

**Travel 1996/97**

**VIETNAM**

**December 1996 – January 1997**

**Suzanne & Jim Russell  
with  
Kay, Jock and Caroline Harkness**



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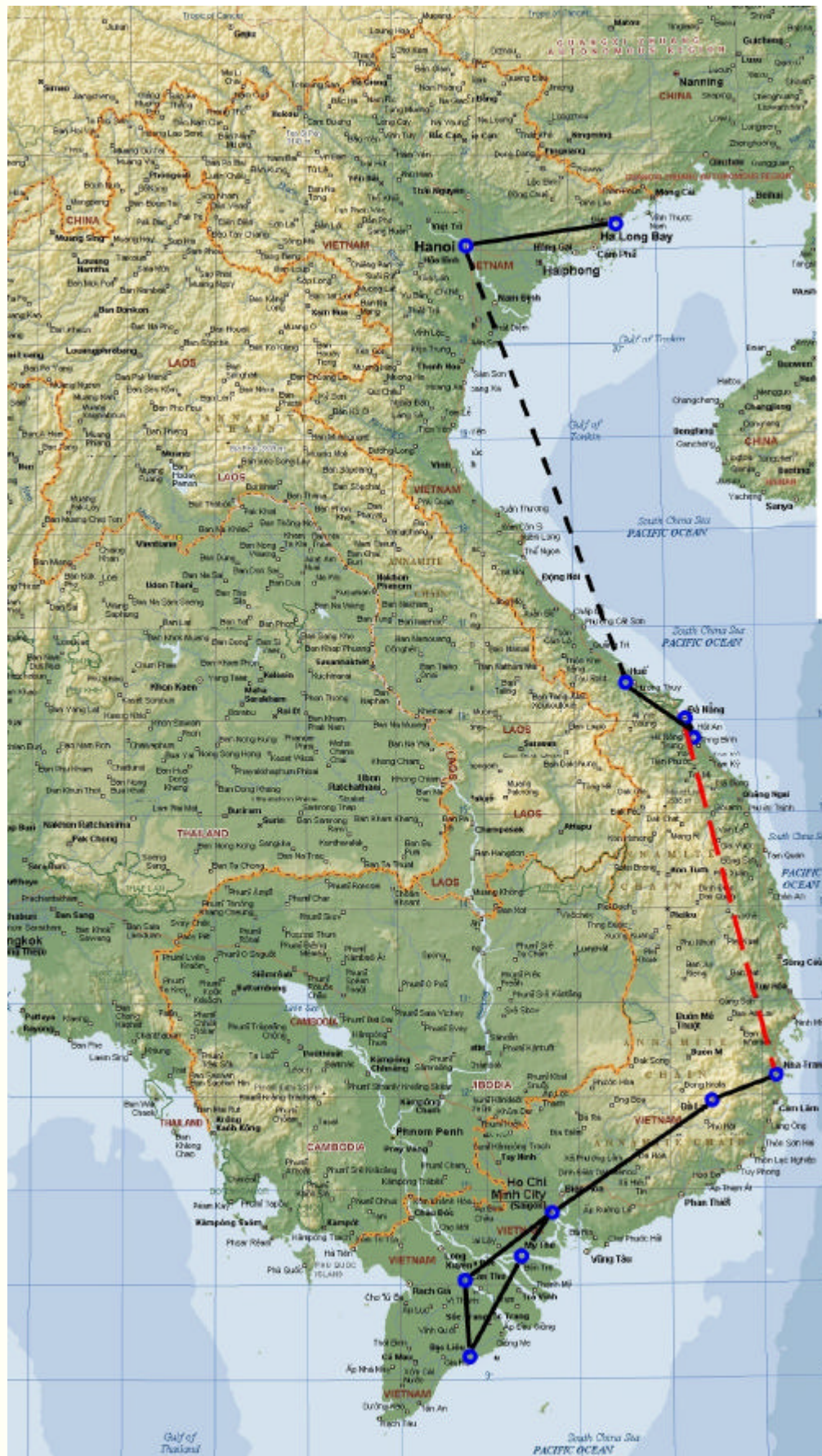
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# Itinerary

## VIETNAM - 1996

| Monday  | Tuesday   | Wednesday  | Thursday  | Friday  | Saturday  | Sunday   |
|---|---|--|---|---|---|--|
|   |   |  |   |   | December 14   | December 15<br>Day 1<br>Melbourne to Hong Kong to Bangkok<br><br>Bangkok   |
| December 16<br>Day 2<br>Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh City<br>Local Market<br>Que's guitar teacher<br>Dinner at Que's<br>Visit Nam's parents<br><br>Cyclo / home HCM                   | December 17<br>Day 3<br>Ho Chi Minh City<br>War Museum<br>Vinh Nghiem pagoda<br>Cho Lon Market<br>Kim's Cafe<br><br>Taxi / home HCM           | December 18<br>Day 4<br>Ho Chi Minh to Mekong Delta<br>lunch & canal trip at Cao Lanh<br>VC hide-out<br>Vinh Long ferry<br>Can Tho ferry<br><br>Mini-bus / Can Tho | December 19<br>Day 5<br>Mekong Delta: Can Tho to Bac Lieu<br>boat Mekong River: fruit orchard<br>Can Tho market<br>visit Que's english teacher<br>Minibus / Bac Lieu                | December 20<br>Day 6<br>Mekong Delta: Bac Lieu to My Tho<br>visit Que's house & relatives<br>Xa Lon pagoda<br>bat pagoda<br><br>Mini-bus / My Tho   | December 21<br>Day 7<br>My Tho to HCM City<br>River trip: sanctuary, bee farm, island<br>Cu Chi Tunnels<br>dinner at Que's<br><br>Mini-bus / home HCM           | December 22<br>Day 8<br>HCM City to Dalat<br>floating fish market<br>lunch-Bao Loc<br>Dambri Falls<br>Prenn Pass<br><br>Mini-bus / Dalat |
| December 23<br>Day 9<br>Dalat to Nha Trang<br>Xuan Huong Lake<br>Bao Dai's Summer Palace<br>Crazy House<br>Chicken Village<br>Phan Rang<br>Cam Ranh Bay<br>Mini-bus / Nha Trang | December 24<br>Day 10<br>Nha Trang<br>Oceanographic Institute<br>Bao Dai's villas<br>Hon Chong Promontory<br>dinner & 'show'<br><br>Nha Trang | December 25<br>Day 11<br>Nha Trang<br>Boat trip: aquarium, swifts' nest<br>island, fish lunch<br>pagoda dinner & 'show'<br><br>Nha Trang                           | December 26<br>Day 12<br>Nha Trang to Da Nang to Hoi An<br>shopping & visit friends<br>fly to Danang<br>Marble Mountains<br>China Beach<br>shops in Hoi An<br><br>Hire car / Hoi An | December 27<br>Day 13<br>Hoi An to Hue<br>Japanese covered bridge<br>Mandarin's house<br>museum<br>pagoda<br>Tan Ky house<br>Cham museum<br>Hai Van Pass<br><br>Bicycles & Mini-bus / Hue | December 28<br>Day 14<br>Hue<br>Perfume River<br>boat trip: Chinese Buddhist Temple, Ming Manh Tombs, Thien Mu Pagoda<br>Catholic Cathedral<br><br>Cyclos / Hue | December 29<br>Day 15<br>Hue to Hanoi<br>Citadel: Imperial City, Forbidden Purple City<br><br>Train / Hanoi                              |
| December 30<br>Day 16<br>Hanoi<br>Lake of the Restored Sword<br>QBE<br>West Lake<br><br>Cyclos / Hanoi  | December 31<br>Day 17<br>Hanoi to Halong Bay<br>boat trip around islands<br><br>Mini-busTour / Halong Bay                                     | January 1<br>Day 18<br>Halong Bay to Hanoi<br>boat trip around islands<br><br>Mini-bus Tour / Hanoi  | January 2<br>Day 19<br>Hanoi<br>HCM museum<br>Temple of Literature<br><br>Cyclos / Hanoi  | January 3<br>Day 20<br>Hanoi<br>Old Quarter<br>West Lake<br>Water puppets<br>Cha Ca Va Vong restaurant<br>Cyclos / Hanoi  | January 4<br>Day 21<br>Hanoi to HCM City to Melbourne<br>HCM mausoleum<br><br>Fly   | January 5<br>Day 22<br>Melbourne<br>7am  |

## Map - Vietnam 1996/1997







# Vietnam 1996-1997

**Sunday 15 December - Melbourne to Hong Kong to Bangkok**

**Day 1**

The trip to Tullamarine was uneventful, in contrast to the following hour. There was no sign of any flight resembling Air Vietnam on the departures board. Enquiries revealed that the plane left at 8.15am (it was now 9am - plenty of time for the departure time of 10.55am, written on our tickets). Vietnam Airlines desk was closed down and their next flight to Ho Chi Minh City was Thursday.

We were not the only passengers left behind. A discussion by phone with our travel agent, then we asked Qantas to get us to Vietnam ASAP. Their next plane left in one hour - bound for Bangkok via Hong Kong and we were on it.



