

# *Vietnam and Cambodia*



*March 2011*

*Molly and Bob Hillery*

We had visited Cambodia a few years ago but only for few days in Siem Reap with the sole purpose of visiting the Angkor Temple complex there. We had never visited Vietnam but it had been on our list for some time so when Viking River Cruises initiated a cruise on the Mekong River that covered both countries, we signed up immediately. We had used Viking for our trip to China in 2010 and had thoroughly enjoyed the visit and the service we received so we were anticipating a similar experience this year.

We were not disappointed. The organization was superb and the local guides were very informative and entertaining. The five star hotels in the cities were, of course, exceptional and the river boat – somewhat smaller than that we had experienced on the Yangtze – was well-appointed and comfortable and meals were once again excellent.

The visit started with a two night stay in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) where we saw the commercial center of the country and experienced the cosmopolitan mix of Asian culture with that of French Colonial, as well as the Western influence resulting from the large American presence in the 1960s and 1970s.

The cruise on the Mekong River began just a two hour drive from Saigon in the Delta and continued upstream in Vietnam to the border with Cambodia. In Cambodia, still on the river, we made a number of shore excursions, including in the capital city of Phnom Penh where we were taken to the Killing Fields of the Pol Pot regime of the late 1970s.

Further upstream in Cambodia, we left the river boat to drive to Siem Reap, home of Angkor Wat and other temples of the eighth to twelfth centuries, built at the height of the Angkor Period. We spent a full two days here visiting these remarkable sites which had been essentially lost to the jungle for 400 years before being re-discovered by French explorers in the late 1800s.

# ***Vietnam and Cambodia, March 2011***

## **Tuesday March 15**

We left home a little before 7:30pm to have dinner at Morton's downtown before driving on to the airport Marriott for the night.

## **Wednesday March 16**

We were up at 5:30 to get ready for the 6am shuttle to the airport. Check-in and Security were relatively speedy so we had about 30 minutes in the gate area before our first flight to Detroit. This flight left at 7:30 and we were in the terminal in Detroit before 8:30 – leaving us four hours before our second leg to Seoul.

We had a McDonalds breakfast and then sat in the Sky Club until it was time to check in for the Seoul flight. This flight left about 30 minutes later than its scheduled time of 12:30 but, with a 3 ½ hour layover in Seoul there was no concern about connecting,

The flight headed due north across Michigan and into Canada at Sault Ste Marie. We continued north until we were well into the Northwest Territories and then turned a little more westerly towards Alaska and then the northern portion of Russia.

Lunch was served shortly after leaving Detroit and then most passengers seemed to bed down for a nap in the new flat bed configuration that Delta is introducing on its long haul flights. One downside to this particular "herring bone" configuration is that no two seats are next to one another so people traveling together are not even within speaking distance.

The long flight (14 hours) was very smooth the whole way and we both had a couple of naps that helped pass the time as we flew over Russia, China and into South Korea, avoiding North Korea by taking an easterly swing before landing in Seoul. It was a beautiful sunny day, although the temperature was only about 40F.

We spent a couple of hours in the Korean Air Lounge before boarding our 7pm (it was now Thursday afternoon in Seoul) flight to Ho Chi Minh City. This 5 ½ hour flight was operated by Korean Air Lines and once again we were struck by the difference in service and personnel between this airline and Delta.

We arrived in Ho Chi Minh City soon after 10pm and entered Vietnam for the first time. It was an easy passage through Immigration and Customs and then we quickly found a taxi to take us to the Sofitel hotel downtown. Once checked in we found that we weren't really very tired so we went to the bar for a late night drink and then took showers before retiring some time after midnight.



## **Friday March 18**

We both slept very well and woke up feeling quite refreshed soon after 6am. We had breakfast in the hotel before attending a briefing by our tour guide who gave us an overview of the whole tour but primarily covered the things we were to see and do in the day in Saigon.



At 9:15 we left by bus to visit first the old presidential palace. This had been built to replace the French-built building that had already been destroyed in the Vietnam War but was occupied by three presidents only very briefly since it became redundant once the North took over. It is now used as a meeting hall on occasion and as a museum-type reminder of days gone by. It is now called the Reunification Building.



*Inside and outside the Reunification Building (formerly the Presidential Palace) and a glimpse of Saigon*

Then it was on to two markets. The first was in Chinatown and dealt solely with the wholesale trade, so there was no hassling of us as we passed the hundreds of outlets selling everything from foodstuffs to clothing to electronics. Amazingly, although housed in a permanent building, every item is brought in and set up every day – and taken out again at the close of business. Motor bikes and scooters (of which there are four million in the city) haul everything to and from the market

and it is not unusual to see a bike piled high with clothing, plants and vegetables, or even televisions and refrigerators. It is equally common to see a family of four on one scooter!



***Wholesale Market, Ho Chi Minh City. More deliveries on the way.***

***"Need a hat?"***



***See how much you can get on a bike!***

The second market we visited was more typical in that it traded directly with the public at the retail level; the public being local shoppers and tourists alike. Again, the variety of goods for sale was impressive but, as one would expect, the tourist was approached and encouraged at every turn. The "hassling" was not aggressive and, indeed, was very friendly, although for the average Westerner the encouragement to buy through the use of a personal touch (with the emphasis on "touch") was a very different experience.

