



Vietnam Travel Research

Sherry McCampbell – Aug 2023

1 2023 Travel Requirements (US Passport)

1.1 Vietnam

Travelers need a visa to visit Vietnam for Business or Tourism. An eVisa is the fastest and easiest way of obtaining a visa for Vietnam because travelers can submit their application and supporting documents online. Once the application is approved, travelers receive their eVisa confirmation electronically. A valid visa is required to board the flight. If the visa is expired or doesn't match the traveler's passport information, travelers will not be able to board their flight.

[Apply online](#)

For full details and exemptions, see [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam](#)

Currently no vaccine required, no pre-arrival test, and no quarantine. (Aug 2023)

Someone else recommended this visa company: www.visavietnam.net.vn

The total Vietnam visa cost for Visa on Arrival Vietnam (service fee + stamping fee) would be somewhat like - 1 month single entry: 12 + 25 USD= 37 USD.

Service fee is the cost which you would be paying online as you submit the visa application form. This is the charge needed to grant the Vietnam visa approved letter from the Immigration Department.

The stamping fee is the charge which you would be paying directly to Immigration outlet at the Vietnam international airport on your arrival. The fee involves the charge for your Vietnam visa on Arrival print-out and the approval stamp on your passport from the Immigration department. The standard stamping fee for single entry (both for 1 month & 3 months) is around 25 USD.

1.2 Tour companies

Recommended by various people:

GAdventures: <https://www.gadventures.com/>

Hanoi Green Tour: <https://hngreentour.com/>

Hanoi Voyages: <https://hanoivoyages.com/>

1.3 Laos

<https://laoevisa.gov.la/index> \$50 USD per person, apply online, approval within 3 business days

2 Proposed Trip – Aug 22 to Sep 6

Fri Aug 15 - Bus to KL (Ipoh flights require an overnight in Spore), overnight near airport in KL (\$50)

Sat Aug 16 - KL to Luang Prabang Laos, Air Asia via Bangkok (500 MYR/\$111 USD one way pp)

8:20am – 2:05pm **BOOKED**

Stay in Luang Prabang for Sat, Sun, Mon, Leave Tue ?

Tue Aug 22 – Fly to Hanoi (500 MYR/\$111 USD one way pp) Air Asia via Bangkok 14:35 pm to 8:20 pm

Or Lao Airlines – 12:25 pm to 15:30 pm \$165 pp

See G-Adventures details about getting into the city after arriving.

Wed Aug 23 – Day tour Hanoi & Overnight Train to Sapa

<https://www.chapaexpresstrain.com.vn/>

Thurs/Fri – Sapa / Fanispan Peak / Back to Hanoi early evening

Sat Aug 26 - Meet GAdventures Tour early evening

Tour Sat Aug 26 to 04 Sep - \$920 pp

04-Sep to 07-Sep More Saigon? Possibles: Bike tour of the city, visit the Reunification Palace, Thien Hau, or the Giac Vien pagodas, Mekong Delta visit, boat ride, War Remnants Museum, Colonial Quarter, or Ben Thanh Market

\$150 budget for 3 nights in hotel plus food.

06 Sep Fly back to Ipoh via Sing 8:55 – 4:20 (3.5 hrs Sing) ~\$155 USD pp18

Grab to Marina - (10 days to prep for trip home)

Notes from Tudor

Hotel de la Coupole – Sapa <https://www.hoteldelacoupole.com/>

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=lloyd+and+mandy+vietnam

Food Ranger

3 GAdventures Tour

<https://www.gadventures.com/trips/classic-vietnam-hanoi-to-ho-chi-minh-city/4330/itinerary>

3.1 Day 1 - Hanoi

Arrive at any time, meet with tour director and group (usually early evening)

3.2 Day 2 - Ha Long Bay Cruise (Overnight)

Enjoy a Ha Long Bay cruise on a junk boat with visits to a cave and an island lookout. Savour a seafood lunch and dinner.

3.3 Day 3 - Ha Long to Hué (Overnight Train)

Enjoy breakfast and lunch on board before sailing back to the port and return to Hanoi. Enjoy some time in the city before an overnight train to Hue.

3.4 Day 4 - Hué

Guided tour of the Imperial Citadel, Royal Tomb and Tien Mu Pagoda.