Our overnight hotel in Bangkok

**Monday 16 December - Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh City**

**Day 2**

An hour in Hong Kong, overnight in Bangkok and we touched down in Ho Chi Minh City (previously Saigon) just after lunch. Fortunately Kay, Jock and Caroline had found Que's parents house (a combination of luck and perseverance) and given warning not to meet us at the arranged time and not to cook the welcome banquet.

centre and the Annamite mountain range stretches between the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong Delta in the south. Vietnam borders China, Laos, Cambodia and the South China Sea.



Que and her parents

Ho Chi Minh City is at the south end of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, a long thin country running 1600km along the eastern coast of the Indochina peninsula (Indochina was formed from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos by the French in 1887). The country narrows to only 70km in the



Que's family home in Ho Chi Minh city

Vietnam's ability to grow sought after produce and its position close to many other countries as well as the sailing ships' trade routes has given rise to a long and chequered history as a country invaded by others and of feuding between factions within its own borders.

The population of Vietnam is around 74 million, a density of 225 people to the sq.km, one of the highest in the world for an agricultural based country.

A very warm welcome from Que and her parents (at the airport I kept pushing away the man trying to take my case and, of course, it turned out to be Que's father).

Their house is modern, beautifully tiled throughout, with three bedrooms, living room, kitchen and bathroom. We have the large upstairs front room (reached by a tiny circular staircase) with a balcony shaded by a cerise bougainvillea.



**Stalls in Cholón Market - Hats - Pots and Pans**



We went for a walk to the local market, buying bananas, then visited Que's guitar teacher. Back home in cyclos (Que and I in one, Jim in the other) and sat down to a superb meal of fried rice with many and varied ingredients, steamed and fried fish, vegetables and other dishes - delicious!

Que's father took our passports to the local police station to register us - the police were not happy about us staying in a private home (too great an opportunity to influence the locals) but they relented and will allow us to stay with the family.

After dinner we went by taxi to Nam's parents house and spent a very pleasant hour with them, Que translating as we talked.



**With Nam's parents in HCM City**

Exhausted, so a shower and bed by 8pm.



**Under the mosquito net**

## **The Vietnamese Communist Party and Ho Chi Minh**

The communist party, through highly controlled security and political systems, dominates social and economic life in Vietnam.



The 500 seat National Assembly is the democratically elected legislative authority. Only communist party approved candidates may stand and opposition parties are prohibited, so the members are mainly party cadres. From this is elected a Council of State (15 members) which acts as the presidency and a Council of Ministers, of 22 members, functions as a cabinet with portfolios.

The communist party congress meets irregularly to ratify major policy changes (eight times since 1930, when the party was begun by Ho Chi Minh).



**Uncle Ho in Ho Chi Minh City**

Then, changing his name, he moved around, including China, Russia and Bangkok, founding revolutionary groups, including the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930, although some of the time was spent both in gaol and in hospital.

In 1941 he returned to Vietnam, disguised as a European journalist under the name Ho Chi Minh (meaning bearer of light), to form the League for the Independence of Vietnam, better known as the Viet Minh, dominated by the communist party and responsible for many minor uprisings as well as the momentous August Revolution of 1945, following which Ho triumphantly declared Vietnam independence at a rally in Hanoi.

Within a year the Franco-Viet Minh war had broken out and Ho remained in a northern mountain hide-out for eight years, masterminding gradual control of Vietnam by the Viet Minh, culminating in the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu. Ho filled the position of Chairman of the Communist Party from its inception and it has been left vacant since his death in 1969.

**Tuesday 17 December - Ho Chi Minh City**

**Day 3**

Woke early to the sound of the cock crowing. The house is well away from the main road so no traffic noise, but there are plenty of birds and animals who like an early start to the day.

Breakfast was home delivered - a boy brought each of us a bowl of pho (large bowl with chicken, spring onion, coriander and other herbs, and fresh noodles in a delicious boiling broth). I thought I wasn't hungry but finished mine.

The taxi arrived at 8am and we set off to see Kay, Jock and Caroline at the Bong Sen 2 Hotel. They were having breakfast so we joined them for coffee. To the bank for money. Many goods are marked in, and paid for, in US dollars. The dong comes in notes of mainly small denominations and as 10,000 dong is about \$1 Australian, carrying dong can be a very tiring affair.

Then to the Australian Consulate for Que's visa extension and on to the Cholon Market - vast, with every item that exists for sale. Lunch was grilled large crabs, fish steamed in ginger and black bean sauce, rice, cabbage with a vinegar sauce, grilled marinated chicken and rice, followed by papaya. With beer and soft drinks, the total came to around \$8 each, which we thought very cheap, however it turned out to be one of our most expensive meals.



**Neighbours**

Next stop the Post Office to send cards (18 airmail to Australia for \$aus8). The Post Office is a large ornate wrought iron building, built by the French and designed by George Eiffel.



**HCM City Post Office**

After that the railway station for information about the soft bed sleeper from Hue to Hanoi and

to Kim's Cafe to check our minibus and pay for our Mekong Delta trip.

We spent some time at Air Vietnam organising air tickets for the Nha Trang to Danang flight. Foreign tourists double price.



**Memories of the French Colonial days**

Next to the War Museum - everyone should see it, but don't expect to enjoy it.



**Captured US tank**



**Vinh Nghiem Pagoda**

Following that, the Pagoda, a very well maintained building with an enormous Buddha and



beautifully painted panels high on the walls depicting the origins of the Buddhist religion.

We economised on dinner - a noodle dish with either chicken (ga) or beef (bo) - at \$2/head. We included our driver who had patiently waited at each of our many stops, with the car cooled for us to return to each time.



**Vinh Nghiem Pagoda**



**People's Committee Building**

Crossing the road in Saigon for the first time is an experience not easily forgotten. Nothing actually stops for anything else. They weave around each other - the more traffic, the slower the weaving. The answer for pedestrians is to keep walking, and as each moving object approaches, keep walking very, very slowly. This way your speed (or lack of it) is known and the approaching object can weave around you at the appropriate micro-second.

**Wednesday 18 December - Ho Chi Minh City to Mekong Delta**

**Day 4**

Our mini-bus, with Que, her father and ourselves left at 8am, picking up Kay, Jock, Caroline on the way, dropping off more papers to the Australian Consulate and then setting off through Ho Chi Minh City's crowded streets to National Highway 1 (the only highway, running the full length of the country) and the Mekong Delta. The roadside houses become smaller and the roads less congested (well, it's all relative) as we move through villages and small farms on either side as far as the eye can see.

The Mekong Delta is the southern-most region of Vietnam, formed by sediment deposited from the Mekong River, which continues silting up the river at the rate of 70m a year.

The land is rich, with just on half the land under cultivation, predominantly rice with 3 crops a year. Other produce includes sugar cane, fruits and vegetables, coconuts and fish. The Mekong is one of the great rivers of the world and originates high in the Tibetan plateau, flowing 4500km through China, Laos, then Cambodia where it splits at

Phnom Penh, the lower branch flowing out to the sea at Can Tho and the upper branch splitting a number of times around Vinh Long, emptying into the South China sea at six different points. The Delta is a flood plain and many people build their houses on stilts or live on boats and all travel by boat.



On the 70km journey from Ho Chi Minh City to My Tho we pass through small villages such

as Tan An, where the houses are even closer together and closer to the road and fresh produce is offered on the road edge by everyone in the village. Through My Tho, a large and very crowded town where we will stay overnight on our return trip.



**Fishing for small fish in the rivers and canals**



Each house has a narrow boat for fishing (fish is the main food and any over is traded for other foods) and a small vegetable patch.



Lunch at Cao Lanh in an open air riverside cafe (beef noodle dish, large prawns and green vegetables) then into a small boat for a trip along the river and into canals built hundreds of years ago - many houses with very basic living - no water

or power. Large earthenware pots contain the water for each house, which must be carried from the river or well.

We come to a fork in the river, where we change boats, climbing, 2 or 3 to a boat, into even smaller and narrower wooden boats to move along tiny waterways dug through the dense jungle vegetation.



**Que demonstrates her skill in the shallow waters of the Mekong Delta**

This is where the Viet Cong Generals had their secret hiding place, very close to the American base, from which they organised the VC guerrilla attacks in the area. The Americans knew there had to be something nearby but could not find it hidden deep inside the thick vegetation. Around 4pm we return.



**Viet Cong Bunker**

Back on the bus and a further 70km on we cross the Mekong by ferry at Vinh Long - we



stayed in the bus, inaccessible to and greatly upsetting the postcard / pork bun / fermented drink / peanut toffee / etc sellers (they travel the 20 minutes backwards and forwards on the ferries all day, selling their goods). It was around 7pm and dark when we reached the Can Tho ferry, after a long wait with hundreds of other cars, trucks and motor bikes, where again we were offered all sorts of foods. We bought lychees and shared a pork bun bought by Jock.