We returned to the hotel for lunch – we had a simple appetizer of egg rolls and a drink – before re-convening for the afternoon tour.

First stop in the afternoon was at the workshop and sales outlet for lacquer work pieces – together with the usual sales pitch. Once again, however, the staff were present to assist but nowhere near as aggressive as many similar places we have visited around the world. And the pieces for sale were very attractive, so we did our small bit for the economy of the country.

The next stop was at the War Remnants Museum, formerly called the War Crimes Museum and before that "The House for Displaying War Crimes of American Imperialism and the Puppet Government [of South Vietnam]." There is no doubt as to the message here: America was guilty not only of meddling in the internal affairs of Vietnam but of committing the most horrendous crimes against humanity. Following World War II and the beginning of the end of French rule, Vietnam was partitioned, much like many countries in Europe and Southeast Asia. The French departure and a reluctance by the South to abide by the dictates from the North, plus increased Communist aggression led to the US involvement which of course was very unpopular in many countries around the world, including within the United States.



*"We would like to thank the communist parties and working class of the countries in the world, national liberation movement, nationalist countries, peace-loving countries, international democratic organizations, and progressive human beings, for their whole-hearted support, and strong encouragement to our people's patriotic resistance against the US, for national salvation."*

(Excerpt from political report of the Central Executive Committee of the Vietnam Communist Party, at the 4th National Representatives Conference, Dec. 1976)

The museum paints a very ugly picture of the American presence and particularly of the damage done to both the countryside and its people by Agent Orange. Photographic displays are very graphic and totally one-sided. Although we lived through the war (in both the UK and the US) and were of course well aware of the anti-war protests in America, we were not directly affected and probably not as aware as we should have been of the losses and devastation. This museum brings all that up front and is a very sobering and disconcerting experience. But as our guide said before we went in: "Take a look, see what history says, take it into your heart..... and leave it in the museum. We need to look forward!"



*Modern Ho Chi Minh City and the ubiquitous bikes.*

Our final afternoon activity was a bus tour of the downtown area with a brief stop at the cathedral and central post office. The cathedral is a nineteenth century French structure which is a fine brick building (materials for its exterior were imported from Marseilles) with a rather plain interior. On the other hand, the Post Office is ornate both inside and out and one of many examples of the French colonial influence still standing. Others include several early 20<sup>th</sup> century hotels and large homes, all of which are now being challenged by 21<sup>st</sup> century high rise architecture.

In all, today was a fast-paced overview of a very interesting city that has a wide range of architecture, culture and peoples as well as a long history overshadowed by the 1955-75 period from which it seems to be recovering very well with no obvious lingering animosity against Americans.

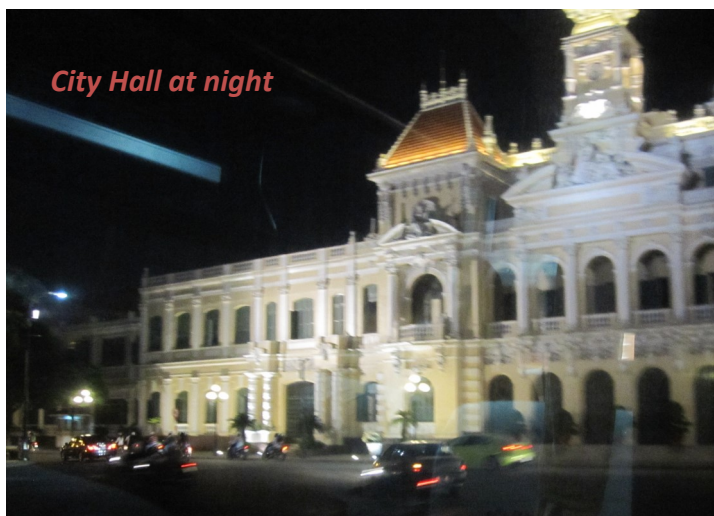


***French Colonial Cathedral and Post Office***

In the evening we went for dinner and a show at the Rex Hotel, apparently used extensively by US Servicemen during the war. The meal was a seven course Vietnamese creation, all of which was very good and served by a very efficient staff. The “floor show” was by two groups – a musical trio and a four person dance troupe. The music, although a little unusual to Western ears, was good and one instrument in particular (a single-stringed horizontal “zither”) had a sound box that gave it a tremendously wide range. The silk string was attached at one end to a wooden rod which in turn was attached to a half coconut shell which served as a resonator. The other two instruments were more conventional multi-stringed zithers which were either plucked or struck by hammers much like a dulcimer.



*Dinner and Entertainment at the Rex Hotel*



*City Hall at night*

It seems that all organized tours must have a “typical Vietnamese (or Chinese, or Thai or Maori, etc.) evening” but this one was better than most and the meal, especially, was a good introduction to a wide range of local fare. We returned to the hotel about 10pm and finished the evening with a drink in the lobby bar.