3.5 Day 5 - Hué to Hoi An (Near Danang)

Drive the Hai Van pass. Take advantage of Hoi An's many options over the 2.5 days in town. Opt for a cooking class, riverboat trip, bike ride, beach time, tailor visit or My Son ruins.



Day 6 - Hoi An - Explore all Hoi An has to offer. Dive into the culture, hang out on the beach or get clothes tailor-made in one of the many shops around town. Enjoy a noodle making demonstration and lunch at Oodles of Noodles, a G Adventures-supported project.

Exclusive Inclusions: Your G for Good Moment Oodles of Noodles

Day 7 - Hoi An - Spend a free day exploring all Hoi An has to offer.

3.6 Day 8 – Fly Hoi An to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

Fly from Hoi An to Ho Chi Minh City with free time to explore this hectic city.

Day 9 - Ho Chi Minh City - Enjoy a guided tour of the Cu Chi Tunnels and learn more about the Vietnam War. Use free time in the afternoon to explore sprawling Ho Chi Minh City.

Meals included: Breakfast

3.7 Day 10 - Ho Chi Minh City (End of Tour)

Leave anytime.

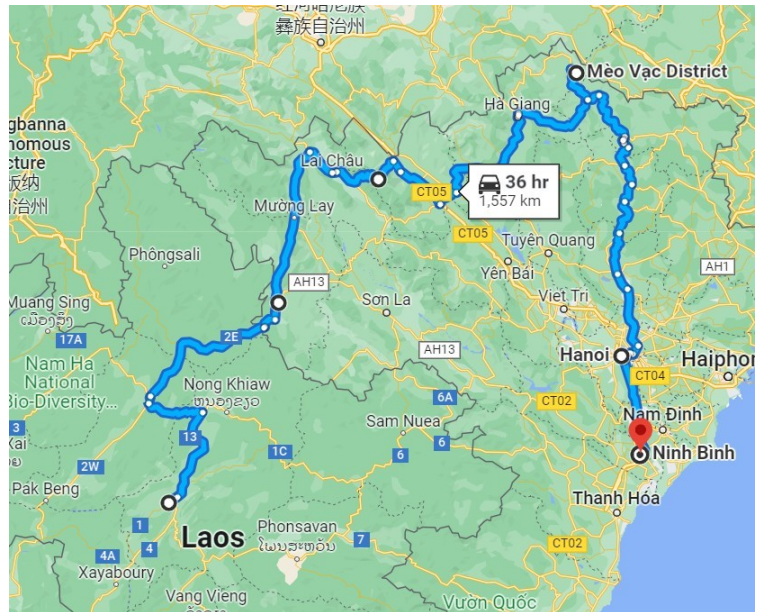
4 Ocelot June 2014

More here: <http://svocelot.com/Landfalls/Newsletters/Vietnam/Vietnam.htm>

4.1 Luang Prabang Laos

We went via river boat from Chaing Rai TH, down the Mekong to Luang Prabang Laos (and loved LP so much we spent a full week there, eating meals above the Mekong, bicycling, renting a scooter etc.). Then we bussed north to the northernmost city Phonsali, which is more Chinese than Laotian where we caught a local boat south on the Nam Ou River to the main road 2E at Muang Mai, which crosses between Laos and north Vietnam., and right to Dien Bien Phu.

We bussed across the hills into Northern Vietnam which was beautiful. I recall being so excited and saying to Jon, "Wow! I never thought I'd come to Vietnam!" He answered, quietly, "I did." (Never drafted, but close!) It was one of those moments...



4.2 Dien Bien Phu

We arrived in Dien Bien Phu and had major culture shock. There is virtually no English spoken. The only saving grace is that the Vietnam script looks sort of familiar to our Western eyes, and we soon learned the series of letters that meant "guest house" (sorry, can't recall them now). We used good ole Lonely Planet and Trip Advisor for ideas. Spent a couple nights in town and visited the war museum which was all about the French War. Jon found some incorrectly labeled photos (They showed "a shot down B-52", but it was a propeller plane.) and he became more and more skeptical. But it was interesting.

We found 2 businessmen, obviously also tourists or there for work staying at the guest house and asked them about food to order, as we couldn't pronounce or understand anything. We at least learned to say "phu" correctly, and the words for egg and chicken and tea.