We walked on board, but the bus and driver did not make it until two ferries later, then picked us up and to the Doan An Tuong hotel - large, clean rooms with two double beds, bathroom and airconditioning. As with each hotel we stayed at, we had to hand over our passports so that the staff could register our presence with the local police. Dinner at a nearby restaurant - beef soup with noodles, a fish and vegetable dish, rice and

other little fried and steamed morsels which Que expertly ordered.



Ferry at Vinh Long

## Recent Vietnamese History

In 1802 the first Nguyen Emperor had declared Vietnam united and Hue as the new capital city. Assistance for both sides came from many countries during the Tay Son Rebellion, including France which supported the Nguyen's in their bid for supremacy, however it was not until the 1840's that France began military activity in earnest, and over the ensuing years divided the country into three regions - Tonkin in the north, Annam in the centre and Cochinchina in the south, declaring each a colony of France.

From the late 1800's on, as the Vietnamese were increasingly taxed by France, many losing their land and starving to death, revolts and uprisings led to greater controls and harsher treatment by the French. The Emperors alternately fought and collaborated with the French as the people agitated for independence.

The rise of communism and activities of the Viet Minh - Vietnamese patriots and nationalists controlled by the communist party and Ho Chi Minh - led to the August Revolution in 1945. The Emperor Bao Dai (the last emperor) abdicated and went to France.

As a result of the carve-up of countries at the end of WW2 in 1945, China was given control of Vietnam north of the 16th parallel and Britain the south. When the British arrived in the south they found the French maintaining administrative control, which they did not actively oppose. But the Vietnamese became increasingly impatient with the French, leading to the Franco-Viet Minh war in 1946, and Ho and his forces fled to the mountains, where they masterminded the fighting for eight years, culminating in the French troops surrender to the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

The United Nations took over and, at the Geneva Conference, Vietnam was divided into north and south at the Seventeenth Parallel, with the US supported Ngo Dinh Diem heading up the south - a temporary measure, pending UN ordered nationwide elections.

After the signing of the Geneva Accord in 1954, Ngo Dinh Diem, the strong anti-communist leader of the south (with US support), believed that if the elections ordered by the UN are held, Ho Chi Minh would win, so he held a referendum on his continued rule, which he claimed to have won (there are serious doubts about the validity of the result). He declared himself President of the Republic of Vietnam, a position recognised by many Western countries including the USA, Great Britain, France and Australia. Diem (along with his sister-in-law, Madame Nhu) consolidated his position in the south, becoming increasingly tyrannical and alienating his supporters, to the point where, in 1963, he was overthrown and murdered in a US backed military coup.

In the north there was major rural unrest with the communist reforms, however Ho Chi Minh had the support of the people for the new National Liberation Front (known as the Viet Cong), established in the south to fight for the unification of Vietnam. Many of the former Viet Minh became Viet Cong, those in the north moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the south.

As the power of the government in the south decreased, the US increased aid, accepting, along with many Western countries, the domino theory of communist overthrow. In 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin incident (the US claimed an unprovoked attack by North Vietnam, later proved false) sparked US military action, starting at Danang. By 1967 there were 1.3 million personnel (mainly US, with other Western countries, including Australia) fighting the Viet Cong, who were proving a major challenge in the jungle terrain.

In 1968 the Tet Offensive began, with the North Vietnam Army and the Viet Cong launching an attack on over 100 cities. The action was shown on television around the world and public tolerance of Western involvement in the war suffered. There were major anti-war demonstrations in many countries and the US started to withdraw troops. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho negotiate in Paris, but it is not until 1973 that a cease-fire agreement is signed. China and Russia continue to supply arms to the north, while the US continues but at a decreasing level, to support the south.

By 1975 the north has overrun the south, culminating in the fall of Saigon, and in 1976 the formal re-unification is sealed with a government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Western countries refuse to establish trade or other relationships with the new government. In the late 1970's Vietnam aligns itself with Russia and attacks the Chinese backed Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, in retaliation for Cambodian attacks on the Vietnam border.

During this time many in the south who were seen as opponents of communism were sent to 're-education camps' There is also an increasing number of 'boat people', illegal emigrants who fear for their lives, heading for other countries.

### ***Thursday 19 December - Can Tho to Bac Lieu***

***Day 5***

8am departure for a boat trip on the Mekong River, a river crowded with small and large boats piled high with farm produce, building materials, fish and children. To the floating markets where each small boat had about 50kg of produce from the family's vegetable plot and fruit trees or products such as cane baskets made by the family.



Through the narrow canals in the mangrove swamps to a fruit orchard - the python snake was brought out for us to admire. The owner

offered us lunch, however Que checked the kitchen and commented that there was no food.



The owner responded that we should walk for a little longer in the orchard and he would catch the chicken which had just run past us and cook it for our lunch. The owner was somewhat put out when we declined with thanks.





**A room with a view**

We returned and walked through the Can Tho market - a vast range of very high quality fruits and vegetables, fish and shellfish, different grades of rice, fresh noodles, bundles of many types of fresh herbs, pork and a little beef.



**Everything travels by boat**

Lunch followed - asparagus soup, spicy king prawns and rice for 80c each. We tried the lemon (they are really little limes which are called lemons in Vietnam) juice and soda drink, which was very refreshing in the Delta humidity.

The air conditioning in our mini-bus had ceased to operate and the air was hot and humid, so we initiated some discussion with our driver, who seemed reluctant to have it repaired. Further discussion (following which he told Que, in Vietnamese of course, that he thought I was a difficult lady) and it was fixed quite quickly and so we set off for Bac Lieu down National Highway One, through Soc Trang.

A flat tyre on the way (with a spare that would not have passed even the most liberal of tests) did not delay us long as plenty of onlookers appeared and all assisted.

Bac Lieu is a country town struggling to survive amidst low employment, few public amenities and frequent floods, which destroy the crops.



**Our Hotel in Bac Lieu**

Our hotel (as far as we knew the only hotel, although we were later told that there may have been a new one built in another part of the town) was government owned and run and reflected the general feeling of despair.



**Kay and Jock's en-suite, looked good but it didn't work**

There had been no maintenance or cleaning carried out for years so no water from the showers or hand basins, some toilets flushed occasionally and we did not touch any surfaces if we could avoid them. However it was air-conditioned and had sleeping nets! We, with Kay and Jock, downed several strong whiskies & brandies, and Kay produced some peanuts.

All was not lost as we were then taken to a good, clean restaurant for the local specialty - a

superb fish in a spicy black bean sauce cooked over coals in a hot pot at the table.



**The local speciality, fish in black bean sauce**

We tried several other dishes - all just as good and were entertained by the diners at the next table who were singing and playing imaginary instruments - we applauded at all the right times (we think).



**French colonial buildings - riverside in Bac Lieu**

Then to Que's English teacher (up a dark and muddy lane in the pouring rain) where we had a great time talking with his current pupils, who spoke English very well, and the teacher, who was obviously very pleased with Que's accomplishments and appreciated the books on Australia which we presented to him.

**Friday 20 December - Bac Lieu**

**Day 6**



**Town centre- with 5am start loud speakers**

4.51am and the public radio, through loud speakers outside our windows, opens with a stirring anthem. Designed to be heard over several blocks, it is a very effective alarm clock if you need to, or want to wake at this hour. Next came exercise music, with counting in Vietnamese to assist you and after that the news of the day and community messages eg. AIDS, family planning (we had to take Que's word for this).

At 5.30am I make a cup of tea - the breakfast cafe across the street is full and the traffic going round the roundabout outside our window gets heavier and noisier. We are definitely at the heart of the CBD. A walk around the town,

purchase bread and apples for breakfast and then into our bus to see if we can find the house in which Que's family lived in previously. We did and have a photo to prove it.



**Que outside the family home when they lived in Bac Lieu**

The Mekong Delta was once part of the Khmer kingdom and was the last region of modern-day Vietnam to be annexed and settled by the Vietnamese. The Cambodians, mindful that they controlled the area until the 18th century, still call the Delta "Lower Cambodia" and the Khmer Rouge tried to follow up on this claim by making



night time raids on Vietnamese villages which led to the Vietnamese army invading Cambodia in 1979.

Into the bus to pick up Que's father, who stayed with his cousin in Bac Lieu overnight. We are invited in for morning tea (which included chocolate biscuits) and then back up the highway to the Xa Lon pagoda, 12km south of Soc Trang.



**Xa Lon Pagoda**

The Xa Lon pagoda is a classic Khmer pagoda built in 1923 on the site of a 200 year old wooden structure. It has been enlarged over the last few years as a result of donations.



**Inside Xa Lon Temple**

Over 20 monks reside there, one of them taking us around and explaining the significance of each area. The monks eat breakfast at 6am, beg until 11am, when they worship for one hour, lunch and study in the afternoon (no dinner). The teenage monks were busy chopping wood - lots of

laughter and not much chopping! In a shed nearby is their entrant for the dragon boat race, a magnificently decorated dragon boat.



A little further on is the bat pagoda, a pagoda with a colony of thousands of fruit bats which hang from the surrounding trees. Fortunately most of them were sleeping while we were there. We stop for a light lunch - fish hot pot with king prawns, cuttlefish, squid and fish, green vegetables and rice.



