

# Vietnam



# Cambodia



Hong Kong & Macau Sept. 12-28, 2018

## Vietnam -Hanoi September 12,2018

The first and most important tip when in Hanoi: understand how to cross the road without becoming a road kill. There are 4 million motor bikes in Hanoi and they are all out on the roads what seems to be at once. Motor bikes are not subject to traffic rules including red lights, stay in lane and speed limits. To cross the street, you need to first pray then start crossing with a slow yet firm and decisive manner and weave yourself between the cars and bikes. Pray again when you get to the other side.



The old city of Hanoi is built around a lake or better yet a pond about 2-3 KM in circumference. A night walk around the lake is a feature attraction. Restaurants, shops, street food and many of the 9 million who live in the city. Every few hundred meters women (only) exercise in the form of intricate line dancing to a rock like beat. They say that Jews like oriental food especially on Christmas Eve. We are Jews, but this is not Christmas Eve. We flunked our first culinary experience and left a lot of food on the table. Mom is not nearly impressed by the offering but that is only the first evening.



## September 13, 2018

Remember the rule of three. After a day of touring Hanoi with our guide Tong and our driver Vu three words stick in our mind Traffic, Ethnicity and Humidity. In reverse order the heat and humidity in this town is something we haven't experience before. We learned that Vietnam is one of the most ethnically diverse country in Asia. There are 62 provinces in Vietnam and 54 ethnic groups dating back generations. As Vietnam is a narrow coastal land bordering China, Cambodia and Thailand immigrants from these countries settled in Vietnam and are now part of the ethnic landscape. But our main if not the most important impression has to do with the traffic. Hanoi is a maze of streets and boulevard with very few traffic lights and massively chaotic traffic of cars and thousands of motor bikes on the road at all hours. Yet even where basic traffic rules are ignored, and bikes are riding against oncoming cars we have not noticed a single slow down never mind a hint of an accident. It is amazing to watch especially when all this is intermingled with pedestrians weaving their way through heavy traffic and everything flows. It's a miracle. Later in the evening we had a taste of Hanoi's famous street food. It's good. Even mom will say so somewhat reluctantly.



## 14 September

Leaving Hanoi to Halong Bay. Add one more word to the three: Hospitality. The Diamond Hotel staff blew us away. Personalized service and genuine personal interest in the guests' experience background and interests. Have not seen this before to the same extent. Three and

a half hours drive South East of Hanoi lies the beautiful Halong Bay. The bay is surrounded by a chain of 2000 natural island rocks. It is a natural wonder and beautiful vistas. We are aboard a medium size ship for an overnight cruise. The pictures tell the story much better. The top down photos may have been the last I would have ever taken. I almost died climbing more than 500 steps a mistake I'll never repeat. Age, weight and conditioning have taken their toll. By the way 24 (Actually more) hours without Wi-Fi is totally therapeutically. We lucked out with our cabin (a 4 Star hotel suite) the only one with a private balcony where we spent hours just chilling in the cool breeze of the bay.



### **September 15**

The Halong Bay cave is not a slouch. We've seen better in Nerja, Spain, but this one can give it a run for its money. Always fascinated by what nature can do. We lucked out on this cruise as the two days earlier and two days later the cruise will have been cancelled because of the Super Typhoon the effects of which are scheduled to arrive here by Monday. Let's see what this monster does to the main targets of Hong Kong and Macau where we are scheduled to arrive in a little over a week.



## 16 September

We are in HUE the 700,000 Royal City once the capitol before the French occupation. HUE is short for Hot Unbelievably Everywhere. 36 degrees with almost 100% humidity probably if not officially 45 degrees with the Humidex. Lots of Israeli and Spanish tourists. Tour of the forbidden city and the royal palace well worthwhile even in that heat. Our guide Yim is fantastic in 30 minutes we received a comprehensive understanding of Vietnam history from the Minh empire the Chinese occupation to French colonialism Japanese fighting the communists of the North to the civil war and the American Vietnam war to post war unification. 8 million lives later things appear to be calm and friendly if the communist government says so. After a 5 (small) courses of traditional Vietnamese tourist edition lunch which I liked, and mom suffered through - can't wait for taking a shower and a self- imposed siesta.