4.3 Sapa

We bussed north to Sapa which was the correct season (dry!) to visit. August should be good too! We stayed at an awesome multi-storied hotel with views over the valley and mountains. You'll be met at the bus station by young women (mostly) in their Hmong garb (red boots, bright wrapped topos and pants) who speak passable English. They want to be your guide to the villages of the area. They are not welcome in the hotels (which are run by Han Chinese, mostly, or city folk from Hanoi who don't like competition for tourist activities from the locals) so we had to meet her the next day in the street outside. We walked with her for a few hours into the hills and I spent the night in their dirt-floor cottage, with the bathroom being the corn field. Jon wasn't feeling well, so they got him a scooter ride back to town. Baw was lovely, buying and killing a chicken for us for dinner, cooking it in the earthen hole in the kitchen floor and walking with me through the village.

4.4 Meo Vac

Because it was May, and VERY hot, we chose to visit only north Vietnam. We bussed to the very north, to Meo Vac, a very un-touristy area and I was glad we knew the words for eggs and tea and chicken and bread. From the hub town of Ha Giang, we chose a bus taking the very northern-most route to Meo Vac. (Google map this one!) just because we'd heard it was spectacular. Which it was. But lots of bus-sick passengers, too!

A night in Meo Vac, then a bus back to Ha Giang to find a slow bus to Hanoi. We chose the slow local buses, not the overnight or A/C buses because I prefer fresh air in my face on curvy roads, and wanted to be able to open the window for both air and to take photos.

4.5 Hanoi

Hanoi was a surprisingly lovely city. We were just 2 blocks east of Ho Tay Lake where folks do tai chi in the evenings and morning, jog, walk pets, etc. We took in a water puppet show which was interesting and "very cultural". The coffee was awesome. From there we bused south a bit to the rice fields and karst mountains of Ninh Binh. Think Phang Na Bay with green fields between the islands and you can picture it! We rented a scooter \$5 for the day and rode all around the area. Rice being threshed on the road is slippery, though! We took a boat tour along one of the waterways at Trang On and Tam Coc, and wandered a cave and shrine in the hills. Gorgeous!

