".



Along the Mekong River in Cambodia in a town or small city — another typical view.

November 14: Phnom Penh

14 NOV PHNOM PENH

Phnom Penh was once known as the Paris of the East. Despite its rapid development, it has retained a lot of its old-world charm and elegance. After breakfast, you shall enjoy a fascinating talk on Cambodia's modern history before embarking on a tour of one of Indochina's most fascinating cities. Sights in the morning will include the Killing Fields, a sobering reminder of the torment and suffering this nation endured at the hands of the Khmer Rouge in fairly recent times. After lunch at a local restaurant, we will visit the Genocide museum and the dazzling white and gold edifice of the Royal Palace and the Silver Pagoda, and witnessing exceptionally beautiful Khmer art at the National Museum. From here you shall transfer by traditional vehicle (xich lo) back to the ship where a cocktail will be served followed by a traditional Apsara dance performance onboard, which highlights the more beautiful side of Khmer history, art and tradition.

Hi Friends,

[Internet here in the Cambodian capital is weak to non-existent, so it was correct to separate the email from the photos. The kicker is that Apple Mail gives me no feedback until often the next day and I don't know what went and what didn't. I'll continue to separate photos and I very much doubt that they'll go tonight. You'll hear from us when we're connected.]

We're in Cambodia for a few days at the end of our Vietnam trip and we'd not read up on

it or really thought much about it, so all is new to us. Now I wish I knew more of the history, especially the recent history. Our guide gave us a summary of the last 50 years and I understood his words but not his sentences. We'll have a lot of catching up to do when we return home — and have a useful internet connection. Watching "The Killing Fields" is on our list.

An interesting perspective is that they have a complicated relationship with both the Chinese and Vietnamese, who have alternated between friends and enemies and back again. We're definitely getting a different slant on the war between the Cambodians and Vietnamese to the version we heard last week. I can't begin to summarize here the little I think I know.

Our day began with a bus ride to The Killing Fields — one of scores that is close to town. It's sickening to think what we do to our fellow humans. The photos can tell the story.

Then to cheer us up we toured the Genocide Museum, the former prison where "intellectuals" were tortured for up to a year before being sent to a Killing Field. An "intellectual" was anyone who was above the level of a farmer — merely wearing glasses was enough to sentence you to death. Out of tens of thousands who entered the prison only two men survived, and they were signing autographs. Surrealistic!

We were in Phnom Penh all afternoon, so lunch was at a fancy restaurant in town.

Then to visit the King, who we're told is a figurehead without real power. His palace complex was built from the late 1800s to the early 1900s and is ornate and oriental, but is nothing like the Catholic cathedrals of Spain. All very oriental. Barbara went in the Silver Pagoda but I declined to remove my sandals and waited for her outside.

By this time I was through with the cultural part of our day. Even the Palace Complex left me feeling like I'd seen enough already. When I was offered the chance to see the National Museum with its many Buddhas, or head directly to the ship and have a beer, I had to ponder that for about 3/4 of a second. I will admit that the pedicab ride thru Phnom Penh was thrilling — not because I wasn't killed weaving thru traffic, but because Phnom Penh is a terribly exotic, busy, vibrant 3rd-world town that causes sensory overload. As Barbara says, she's not in Kansas anymore.

Once back in the cabin shower revived my energy, but equally important I soaked my clothes in the sink. They were already soaked with sweat, so they were only slightly wetter when I had rinsed them in the sink and hung them up to dry. If you travel to this part of the world a required item is a bandana to wipe the sweat off your face to keep it from running into your eyes and mouth, and we wish we'd brought one. We'll spend the winter in the Mojave Desert where the humidity is the reciprocal of the value it is here, and that will be perfectly fine with us.

No rain! We lucked out again.

Before dinner we attended a lecture on modern Cambodian history by an esteemed professor, but we understood so little of what he was saying that we left after a few minutes. Sometimes it's just too hard to bother.

I was dreading another dreadfully long dinner, but we were spared: it was barbecue up on the “Sun Deck” well after dark. The temperature had fallen to 82° but with the humidity at 92% it's borderline bearable — so another shower before bed! The barbecue was tasty and great. We've made some friends we enjoy talking to.

Dinner was followed by local ethnic music and dancing. I thoroughly enjoyed the music, which was on xylophone and drum, but the dancing was too stylized for me to get much out of it. One story was a monkey god who fell in love with a mermaid, and I could appreciate the monkey's dancing, but all the intricate hand motions left me baffled. I'd have to live here a hundred years before I developed enough appreciation for the dancing that I'd pay money to see a performance. But it's nice to see such performances where it's local.

Comments and Observations

Phnom Penh is basically like Hanoi (less like more modern Saigon) with lots of noise and energy and — to my eyes — chaos.