## September 17

Ooh it's hot in Vietnam. The further South you go the hotter and we are going South. Could be literally. But,

Another day another Pagoda and a tour of the tomb of the King also his summer residence. Beautiful grounds as you can see. The poor guy had 108 wives but couldn't sire a heir because of a childhood small pox disease. Our guide Diem was telling us that the Communist President of Vietnam comes from a working family with little education (that is so valued in Vietnam) and uninformed with little knowledge, respect and appreciation for history and traditions. He makes decisions that are political, expedient and she summed up the description by saying: He is stupid. For the longest time we thought she was talking about Trump. Hue is the center of Education with the best schools and universities in Vietnam. Half of its population (500,000) are students from all corners of Vietnam as well as foreign students. Renting rooms to students is the main industry in town. The Central and South Vietnamese are biting their lips in accepting the Communist government in return for peace and tranquility that was absent in their entire history. By the way the Communist regime saw to it that all Vietnamese are millionaires by their currency. 10 USD is equivalent to a quarter of a million Dong. So imagine if you had a 1000 USD you're a quarter billionaire - what a country.

Danang for (a great) lunch. 36 degrees in the shade and we're not in the shade. We were promised that as we keep going South to Saigon (aka Ho Chi Minh City) it'll only get hotter.





## September 18

We are learning so much about Vietnam and the Vietnam war from Diem who is a South Vietnamese and therefore has a more balanced view. Your mom is the bravest woman on earth. She is walking and climbing like a (heavy) gazelle all the while promising to never ever try this again. It's the humidity idiot. If you never experienced being dripping wet from head to toe including your underwear and socks - you should try this. But it was well worthwhile to tour the (some destroyed by American bombs) temples in My Son pronounced Mi Sen learning about the ancient and modern history and watching a cultural show. As we are headed back to town for lunch mom declared that if we are so lucky our next destination is Iceland. It doesn't have to be the country but any country where it is cold as ice. This heat and humidity borders on unbearable.



## September 19

Tom Kippur - only the second in our lives where we were not home.

Today we drive to Banna Hills. You have never seen so many Asian tourist in one place not even in Pacific Mall. The origins of Banna are during the French colonization period. It is a mountainous resort built in traditional French architecture. French soldiers used to come to Vietnam for a one-year stint and after 6 months and now we understand why, we're entitled to R&R in the mountains where it's cooler and serene. Today Vietnamese who could never afford to go to Europe view it as their "Little Europe". What is Banna Hills? It is a French Disneyland

reached only by cable car at 1500 meters up on the mountain. At the mid level it is an incredible garden(s) where the landscaping is exquisite and blends with the French architecture structures. At the top it is like a Disneyland on steroids. Beautiful, large and swarmed by Asian tourist mainly Chinese, Thai and Singapore. For them (and for us) Vietnam is cheap, close and the European angle is an added attraction. Recently the Golden Bridge held by two hands (see photo) has become and heavily promoted as a must see for tourists of all nationalities who come to Ho Ai but not to Banna. Regardless it is a must-see destination.



Diem is an independent, educated beautiful 30years old woman. She has been in a relationship with her boyfriend teacher, but she can't get married. In fact, she asked our opinion as to whether she should look for another man. She is eager to get married and start a family, but she can't because her parents and mainly her mother do not approve of her choice. We spent a fascinating hour and a half learning about family and community culture in Vietnam and why it is not as simple for her to decide on her own who to marry. The child parent relationship is anchored in a birth right debt of children to parents. Much of it has to do with the country being poor and children depend on their parents for money and shelter. Obedience is hammered into their psyche from birth. We also talked about many aspects of life in Vietnam including passion for soccer. The excursion was great but this one hour surprisingly very open and candid talk was even greater.



### **Sept. 20**

It took us almost 10 days to have a Vietnamese meal that we (both) rated Excellent! Especially the Elephant fish which we rolled into Sushi like bites. We are in the Mekong Delta a two hour drive from Saigon travelling by a river boat and engaging with locals by watching them work (brick factory, mat family "factory" and things they can do with the coconut tree both the fruit and the tree itself. Things like furniture, utensils, craft and more. We both rank today as the most interesting and exciting day so far. We are walking through a rain forest or a jungle if you prefer surrounded by Banana and Coconut trees and now on a row boat of another channel of the Mekong river. Peaceful, eyeful and relaxing albeit sweating like pigs.





## Sept 21

Today we learned that we knew only little about the Vietnam War and mainly from the US viewpoint. Who are we to judge if the Vietnam war was a just war or not. What we clearly learned and witnessed is why the Americans lost the war, why so many Americans lost their lives and why so many veterans to this day are either angry and/or traumatized.

