

Taiwan, Vietnam and Cambodia
November 2004
Or, “Lessons in Street Crossing”

Our 19-hour flight to Taipei, Taiwan included a brief stop at the new Kansai International Airport, which is quite a piece of engineering. It's built on a man-made island near Osaka, Japan. In Taipei we stayed at the huge Grand Hotel which is styled and decorated like a Buddhist temple. We spent three days riding the clean and efficient public transportation to the sights in and around the city. We visited some war memorials and monuments, the world's tallest building, and a waterfall in the country. Our closest cultural experience was when we bathed with the locals in a hot spring.

We spent most of the three-day visit working on the answer to Essay Question #1; “Compare and contrast Taiwan and mainland China.” Taiwan and China share a very tenuous relationship. When the Communists took over the mainland in 1949 Chiang Kai-Shek packed up his followers along with the best treasures from the Forbidden City and fled to Taiwan. Today, the military threat has diminished, but the diplomatic wars continue. Beijing refuses to do business with any country that establishes formal diplomatic relations with Taipei. There are no direct flights across the 100-mile-wide Formosa Strait. The standard of living in Taipei is a magnitude higher and seems to be the goal of the mainlanders. Mainlanders ride bicycles. Taiwanese ride motor scooters. Mainlanders ignore traffic signals and use their horns incessantly. Taiwanese are much more disciplined, both as drivers and pedestrians. Many Taipei crosswalks have timers which count down the seconds remaining to cross the street. An animated figure hurries his pace just before time runs out. Speaking of discipline, just try to get a resident of Taipei to smile before 6:00 PM. The Taiwanese calmly and methodically go about their business. It's said that the business of Taiwan is business, but we think that they'll be left behind in the future. English is not widely spoken, and most people are computer illiterate. This is due to the difficulty of keyboarding Chinese symbols. Each stroke in the written language requires a separate touch of a key. Several have to be combined to make a single character. Imagine typing “(/ + \ + -) =” instead of just “A”. We foresee a steady erosion of Chinese importance in the Internet age. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese made us feel very welcome. Taiwanese pay three dollars to visit the National Palace Museum. Foreign passport holders enter for free. In Beijing, foreign visitors pay ten times as much as locals to visit the Forbidden City or Great Wall.

It was a three and a half hour flight from Taipei to the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi. It should have required a lot less time, but we flew hundreds of extra miles to stay outside of Chinese airspace. We're not sure what we expected to see in Vietnam, but Hanoi wasn't it. Hanoi is like China with a French façade. The buildings look like drab Chinese cement block houses from three sides, but the fronts are neatly painted and elaborately decorated with intricate doors and fancy railings. This is probably symbolic of the strong Chinese culture mixed with the influence of a century of French colonialism. There is a lack of tourist infrastructure, but lots of hotels are being built on strong hopes for the future. Our tour operator laments that he turns away clients due to lack of hotel space which meets western standards. Vietnamese is an easily typed language and this report is being written at one of many inexpensive Internet cafes. The Internet access is a little slow. I'm not sure if this is because the Communist government restricts access to many websites. They claim that it's to keep porn out and the nation pure. They may be filtering porn, but definitely not violence. The kid

sitting at the computer next to me is deftly playing some shoot-em-up video war game. He's just chosen a bulletproof vest and a rocket launcher for his arsenal from the English-language menu.

Speaking of video games, do you remember the 1980's video game of "Frogger?" You would control a hapless frog as he tries to cross a street without getting creamed by a barrage of vehicles coming at random speeds from different directions. Crossing a street is just like that in Vietnam, except lane markers mean nothing, and there is no refuge on the sidewalk. The sidewalks are being used as scooter parking lots, or restaurants, or extra floor space for the various shops. There is a jumble of pedestrians, bicycles, cars, trucks, and scooters with up to four riders all competing for the same space. Our first guide, Tuan, explained that you look straight ahead, walk at a steady pace, and the traffic will avoid you. Just don't stop suddenly or you'll screw up their careful calculations of time, speed and distance. There really is no problem, and he said accidents happen only once a month. It must have been quite a coincidence, but we witnessed almost daily contact between pedestrians and various vehicles. Most were minor, but we saw a scooter with two elderly riders hit one pedestrian just in front of us and all ended up on the ground. Two days later, our private van struck a scooter, knocking him onto the ground in the median. There was a 20-minute argument over the fault, which we believe was our driver's, but the police were not called, probably because the scooter driver was not properly licensed or insured. We've visited 93 countries, and Vietnamese drivers are the worst, bar none. They weave in and out and lay on their horns constantly. Right-of-way seems to be a function of mass. We suspect that the reason for the poor driving is that this is their first generation of experience with motor vehicles.