I asked our guide what he can't talk about; can he criticize the government or the King, for example. And are people free to have any religion. I couldn't understand his answer although I rephrased my question several times, so I don't know if he was being evasive or just unclear. I didn't understand most of what he said about his country's history either, so I think the latter.

I have no idea what's with the Khmer language. I like languages and were we to be here longer I'd try to puzzle out some of the history and the salient points, but in only a few days I'll not attempt it. I don't know where to start to interpret it.



Tower of Skulls in the Killing Fields. See next photo.

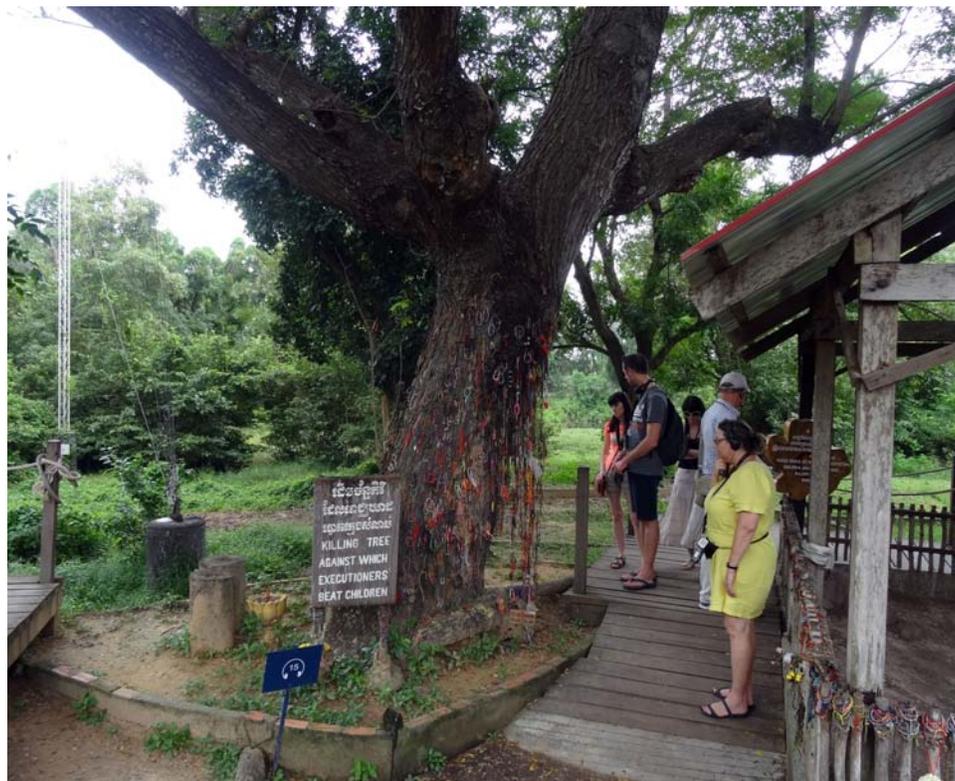


The Tower contains hundreds (thousands?) of skulls excavated from the Killing Fields surrounding it. 2 million of 8 million Cambodians died during Pol Pot's reign 1975-79,

most from starvation, but it included anyone who was an “intellectual”. Man’s inhumanity to man is unfathomable and Barbara says she’s beginning to not like mankind. How the country has recovered so quickly from such a self-inflicted genocide is beyond me.



One of many mass graves, excavated decades ago. These photos are ultra-compressed, but the caption says, “Mass grave of 166 victims without heads.”



They killed the babies by grabbing them by the ankles and bashing their heads against this Killing Tree, then threw them and their mothers (who were killed with spears and machetes) into the pit at right. The tree is decorated with religious offerings. I didn't

photograph the painting of the kids getting their heads bashed in and will spare you that. A sign at the entrance said, “no laughing” and nothing was farther from my mind.



On to lighter matters, this is a typical utility pole. I didn't search out one that was outrageous, they're all like this.



Our guide on the bus demonstrating how the Cambodians say Hello, Thank You, and many other things, accompanied by a slight bow of the head. Everyone but everyone does this.



Barbara about to be pedicab-cycled back to our ship. The cyclists weave thru traffic almost without regard to lanes or oncoming traffic, and you sort of feel lucky to be alive when you reach your destination. It's not for the faint of heart. But it is fast and efficient (and a lot of fun).



A frame from the video Barbara shot on her pedicab wild ride. The video is a lot more dramatic than a single frame. Both sides of the road thru the middle of town are line with shops and sidewalk vendors.

