

# **THE LONG SUFFERING VIETNAMESE FINALLY HAVE ECONOMIC FREEDOM AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY**

The 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Marine Landing at Da Nang

The 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Fall of Saigon

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On March 24 of this year I was at Bangkok's new Suvarnabhumi International Airport, the fifth busiest in Asia and to me the most beautiful. Though a Buddhist kingdom, Thailand still shows profound Hindu influences: Survarnabhumi is Sanskrit for "golden land." In one of the airport halls the Thai authorities have placed a life-size depiction of the Hindu myth "The Churning of the Ocean," presumably to lure travelers to the East Gallery of Angkor Wat in nearby Cambodia.

Along with my new companions on an Overseas Adventure Travel tour, I boarded a brand new Airbus 321, Air Vietnam flight 830 to Hanoi. I thought to myself: "Forty years ago Americans flying this direction would have been pilots on bombing runs."

Over 80 percent of the ordnance dropped on Vietnam, triple the tonnage of both the European and Pacific theaters of World War II, were carried by F-4 and F-105 fighter bombers from Thailand. Violating Thailand's official neutrality--just as the North Vietnamese had done by establishing bases in neutral Cambodia--seven U.S. air bases were eventually established.

## **The French leave after Dien Bien Phu, but the Americans take their place**

On our flight to Hanoi we passed over the battlefield at Dien Bien Phu, now a tourist site popular with the French. In the spring of 1954, 48,000 Communist forces, with aid of 40,000 men and women porters, surrounded 10,000 French troops. Incredibly enough, the porters had carried disassembled artillery pieces, many of them U.S. 105 Howitzers captured from Chinese national forces, over mountain trails.

The battle commenced on March 13 with 60 shells hitting the stunned French base every minute. Once again the French had been outfoxed by General Vo Nguyen Giap, just as he would later outmaneuver U.S. forces. Stanley Karnow states that Giap's "brilliance as a logistician, organizer, and strategist ranks him with Wellington, Grant, Lee, Rommel, and MacArthur in the pantheon of great military leaders."

The French surrendered on May 8, and as they were withdrawing all their forces at Haiphong harbor, American intelligence agents were there to debrief them. Ignoring their advice, then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles violated the 1954 Geneva Accords and committed the U.S. to an anti-Communist campaign at which the French had failed and we followed them with eyes wide shut. In a review of *The Valley of Death*, a new book on the battle of Dien Bien Phu,

Ed Voves states that “except for the resounding battlefield defeat like Dien Bien Phu, the ‘American War’ was almost a carbon copy of the ‘French War.’”

### **Hanoi: Vibrant Capital of New Asian “Tiger”**

As we drove into Hanoi from the airport we saw many bridges over the Red River that had been destroyed time and time again by U.S. bombs, only to be rebuilt or spanned by pontoons. The river was crowded with boat traffic, mainly loads of basic building materials.

I had expected a drab Marxist-Leninist city, but everywhere we looked there were brightly colored town houses, which outnumbered the more shabby residences. With ornate French colonial ironwork, they are narrow, multi-storied structures because property prices are so high.

We also saw huge high-rise apartment complexes and exclusive gated communities. Overseas Vietnamese are complaining that they have to pay the same amount for a condo that they paid for their homes back in Canada, Australia, or the U. S. Economists are worried that the Vietnamese real estate market may bubble with catastrophic consequences for the booming but fragile economy.

The Communist officials have given private developers free reign, and the result is that many buildings are of shoddy construction and they are not served by adequate infrastructure. Many families are now moving out of some of Hanoi’s new apartments because there are no schools and no places to shop.

In the old days Communist officials imprisoned enterprising businessmen, but now they appear in public with them praising their projects. Dao Trong Cuong, one of Vietnam’s richest men, has made a fortune in the gem business. Declaring that he “likes big, manly things,” Cuong was the first Vietnamese to buy a Hummer at a cost of \$300,000.