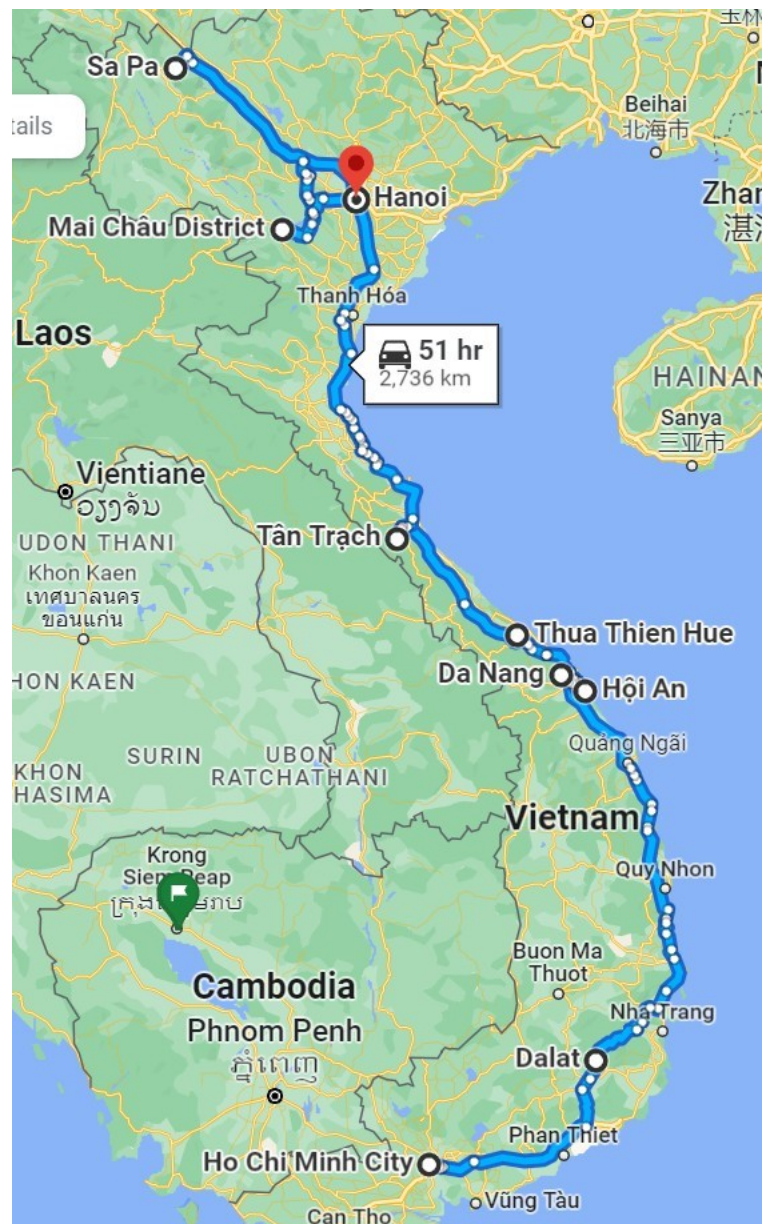
Flew back to KL from Hanoi for \$50

5 Dream Away Late 2017

5.1 Ho Chi Minh / Saigon

Our arrival in Vietnam was remarkable for the speed we transited through Ho Chi Minh City airport. A long row of fully staffed desks awaited us in immigration with not a queue in sight, our e-visas were rapidly processed, passports stamped and it was out to the baggage reclaim where our luggage awaited us. A friendly wave from customs and we were out into the thriving commercial hub of Vietnam. After some delays to allow our taxi driver to ask the way, we were dropped in front of a characterless narrow fronted block of flats that were mirrored along the street. What may best be described as a concierge was expecting us, let us in through the steel barred gateway, gave us the necessary keys and pointed us up the stairs to our new home. It was a really comfortable modern one room flat with a well-equipped ensuite bathroom and a great view over the street.

Outside our entrance a small wooden booth occupied the pavement, the inhabitant engaged in selling cigarettes and washing cars. Next door a chap was mending motorbikes, next to him a lady was selling flowers and as we looked further up the street it was obvious that every building had some enterprise operating from its ground floor entrance. There was a steady procession of bicycle vendors selling all manner of produce and often simple meals or drinks from trailers



towed by the cycles. Across the road the front of a building was being partially demolished to provide a large seating area for a cafe that would be competing with the myriad of small bars and eateries already in existence. To complete the picture of unceasing commerce the road was packed with an endless stream of small motor bikes all engaged on some mission, their riders weaving in and out amongst each other with total disregard for any conventional traffic discipline.

We walked around the city centre where our singular street experience was magnified beyond imagination. Everywhere there was some renovation or construction taking place including a major metro project; pavements were lined with every conceivable manner of business and any available pavement space was jam-packed with parked motorbikes. Typically these are around 100cc, 150 is considered large, and it felt as though everyone in the city must own one. Crossing the road was daunting at first as there truly is an unceasing mass of them moving along the whole width of the highway. We learnt that if you walked out steadily in front of them they would weave around you and this was quite expected. Speeds are generally low and they are not aggressive drivers, we found them to be a gentle, friendly people who treated us kindly and respectfully.

5.1.1 Reunification Palace & War Remnants Museum

Despite ending a generation ago, the war with America continues to leave an indelible mark upon the country and features on most tourist itineraries. The **Reunification Palace** was the site of the famous picture of the first communist tank crashing through its wrought iron gate just prior to the final downfall of the South Vietnamese state. Nearby, the **War Remnants Museum** bears witness to the horrors and atrocities mankind is capable of inflicting upon his fellow beings. Many of us have seen the carnage that occurs when a super power tries to impose its will militarily upon a non-industrialized, agrarian society but not so many get to hear the victim's story directly as we did in Vietnam. Look no further than Syria and the Yemen to see how few lessons have been learnt.

5.1.2 Jade Emperor Pagoda

Despite the past, there remain many fine examples of French colonial architecture, Chinese temples and notably the Jade Emperor Pagoda, a bizarre structure packed with grotesque icons and swathed in incense. The city center is a mix of modern glitzy shopping centers, older family enterprises, small outlets and street sellers abounding. In the evening we wandered around the street night market and found a large line of gazebos housing an open restaurant, all the staff in uniform and the chefs in chef's hats conjuring up delicious looking sea food dishes. We stopped for a super meal, sharing prawns the size of small lobsters.