**View from the balcony at My Tho**

The rain drizzled as we made our way back across the two ferries and on to My Tho, where we stay at the Rang Dong Hotel. Spacious air-conditioned rooms, but our bathroom has a space and two bare wires where the hot water service should be. I request a move and we are upgraded to a suite, which runs across the front of the hotel on the second floor, with bedroom, bathroom and sitting room – air-conditioned and refrigerator for \$18. Even better is the wide balcony, with tables and chairs, outside our room, overlooking the river, where we set up drinks and nibbles.

A couple of drinks and going out for dinner seems like too much effort, so Que disappeared for a short while and next a lady carrying a basket appears and from the basket comes bowls of soup, then pork and rice dishes, plates, chopsticks and little dishes of fish sauce. We finish with the fruit - nashi, longan, rambutan, bananas, mango which

we have bought at the markets during the day, and coffee from the Russell coffee maker. Our lady reappears, gathers up all the dishes and the bill is

25,000 dong (\$2.50) for the six of us. We give her a good tip! 9pm and to bed.

## **Saturday 21 December - My Tho to Ho Chi Minh City**

**Day 7**



**Breakfast at My Tho**

Up at 6.30am and breakfast on the balcony overlooking the river. Que has organised a crusty bread loaf and two fried eggs each. We walk along the street to the market and shops, then to the departure point for boat tours. For \$US40 all seven of us head off for a 3 hour boat trip around the islands.



**Coconut Monk Sanctuary**

First to the island with the open air sanctuary of the Coconut Monk (because he ate only coconuts for three years?), a gaudy

conglomeration of dragon columns, twisted metal towers and animals in cages. He founded the Tinh Do Cu Si religious sect which was a mixture of Buddhism and Christianity.

There are temples and other signs of the many sects found in the Delta, including the Cao Dai (pronounced cow's eye), founded in the 1920's, unifying the teachings of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity, with a number of well known personalities as its' saints, including Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, Shakespeare and Sun Yat Sen.



**Que inspect the bees**

Next the narrow boat took us through jungle vegetation overhanging the stream, with small farms and huts along the banks, to a bee farm where we saw the bees in their hives and drank tea sweetened with honey and ate candied coconut.



**Schoolgirls crossing the bridge over the canal**



Morning tea is on another island - pineapple, papaya, bananas, longans and chinese tea, served by some of the family, while others played traditional Vietnamese instruments music. Back across the wide river, dodging the ferries taking cars and people from one side of the river to the other. To our hotel, pay the bill, (\$US85 for four rooms, breakfast and drinks for our "balcony-delivered" dinner.

Into the bus and off to the Cu Chi Tunnels, 100km away on the map, but this gives no indication of the total distance if you include our mini-bus travelling down one side of the pot-holes and up the other side.



The Cu Chi Tunnels are a 250km network of tunnels, only 40km from Saigon, built by the Viet Cong to co-ordinate their activities against America in the 1960's. Thousands of soldiers endured horrific conditions underground, which included living areas, kitchens, hospitals and weapons factories.



**Destroyed US tank**

When the Americans could make no impression on the area, they turned it into "the most bombed, shelled, gassed, defoliated and generally devastated area in the history of warfare". We lowered ourselves down into the very narrow, low passage and Caroline and Que's father made it to the second trapdoor, the rest of us escaping at the first exit trapdoor, after about 40 seconds. Very claustrophobic! The nearby museum has photos, a small scale model of the tunnels and a video with lots of noise and bombing.



**Que emerges from underground command centre**

Into our bus and back to Ho Chi Minh City where Kay, Jock and Caroline joined us for a superb dinner cooked by Que's mother and a friend.



**Who are the real Viet Cong?**

The written language in Vietnam was originally based on Chinese characters, however few people could actually write. By the 14th century the Nom system, which combined Chinese characters had developed, but still had little use. In 1624 Alexandre de Rhodes, a French Jesuit missionary, developed a Roman based script, called 'quoc ngu', which has been adopted as the

written form of the language. Each syllable is treated as a new word and there are six tones (designated by squiggles above or below a letter) which change the meaning of, and the way in which the word is pronounced.



**Ho Chi Minh City**



**Our staple diet**

**Sunday 22 December - Ho Chi Minh City to Dalat**

**Day 8**

Que's father stays home and her mother joins us for the trip north. Our mini-bus (with Mr Phuc, the driver) picks up Kay, Jock and Caroline at 8am, us at 8.30am and we are on our way to Dalat, up in the mountains and over 200km away. As it is Saturday there is a little less traffic, but it's all still relative!



**Floating fish farm**

Some 40km out of HCM we turn off Highway 1 (the coastal road) and on to Highway 20 (the mountain road). The road is continuously bordered by small shops, with many signs for hot toc (this one is easy - always in front of a shop with

antique barbers chairs or high stools and small mirrors) and xe may (men and small boys squatted on the ground - close examination showed bits of motor bike and oily rags. We then move into the rice paddies, some being planted, others with the rice being threshed in the little cubicles dotted around the fields or just placed on the road for the cars to do the same job, but with less human labour. Very colourful with the many coolie-hatted and brightly dressed workers (women).



**Rolling hills and tea plantations near Dalat**



We stop at the floating fish market - small houseboats with a fish farm contained in netting beneath each house. Lunch at Bao Loc, a small village on the side of a hill, overlooking the bright green rice paddies. Lunch was very good, but began with Caroline and I seeing a large rat run across the floor. She was very controlled but I let out an involuntary scream - I wouldn't say why until after we left the restaurant.

We were promised a tour of a tea factory here - and most of us saw the girls sitting on the floor in a pile of tea leaves in the corner of the kitchen - tea dust everywhere as they spooned it into bags. Kay was concentrating on the conditions under which our lunch was being cooked and finding the toilet as she walked through the kitchen. We had no sympathy when she complained later that we had not been taken on our tour. She promised to be more attentive in future.



**Dambri Falls**

We turn off the main road, bumping 15km to the Dambri Falls - at 90 metres they are the highest falls in Vietnam - very spectacular. Caroline, Jock and Jim walk right to the bottom - a long climb down and even longer up. (Que's mother and I made it three-quarters of the way down).

Through the Prenn Pass to Dalat where we try to stay at a smart looking mini-hotel overlooking the town, but they don't have a permit

to take foreigners - the police are very strict in Dalat.



**It is a long climb up the Prenn Pass with this load**



**The Europa, Dalat**

We move on to the Europa - our rooms are very comfortable, good hot showers, refrigerator and TV. (reception area on the ground floor alternates as the dining area and garage - our bus was driven in after dinner had finished and the breakfast tables were being set up as we departed).



**The local dress maker**

Dinner at a Lonely Planet recommended restaurant - the Thanh Thanh - chinese and at \$6/head quite expensive.

Dalat is just on 1500 metres up in the mountains and as such has a temperate environment with lakes, evergreen forests and gardens. It was used by the French as a holiday retreat when the coastal heat became too much for them. It was also famous for big game-hunting - 'deer, peacocks, pheasants, wild boar, panthers, tigers, gaurs and elephants' - but so successfully that they are all now non-existent in the area.

#### **Dalat's Eiffel Tower**



**Monday 23 December - Dalat to Nha Trang**

**Day 9**



**Jock and Caroline bargain for mangos**

Left at 7am for breakfast at the restaurant built over the Xuan Huong Lake, in the centre of the city - omelettes all round, coffee and crusty bread. The large windows on four sides of the restaurant overlook the park surrounds including one of the few golf courses in Vietnam.

Then to the Emperor Bao Dai's Summer Palace, a 25 room villa constructed in 1933 and has not been altered since then, despite the family using the building up to the mid 1950's when the Emperor moved to France. Emperor Bao Dai was the successor to his father, in 1925, when he was twelve years of age and at school in France.

He was the thirteenth and last ruler of the Nguyen Dynasty, coming to power at a time when Vietnam was under increasing pressure and influence as a result of two world wars and the rise of communism.



**Boa Dai's Summer Palace**

His power diminished and he was seen as a puppet ruler, finally leading to his abdication in 1945. The large rooms in the Summer Palace contain original furniture from the time of building and the grounds are colourful and carefully tended with a superb view from the hillside gardens.

On our way we passed the Hang Nga Guest House and Art Gallery - the 'Crazy House'. The owner has a doctorate in architecture from



Moscow and the building is a large concrete tree with hotel rooms built into the branches.



**Garden at Bao Dai's Summer Palace**

The concrete giraffe has a tearoom inside. Although it is regarded with displeasure by the local People's Committee, she has little trouble as her father, President Truong Chinh, was Ho Chi Minh's successor.



**The 'Crazy House' Dalat**

Continuing on Highway 20 out of Dalat we make our way over the Ngoan Muc Pass to 'Chicken Village'. The inhabitants belong to the Koho minority, one of over 60 minority groups, scattered throughout Vietnam, which continue to live their own lifestyle. The name Chicken Village comes from an outsize concrete statue of a chicken in the village centre which has several historical /

mythical stories attached to it - all equally unlikely. We buy some of the colourful tapestries on sale.