Hanoi’s inner city is vibrant and bustling with private stores piled with goods and street-side restaurants doing a brisk business. The noodle soup called “pho” is the best in Asia. One of my travel companions was a city planner from New York City, who contrasted the “food deserts” (mostly chips, candy and soda) in part of his city with the abundance of nutritious fare everywhere in Vietnam.

Vietnamese city streets are essentially crime free, and pedestrians are safe if you follow some simple rules: “don’t run and don’t panic.” Drivers will then give you a small role in an amazing car-scooter ballet. After two weeks in the country I did see any road rage or a single accident.

The first evening in Hanoi our guide took us to the lowering of the flag at Ho Chi Minh’s tomb and the next day we visited his famous house-on-stilts. Uncle Ho, as the Vietnamese call their beloved, ascetic leader, refused to live in the presidential mansion right next door, but he was shocked when he saw that workers had used the most expensive hardwoods to build his hut. A Buddhist pagoda right next to Ho’s home was filled with Vietnamese worshippers.

As a student of Asian culture and religion I was particularly impressed with Hanoi's Confucian temple. In 1992 I visited the main Confucian temple in Beijing and there must have been two inches of dust on everything inside. Hanoi's Confucian "Temple of Learning" was immaculate, and I was able to buy a beautifully produced scholarly guide to this impressive shrine to China's most famous scholar.

### **Economic and Religious Liberty, but No Political Freedom**

After interacting with Vietnam's farmers and small business men and women, I have concluded that these people are totally unsuited to Communist ideology. This should be no surprise because human nature in general rebels against totalitarianism in all its forms.

The Chinese oppressed the Vietnamese for 1,000 years, the French denied them basic rights for a century, and for 20 years American supported South Vietnamese governments that tortured and killed thousands of those suspected of Communist sympathies. The Diem government towed a French guillotine around the countryside for clean decapitation of his perceived enemies.

The "liberation" promised by the North Vietnamese Communists turned out to be another 15 years of oppression. Private property was abolished and every line of work, even the barbers, was collectivized. The experiment was a colossal failure, but since 1989 most property and businesses have returned to private hands and Vietnam is becoming another Asian economic "tiger."

The government still controls the prices of gasoline, electricity, and coal. In 2009 the economy was stimulated at the tune of \$1 billion (1 percent of the GDP). The economy grew at a strong 5.3, but it also produced an inflation spike of 2 percent in February. Vietnam is returning to its role as a major rice exporter. Second only to Thailand, its 2009 was a 43 percent increase from 2008.

Politically, Vietnam, like China to the north but unlike Cambodia to the West, is still a one-party state with tight controls the press and other media. After trying to discourage religion, the Communists now allow religious freedom. The Buddhist temples and Catholic churches I visited were well attended and well maintained.

As in the case in Chinese, politically active Buddhists are not treated very well. In Lam Dong province 380 monks and nuns, followers of world famous Thich Nhat Hanh, were evicted from their monastery in September of 2009. Allowed back for two visits since 2005, Hanh was *persona non grata* with both the Communists and the former South Vietnamese authorities.

### **Many "Boat People" Come Back**

Unlike the holocaust in Cambodia, there was not a blood after the fall of Saigon and the reunification of the country. More Vietnamese, estimated at 100,000, have died because of left-over U.S. landmines than from the 65,000 executions, the conclusion of a UC Berkeley study.

Millions of gallons of Agent Orange (and much more deadly Agents Pink and Purple) were spread across the Vietnamese countryside, and since then birth defects have increased fourfold. Dao Thi Kieu had 8 children, 7 of whom had severe defects and 5 of whom died before the age 8. When she was 16, her village's crops were sprayed with Agent Orange. The premature death of her husband, employed by the South Vietnamese Army, was due to an herbicide related cancer.

About 300,000 of those who worked for the U.S. or the former South Vietnamese government or businesses were sent to "reeducation" camps. Most of them were released in 1976, but 10,000 remained in prison. The harsh treatment in the camps convinced many, most of them well trained professionals, to flee the country as "boat people" under atrocious conditions.