In Hanoi we visited the Ho Chi Minh Memorial and several museums. Ho Chi Minh is still revered as a great leader, and the people seem quite content with their Communist government. We also visited the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prison where American POW's were held during the war. The government signs describing how well they were treated tell a somewhat different version than what we recall hearing at the time. Given recent events, it's difficult to be too indignant at what happened to American POW's in a past war.

Essay Question #2; "Compare and contrast China and Vietnam." Hanoi is a lot like China in that both are filthy and polluted. The air is a thick haze and Cheryl and I both developed watery eyes and scratchy throats. Outside of the capital, much of the area could be described as squalor. Both countries have Communist governments, but the economies are as capitalist as it gets. There may be no free speech or elections, but everybody knows that the way to better your life is through finding a good job or running a successful business. Factories are popping up everywhere as the government loosens control over foreign investment, and \$4/day is considered a good wage. There is still some corruption, but we didn't see the signs of opulence in the hands of the powerful like we witnessed in Russia. The Vietnamese economy moves on the back of scooters. We saw scooters piled high with everything from building supplies to chickens, live pigs, and cages full of dogs and other livestock. Yes, it was my intent to include "dogs" in the category of "livestock". The food was similar to what we ate on mainland China and generally good, but the average Vietnamese physique left me feeling obese at 175 pounds, so I didn't overindulge.

We took an overnight train to the northern hill country near the Chinese border. This area is populated by some of Vietnam's ethnic minorities. These 53 groups tend to be dirt poor, and spend their days laboring in the terraced rice paddies.

They wear colorful outfits and marry very young. Driving in the countryside is further complicated by the need to dodge animals and sections of the road which the farmers are using to dry rice or corn. We visited a local market and I was unsuccessful in my effort to purchase a water buffalo at a good price. Our guide Tuan took us hiking through the countryside many miles off the tourist path. We were invited into a small house with ten occupants including two infants and a 16-year-old girl, pregnant with her second child. Despite their abject poverty, they all seemed very happy. In fact, we were made to feel welcome by everyone during our stay in Vietnam, and not just because of the money we were spending. They are genuinely warm hosts and very forgiving for what the Americans did to their country three decades ago. The only exception to this rule is for missionaries. We were told that anyone with a suitcase full of bibles can expect a quick and unpleasant ejection from the country. They haven't forgotten that the French came originally to spread the word and stayed on to colonize.

The Vietnamese have a strong culture with emphasis on hard work, discipline, loyalty, duty and family. One cultural tradition and duty that our guide Tuan did not relish was how the dead are treated in Vietnamese culture. His mother-in-law had died three years earlier and been buried. It was now his duty to dig up her remains and scrape and carefully clean the bones. They would then be reburied permanently for long-term worship. We found many open graves in the countryside and near the beaches.

Our next stop was in the central part of the country, in Danang and Hoi An. Vietnam is over 1000 miles long and different sections have very different weather patterns. We arrived on the edge of Typhoon Muifa which was battering the southern part of the country with winds over 90 mph. We remember a line from "Forest Gump" from when he was in Vietnam; "...and then it started raining and didn't stop for six months". It rained for most of the time that we were in the central part of the country. The good news was that the rain and the sea breeze left the air refreshingly clean. We visited China Beach and a historical museum and did some shopping. Tailor made cotton shirts were \$8 and a suit was \$45. Bargaining is required for everything. We had to bargain for beer in a little party store when they tried to charge us more than the restaurants. The process requires lots of passionate discussion, but all smiles when the deal is done. The rains caused the river to be swollen beyond its banks, but the people just waded through the ancient town wearing plastic sandals. Our itinerary called for tours of the ancient ruins at My Son and Hue, but the roads to My Son were flooded and our scheduled hotel in Hue was underwater. We decided to fly to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) a day early. It cost us 32 cents per person to change our airline reservations, but it was worth it. We later saw on the news that scores of people had died in the floods.

