

## A Fistful of Dong Part 9 - HANOI

Contributed by Tim Giles  
 Wednesday, 10 January 2007  
 Last Updated Monday, 08 June 2009

Inside Cao Dai temple Cu Chi Vietnam. THE SEYMOUR MONKEY CHRONICLES:

Hue airport. A jet stands on the tarmac fifty metres from the terminal &ndash; We are hustled down stairs from the departue lounge where a bus awaits implying a long journey. We queue for twenty minutes sweating in the heat and juggling luggage. A small army of bureaucrats and groundstaff surround us and try to appear busy by counting heads, ticking boxes on clip boards and rearranging the guide ropes on the queue barrier. We watch the bus reverse forward and back eventually completing a ten point turn and exposing sliding doors that open with a gush of air conditioned breeze. There are not enough seats for all passengers so we stand for the entire journey, all twenty seconds of it, as the bus does a quick arc to the steps of the plane a mere drop punt away. A small village of Vietnamese gainfully employed in engineering the transport of passengers the distance that Usain Bolt travels in under 5 seconds.

An hour later following a rough landing, with a slight shimmy, on the runway and we are in Hanoi. We hook up with the Canadians we had met a few days earlier down the coast and decided to split a cab. We emerge at the rank and head towards a shuttle bus and a small army of officials - We stand back and let Vancouver fireman Garry haggle a deal on price. He works one tout off against another. He busts their balls. He breaks them down. He returns triumphant like Chamberlain from Munich.

We file onboard the mini bus. Our bags are loaded. The door slides shut. We appreciate the extra room the two empty seats provide. The driver starts the engine, a hand reaches in the window and turns the key. The motor dies abruptly. An official looking woman in uniform shows up to grumpily inform us that all bets were off regarding price. An extra \$1US each or we wait until the bus was full.

I plead to my companions that surely an hour of our time is worth more than a buck? I am out voted by my penny pinching companions. As we wait some more, Boney M spurt distorted Russian History from the driver's radio. Half an hour passes. I long for the Cu Chi machine gun.

We live the hypocrisy of the Western traveller, where we gladly fork out fifty quid to a London cabbie to get to Heathrow on time but bitch about pocket change when we get somewhere exotic. We fret over how much to tip in a shitty artery clogging US diner but feel ripped off if we get duded on our change in some Asian farmers market. Eventually with a full busload we make the 30 kilometre trip into Hanoi through the Vietnamese version of Caroline Springs &ndash; Carbon copy housing developments roofed with enough terra cotta to build a thousand entombed warriors.

The Old Quarter was where we wanted to go. Full of ancient laneways filled with bustling trade and motor bike traffic. This is where most of the tourist hotels are, interesting restaurants and the best shopping. True to form though the shuttle bus driver refused to take us anywhere near there insisting on dropping us out the front of the Vietnamese Airlines office where the throng of obligatory approved touts had gathered. On the bus journey we had realised that our chosen hotel was only a few blocks from the Canadians so we agreed to split another cab for the final leg. True to form Garry haggled a good bargain, and similarly the cabbie tried to drop us at a different hotel from where we wanted to go. We ended up walking the last few blocks to our hotel carrying our luggage that was like a flashing beacon for every cyclist and street grifter along the way.

Hanoi &ndash; AKA the City of the Ascending Dragon, or City in the Bend of the River depending on the particular naming myth favoured by the tour guide of the moment. The backpacker rumour mill had also alerted us to its travelers nickname of &ldquo;Annoy&rdquo; &ndash; A warning and a sneered commentary on the "in your" face pestering that seemed to comprise the only marketing strategy known to the locals. In reality once we had ditched the packs we found the city tout plague about par for the course by Viet standards having built up our tolerance through a fortnights inoculation in the cities up the coast.

One new experience was the professional photographic models that roamed the streets pimping their trade &ndash; Think beggar chic. Think lamb pretending to be interesting mutton. Think faux tourist snapshot opportunity. Twenty something girls with Revlon complexions lugging a couple of fruit cocktails around like they were bags of cement. Cheap imitations of the ancient grannies from Hoi An that we had seen toiling in the streets under yolks supporting baskets of groceries that you would take two or three trips to bring in from the car. Their faces etched in character cried out to be photographed and warranted a subtle exchange of a few Dong for the privilege. The Hanoi facsimiles who tugged at your

shirt sleeves and repeatedly demanded 10,000 Dong to pose were as inauthentic as a theme park Santa. Perhaps the entire country was simply a tourist scam. I wondered if those water buffalo pulling ploughs we had seen from the buses and trains as we drove past were actually deliberately positioned along the tourist routes whilst off behind the tree line Vietnamese farmers chuckled on their Massey Ferguson tractors wearing John Deer baseball caps.

For lunch we took a hit of western food on offer at one of the cafes in the Old Quarter -Pasta with a Vietnamese slant that was as good as any on offer on Lygon Street. Whilst we were eating we had thumbed through our trusty Lonely Planet guidebook looking for recommended tour agencies to book our trip to Ha Long Bay the next day. Vietnam is a pirate's paradise where the one thing you can be sure of is that once one business gets a favourable write up in a guide book then clones and blatant rip offs emerge. In the block immediately adjacent to our restaurant were no less than ten travel agencies all with variations of the Sinh Travel brand. We chose two almost at random and after playing one agent off against the other had managed to secure a three day and two night package that included transport, accommodation, meals and activities for 37 bucks each. Our decision to jump on a plane from Hue had given us an extra day up our sleeve and we planned to spend it on a junk sailing through one of the world's natural wonders. Until then though we had wads of Dong that were burning holes in our respective money belts and so we hit the Old Quarter for some bargain hunting.