In 1989 the Reagan administration negotiated an agreement by which former South Vietnamese soldiers and officials could legally immigrate to the U.S. There are now about 4 million Vietnamese living overseas (1.6 million in the U.S. and 600,000 in Cambodia). Their families fled primarily because of the oppressive conditions in the country after 1975.

The overseas Vietnamese have poured millions of dollars back into Vietnam. Our guide showed us some of their mansions and also the new family temples to honor their ancestors. These elaborate and ornate temples stand in stark contrast to the homes of the family members who chose not to flee.

One day our bus broke down on our way to Hoi An, the most prosperous city in Vietnam because of UN development aid. We wandered along a side road that was decorated with a Confucian-inspired saying: "People grow bonsai plants for entertainment, but people should also grow trees of virtue." The banners led us to an elaborate family temple where an annual festival was being held. We were invited to burn incense at the ancestors' altar, and we also were invited to stay for the feast in their honor. We were overwhelmed with their declaration that we might very well be part of their family tree.

### **The Former Imperial Capital of Hue**

The next stop on our tour was Hue, the former imperial capital. The government has discouraged commercial development here, and it was nice to be away from the hustle and bustle of Hanoi. Much has been done to restore the many historical sites after the massive destruction of the Tet Offensive of 1968.

At the Dong Thuyen Monastery I ate the best vegetarian food of my life. We also visited the Minh Tu Orphanage, where Buddhist nuns have nurtured thousands of children and have taken great pride in their success in school and their chosen professions. After lunch a tourist asked one of the nuns "What is the purpose of life." I loved her answer: "Always be true to yourself," an answer that Gandhi was fond of giving to the same question.

The Vietnamese do not hide their dislike for the Chinese, but their culture was profoundly influenced by Chinese culture. The citadel at Hue is a copy of Beijing's Forbidden City, and at Nam Giao the Vietnamese emperor would perform animal sacrifices as the "Son of

Heaven.” These burnt offerings were banned in China in 1911, but were continued by Emperor Bao Dai until 1945.

During the Tet Offensive in 1968 the Viet Cong invaded the city and their flag flew over the Citadel for 25 days. The Communists rounded up South Vietnamese officials and, according to their own count, 2,720 were executed. Additional bodies in mass graves may have been the work of the South Vietnamese army as it took back the city with the help of U. S. Marines. As many as 5,000 Communist troops may have died, along with 631 allied troops and 5,800 civilians.

### **Da Nang 45 Years Later: From Marine Landing Site to Beach Resorts**

From Hue we drove along Highway 1 to Da Nang, where we saw condos, beach hotels, and golf courses built all along the coast. Forty-five years ago March 8, the U. S. Marines landed here as the beginning of a massive build up of troops that reached over a half million.

As a student of Hindu culture and religion, one of the highlights of the trip was the ruins at Me Son, one of the temple sites of the Cham culture that flourished from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Both Cambodians and Vietnamese warmly embraced the Hindu religion that Indian traders brought to Southeast Asia. The ruins at Me Son are in very bad condition primarily because the Viet Cong sought refuge here and the U.S. bombed Me Son to drive them out.

As we flew over the former Demilitarized Zone (which ironically was the most militarized during the war and was never meant to be an official border between North and South Vietnam), I was almost to the end of Stanley Karnow’s Pulitzer Prize winning book *Vietnam: A History*. He was writing about the final campaign for the liberation of South Vietnam, which the North Vietnamese predicted would take two years.

On the evening of April 2<sup>nd</sup>, from the 10<sup>th</sup> storey of our hotel in Nha Trang, we watched massive fireworks explode in celebration of the liberation of the city one year early in 1975. With the South Vietnamese army and government in total disarray, the Communists had already taken Hue and Da Nang and would march into Saigon on April 30. Outside of Saigon the South Vietnamese Air Force inflicted heavy casualties on the advancing North Vietnamese Army, but these troops had lived through B-52 bombing raids far worse than this last ditch defense.