**Chicken Village**

On towards Phan Rang where Highway 20 meets Highway 1 and where we stop in the grounds of a pagoda to eat our bread, cheese, bananas and mangoes, bought at the market in Dalat.

Every region has its own food specialities in Vietnam and we are determined to try all of them. Every second shop or stall has the sign pho bo or pho ga, meaning the traditional noodle dish served at breakfast and lunch, noodles in a bowl of flavoured stock, with vegetables and chicken (ga) or beef (bo). A container of steamed rice is served with most meals, and each diner places some in their own bowl to eat with the other dishes of vegetables, seafood, chicken, duck, beef or other. Dog is raised for eating, but as it must be fed meat, it is dearer than other meats and therefore, as an expensive delicacy, is unlikely to be served without you knowing. It is also served in restaurants that specialise in dog meat (thit cho), clearly shown outside the restaurant.

The weather reports as we progressed were not good and our driver checked at several police stations and tourist offices. The rain in central Vietnam had been relentless over the past week and Highway 1 was cut off by floods. One report indicated that at least one car had been swept away by fast moving water on the road. We pressed on - as we got closer the indications were that the road was open but not good. These reports were right - stretches of poor road interspersed with pot-holes that motor bikes could disappear in. We rocked and swayed as our expert driver negotiated the water filled holes.

At one stage several small boys walked in front of our bus, through the running water, to indicate the shallowest holes in the road - we gladly paid them 200 dong each.

We passed through Cam Ranh Bay, a natural harbour some 60km north of Phan Rang. It was used by the Russians in the early 1900's, then the Japanese during WW2. In the 1960's the Americans constructed a base and after re-unification the Russians returned and made use of the extensive facilities. The Russians are still there in small numbers and say that they will pull out when Vietnam repays its financial debts to them. The Vietnamese are anxious to regain the base as they warily watch the Chinese continuing to claim more and more islands in the South China Sea.

We finally made it into Nha Trang - not that far if you just count the kilometres, but our

odometer would have shown much higher count than the road map (200km in 10 hours). Our hotel near the beach is excellent - very comfortable (cable TV and refrigerator) and quite new, with two large swimming pools, outdoor restaurant and theatre. (Vien Dong Hotel, \$38 less 20% discount).

Our driver recommended a seafood restaurant - we had two clay-pot BBQ's (griller over hot coals) on the table on which to grill our marinated tuna, giant king prawns, squid and beef, and a steam-boat (pan of boiling stock over hot coals) for cooking our green vegetables. A Bordeaux red for \$US9, Carlsberg beer, and we were set. \$40 for the eight of us (we took driver and mini-bus) for drinks and all we could eat.

## **Tuesday 24 December - Nha Trang**

**Day 10**

Met at 9am in hotel foyer - the Harknesses had already been for breakfast and a walk along the beach. We had planned a boat trip to the islands, but no boats have ventured out for ten days due to high winds, flooding rivers and rough water. So, into taxis and to the Oceanographic Institute - turtles, stingrays and other sea animals in tiled concrete pits. One building housed a 20m long whale skeleton, found 4km inland, which would have originally weighed around 100 tonnes.



**Outside the Oceanographic Institute**

We walked up the hill to the five Villas of the Emperor Bao Dai, built in the 1920's, which are on three hills overlooking the South China Sea - great views of the harbour. After his abdication the villas were used by high ranking officials of the South Vietnamese government, today tourists can rent a room for about \$40 a night (beyond our budget).

Next to the Hon Chong Promontory, high above the sea, with views of the mountains surrounding Nha Trang and the harbour. We

rested in deck chairs set on the edge of the cliff, drinking cool coconut juice in the shell.



**Coast at Nha Trang**

Off to downtown Nha Trang and lunch in a little open air restaurant - the Nha Trang specialty of do-it-yourself pork spring rolls with a spicy minced pork filling, fresh coriander (we washed this in the beer) and rolled in rounds of rice paper, then dipped in a sweet & sour sauce.

Most Vietnamese follow Buddhist religious practices, and many shrines are seen in homes and the open air as well as in the temples and pagodas. Four major religions have developed in Vietnam - Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity, although the teachings of the first two have intermingled with Buddhism over the years. There are many different Buddhist sects, each with influences from other countries such as India and China. There are a number of Christian churches, mainly Catholic, in several of the large cities.



We walked back to our hotel, coffee and farewells to Kay, Jock and Caroline as they headed for the airport and Hong Kong. We booked a front row table at the hotel open air restaurant-theatre for our Christmas eve celebrations.



#### Christmas Eve entertainment

Excellent - in fact Caroline would have called it a 'highlight'. Over dinner we were entertained with the music and dances of minority groups, traditional Vietnamese stringed instruments,

classical guitarist, a superb violin player, with a couple of Christmas carols thrown in.

Our meal (with a bottle of the Nha Trang local red - not one our better wine choices!) was beef and fish which we cooked on a clay-pot BBQ, steam-boat with vegetable and prawns, served with rice. A gift to each guest was a small cake with a piped pink rose and green leaves on top.

All up, this was 128,000 dong (\$12.80) for the four of us. As there were about eight musicians in the classical part of the show and eight to ten singers, dancers and musicians in the traditional section, then our contribution to each one must have been pretty meagre. Each table was decorated with a bowl of roses from the hotel rose garden. The Vietnamese have adopted the festivities of Christmas with enthusiasm - another day in which to decorate the town and have a party - although some of the interpretations of Father Christmas, decorated Christmas trees and the nativity scene are interesting to say the least.

### Wednesday 25 December CHRISTMAS DAY - Nha Trang

Day 11

It has rained during the night but stopped this morning. If the sun comes out it will be hot and steamy. We walk along the beach front, drink fresh orange juice at one of the beach cafes, then negotiate our boat trip. The haze is lifting as we make our way to the boat harbour where we find that our boat for four is 40-50 feet long and will take about 25 passengers. The four of us spread out on board.



We visit an outdoor aquarium with large turtles and fish waiting to be fed. Then a look at several islands - high cliffs where the swifts nest

and the nests are gathered as a gourmet delicacy after the swifts have finished with them. We anchor off another island - as we climb onto the raft taking us to the shore, we must choose the fish from the floating nets that we want for lunch.



#### Choosing the fish for lunch

It comes on the raft with us and while we eat crispy rice cakes one of the fish is in a steamboat with vegetables and the other two are crispy fried and all are served with a variety of sauces and rice, of course. Followed by fresh fruit for dessert, then a walk through the island village - houses, school, little shops.

On our return we are taken to our boat in bowl shaped boats - basket boats - made from woven bamboo strips covered in pitch - two passengers (who do some rowing) and two rowers to a basket. We sing 'row, row, row your boat'.



Back to Nha Trang at 3pm and a taxi to the pagoda - interesting but we are pestered by begging/postcard selling children.

Extravagant dinner with 'floor show' and a bottle of Bordeaux red (\$14). There are five of us (Binh, another AIDAB student who has visited us in Melbourne), from Nha Trang joined us for the evening) and we have lotus shoots and beef, sweet and sour pork, lemon chicken and a prawn and crab noodle dish, followed by fresh fruit. Another \$15 for the food.



We admire Binh's motorbike, then to bed.

## Cultural Notes

The 'floor show' was actually classical theatre (Hat Tuong, literally translated as 'songs with show dress'), depicting historical stories such as the wars against China and sad love tales. Classical theatre is based on Chinese opera with formal gestures, costumes and scenery. The cast establish their identities through readily identified make-up and dress - for example, red face paint represents courage and loyalty, while traitors and cruel characters have white faces. There is an accompanying orchestra of six musicians, dominated by the drum and including reed flutes, lithophones, gongs and stringed instruments made from gourds.

The story lines are well known to the audience - the revolt of the Trung sisters against the Chinese in 40AD, who, in the counter revolt three years later threw themselves into the river rather than surrender; the unfaithful lover, who, too late, returns to beg forgiveness; the hardships of peasant life and backbreaking task of planting rice. The costumes were superb, the singers excellent, and we, along with the rest of the audience, thoroughly enjoyed the show.

The Vietnamese people developed as a distinct ethnic group in the north (the Red River Delta) between 200BC and 200AD. During this time the inhabitants unsuccessfully resisted the efforts of China to move them from a hunter/fisher existence to domesticating beasts, using metal ploughs and irrigating the land. China ruled Vietnam up until 938AD, when, following a revolt by the Vietnamese, the two parties reached agreement on 'Vietnamese independence with Chinese sovereignty'. The Hindu Kingdom of Champa appeared in the centre of the country towards the end of the second century BC, while in the south, early in the first century AD, the Indianised Kingdom of Funan established itself, building a canal system for transport and irrigation. The northern Vietnamese people gradually extended south as the need for more rice growing land grew, reaching the Mekong Delta by the end of the first millennium.