November 15: In a remote Cambodian village

15 NOV PHNOM PENH - ANGKOR BAN - KAMPONG CHAM

This morning depart before the break of dawn from Phnom Penh. Stop at the little-known silk weaving village before returning to the ship and continuing to cruise past the Mekong's tranquil villages, exhilarating river life and sun hardened fishermen on their wooden boats. Tour the rural Angkor Ban village where time has seemingly stood still. You will feel as though you have been transported back in time to an era untouched by modern civilization. Be amazed at the truly rustic architecture all made by hand and enjoy the unbridled warmth of the villagers. Experience village and take part in activities with the locals before heading back to the ship to cruise towards Kampong Cham.

Hi Friends,

[I have no idea what's with my emails and get little to no feedback from Apple. I can't tell what's gone and what hasn't. You may see some twice, and if so just ignore it. It takes maybe 4 minutes to send the text but about two hours to send my compressed photos. But when you look at where we are, why should we expect to have internet at all!]

We "sailed" at 11 last night and docked at 6 this morning. I enjoy the "sailing" part as much as anything, but we mostly sail at night when (a) I'm sleeping and (b) it's dark with nothing to see. It was the same with our Viking Danube cruise last spring.

Breakfast: I always end with a fruit course, usually mango and dragon fruit. Today I included lychee, also quite tasty.

It rained hard overnight so the ship is buttoned down for the weather. We watched in dismay as a tropical downpour at breakfast soaked our ship, visualizing having the sandals sucked off our feet as we trekked thru deep mud. But the sun came out — and for the first time this trip I put on suntan lotion.

We anchored at a small town "untouched by civilization" except for the one paved road that connects it with the outside world and the village's central generator that provide all the houses with electricity. This was yet another remote village off the tourist track that we were allowed to wander and take photos, and to talk with the elementary school students who were happy to practice their English (which everyone now learns in school). Houses are on stocky "stilts" and the animals live beneath; plenty of chickens and a surprising number of white cattle wander about. There are tables on the dirt ground floor and that's where people spend their time, preparing food, chopping firewood, or making what they need. It really could be from a different century and we're seeing life in the Middle Ages. Fascinating. We took scores of photos and short videos.

Our guide explained that the cattle are not kept for meat nor milk, but to work. They're certainly skinny and we can count their ribs. When their working days are over they're sold to the slaughter-house.

We ended up at the small village market (fish from the river is a big item, also veggies

from local gardens) and then the Buddhist temple with its bizarre (to us) statues.

We were back onboard at 10 to shower off the sweat (again sweat was dripping into our eyes), rinse out our shirts, and relax with a beer or Pepsi on the lounge deck. My shirt was damp when I put it on again a few hours later but that felt quite good — I must remember to do it again.

Our afternoon excursion was to a pagoda on a hilltop, but we've both seen enough pagodas by now and it held little interest for us. I attempted to engage in conversation with an old monk my age in French, but we went nowhere — my French is primitive and my accent is atrocious and his French with a Cambodian accent left me baffled; I couldn't even say "etats unis" clearly enough. Oh well, it was fun trying. Then to a village where the ship's company sponsors a private school. We were treated to a short music and dance show before the hat was passed around. We're happy to support such endeavors — these countries need all the help they can get and we trust the ship to direct us to useful organizations.

The pagoda was OK at best and the school nice, but the bus ride through the Middle Ages was fascinating. It's hard to imagine a life so different than ours.

Comments and Observations:

I got to wear one of my new Tommy Hilfiger shirts. Our routine is to shower and then wash our clothes in the sink before dinner, put on a clean shirt for dinner while the wet one begins to dry, and wear the new one the next day until it's time to wash it. We bring lightweight wash-and-wear clothes and rotate thru the same few shirts. Underwear easily dries overnight — but now I'm giving away travel secrets.

- John (& Barbara)



A cow, doing what cows do best.



A shrine and cows in the Medieval village. Note the mud. Life is slow here.



School kids. They practiced English on us. They all learn English. They used to learn Russian and Chinese but those languages are out.



When we were close to shore kids would jump up and down and wave and scream “hello”. The video I shot at the same time is pretty good.



Another house in the same village. Note the handrails! The concept does exist. And the oxcart at left — is this from another era or what!



And yet another house in a totally tropical setting.

November 16: A silk farm and an ox cart ride

16 NOV KAMPONG CHAM - WAT HANCHEY

Before the sun peeks over the horizon, wake early to embark on a land journey to the pre-Angkorian temple of Wat Hanchey. Travelers either take a motor-taxi or climb 303 steps to the top. Located at the top of a hill overlooking the river, it offers one of the most breath-taking views in Cambodia. Built in the 8th century, this ancient structure, together with a bigger and newer addition underscores the superb architecture of the Chenla Empire which predates the mighty Angkor temple complex. There is a chance to engage in light banter with some of the monks in the area, before returning to the boat to witness a blessing ceremony performed by local monks. After lunch, and if the tide allows, enjoy a boat visit to the nearby beach to swim in the tea colored Mekong river before cruising towards Kampong Cham. Along the way visit Wat Nokor, a wat built within the ruins of an ancient temple, visit OBT project and organization or Basic Training, and maneuver along a rickety bamboo bridge.

Hi Friends,

We awoke to bright sunshine — a first after 3-1/2 weeks — and I wore my broad-brimmed Tilly Hat for the first time. I thought I'd wear it every day but it's not been needed until now. We were dripping sweat within a half-hour and the hat was a mistake — it works in the desert but was too warm here, so too much sweat in my eyes. Maybe those conical straw "coolie" hats are the way to go.

Breakfast: highlights were noodle soup with prawns, steamed dim sum, and lychee. There are no Asians as guests so chopsticks aren't provided and I'm losing my touch. Chopsticks *are* provided with the noodle soup — how else would you eat it? The soup is custom-made at the Soup Station, opposite the Omelette Station, and you pick your ingredients and they stir it all together and serve it up.

To today's schedule: we saw the Wet Hanchey temple yesterday (no photos; we're saturated with pagodas). I described my attempt to engage in "light banter" in French with a monk. And "tea color" does not describe the Mekong — it's as brown as the Colorado River in flood; "coffee with milk" would be more an accurate drink comparison. And we visited the OBT project yesterday, so the official schedule is one day off reality and isn't very useful. They do give us a new printed schedule each morning that is accurate.

What we actually did was dock at an island and visit a silk-manufacturing area. They grow the worms which feed on the mulberry leaves and then extract the silk, spin it, and weave cloth items; exit thru the gift shop (which did a super business). We had a nice tuk-tuk ride to and from the farm and got to see another essentially Medieval village. The people seem happy in their poverty, but maybe they're happy to see us knowing that we tourists bring in dollars. We concluded that silk is woven here because the labor is the cheapest in SE Asia; the relatively affluent Chinese are big customers at the wholesale level. We're at the bottom of the food chain for labor. No souvenirs and no photos.

Once back on board we took a shower and rinsed our clothes. We then had hours until lunch and the afternoon activities, so I sat in the open lounge, enjoying a breeze and a beer, watching the world drift by. Usually we were close enough to shore to see into houses and ships — all very interesting.

We backtracked down the Mekong to Phnom Penh and then turned right and headed up the Tonle River where will dock on Saturday at Siem Reap to see Angkor Wat. So the Mekong is now behind us.

The first afternoon activity was a blessing by two Buddhist monks held aboard ship. Our guide stresses that Buddhism is not a religion; it is a philosophy. Buddhists who commit violence are "not true Buddhists". Where have we heard that before!

Then off by 2-wheel 2-ox oxcart to a school funded in part by the shipping line. The oxcart ride was wild — yet another ancient activity that I've always read about but never experienced personally. The cart was all well-worn wood except, presumably, the axle, and it creaked and groaned as we wobbled down the road at a fast walking pace. In pre-scooter days this was the best way to haul heavy loads, and they still use them in these rural areas for carting agricultural goods in addition to tourists. Very interesting. I thought as we were trundled thru a little village that this is just about the most primitive place we've ever been. The video will look wonderful.

The school kids put on a show for us, and we were asked repeatedly, "What is your name?", "Where do you come from?", and "How many brothers and sisters do you have." They were cute, as all kids are, and I like the idea of uniforms. Exit past the "Donations" box and we all contributed. We didn't see a rickety bridge.

Dinner was with friends we've made this trip. All turned out well regarding being with others.

Tomorrow is our last day aboard the RV Jayavarman.

Comments and Observations:

The background music aboard ship is elevator music; harmless but also pointless. I don't know what the term for "elevator music" is in Cambodian, but I doubt that most Cambodians have ever seen an elevator.

We've seen few flies the last couple of days -- nothing to make me want to use some of the several full bottles of bug spray we brought and will take home.

Cambodia is in the news world-wide. I read on BBC that the prime minister abolished the opposition party today. It seems that most problems most countries have are self-inflicted, and it's not limited to 3rd world countries that have no history of democracy (take Britain and the USA as recent spectacular examples). BTW, I don't know if any of my websites are censored because I can't connect well enough to try many — just Google News and BBC.

- John (& Barbara)



Contrast the old and the new: Phnom Penh with an unpainted wood fishing ship in the foreground.



Another. The country has come quite a long way since their government murdered everyone with an education 40 years ago. That government is still in power, by the way – they've just switched from murdering people to taking humongous bribes.