5.1.3 Cu Chi Tunnels

Outside the city we visited the Cu Chi tunnels, an extensive man made warren used by the Vietcong for both shelter during the day and from which to launch nightly attacks. We took the opportunity to explore some of the claustrophobic labyrinth, we both had to bend down (sometimes crawl) and G rubbed the skin off his shoulders so narrow were the passages linking large communal areas. We learnt that in many places the basic system already existed where whole communities lived underground to escape the bombardment, some were excavated down to three levels. The Vietcong had extended these to form networks between the 'villages' covering huge areas. Nearby was the usual collection of military hardware on display ranging from tanks and aircraft to assault rifles and ammunitions. Along our route we stopped at a rehabilitation centre for the victims of Agent Orange. The genetic mutations caused by this continue to be transmitted amongst the population, often resulting in appalling disfigurement or brain damage. At the tunnels we had been entertained by a band of musicians handicapped by 'accidents' with unexploded ordnance, particularly land mines. They were raising money for similar victims; each year hundreds are still killed or maimed by these lethal horrors.

The plan was to head north by coach or train, stop at any interesting centers and hire a motorbike to explore each region and it worked well.

5.2 Dalat

5.2.1 Overnight Train to Dalat

We left HCMC on a sleeper coach, an experience in itself. There are three rows of narrow steel framed bunk beds with an aisle between each. The back can be raised rather like a hospital bed, there is a mattress, pillow and blanket plus a small locker for shoes that have to be removed before embarking. Sounds fine except they are designed for Vietnamese who are shorter and smaller than us.

5.2.2 Dalat

We were going to Dalat, a hill resort developed by the French in the Southern Highlands to escape the hot steamy tropical climate of the lowlands. By tacit agreement between the fighting factions Dalat had been spared in the war so most of the elegant French mansions and government buildings remain intact. The town is built around an attractive large lake over which we had a great view from our comfortable hotel room.

Our motor bike took us out to a number of picturesque waterfalls and a nearby National Park where unfortunately the trails we had hoped to walk were closed as the result of a super typhoon that had swept through the week before our arrival in the country.

Dalat is the centre of the wine producing region and we passed several extensive vineyards and enjoyed their fruity red product. The town had a huge market where many folk from the minority villages came to sell their wares. There are over fifty different ethnic groups residing mostly in small isolated communities in the hills and remoter areas of Vietnam and it is said there is considerable pressure on them from the government to enter the mainstream. However they seem to have successfully resisted this so far.

5.3 Danang & Hoi An

Next came another overnight 14 hour coach ride to Danang, notable for having no toilet aboard and the only rest stops being in deserted lay-bys in the middle of nowhere in the dark. Ok for the guys but no fun for Av and the other ladies. Danang is a large modern city built along the Han River adjacent to the long white sand China Beach.

5.3.1 The Dragon Bridge

The Dragon Bridge is a prominent feature. The atmospheric lighting is added to twice a week by the dragon spouting out great gouts of flame followed by a fountain of water from its head, an impressive display that certainly draws the crowds. The large picture window in our hotel room looked out over the river and bridge so we were able to maximise our enjoyment of the night scene.

5.3.2 Hoi An

The main reason for stopping in Danang was to visit Hoi An, a gem of a town about 30km along the coast, a good ride on a motorbike. Hoi An was once an important port but silting in the estuary rendered it untenable and it became a quiet backwater until discovered by the recent tourist industry. It is a perfectly preserved collection of fascinating ironwood buildings; homes of the wealthy Japanese merchants, Chinese clan halls and temples, warehouses, shops and a wonderful market. Today many of the buildings have been transformed into museums, restaurants, boutique hotels and souvenir emporiums. There is a lovely ancient Japanese bridge and associated temple and the whole place is crowded with tourists. The icing on the cake is the unbelievable number of tailors who will produce a high quality, made to measure suit or whatever you desire overnight. There is a wonderful array of quality materials and all you need do is select your style and

you are away. They'll also sew in whatever label you fancy, 'Armani sir, no problem'. Apart from a few heavy rain showers we enjoyed the place and spent two days visiting the many attractions.

5.4 Hue

We took a train ride from Danang to Hue, the ancient capital built alongside the atmospheric Perfume river.

5.4.1 Citadel, Imperial Enclosure, Forbidden Purple City

The highlight is the vast citadel, once home of the emperor and his family plus the usual entourage of hangers on, servants and militia. The Imperial Enclosure and Forbidden Purple City form a citadel within the citadel with many fine edifices. Sadly much had been reduced to rubble by intense bombing but renovation is currently proceeding at an amazing pace and there is plenty to see and admire. Whatever else, the 10 Km of immense 2m thick walls are impressive for what they have withstood.