We leave the hotel at 8.30am for a walk through the centre of Nha Trang and to visit the parents of a friend of Que (the friend is still in HCM with the other students trying to get their computers out of customs). We are served tea and chocolate biscuits, a treat as we have eaten few sweet foods. Mother does some shopping - sandals - and we wander in and out of the fascinating shops (we bought silk sleeping bag inner sheets for \$11; \$50 in Melbourne).

At 11am a taxi to the airport, which turns out to be four minutes away. We eat our leftover mangoes and bananas while waiting for the plane. Mother has never flown before so Que gives a rundown on the safety demonstration - all in vain as there is no demonstration on the plane. We are served lunch on board - tomato juice, 7-UP or coke and half a sandwich. Only foreigners are offered sandwiches, so we feel better about having to pay twice as much for the same plane trip as Que and her mother.

Our car is waiting at Danang Airport, ready to take us the 30km to Hoi An (\$US15). On the way we visit Marble Mountains where we spend about an hour climbing to the top (Mother and I) and the very top (Que and Jim) for spectacular views which would be even better if the haze lifted.



**On top of Marble Mountain**

The Marble Mountains are five hills formed from marble. Each is said to represent one of the five elements of the universe - water, wood, fire, metal and earth. The largest hill (water) has natural caves in which Buddhist sanctuaries have been built over the years, and when the Champa ruled the area they used them as Hindu shrines.

It was very dark at the entrance to the main cave (my pen torch was very useful at this stage) and opened to a large area with a giant Buddha. Next to China Beach, the place where the US military

were flown by helicopter for R & R - an ordinary beach which you pay 5000 dong (50c) to look at.



**Our hotel at Hoi An**

Our hotel (Phu Thinh Mini) is a narrow building in a narrow street - quite adequate with good plumbing, refrigerator and airconditioner (\$US25).

Hoi An streets are narrow with very pretty and very old houses and shops. Cars are banned in certain parts of the city and all renovations and building are under the control of the local government historic authority. We walk to the river one street away and along to a floating restaurant.



**Dinner at the floating restaurant**

Dinner is extravagant - boned duck, prawns with vegetables, pork spare ribs in spicy sauce, a whole large fish, crispy fried, mixed green vegetables and rice. Jim has two bottles of beer and the whole lot comes to \$9.90 - we make it \$10 and they are delighted.

Wander back through shops selling paintings, ceramics - many of which appear to be quite old, including crazed willow pattern plates, and table linen. We see a tourist agency so



organise our car and driver for journey to Hue (\$24). Ask at hotel about renting bicycles - we check them as they are parked out the front - they turn out to be the hotel workers bikes, so for us, 50c each for the day - its' a deal. Cup of tea and bed.

Hoi An was a major trading port for merchant ships from many countries, between the

15th and 18th centuries, trading products such as silk, ceramics, sugar, paper, tea, molasses, elephant tusks, beeswax, mother-of-pearl, lacquer and spices. The city has an old world look about it and parts of it are, we are told, just as they were a century ago - according to the Lonely Planet Guide, 844 structures of historical significance have, so far, been officially identified in Hoi An.

## **Friday 27 December - Hoi An to Hue**

**Day 13**

Do not stay at the Phu Thinh Mini Hotel if you come to Hoi An - a squash court adjoins our room and play starts around 5am. The hotel has our bicycles ready and we head off to the tourist agency where the ticket for all attractions is a package deal. We pass through the Japanese covered bridge, first constructed in 1593 by the Japanese community to link their part of the city with that of the Chinese. It is very solidly built, with a small temple built into one side.

First stop is the house of one of the original Chinese mandarins (the Vietnamese ambassador to China) - 200 years old and the family still live there and show you the house and talk about the role of the ambassador and the way in which the ancestors are remembered each year on the anniversary of their death. We are served tea and delicious crystallised cumquats. We buy several things - drawings on rice paper, cinnamon pot, inlay box.



**Quan Cong Temple**

Then on to Hoi An Museum, the Quan Cong Temple and the Tan Ky house, the latter built some 200 years ago by a wealthy merchant. Very interesting discussion with the elderly couple who are the fifth generation of the family to live in the house. Their son (6th generation) has PhD. in linguistics from University of Sydney and teaches at Danang University for \$US50/month. The house is beautifully maintained, however they showed us

the flood level of one month ago - about 1.5m waterline on living room wall.



**Kan Ty House**

Lunch at noodle house overlooking the river - specialty of the region with thin crisp rice paper which you break up into the noodles, bean shoots, onions and other herbs, meats and broth.



**Hoi An Cyclist**

Back to the hotel, hand over our bikes and we are picked up to go to Hue (Que negotiated the deal for a car, however a mini-bus appears so the four of us spread around the 12 seats with our feet up all the way)



**Danang**

We go back through Danang, stopping at the major attraction, the Cham Museum. It was established in 1915 by the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient and has the finest collection of Cham sculpture in existence. It was around this area in the 2nd century AD that the Hindu Kingdom of Champa, with its Indian influences, developed and as Champa civilization declined with its increased feuding the more formal Khmer influence became apparent in the culture. The museums sculptures, dating from the 7th to the 15th centuries, were mainly discovered around Danang, particularly at My Son. A recurring image in Cham art is that of Uroja who was believed to have given birth to the dynasties that ruled Champa.



**Cham Sculpture**

The sandstone carvings in the museum include altars, lingas, garudas, ganeshas and images of Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu.



**Hai Van Pass**

We move on up Highway 1 towards the Truong Son Mountain Range and up over the 1172m Hai Van Pass, with spectacular views towards the sea and inland. In the 15th century Hai Van Pass formed the boundary between Vietnam and the Kingdom of Champa. Another couple of hours through superb scenery and we pull into Hue.



**The Thanh Noi Hotel - Hue**

To our hotel - the Thanh Noi, next to the Imperial City on the 'old city' side of the river. Walked to Que's friends home (father has a traditional Chinese herbal shop which is the front of the building) and then to noodle shop for dinner - Jim's shout which comes to \$5 for the six of us including drinks. Walk back to our hotel.

**Saturday 28 December - Hue**

**Day 14**

Awoke early for 8am departure in car to Perfume River Boat trip (\$US13 for 8am to 3.30pm). We have a boat to ourselves so can decide how long we want to stay in any one place.

First stop is Chinese Buddhist Temple - old building high on waterfront. Our boat has a family on board - mother, father, 3 year old and 10 week old baby in a rattan cradle hanging from the roof.





**Our boat on the Perfume River - Hue**

Next stop is Minh Mang Tombs - large, highly stylised buildings (such as the Fresh Air Pavilion), terraces and lakes (the Lake of Impeccable Clarity, the crescent shaped Lake of the New Moon) where Emperor Minh Mang (1820 to 1840) and the second of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors, was buried.



**Minh Mang Tombs**



**Lake at Minh Mang Tombs**

Following independence from China in 938AD, a series of Dynasties, each overthrowing the previous, ruled Vietnam. By 1545 the country was divided into north (led by the Trinh Lords) and south (led by the Nguyen Lords), two factions which fought right through the 17th and 18th centuries until a rebellion started by the Tay Son brothers in 1771. The Tay Son Rebellion lasted

until 1802 when the Nguyen Dynasty established itself as ruler over the whole country (the first unification), beginning a new line of emperors, some of whom were still children when they succeeded their father.

Emperors' burial tombs covered many hectares, and were elaborate buildings and gardens, each taking years to build by hundreds of thousands of workers (who were often killed on completion for fear that they would divulge the location of the treasures). Most of the tombs have now disappeared, as a result of looting, destruction by war or use of the stone and other materials for new buildings and certainly all the treasures buried with each emperor have vanished.

We ate a very good lunch (50c noodle dish) at a little village across the river. Back along river and the humidity reached the stage where it was raining.



**Thien Mu Pagoda**

Our next stop was the Thien Mu Pagoda, the largest in Vietnam. It is a 21 metre, seven storey high octagonal tower. As we stopped to shelter under very pretty creeper, a monk appeared, talked to us for a few minutes (his english was good), then invited us in for tea, which we accepted. A very interesting person - he is the teacher for all the novice monks, who are around 16 years old, and he has a large room - bed, table, chairs, blackboard - quite well furnished. He told us of his work at the monastery and of his friends around the world who have visited the pagoda. Farewelled him, back on our boat and we return to the hotel.





**Cyclos to dinner**

We negotiate a deal with three cyclo drivers at the hotel gate - for 30,000 dong (\$3) each they will take us around the town, wait while we have dinner and then bring us back - Jim and I in a cyclo each, Que and mother in the third. Around the back streets, over the bridge (in peak hour traffic) and our cyclo drivers give us a tour of the city.

We watch a Christmas rehearsal of 8-10 year olds dance and sing Jingle Bells in the Catholic Cathedral. The performance is the next

day and they have quite a way to go before any of them are doing remotely the same thing, at the same time, as their neighbour.