Cattle being led somewhere.



Along the shore of the Tonle River not far from Phnom Penh.



Ditto, with a mosque behind! The country is 90-95% Buddhist.



Looking in on lunch aboard a ship on the Tonle River near Phnom Penh.



In our oxcart, ready to roll! This was not the latest model — it might be older than I am.



We were a string of about 25 oxcarts with a police escort (on a scooter), here leaving the little village we passed thru. The video I shot is quite good with clopping and bells!



A modern house. Note the absence of windows, which baffles us. The family spends most of their time outside on big tables under the house.



A cow — probably enjoying life.

November 17: Up the Tonle River and Across Lake Tonle Sap

17 NOV KAMPONG CHAM - KAMPONG CHHNANG

This morning we set sail towards Kampong Chhnang on the Tonle Sap River - an amazingly narrow river - which glides through leafy swaths of the Southeast Asian jungle. We are sure to be greeted by locals who bring their livestock for a bath in the meandering Tonle Sap River. Then we approach Kampong Chhnang, Cambodia's "waterworld" where everything is built on stilts. Here we take a land excursion to the land to see both Khmer-styled pottery and sugar palm collecting at the Aundaung Russey village. Then, it is back to the river for an adventurous excursion to the wetlands, floating houses and fish farms in the region before returning to The Jahan for lunch. Your floating sanctuary will then cruise gently, in the afternoon, along the narrow and meandering Tonle Sap. In the evening, an impressive buffet will be served on the Upper Deck as you enjoy your final night onboard. Then the dancing and partying begins – for you, your fellow passengers and the fantastic staff members of the Ship. A wonderful way to finish the evening!

Hi Friends,

Early in the morning we sailed thru a remote part of Cambodia where there are few farms — and no internet. The main industry is fishing, some of it making its way to the USA, and we're at the end of the rainy season so the fields are flooded.

Our one shore excursion was to the only pottery-making area in Cambodia, and in the village we visited the technique hasn't changed in 6500 years. It's pre-pottery wheel; they shape the bowls etc. by hand and by smacking them with a wooden paddle. Why they still do it this way is beyond us. We also had a demonstration of how to manage and harvest sugar palm trees for their oil, also primitive and a lot of work. We were treated to a shot-glass of palm wine each, which was stronger than the little bottle I scored a few days ago. These "wines", like rice wine, can be as strong as vodka — and taste similar.

Lastly, a walk thru the market. I missed the bin of fried grasshopper that others saw, but like all of these farmers' markets it's full of fascinating stuff, and the fruit and veggies look first class.

Back to the boat at 10 to cruise the rest of the day, first past a large fishing village (many "hellos" from the kids), then a narrow canal, and finally into and across the lake (nothing to see — the far shore was far away). There's not much to report; most people tried to finish the book they'd borrowed from the ship's library. The breeze from our forward motion made the 110% humidity barely tolerable.

The crew put on a farewell cocktail party and dance. My inclination was to skip it, but with only 50-some passengers and nowhere to hide other than my room, my absence might be noticed. I should have done it anyway.

Our farewell dinner was noisier than usual with a bunch of drunks, and when the first appetizer came after 20 minutes and weighed, I swear, less than an ounce, I gave up, suppressed a scream, and fled to my cabin. I absolutely hate these slow, uber-noisy dinners, and they'll dissuade me from cruising again. I fully expected to eat the granola bars I'd brought from home for emergencies like this, but to my surprise. they brought the full dinner on a tray to my cabin, and they even brought two glasses of wine. I was able to dine in peace and quiet. The service aboard ship is excellent and we give them full credit: "Heritage Lines", highly recommended.

Now to finish both my coconut "wine" and this email.

In the morning we depart the ship after breakfast. We have two days in Siem Reap, the first a free day and the second to tour Angkor Wat. High on my list is an exfoliation salt massage.

Comments and Observations:

The temperature here varies from about 77 to 91, but it feels worse because of the humidity. The weather in St. George this coming week (mid-40s to 70 with low humidity) will be an enormous relief. We're ready!

I asked our guide what he could tell us about the recent political developments just to see what he'd say. He was clearly uncomfortable with it, but he gave the official description without editorializing — which is what I expected.

Yesterday's small photo collection took 4 hours to send, not counting the many hours when there was no connection at all. We should have good internet access beginning tomorrow evening.

- John (& Barbara)



A farm in the flood season. The fields are under water and now is the time to fish.



These houses are part of a giant fish-farming community. Each house has fish farms underneath; the fish live in the river while the family lives above them. This house has solar panels and a satellite dish on their bamboo and stray roof, so they're prosperous. Solar panels are not common in Cambodia or Vietnam but they make sense where there is no power grid.