The surrounding area is packed with ancient mausoleums, temples and pagodas but the two days of fairly incessant rain we endured dissuaded us from further exploration.

5.5 Song Trach / Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park

Halfway between Hue and Vinh

To escape the coastal deluge we headed inland on a local mini bus to Son Trach, the centre of the totally amazing Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park. The park is 90% primary tropical jungle, contains the oldest karst mountains in Asia, is riddled with immense underground cave systems and is still home to elephants and tigers and a wealth of other creatures.

The old Ho Chi Minh Trail runs through it and the scope for exploration is immense. The town is a long one-street affair with building work and infrastructure development going on all around. We arrived at our hotel and were shown to an obviously new room on a newly built floor of the building. We had a bed, a TV and a bathroom but all the other amenities quoted on the internet booking were absent. It was a family run concern, none of the adults spoke English but a couple of the younger children had some. They were lovely people, desperate to please and prepared to provide anything we wanted. Slowly we gathered together some furniture, bathroom equipment and a fridge which immediately blew up, producing a spectacular amount of smoke and was hastily replaced. We felt it would have been churlish to mention the lack of the promised lift to our third floor eerie, so settled in with smiles all round.

5.5.1 Paradise Cave System

Back on a motor bike again we toured around, visiting the 31Km long Paradise Cave system, enjoying wonderful jungle treks, watching the wildlife and spending time at a spectacular waterfall that was really a big playground with ropes strung across the midsection of the falls so you could wade across and scramble up around the massive boulders amidst the torrential waters. All the time suffering a sensory overload from the magnificent pristine jungle that spread out in an immense mountainous vista of green reaching to the far horizons.

Our mini bus ride and increasing experience in the traffic was familiarizing us with driving techniques in Vietnam. The first rule is that the largest vehicle always has priority and we were pretty low in the pecking order. Sounding a klaxon, preferably multi-tone is a necessary accompaniment to any maneuver and always before and whilst overtaking. The most terrifying examples of this is when immense, heavily laden, quarry lorries hurtle along a narrow dirt road through a ramshackle village. With a blaring horn scattering errant children and chickens before them there is not the faintest chance of stopping should any poor misfortunate stumble into their path. In practice we found mostly light traffic outside town whilst in town, although crowded, the pace was gentle and other road users considerate.

5.6 Sapa (Near Lao Cai on the N border w China)

In the far north, on the Chinese border, it had been snowing but a weather forecast for a clear sunny spell got us moving again towards Sapa. It's an old French hill station but successive wars against the French, Americans and Chinese have done it no favours and today it is really one huge building site, with rapid development to cater for the burgeoning tourist industry. To compensate, the surrounding mountains with bright green terraced lower slopes, a myriad of tiny remote ethnic villages and endless trails made it a trekking paradise.

Our hotel room had breathtaking views across the valley to **Fansipan**, Vietnam's highest peak, today accessible by a **6Km cable car** strung out across the valley. Foolishly, we took a trip to the top in marginal weather which had deteriorated to appalling by the time we had climbed the six hundred steps to the summit, passing several temples and an enormous black Buddha, all newly built. Howling wind, freezing cold, wet, and enveloped in cloud; not a good day for pictures but the view from the cable car had been magnificent. Inevitably the next day was crystal clear so we went again and were rewarded with spectacular views across mountainous landscapes to China, Laos and a big chunk of Vietnam. Looking at the terrain one was struck by the colossal enterprise of the Chinese invasion and how futile it had all been.

GPS is surely one of the great benefits of technology, it has changed the character of sailing beyond belief, now folk go to places previously undreamt of. Equally, on land it gave us the confidence to trek off in any direction we fancied, criss crossing a maze of terraced rice paddy fields, fording streams, climbing hills always confident the system could guide us home.