**Rehearsal for Christmas Pageant**

Across the way to the restaurant for king prawns, fish steam-boat, green vegetables, spring rolls, spicy chicken and beef in sauce, all with a bottle of \$8 Bordeaux red (the same one we paid \$14 for in Hoi An) - 220,000 dong in total. Back in our cyclos and across the old bridge - bikes and pedestrians only. To our hotel and the drivers are delighted with 100,000 dong between the three of them.

## ***Sunday 29 December - Hue to Hanoi***

***Day 15***

Que's friends call for us at 8am and we walk to the nearby Imperial City. It is part of the Citadel, which began in 1804, and is a large walled area chosen according to the ancient Chinese rules of geomancy or harmonic balance with nature. It consists of 3 concentric circles - the common peoples' city, the mandarin city and in the centre the Imperial City containing the Forbidden Purple City or royal palace.



**Imperial City**

Within the area are a number of buildings including the royal residences, the royal kitchen, the king's library, the royal kitchen, the Palace of Supreme Harmony used for official receptions, the halls of the Mandarins and the Forbidden Purple City for the personal use of the emperor.



**Entrance to the Imperial City**

Surrounding the buildings are several lakes and gardens, with the remnants of tiles

showing on the open paths. There is the 37 metre Flag Tower, the nine holy cannons which are symbolic protectors of the palace and the Noontime Gate where the Emperor appeared on important occasions, The whole area is surrounded by a moat, with steep sides and a number of highly ornate buildings, which act as Gates, in the high stone walls.



**Que, her mother and friends at the Imperial City - Hue**

Considerable work is being carried out to rebuild the fallen buildings, mainly through UN projects funded by various countries. The Noontime Gate, which overlooks the Flag Tower and the Imperial City, has displays of the work being carried out and the donor countries.

When we get back to the hotel it has been transformed into a wedding reception venue. We pay the bill (with difficulty as hotel desk is now in the middle of the wedding celebrations) and a taxi arrives to take us to the train station. Que and mother buy bananas, bread and cans of drink for our 16 hour train journey to Hanoi.

We board the train and are shown to our four berth 'soft sleeper' compartment. Two stops before nightfall, with many food sellers on the station at each stop - 'hard & soft seat' passengers evidently don't get a meal supplied as all the action is at the other end of the train. We pass through paddy fields with 'buffalo power', acres and acres of red river gum trees and lots of villages right on the train line.

Dinner is served to us in our cabin - we are each given a tray with numerous compartments holding a variety of foods - Jim's and mine have

soggy chips, chicken pieces in a spicy sauce, rice, soup and a cold hardboiled egg.



Que and mother (remember, as locals, they are paying half our fare) have green vegetables instead of chips and a meat dish instead of the hardboiled egg. Que likes the sound of chips and her green vegetables look good to me, so we pool resources and get what we want. This is served with bottles of spring water or tea and a strawberry cream wafer biscuit, which we eat for dessert.



**Traveller on the Reunification Express**

It is quite dark by 6pm - the smooth track giving a comfortable ride as we settle down in our beds and speed through the night. Facilities are not as bad as we had been led to believe - the toilets are many times cleaner than on the Chinese trains in 1978.

**Monday 30 December - Hanoi**

**Day 16**

The train pulls in at 5.45am and it is still dark. 15 minutes before arrival time the conductor

gives us a wake-up call and turns on our light. Out of the train and into a taxi and five minutes later we



are at the Bac Nam Hotel (recommended by Kay and Jock) where they have two rooms which open onto the balcony area. Hot showers, washing done and hung out, and off for a walk around the town and along the Hoan Kiem Lake or Lake of the Restored Sword



**Hoan Kiem Lake or Lake of the Restored Sword**

Back to hotel, past the fancy Sofitel Metropole (over \$US200 a night), new office buildings and many old French buildings, some magnificently restored, other crumbling with decay. Hanoi is not as frantic as HCM city, with fewer cars. We explore street markets quarter of the city, where we buy small, crusty loaves of bread to eat, with our Laughing Cow cheese, by the lake.

At 2pm a taxi to the QBE office (Que is to sign her employment contract) where we meet the manager, Peter Hemphill and staff. We have coffee and are shown over the five storey building in which he lives and works - new and well-appointed building with roof top area overlooking the surrounds. Staff are very pleasant and welcoming - a very friendly atmosphere. He offers QBE's four wheel drive and driver, but we have decided to return by cyclo and see the sights on this side of town.



We hail three cyclos, the drivers agree on 20,000 dong for an hour's ride and we set off for the West Lake.



Through the old quarter with street markets and little shops, finishing back at the hotel.

A good tip as they safely negotiated us through the peak hour traffic, up hills and down narrow lanes. Excellent dinner at the Bac Nam - crab soup, green vegetables, pork with shallots, fish sweet and sour, followed by creme caramel. A bottle of French riesling to celebrate Que's new job.

## Legend of the Lake of the Restored Sword

The 15th century warrior king, Le Loi, was loaned the magic sword by a turtle who inhabits the lake - Le Loi used the sword to defeat the Chinese Army and then he established the longest Dynasty in Vietnam's history - mean while the turtle took back the sword.

**Tuesday 31 December - Hanoi to Ha Long Bay**

**Day 17**

Our tour bus for our 2 day trip to Ha Long Bay picks us up at 7.30am. We have packed an overnight bag each (the hotel will look after our other bags) and breakfasted in the foyer of the

hotel on french bread, fried eggs and freshly squeezed orange juice. We are near the end of the pick-up line so most other travellers are on the mini-bus when it reaches us and we head for



Highway 5 through densely packed bicycles, motor cycles, construction trucks (Highway 5 is in the process of being widened) and pedestrians.



**Ha Long Bay**

The trip is just on six hours - we have the front seat (down the back is pretty cramped and there are few springs in the seats), however we quickly understand why these seats are vacant - a far too good a view of the oncoming traffic headed straight for us, the animals wandering on the road and deep pot holes which we avoid by switching to the other side of the road into the oncoming traffic. Our bus stops suddenly, the driver crawls underneath and then gets out the tools. We are assured that there is nothing wrong, he is just tightening up the transmission.



**Sunset over Ha Long Bay**

Under way again - villages, rice paddies, miles of vegetables - onions, beans, sweet corn and others we do not recognise. One part of the highway is completed - it is a dual road with one section for cars, trucks and motor cycles and

another for bicycles, farm carts and animals - a disaster as no one takes any notice of the section designed for them and the cars and trucks take it as an invitation to double their speed. No emergency service will have any hope of getting to anyone injured. We see three large trucks and a car which have gone off the road and into ditches (over the last few minutes as onlookers are still gathering in each case), one into a deep pond.



**Island in Ha Long Bay**

The new section of the highway is marked by broken windscreen glass and tyre marks - pedestrians, bicycles, buffalo, cows and ducks still cross without warning (gaps are left at regular intervals for them to do so), with no perception of the increased speed of the vehicles.

We check into our hotel - very basic/no frills but quite clean bedroom & bathroom. For our \$48 each we get the return trip, hotel accommodation, all meals and two half-day boat trips. Lunch at a restaurant - omelette, cabbage with ginger and tomato, pork spring rolls, rice and fresh oranges - very good.

Into bus and to our boat - a well-appointed large wooden boat which took us around the islands and to some very slippery, dark caves, with a large combination stalagmite/stalactite formation in one of the chambers which played different notes depending on where it was tapped along its length.

Ha Long Bay is in the Gulf of Tonkin, with some 3,000 tiny island mounds jutting out of the water. The name Ha Long means 'where the dragon descends into the sea'. The legend has it

that the islands were created by a great dragon who lived in the mountains.



**Limestone cave on an island in Ha Long Bay**

As it ran toward the coast, its flailing tail gouged out valleys and crevasses and as it plunged into the sea, these filled with water, leaving many small, high spots to form the islands.

The sun goes down as we weave our way between the islands, forming dark shadows and bright golden streaks across the water - quite spectacular. It is dark by the time we return (around 6pm). Dinner at a restaurant - crab soup, a whole crispy fried fish each, superbly cooked very fresh green beans with spicy beef and another vegetable dish which was like celeriac. Walked back to our nearby hotel and to bed.

**Wednesday 1 January 1997- Ha Long Bay to Hanoi**

**Day 18**

The day (and the year) starts with breakfast on board our boat at 7am - baguette and two Laughing Cow cheese each, a banana and tea or coffee. We are taken on a different route through the islands - small boats come alongside selling fish and coral, but nobody buys (the fish because we can't cook it and the coral because no-one wants to encourage people to take coral from the reef).



**Seafood sellers on Ha Long Bay**

Back through the harbour - the weather is quite different in the morning - hazy, cool breeze, whereas yesterday, as most afternoons, the sun is

out and has dried out the humid haze. A little further out in the bay we can see Cat Ba Island, about half of which is a national park. Tour boats will take you there, but not from Ha Long as it is in a different province and the rival sea police units do not allow boundary crossings. Some of the Cat Ba tour boats allow the tourists to sleep on board (although this is now illegal), however there are recent and frequent episodes of 'pirates' coming aboard and stealing bags and valuables during the night.