Some of the older buildings — a century old? — have Chinese characters on them. There are always lots of wires everywhere.



Live chickens and ducks ready to take home to toss in the pot.



The town market. The cart is full of roasted snails in the shell.



Kids, two in school uniform, waving as we pass. From the time of day I think they're heading home for their 2-hour lunch.



Sunset over Cambodia with fishing boats in the foreground.



My coconut wine bought in from Vietnam a few days ago but no destined to go home.

November 18: Siem Reap free day

18 NOV TONLE SAP TO SEAM REAP

The Tonle Sap lake dominates Cambodia - it is the largest freshwater lake in Asia and thrives with abundant birdlife. It is so wide that one cannot see its shores from the middle of the lake. Enjoy the peace and tranquility of the water on the way to Siem Reap. Please note that the water level varies greatly according to the time of the year - so minor changes to the itinerary may occur during different seasons. Our cruise trip comes to an end this morning as we reach Siem Reap - the city of the fabled Angkor temple complex. Here you will bid farewell to the staff of the Ship - but we are sure the memories will last a lifetime. You will be transferred by coach from Siem Reap Port to your hotel in Siem Reap town.

Hi Friends,

Siem Reap is the gateway to Angkor Wat, perhaps the #1 tourist destination in SE Asia, so not surprisingly it's a total tourist town. All signs are in English, the international language, and it only sort-of feels like we're in Asia. There's still unacceptable amounts of trash and the sidewalks are still untended since the French left, but it feels like Asia-lite. If we'd started here we would have been excited, but by now we're "jaded" (to use a Chinese term).

We were shuttled to the Somadevi Hotel, which is at least as nice as we've seen with a huge room, walk-in shower, and large balcony overlooking the 1-acre pool/garden area. It would be a wonderful place to just hang out, and we both took advantage of the pool to go for a soak. We also walked the main street from our hotel — it's like the main streets we've seen elsewhere but with most signs in English — and took a half-hour tuk-tuk ride to rest our feet.

I stupidly left my binoculars in our room aboard the ship, and they were delivered to our hotel in the afternoon by one of the ship's crew. There's on in every crowd!

After cooling off in the pool — much needed — Barbara took a tuk-tuk to the old market where she bought a very attractive embroidered white shirt for \$6. I admire her sense of adventure. The ride was \$2 plus a dollar tip, and for another \$3 he waited while she shopped and returned her to the hotel ("a rider in the hand is worth two in the bush"). Tuk-tuks are everywhere, rides within the city are \$2, and it's a fast and efficient taxi system. I had a 90-minute "4-hands" Khmer massage for \$22 that was quite nice; it included a lot of accupressure. All prices for everything are posted in dollars; you wouldn't know there's a local currency.

Dinner was at an Indian-Cambodian restaurant (aren't many of those in St. George). I have no idea what we ordered — I went by what looked good on the photo menu — but it was wonderful and plentiful.

After dinner I opted for another 2-hr massage (\$13 plus tip) while Barbara flipped TV channels.

Tomorrow will be a full-day tour of Angkor Wat from 5 am to 5 pm.

Comments and Observations

Our guide says that if you swim in a local stream or lake (which apparently you are welcome to do) men should preserve local sensibilities by wearing a shirt. I suppose wearing pants is understood.

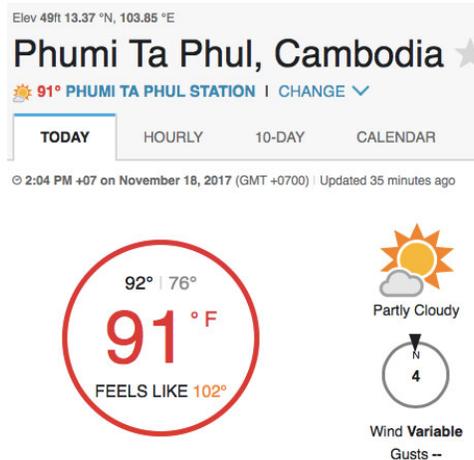
The scooters here travel at 1/3 the speed they do in Vietnam, and that's no exaggeration. There's a world of difference in how they drive. Crossing the street isn't much of a challenge and our Vietnamese-street-crossing skills would quickly go rusty here. And they signal (with their hands) indicating what they're going to do. Unheard of!

Wages are so low in Cambodia that this where the Chinese have things made for cheap. Cambodia was tearing itself apart and committing national suicide while the Chinese

communists were figuring out how to make their country prosperous.

Our guide admitted today on the shuttle bus that the near-term future of Cambodia looks bleak — but things will improve in the future. Maybe he knew the driver doesn't speak English and so won't report him.