5.7 Mai Chau Valley (WSW of Hanoi)

After our first day the weather was kind to us but it was bitterly cold at night so we looked forward to returning to warmer climes in the peaceful rural Mai Chau valley lying to the west of Hanoi. The town itself is unremarkable but many of the outlying ethnic villages offer accommodation in their traditional stilt houses. We arrived somewhat tired after an overnight journey that was not quite as advertised. Our coach was supposed to drop us at the bus station in Hanoi at 4 am for us to await the 6 am bus to the valley. However we were dropped off at the side of a motorway on the outskirts of the city around 2:30am and directed the couple of kilometres to the bus station! When we finally arrived, lugging all our baggage it was shut so we sat on the pavement and fended off various taxi drivers keen to take us all the way to Mai Chau for some outrageous fee. However, the journey was well worth it and we settled into a comfortable room in Lac with great views across the surrounding bright green rice paddy fields to the distant pristine jungle covered mountains.

We had free use of bicycles, hired a motor bike to explore further afield and enjoyed some excellent local hiking. It was a rejuvenating, tranquil location with very friendly people who were always keen to find out about us and to practice their English. Despite the grim recent history the locals welcomed visitors from all nations. When asked about this the inevitable reply was that they always looked to the future and forgave the past, although a few wryly said it would be nice if some tourists stopped referring to them as 'the enemy' when being guided around.

5.8 Hanoi

Our final destination was Hanoi, not as frenetic as HCMC but with a similar density of chaotic motorbike traffic to contend with. Much of the city was flattened and has been replaced by typical monolithic communist architecture, with little charm or aesthetic value. Nevertheless a sizeable section of old town remains as a network of busy narrow streets, different trades or goods being plied in distinct districts. It is the main tourist draw and maps are provided with suggested itineraries and it seemed one could source almost anything desired. Of course there were plenty of restaurants to choose from and we enjoyed our final couple of days of excellent Vietnamese cuisine and the incredibly cheap fresh brewed beer that needs to be drunk the same day. There were a tremendous number of street sellers, many on bicycles pedalling around

wearing their conical straw hats, trying to sell a few meagre items. Many of these folk come from outlying villages to earn cash to support their families. Sleeping in cramped overcrowded conditions for maybe weeks before returning home, it illustrated the struggle many face in the changing organisation of society. It was fascinating to experience a country with a socialist political system and a free market economy. Despite obvious problems, they appear to be making a great success of it.

6 Philip Light – April 2023

<https://www.facebook.com/phillip.light.1>

6.1 Saigon / Ho Chi Minh City

April 11: We just arrived in Saigon, Vietnam, and will be here another 2 weeks, before returning to the boat in Malaysia. I will be posting a lot more photos in the coming days, as we make our way northward to Hanoi.

(Pictures) Same street in Saigon at 730 pm - things just starting to get crazy. We might stay out a little longer to people watch - the beer is pretty cheap compared to Malaysia, but I want to check out the food markets tomorrow morning, so maybe an early night.

6.1.1 Cu Chi Tunnels

April 13: Today we visited the Cu Chi tunnels, on the outskirts of Saigon. These tunnels served as battle locations, and also as communication, supply, and medical links for the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War. This network extended for about 200 km around Saigon, and was used by the Viet Cong during the Tet Offensive of 1968. Within this area, there are numerous displays of guerilla tactics, abandoned armaments, and reenactments of life during that time. We crawled through a short (100 meter) section of tunnel, which gave a small idea of the conditions that the Vietnamese endured to defend their country. Quite a moving and interesting experience!

6.1.2 Street Food Saigon

April 14: Last night we did a four hour motorbike tour, to visit various street food locations around Saigon. In total, there were ten courses, all of them delicious and unique. I continue to be both amazed and impressed by the energy of this vibrant city.

6.1.3 War Remnants Museum

April 15: Ok, this is a bit of a different post - today we went to the War Remnants Museum, the number one tourist attraction in Saigon. Outside the museum there are displays of many types of American military machinery captured during the Vietnam War. Inside, it's a much more poignant story - the account of how the war is viewed from the Vietnamese perspective. I can't really encapsulate what was displayed inside, except to say that the experience of viewing the photographs and listening to the information and narratives of the survivors, left me and most of the people around me speechless. In my opinion, museums like this are important reminders of the mistakes of the past that must not be repeated.

6.2 Danang

April 16: Today we traveled to Da Nang, about midway between Saigon and Hanoi. Nowadays it's a very pleasant small city, with a 20 mile beachfront and lots of great restaurants and shops. Before coming to Vietnam, I had read about a very rare and colorful monkey that is found in a National Park close to here - the Red shanked Douc. So I rented a motorbike to travel to the park, and then we hiked for about six hours without seeing any. Along the way, we met some Vietnamese workers and spent some time drinking beer and eating with them. On the way back, Jenn heard something in the trees, and there, to my amazement, was a family of these beautiful primates, nicknamed the Queen of the Apes. We only had a cell phone camera, but the last video shows them jumping around in the trees.