This was not a trip for the mathematically challenged. One US dollar buys 33 Taiwan dollars or 15,700 Vietnamese dong, or 4100 Cambodian riel or 39 Thai baht. Imagine being in a small shop with no price tags in Hoi An, Vietnam. The shopkeeper says that the large backpack loaded with features costs 250,000. Quick now, is this a good deal? How much should you counteroffer?

It was 90 degrees when we arrived in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and the weather didn't change for the rest of the trip. Saigon has even more scooters and scooter crashes than Hanoi. We visited the War Remnants Museum which is the only place where Americans are not presented as honored and respected guests. There is everything on display from captured tanks and airplanes to actual pickled fetuses showing the malformations caused by exposure to Agent Orange.

The Cu Chi tunnels are located in the country 30 miles outside of the city. This is where many Viet Cong hid during the war. Cheryl and I were among the few tourists who wedged ourselves through the tiny hidden tunnel entrance and managed to crawl the 100-meter section open to visitors. There were displays about life in the tunnels and various types of booby-traps. For \$1/bullet, we were taken to a range to fire an old Soviet AK-47.

The next day we traveled by small boat through the Mekong delta. We visited orchards and rice paddies and sampled the local fruits. Our "getting close to the culture" experience involved spending a night in a local house. Our "bed and breakfast" had a dirt floor and the bathroom was in an outhouse. We slept on cots under mosquito nets in the company of an assortment of lizards. The walls ended several inches above the dirt floor, so there was no way to keep the reptiles out. We were welcomed into the family which was led by a 75-year-old veteran of the North Vietnamese army. They prepared an elaborate dinner which was served outside under the stars.

We continued up the Mekong River and visited some small villages. There were thousands of fish farms which are houses floating on empty oil drums with nets strung underneath. Each had thousands of fish which are fed through a trap door in the living room floor.

We took a speedboat for five hours up the river to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. We had to stop on both sides of the border where the guide paid bribes to limit the customs formalities to an hour and a half.

Essay Question #3; "Compare and contrast Cambodia and Vietnam." Cambodia makes Vietnam look downright prosperous. In Vietnam, the Gross Domestic Product is about \$1000/person. In Cambodia, it is around \$300. Ninety percent of the population consists of farmers and most live in thatched roof huts. Most villages have an elaborate wat or colorful temple with a tall pointed roof. Cambodia has suffered from decades of war, both internal and external. In 1975, three million people were killed by the Khmer Rouge including the educated and "rich". The towns were emptied, families separated and people were sent to work on collective farms in the country. Today there is rampant corruption. Fortunately for us, the police have been instructed not to harass the foreign tourists for fear of killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. There are still millions of unexploded land mines and 745 were stepped on just last year, so we didn't do any trekking off the beaten path. The streets of the capital are full of maimed beggars, and it's difficult to go anywhere without someone asking for money or trying to sell you something. The major exception to the poverty is the highly revered King who seems to be doing rather well for himself. We were very impressed by his Royal Palace and the collection of treasures.

The tourist highlight of Cambodia is Angkor Wat. This is a thousand year old group of 300 temples spread out over miles of jungle. We enjoyed two days with our excellent guide, Ly, exploring the sites. They are making attempts to limit the throng of touts and beggars by placing ropes to show the areas where they are permitted. One teenaged girl selling souvenirs was on the wrong side of the rope when she approached us, and we pointed this out to her. She informed us that there was no problem, because she had paid \$2 to a policeman for the privilege of crossing the line for the day. Lots of hotels are under construction, and the tourist infrastructure is pretty good, but the locals are still becoming

acclimatized. Cheryll found a sign that graphically explained that novice users of western style toilets should not stand on the seat and then squat.

It required two days and three flights to get home, including an overnight in Bangkok. That brings us to the fourth and final essay question. This time it's for you, the reader. "What does the song "*One Night in Bangkok*" really mean?" There are no particular rules other than entries should be sent no later than December 31, 2004 to rich@odendahls.com. We have a prize for the winning entry, and the results will be posted at <http://www.odendahls.com/>

This was an amazing trip that we both enjoyed. We will not soon forget the fascinating culture, excellent scenery and warm people. But the poverty left us thankful for all that we have.

We used a local tour operator who gave good service, so here's a free plug; <http://www.focusvietnam.com/>

Ask Loc, the owner, for Tuan and Ly to be your guides.

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