- John (& Barbara)



This afternoon's weather. The humidity is near 100% which makes a tolerable 91 intolerable.



Barbara and her dwarf friend Oskar in the ship's dining room. Oskar is presenting her with a gift, a drawing he made, to thank her for the origami box she gave him. He's 4-1/2 and the darling of the ship.



These fun-loving guys run the country, and Cambodians will vote for them now that the opposition is in jail or fled the country. The one on left has been in power for 32 years (no term limits) and is a former lieutenant of Pol Pot, so you know the country is in good hands. They've invited the Russians to monitor the voting so the world will know The Cambodian People's Party members were re-elected fairly. These signs are everywhere to remind voters who to vote for.



Our Indian-Cambodian restaurant for two nights. Note that the tiny kitchen is on the sidewalk — enlarge to see the pots & pans. I ordered by pointing to what looked good (actually it all did) on the picture menu and enjoyed it thoroughly, although I have no idea what it was other than one was “chicken or beef” and I ordered beef, and the brand of beer was “Cambodia”.

November 19: Angkor Wat

November 19, 2017

Touring: TUK TUK ANGKOR WITH SUNRISE FULL DAY PRIVATE TOUR

Description: The temples of Angkor represent 600 years (802-1432) of Khmer civilization - one of Asia's greatest Kingdoms. We dedicate the whole day to exploring the most magnificent of the Angkor temples. We begin with a pre-dawn 5 am departure by Tuk Tuk from your hotel for sunrise at Angkor Wat. Enter the temple grounds in darkness (please bring a flashlight) from the little-visited eastern side. Soak up the atmosphere of dawn at Angkor, from the edge of one of the ancient library pools. We then explore the interior of the great temple, spending a thorough two hours discovering the corridors, central chambers and upper terraces of this truly great temple. Your expert local guide will decipher the myriad of stories behind the longest stretch of bas-relief carvings in the world, and give you an insight into life during the height of the Khmer empire. We end our touring at Angkor with breakfast outside the temple (take away, from your hotel), and a short rest. Continue the morning by driving through Angkor Thom city and visit the temple of Bayon before moving on to Preah Khan temple, a ruined but highly atmospheric melange of tree roots and crumbling stone structures. Construction of this site was commissioned by the great 'temple builder' Jayavaraman VII (in honor of his father) and a visit to this smaller site makes for an interesting contrast with the more imposing Angkor Wat. Preah Khan is currently being restored by the World Monument Fund and in places is in remarkably good condition. At the end of the morning return to your hotel for

lunch and a swim, and in the afternoon visit Banteay Kdei temple, a setting for the movie 'Lord Jim' and currently under restoration by a Japanese university. We end the afternoon with a visit to jungle-enveloped Ta Prohm, one of the most atmospheric of all temples in Angkor and sister site of Preah Khan. Once home to 2,740 monks, Ta Prohm today looks much as it did in the early 1850s, when French explorer Henri Mouhot 'rediscovered' this crumbling site. At the end of the day, we catch a final sunset glimpse of Angkor Wat, then return to our hotel. Today is a long but fulfilling day which will leave you with lifetime memories of some of the most impressive monuments built by mankind.

Hi Friends,

Today we visited a place we've always heard about but hadn't really thought about much before and even during this trip. We wanted a river cruise and this happened to be at the end of it, so we hadn't read up on it, and it was a surprise. Our guide was professional and gave us excellent running commentary, and so we feel we saw it.

We set our alarms for 4:15 to meet our guide and tuk-tuk driver at 5, drove to the ticket station, and entered Angkor Wat archaeological district at about 5:45. It was totally dark and drizzling lightly, so we wore headlamps to see where to walk. Angkor Wat was a ghostly outline as we first saw it, but became clearer as we walked around it, and it was bright enough for photography when we entered it. We arrived early to see the sunrise, but that was a washout in the drizzle; should have slept in. We spent at least an hour inside, walking the corridors as our guide interpreted for us. We watched huge groups pass and felt fortunate to be a "party of 2" with our own expert to lead us on. I won't begin to try to describe it, but it is indeed impressive; Google it for gushing and eloquent descriptions that are beyond my powers. According to our guide, it took much more effort (10X?) to build Angkor Wat than the Great Pyramid. What I remember most is the countless steps that left me rather tired.

I skipped the second temple while Barbara toured it, and the 3rd and 4th were much smaller and quicker to see. By then we had seen enough temples and decided to skip the afternoon return.

We were back to our hotel at noon to take the rest of the day off. We started by skipping lunch.

Dinner was at the same restaurant as last night. We ordered from the picture menu, but what they brought was different, so not only do we not know what we ordered, but we don't know what we got — a double blind. Perhaps the cook didn't know either. But it was good, and very cheap.