A carved stone chess set caught my eye - Vietnamese peasants as pawns, pagodas as rooks and a smirking Ho Chi Minh with a gnarled staff in hand as the bishop. "Look at Uncle Ho" the shop assistant laughed. Rosie meanwhile was accumulating footwear in an Imelda Marcos style frenzy. I trawled through antique stores whilst she perused silk merchants. We took in the sights and smells of the food markets and rested in the peaceful surrounds of the Jade Mountain Temple. It is on an island within Hoan Kiem Lake that had also contained other interesting physical and mythical inhabitants over time both current and ancient.

Republican Presidential nominee John McCain had once bailed out on a bombing mission above Hanoi and had landed in the middle of the lake. Fortunately he had not disturbed the mythical turtle that local legend claims lives within. An oft told yarn holds that Emperor Le Loi defeated the Mongol hordes of Ghengis Khan and protected the kingdom for the locals only to be upstaged by a pesky turtle that pinched his magic sword and took it into the depths. Recalling much watched Monty Python videos I pondered another instance of kings, swords and watery bints - Excalibur South East Asian style.

Vietnam is home to a unique performance art form - The Hanoi Water Puppets. Dragons and more tangible aspects of Vietnamese life represented in puppet form emerge out of water and interact by way of intricate levers and pulleys. As we filed into the theatre we suddenly found ourselves, for the first time in the country, to be under dressed as we waited amidst a gaggle of tourists dressed for cocktail hour. Then when the lights went down all thoughts of fashion were forgotten as we became engrossed in short vignettes of Vietnamese life. Buffalos ploughed fields, fish leapt and danced amidst Punch and Judy style slapstick.

Shopping frenzy - Silks, antiques, clothes, shoes and miscellaneous Christmas presents snaffled at amazing prices - Rosie laughing at me in my kimono. Night markets. Hagglng tricks in full swing. Our new imitation Nike bag that we had bought for all the extras we accumulated was now bursting at the seams. We splurged on a big western meal and hit the obligatory Irish pub for a few ales. Dubbed the politest pub in Vietnam we downed a few beers amidst English backpackers getting their Premier League fix off the cable sports channels.

Breakfast in a French patisserie - A slice of Paris in down town Hanoi. Succulent pastries entice in the counter window. The limp soggy microwaved version of the croissant that eventually finds it's way to our plate a major disappointment.

Rosie and I decide to split for the morning while I toured the cultural sites and she unloaded a wheelbarrow full of Dong on the local traders. As she disappeared into the throng of bikes and cyclos I made my way out of the Old Quarter into the museum district.

As I walked the broad boulevards that make up Hanoi outside the Old Quarter, I came face to face with old school communism for the first time. Fumbling to insert a new film into the replacement camera we had bought in Hue with one hand, and fighting off touts and cyclo riders with the other, I found myself literally sandwiched in between the metal gaze of Vladamir Lenin and one of the tools of Commie revolution a Mig 21 fighter jet. The statue of the hero of the Soviet revolution stands nearly twenty metres tall and commands a small park across the road from the military museum. Similarly to Hue further south, Hanoi also has a fortified citadel in it's centre however here it is still in use as a military base. When I climbed the ancient observation and flag tower for a better view of the city I was told in no uncertain

terms that photography from the top is strictly forbidden as you can look down into the army complex. Just what military secrets I could garnish from the soccer pitches and dirty washing hanging outside the barracks buildings I could not fathom. Quick call the Pentagon the General's washed his whites with his coloureds.

The jet fighter had fourteen stars painted on its nose to represent each US plane it had shot down during the war. It had apparently belonged to the leading Vietnamese ace and was proudly positioned threateningly guarding the approaches, although the rusting fuselage seemed to suffer from the same neglect that many of the countries historical monuments had endured. Inside the gates were a range of choppers, tanks and wreckage of downed aircraft. Stars and stripes riddled with bullets and painted unit markings from US Strategic Air Command the only remnants of what had once been a Boeing B52 bomber. The yanks had dropped more high explosive on Hanoi than they had during the entire Second World War and some of these bombs were on display highlighting the nasty payloads. Fragmentation bombs designed to deliver shrapnel across a wide area ripping anything and anyone it encountered to shreds. Delayed action mines timed to explode a short time after the napalm and magnesium bombs had set the buildings on fire to "discourage" attempts to put them out.

The next stop on my tour of the Hanoi monuments to communism was Uncle Ho's mausoleum. Apparently Ho Chi Minh had always wanted to be cremated in tune with his simple socialist ideals, however the commie bureaucracy had different ideas and for over thirty years his embalmed body has sat behind glass as a museum piece and tourist attraction. Thirty years that is, except for a few weeks each year when the body takes a trip to Moscow for some Spring cleaning – A time window that happened to coincide with our visit. In late November the busloads of tourists have to make do with standing behind crowd barriers watching the statue like soldiers guarding the entrance and wait for the regular changing ceremony to add some theatre.

Lunch found Rosie and myself tucking into another massive feast in the Coffee District. Because of the low prices you tend to over order constantly and feel obliged to pig out accordingly. As we were weighing up the pros and cons of finding room for left overs, that would have filled an ample doggy bag, a man selling wicker baskets and hats went past our window. Every conceivable part of the bicycle had rattan products hanging from it to the extent that it was now the girth of a small car and inched its way through the traffic in the narrow streets. Rosie slipped him a few Dong to pose for a photo and he responded with a gummy smile.

- Part 1 - Saigon
- Part 2 - Cu Chi
- Part 3 - The Reunification Express
- Part 4 - Nha Trang
- Part 5 - Hoi An
- Part 6 - My Son
- Part 7 - Hue
- Part 8 - The Dee Em Zee
- Part 9 - Hanoi
- Part 10 - Ha Long Bay