While in Nha Trang we visited a school where one class entertained us with all the verses of “My Darling Clementine”, with each English word clearly recognizable. Our performance of “This Land is My Land” was a stumbling affair with most of us not remembering anything except the first version. Two girls showed me their notebooks, and our guide was right: it was so neat and perfect that you could not tell it from commercial printing. The Chinese have always linked calligraphy with the development of good character, and I could only assume that the care that these students gave to committing an entire English song to memory and writing so neatly will carry over into their future lives.

### **Dalat: French Mountain Retreat and New Zen Monastery**

After a long bus drive over the mountain pass south of Nha Trang, we arrived at the former French mountain retreat at Dalat, relieved to be away from the oppressive coastal heat and humidity. Once a small town reserved for the French and their servants, Dalat is now a prosperous city of 200,000. Our hotel “Mecure Dalat” was built by the French in 1932 and was one of the nicest on our trip.

The highlight for me in Dalat was taking an Austrian built cable car to the most beautiful and largest Zen Buddhist temple complexes I’ve ever visited. It was finished in 1994 and is connected with Buddhist school that goes all the way back to King Tran Nhan Tong (1258-1308). He was known not only for his devotion to Buddhism, but also for his success on the battlefield, defeating two Mongol invasions in 1285 and 1288. In 1293 he abdicated in favor of his son, and as monk he committed the rest of his life to founding Buddhist temples and monasteries.

### **On to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and the Cu Chi Tunnels**

Before the trip I assumed that it would be politically incorrect to refer to Ho Chi Minh City by its former name, but all the Vietnamese we met called it Saigon without any noticeable fear of censure. Saigon escaped the ravages of both wars, and the Communists refrained from major shelling when they found little resistance as they marched into the city. With a mixture of French colonial buildings and wide boulevards, new high rises, and miles and miles chaotic commercial development, Saigon is now a thriving city of 7 million people.

The war museum was a real downer for all of us. We had seen most of these horrific images and we knew most of the tragic stories behind them, but to experience them all in one place was emotionally devastating. Most of us went to the Vietnamese children’s peace art display for a break.

Knowing my special interest in Buddhism, our guide took me on his scooter to the Giac Lam Pagoda. Although built in 1744, it was so well maintained that it looked brand new. I was able to witness a service with monks and laypeople, mostly women, chanting the sutras. As in China and Japan, the most popular Buddhist denomination in Vietnam is the Pure Land sect. By chanting the name of the Amida Buddha with a pure heart, these Vietnamese worshippers will enjoy a life of bliss in Amida’s Pure Land (=Heaven). It is a religion of grace and redemption very much like Christianity.

### **The Cu Chi Tunnels: Defensive Construction Wonder of the World**

Our group really enjoyed was the visit to the Cu Chi tunnels outside of Saigon. Built over 60 years as initially defense against French air and ground attacks, the tunnels went from hut to hut and then from village to village. It has been said that there are two defensive construction marvels in the world: the Great Wall of China, which can be seen from space, and 120 miles of Vietnamese tunnels, which can be seen only by crawling inside of them.

Those who might think it odd that the French wish to visit Dien Bien Phu should take a moment to ponder the irony of Americans visiting tunnels from which major attacks on U. S. troops, such as the Tet Offensive raid on Saigon, were planned and executed. The tunnels had food storage, munitions factories, operating rooms, and meeting rooms on three levels. Only when the entire area was defoliated by Agent Orange, scrapped bare by bull dozers, and bombed repeatedly by B-52s, did U. S. make much progress in flushing the Viet Cong out.

During my trip I was most impressed with the morale of these hard-working, dynamic people. They have suffered far too much from outsiders (and their own Communist government), who thought they knew what their best interests were. Democratic governments believe that it is the people themselves who know what there are and them to be fulfilled private enterprise or government programs approved by majority vote. My fear is that Vietnamese, just as the Chinese apparently do, will to accept the lack of political freedom as long as they have the freedom to worship, to enjoy their professions, and to run their own businesses.

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