We ended the evening with body scrubs so we'd be squeaky clean for tomorrow's l-o-n-g day cramped in the dreaded "back seat" of three aircraft. There are two massage places on each block in this tourist area, so it wasn't hard to find one. I'd not had a body scrub before this trip, but in case you haven't either, they scrub you with a gritty salt slurry to remove not only sweat and oils but dead skin, then you rinse it off in a shower, and they finish was a traditional massage and some replacement light body oil. Quite nice — I could get used to these.

My strategy for the rest of the evening is to stay up late so I'm tired tomorrow so I'll sleep on the planes. It worked coming over. I do so wish I could take a pill on take-off and wake up on landing, or go into suspended animation on a rack like the sci-fi movies. Maybe with our fast wifi tonight I can catch up on Facebook and a few others sites I've neglected these last few weeks.

Tomorrow we depart after a leisurely breakfast to fly Siem Reap - Hong Kong - Los Angeles - Las Vegas. We'll stay overnight at a Best Western by the airport and take the shuttle home after breakfast Tuesday morning. I'll send my final email once we're safely home.

Comments and Observations:

"We love dog" means something different in this part of the world than in ours.

Our guide said that Cambodia has many resources and should be a rich country with a good middle class, but the resources are "being hauled away" cheaply by the Chinese and others to enrich the already rich Cambodian one-percenters thru bribes.

- John (& Barbara)



Angkor Wat — or a tiny part of it. It's HUGE and it goes on forever. Around 1200 AD the total population of the area was a million when London had 35,000. It was abandoned and went back to jungle; the locals knew about the ruins but avoided them so they were left to fall apart in peace. It helped that there have been no damaging earthquakes here in recorded history.



Part of Angkor Wat — an interior view. It survived largely intact since being abandoned centuries ago and needed little restoration, we're told.



This monk in Angkor Wat was offering blessings at \$1 each (US dollar bills) — and you could take a souvenir photo. Barbara declined, sadly — it would have made a great photo. Our guide believes in karma, luck, and in the usefulness of blessings. Blessings increase your chance for good luck and karma determines your station in your next life (this life is only temporary and doesn't matter).



Angkor Wat is the best-known temple in this giant complex of temples, and we traveled from and to our hotel and around the complex by tuk-tuk. It really is the way to go. Proper attire for the driver is flip-flops and a helmet.



This nearby temple has not been entirely excavated and still sports giant trees whose impressive roots are slowly tearing it apart.

November 20-21: Long Trip Home

SOMADEVI ANGKOR HOTEL TO SIEM REAP AIRPORT PRIVATE WITH GUIDE

Inclusions: One way transfer with guide. A representative from Insider Journeys will meet you at the hotel reception for your onward transfer to the airport/train station/port at 9 am. Departure flight: KA249 at 11:20 hours

Hi Friends,

Our driver picked us up at 9 and we began our long journey home. 20 min to Siem Reap airport; luggage 8.9 and 14.6kg. Cathay Pacific flight to Hong Kong, 3 hr layover; 12 hr flight at 600+ mph to LAX (both watched movies half the time and slept half; tray table a

plus over car back seat); 3 hr layover at LAX, and short hop to Las Vegas. We arrived at our Best Western hotel at 7 pm after 25 hours of travel, got a full night sleep, and resumed travel this morning. We decided to overnight in Las Vegas rather than take a late shuttle to arrive home at around 11 pm

All 3 flights and the layovers were very relaxed and not too uncomfortable, so we survived it well.

This morning we caught the St. George shuttle after breakfast and arrived in our nice desert home at 11:45. Total travel time (minus hotel) was 28-1/4 hours.

We have 621 photos that have been Photoshopped, labeled, and organized with nothing further to do with them. But we have 515 videos that haven't been touched since they were shot, and that's a project I'm *not* looking forward to. Most are short and in most of the long ones I was shooting in anticipation of something happening, so most will be discarded, but ti still ads up to 14 GB of video to edit this winter — a cloudy nights project for December, January, and hopefully not February too.

But it's time to restore my tan — 1st priority now that we're back in the desert. And read a book. Actually many books.

My favorite photo: us standing in front of Ho Chi Minh's childhood home — a place I'd never dreamed I'd be.

My favorite moment: when our guide found a modern dentist in Saigon who would quickly replace my broken crown.

My favorite place: either Hanoi or one of the little villages that time forgot. You could spend days in Hanoi but only hours in a village.

I'll post at our travel website the collected emails I've sent y'all as one pdf within a few days of our returning home, where it'll join the others from past trips. It's also our illustrated trip diary.

Bye! Over and out.

- John (& Barbara)