Q: Any ideas about train travel? It might be a good way to see and traverse the country. We enjoyed Hanoi, but would like to visit Ho Chi Min city in the south next time too.

A: Robert Watson we flew here in Da Nang from Saigon, but will probably take the train back from Hanoi. It takes around 36 hrs for the trip, and is pretty noisy, but you can save a nights accomodation, and also see some scenery. I will let you know how it goes.

6.2.1 Hoi An

April 18: We are in Hoi An now, a short ride south of Da Nang. Kind of a touristy place, but still fun, and very beautiful. We did a "basket boat" ride through the coconut jungle yesterday, and then a lantern boat ride around Hoi An. Today we rode bikes to visit an organic farm, where I got to try out my irrigation skills. We are now in a seaside restaurant, looking over the East China Sea.

6.3 Hanoi

6.3.1 Hmong Hill Tribes

Today we traveled north from Hanoi, almost to the Chinese border, and did a hike down to a village of one of the Hmong hill tribes. This area is covered in rice terraces and beautiful bamboo houses. We are staying tonight at one of the Hmong homestays and tomorrow will hike out and return to Hanoi. We only have three days left in Vietnam, but every day seems to be better than the last.

6.3.2 Cruise Around Halong Bay

April 24: We have just returned to Hanoi from a two day cruise around Halong Bay. It was a little overcast, but we still had beautiful views of the limestone islands that tower over this iconic spot. The cruise was excellent, with delicious food and a luxurious room with awesome views of the islands.

7 SSCA 2004

7.1 Danang

We flew into Danang, Vietnam, and traveled by car to the ancient city of Hue, once the cultural center of Vietnam. The Imperial Citadel dominates the entrance to the old city. It's truly massive

Vietnamese flag provides a clue to the intense national pride of the Vietnamese. After visiting the fascinating markets and temples within the Imperial Citadel, we traveled by car to the Khe Sanh Memorial of the western end of the DMZ which formerly divided North and South Vietnam. US forces defended the base during a 76-day siege before the Tet offensive in 1968. This was our first war memorial, and we had to get used to reading posters that describe events in a way that was considerably different from our recollection. Contrary to the posters, US forces held the base; it was never overrun by North Vietnamese forces.

On the north side of the DMZ, we visited the tunnels of Vinh Moc. After this North Vietnamese village was leveled by US carpet-bombing in 1967, the local inhabitants dug tunnels for underground living. Now only 1,700 meters of tunnels remain. If you are free of claustrophobia you can visit several rooms including an underground living room, operating (medical) room where 17 babies were born, weapon storage rooms and some of the tiny cramped living quarters where 100 families spent several years, emerging only for a few hours every few days.

7.2 Hanoi

Hanoi presents many dichotomies of modern Vietnam. The beauty of the French colonial influence remains in the Old Quarter, the motor bike traffic jams demonstrate the success of a market economy, and the Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum and memorial grounds pay respect to those who sacrificed since WWII. We were

interested in the Hoa Lo Prison. Originally a French prison that housed Vietnamese prisoners, it became known as the "Hanoi Hilton," where downed US flyers including John McCain, our Republican Senator from Arizona, was a guest for six years.

The callously disingenuous statements on the wall make imprisonment at Hoa Lo sound like summer camp for US flyers. We also visited the Ho Chi Minh Trail Museum, the Army Museum and the Museum of Ethnology which described the numerous ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

No visit to Hanoi would be complete without a visit to the R&R Bar run by US ex-pat Jay Ellis. On Thursday evenings the R&R deviates from rock bands and features a classical string quartet.

Daytrips from Hanoi included a trip to the Perfume Pagoda and Halong Bay. The trip to the Perfume Pagoda follows a river weaving through some beautiful rock formations. Halong Bay has many lime stone rock outcroppings that jut upward from the sea. On the way to Halong Bay we stopped at the village of Sao Do at the Hong Ngoc Humanity Center where people with disabilities work. Some people had birth defects from Agent Orange during "The American War," as the Vietnamese call it.