**Morning mist on Ha Long Bay**

On the bus and to lunch - bean shoots and beef, fried tofu cubes, water spinach, fried prawns and fresh fruit. On the bus for the return journey to Hanoi for another exciting ride. We gallantly give our seats to a couple who thought they had a bad time with cramped seats at the back - at the first stop they said they thought we seemed such nice, generous people at the time, but now know why we gave them the seats! The bus should have been retired about six years ago.



We hurtle down the centre of the road with bicycles, motor cycles, pedestrians, chickens, ducks, buffalo and playing children all around us.

The tour guide is useless - slept all the time so all the people in our tour relied on Que for information - she was in great demand and very popular. We had an interesting group - two Canadian girls (students); a young Californian couple who had spent 18 months teaching English in Thailand; an Italian lady who worked as an accountant in London (she owned a house in Hammersmith and always advertised for aussies or kiwis as boarders); a chef from Bendigo; a very unpleasant French couple; a 71 year old Vietnamese lady who had left 17 years ago to live with her children in France when her husband died and was returning, with her teenage granddaughter, for the first time (she was very upset at the changes in Vietnam she was seeing); a student at Deakin University who was born in Vanuatu of Vietnamese parents and spoke English, French, Vietnamese and Spanish; and two Japanese

students, one of whom had just worked for 12 months on an organic vegetable farm in Margaret River, WA. The chef, Que's mother and ourselves were the only mono-lingual speakers in the group.

Back at the Bac Nam at 6pm and we discover our first (and only) drawback with the Bac Nam - no hot water in the evening and we and all our clothes are thickly coated with red river delta mud. We made good use of the large bucket in our bathroom, sloshing water over each other and our clothes.

We went to dinner at the flash upstairs restaurant next door - by far our most expensive meal at \$35 for the four of us. It started with drinks, peanuts and cornichons, then duck with ten ingredients (delicious), water spinach with ginger and onion, rice and a grilled prawn each (they were \$4.50 each and worth every cent - they were the size of a small lobster but probably with more flesh) Finished with coffee and walked the ten paces to our hotel.

## Historical Note

After the signing of the Geneva Accord in 1954, Ngo Dinh Diem, the strong anti-communist leader of the south (with US support), believed that if the elections ordered by the UN were held, Ho Chi Minh would win, so he held a referendum on his continued rule, which he claimed to have won (there are serious doubts about the validity of the result). He declared himself President of the Republic of Vietnam, a position recognised by many Western countries, including the USA, Great Britain, France and Australia. Diem (along with his sister-in-law, Madame Nhu) consolidated his position in the south, becoming increasingly tyrannical and alienating his supporters, to the point where, in 1963, he was overthrown and murdered in a US backed military coup.

In the north there was major unrest with the communist reforms, however Ho Chi Minh had the support of the people for the new National Liberation Front (known as the Viet Cong), established in the south to fight for the unification of Vietnam. Many of the former Viet Minh became Viet Cong, those in the north moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the south.

**Thursday 2 January - Hanoi**

**Day 19**

At 8.30am we are all running a little slower than usual, but stagger down to the foyer for a bowl of pho - a large bowl of chicken, spring onions, fresh noodles and lots of tasty bits in a spicy chicken broth - excellent for starting the day.

We walk to the Water Puppet Theatre nearby - tickets for Friday night 8pm. Then set off through the shops to the Ho Chi Minh museum - very well presented - many modern, aesthetically impressive representations of the wars, Ho Chi Minh's early life, his deeds and sayings (no cameras). The mausoleum, with Ho's preserved

body, is not open today, so we will visit on Saturday prior to our departure.

Then to the Temple of Literature (Van Mieu), founded in 1070 and dedicated to Confucius in order to honour scholars and men of literary accomplishment. Vietnam's first university was established here in 1076 to educate the sons of mandarins. Stelae (inscribed stone tablets) record those who received doctorates in each triennial examination, beginning in 1442.



**Ho Chi Minh Museum**



**Temple of Literature**

The Temple has been very well maintained and restored. It consists of five courtyards, divided by stone walls.



**Elderly gentleman at the Temple of Literature**

The central pathways were reserved for the use of the king, those on one side for the administrative mandarins and on the other side for the military mandarins. Throughout each of the buildings are original artefacts and documents from over the centuries.

We walked to the West Lake - a large lake once ringed with palaces and pavilions, but now

considered ideal for joint venture hotel developments! - where we watched rod fishing, deciding that we would not eat any fish which comes out of this very polluted lake. Walked 'til we dropped, then saved by two cyclo drivers, although Que's mother quibbled over the price - \$2 for the two cyclo's back to hotel (we thought it the bargain of the day) and we came back through the peak hour traffic in style.



**Streets of Hanoi**

In the enthusiasm to embrace communism and a socialist economy throughout Vietnam, the farm collective movement was developed, along with other state enterprises. The incentive to work was lost, corruption was rife and the morale of workers plummeted. In the 1980's the profit incentive was re-introduced and by the 1990's Vietnam had embarked on a policy of doi moi, or economic renovation to create a market economy and save the country from bankruptcy. Other countries gradually lifted their trade embargos, the US being the last in 1994.



**Hanoi Cathedral**

A brandy and then cyclos to the Hue Restaurant where we eat the specialties of Hue - pancake with green vegetables which you wrap in rice paper and dip in a peanut sauce, little spicy minced beef patties wrapped in water spinach



leaves, grilled minced pork on skewers wrapped in rice paper. We have been reasonably careful about what we eat and drink. We have boiled all our water, using our jug and electric element, drinking crown sealed bottle drinks, no ice (we saw an ice making plant with the water being pumped straight out of the river!). No uncooked green vegetables - we order a steamboat with boiling

stock over hot coals and cook the greens at the table. Similarly, the hot coals BBQ claypot on the table for cooking marinated meat and fish (especially the delicious tuna and king prawns).

Que and mother leave us to visit Nam's aunt, and we walk back to the Bac Nam.

**Friday 3 January - Hanoi**

**Day 20**

A rest morning - we did not leave the hotel until 10am, then walked through the streets of the old quarter, looking at the wares for sale. Each street is named for the goods the shops sell - shoe street, hat street, tin street (buckets, cake tins, saucepans). Through a fresh food market (saw roast dog being carved). Superb seafood - crabs, prawns, squid, cuttlefish, large snail like shell fish, frogs, 8 - 20lb. fish. Had bread and cheese for morning tea, then coconut drink and pork in banana leaf for lunch.



**Market Stalls**



To hotel for a short rest then to museum for a look at the history of Vietnam. The exhibits included artefacts from Vietnam's pre-history and from the 1st and 2nd centuries BC through the 15th century Kingdom of Champa and on to the struggles against French and the history of the

Communist Party. Some interesting exhibits - paintings, tools, sculptures and household items as well as many copies of original artefacts.



**Funeral Wreaths in the Market**

To dinner at the Cha Ca La Vong Restaurant - they only serve one dish, so no need to order - fish cooked in brazier at the table and you add fresh coriander, spring onion and other greens to boil in the hotpot. Served with fresh noodles and fish sauce.



**Water Puppets**

Our cyclos waited while we ate then took us to the Water Puppet Theatre. A bit early so we went to a restaurant overlooking the Lake of the Restored Sword for mango icecreams.

To the Water Puppet Theatre and an excellent show with musicians playing Vietnamese

instruments and the highly coloured water puppets acting out the traditional Vietnamese stories. Walked back to hotel, tea/coffee and bed.

### **Saturday 4 January - Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City**

**Day 21**

Leave hotel at 8am for HCM mausoleum in cyclos organised by Que. They will wait for us and bring us back. No waiting at the mausoleum, we walked straight in, through the central chamber with a very impressive use of marble where Uncle Ho is well illuminated in a glass case. Out the other side and into the large grounds of the magnificent government building (French built and very well maintained) to view HCM's house on stilts - polished timber throughout and his clock and hat in perspex boxes. Round a small lake, surrounded by laden fruit trees and you are out into the wide streets surrounding the museum and mausoleum, where are cyclo driver is waiting.



**Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum**

Back through the street markets and shops, with life being lived on the footpath. We have saved all the dust and dirt on our shoes for this occasion. We stand outside the Bac Nam, waiting for the inevitable post-card sellers and shoe-shine boys - sure enough and he wants 70,000 dong (70c) - he gets the job, me first then Jim, while we sit on the Hotel Commissionaire's chair on the footpath.



**Government Building**



**Goodbye to Que and her mother**

Que and mother arrive back and then load themselves and their luggage onto the two motor bikes - they are being collected by Que's brother's in-laws to go and meet the family. A taxi to the airport (\$US22) and although we were assured we were direct to Melbourne, we head for HCM city (a delicious lunch of salad, prawns and noodles) unload, wait an hour, reload and take off at 7.10pm, only 30 minutes late, which is evidently pretty good.



Slept/dozed most of the night, although it was pretty noisy (my Hercules earplugs were very useful) and some didn't seem to understand what 'no smoking' meant. Into Melbourne at 7am,

through customs and then bags thoroughly sniffed by the quarantine beagle - he found one family with their pet canary in the hand luggage.