We went to the Jungle some 100 KM out of Saigon to Cu Chi where the Viet Kong were camped before advancing on Saigon. This is the place where the bulk of the fighting took place. By the end of the visit it became clear as to why the Americans lost the war. Frankly they didn't stand a chance. The Israeli Mossad credo is loosely translated from Hebrew means: Through deceit and trickery you make war. There lies the answer. The VK were dug in tunnels that were made literally by hand with the most primitive of tools. They were totally familiar with the jungle and used extremely clever as well as lethal traps to catch and kill American soldiers. They also relied on the wider population to hide them, feed them spy for them. Always one step ahead of their enemy. They fought in their land and for their land with patience, purpose and sacrifice. The Americans did not and could not. Patience and purpose were at a premium. The VK lived and taught on a familiar terrain and needed very little to survive in a poor country at war. The Americans clearly had superior power in the air and on the ground but could not win an asymmetric guerrilla war no matter how powerful their standing army. As history demonstrated since 1975 when Americans left Saigon with their tail between their legs to this day (Iraq, Syria,

ISIS etc.) have not learned their lesson. Fire and Fury is a political slogan fighting for dubious causes on foreign lands is altogether a different ballgame.



### September 23

We're in Siem Reap Cambodia the Royal City of the Khmer kingdom that ruled over what is today Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and parts of Thailand. The first impression is that Cambodians' temperament and demeanor is calmer, and polite compared to Vietnam. In fact, their traditional core values are Charity, Compassion, Sympathy and Equality. The people live in harmony Buddhists Hindus secular Thais Vietnamese Cambodians no difference. Our guide Mr. T a Professor of Anthropology, he is also a performing musician. He comes from an Upper-Class family where his father was the chief adviser to the president of Cambodia. Nevertheless, he and his family spent 13 years in a refugee camp in Thailand after they escaped the Khmer Rouge. He has been detained tortured but managed to escape. We are learning a lot about Cambodia. In all our travels, especially in Asia, except for Bhutan, we find discontent among the people toward their governments. Cambodia which is a constitutional monarchy has it all: the 4 Mekong Rivers, the ocean the largest fresh water lake in Asia, oil, minerals, forests you name it. Yet the current Prime Minister has been "democratically" elected, every 6 years for 5 consecutive terms now. A bit like Bibi Netanyahu. As would be expected, corruption reigns rampant. This is a country that faced the genocidal Khmer Rouge who slaughtered close to 4 million Cambodians and turned the country into a burning hell. The wounds of the war are still

evident. Including scars and lost limbs of our guide.

But with all of this you come to Cambodia for the Temples Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat, one of the seven wonders of the world the largest Buddhist shrine in the world that only pictures can describe it as you can see. The architecture and construction are wonders similar and may be even more impressive than the pyramids of Giza because of the art carvings. You keep asking yourself How did they do it?



### **September 24**

We are in Cambodia for the temples. Yesterday was fascinating, interesting and we learned a ton about the French discovery of Angkor Wat and the Khmer Rouge. If yesterday was the equivalent of watching a top 4 Premier League match today was a Championship relegation match. 3 more temples and we skipped the fourth. After a while they all look alike and the effort to walk and climb in the humidity is almost unbearable. Tomorrow we fly to Hong Kong for some R&R after a fascinating trip, a wonderful itinerary and for us the ultimate physical endurance test. One which we almost flunked. You have no idea how close you came to have to make an annual pilgrimage to Cambodia to pay respects to your mother.



### **September 25**

Our last day in Cambodia and on the private tour. Later this afternoon we are headed to Hong Kong. This morning we went on a boat ride on the fresh water lake and watched a floating village a fish and crocodile farm but the hour we spent with our guide learning and exchanging political views on Cambodia and Canada was worth the entire trip. Our guide is an independent and unlike the uniformed guides dares to criticize the prime minister of 30 years who was also the commander of the Khmer Rouge. Arrest and executions for sharing political descent is the most probable outcome. We were lucky to have him as our guide. We feel for the Cambodian people.

### **September 26**

So here is the deal about Macau. We are the only Caucasians in a tsunami of mainly Chinese and other Asians. The place is beyond description as to its size and commercial space. Vegas is number 2. Secondly after our visit the authorities would require foreigners to declare their net worth as a condition of entry. Mom wants to play Baccarat, but the minimum bet is \$85 CDN a hand. The entry fee for the lowest Texas Hold'm is 850 dollars. We are spending serious time finding our way around the place and no one to ask for direction who speaks any English. In summary it's a haven for Crazy Rich Asians.



**September 27**

The whole trip started with mom wanting to take me out to a \*\*\* (3!) Michelin restaurant and read an article about culinary delights in Macau. \$500 later and the Macau experience turned out to be a bust. Here is what \$500 will buy you at the 8 (EIGHT) restaurant at the Grand Lisboa in Macau:





