

Saturday March 19

We had breakfast in the hotel, checked out and were on the bus by 9am. A few lasting views of Saigon.



Ho Chi Minh City from our Hotel Room



An Electrician's Nightmare



I told you we could get the whole family on this bike

It was a two hour drive to the point where we embarked on the river boat that was to be our home for the next seven nights. The drive to the Mekong River took us through predominantly farmland – rice, fruit and vegetables – and very lush countryside, which was perhaps not surprising in that we were crossing many tributaries of the river in this delta region. The homes, once we were out of the city, became more and more crude and the living conditions clearly were less ideal but the people seemed to be as friendly as those we had encountered in Saigon. Obviously the labor content of work here was much greater than in the city but apparently there is a heavy interest in school and education even in the more remote areas on the islands and banks of the delta. School attendance for all ages is paid for by the parents, although it would appear that it is generally quite cheap and in many cases subsidized to some extent by the government.



Through the Delta to the Mekong River

We were welcomed on board our ship (the original of which was built in Glasgow) with a drink and orientation talk on the sun deck. The ship is small but is very nicely appointed and the cabins are relatively spacious – and air conditioned. With temperatures near 90F and humidity to match, this was a definite plus.



After lunch (very good) we relaxed until about 3:30 and then were taken on a 2 ½ hour excursion to the floating market and to visit some of the local industries on the islands. We were taken there in two smaller boats which pulled alongside our ship; this made for an interesting embarkation and an even more challenging disembarkation at our points of call en route.



Apparently the area is filled with family businesses which encompass everything from salt refining to rice product manufacture to rice wine distillation. We saw examples of each of these and sampled the products which were made under extremely hot and sticky conditions – often with a roaring fire to add to the misery index. How these people could actually do work under these conditions is difficult to imagine when we visitors were hard pressed just to stay “cool” while simply watching.



Industry and Commerce all along the river

Our last stop was at an old French colonial home (still occupied) which provided a stark contrast to the thatch or corrugated iron roofed shacks occupied by the majority. This home was set in very ornate gardens and, as is the custom in the remote regions away from the city, the land area contained its own cemetery for generations of the family.



French Colonial Riverside Home



It is difficult to imagine in this age of television (even the most modest housing seemed to have one), cell phones (again ubiquitous) and the Internet just how long the lifestyle of living on the river (either right at the water's edge or actually on board a boat) can continue. Apparently the custom has been for each generation to succeed the last in the family businesses, all of which are tied to the river in some way and life seems to have gone unchanged for many years. But how can it last as Vietnam very quickly transforms itself to at least a more mechanized farming community and ultimately a strong industrialized nation?

We returned to our ship with just enough time to take a quick shower and then enjoy cocktails on the sun deck and be introduced to the crew as the moon brightened and night time fell on the river. This was followed by

another good Vietnamese meal onboard, after which we retired to catch up on our sleep for another hectic schedule tomorrow.

Sunday March 20

We were up soon after 7am and had breakfast before once again leaving on an excursion through the delta, primarily via a small boat. It took about an hour to reach our first stop at a brick works, but along the way we passed hundreds of boats of all sizes, each carrying its own load of everything from a couple of people to tons of bricks to haystacks to rice – and all products in between.



Life Along The Mekong



At the brick works we saw rice husks being unloaded (used for firing the kilns) and watched as dozens of soft tiles and bricks were laid out in the sun to begin the drying process. The tiles complete the drying operation naturally but the bricks are loaded into kilns for firing.





Right next to the brick works, rice was being separated from the husk and then, via a series of shaking machines, was converted to the white rice that is sold around the world. The whole small industrial complex was hot and dusty and would not pass most of the OSHA safety standards, but provides employment (\$2 per day) for families in the area. Many of the workers in these heavy lifting jobs were women.



Back on the river we saw once again the hive of activity that takes place on and near the water. This particular tributary, as much of the delta we have seen so far, was covered with boats which somehow managed to go about their business at a frenetic pace but it all seemed to come together to provide work and provisions for its people.

We disembarked again to walk through a produce market in which every conceivable food (and some not so conceivable) was being sold to the retail customer. There were dozens of fruits and vegetables – some familiar, some not – all of which looked to be very fresh. Similarly, meats and fish were available either killed and prepared for cooking or, just as often, still alive and kicking (or swim-

ming). Everything was available from eel to snake to rats – as well as any meat and fish we might be more familiar with at home.. It was fascinating to wander by the stalls and see the variety of produce and the manner in which it is sold.



Everything is fresh!



Our final stop was at the home of a couple that made news in the thirties and later by way of a movie called "The Lover". This movie had been shown on board our ship last night but we missed it as it wasn't scheduled to finish until midnight. However, it was the romantic story of a French girl (the daughter of a colonial official) and a Chinese local who fell in love and apparently had a rather "hot" affair, at least according to our guide. I'm afraid that not knowing the story put us at a disadvantage and all we could do was admire the house.



We then returned to the ship, which had moved further up stream to provide a much shorter journey back.

Lunch was served shortly after our return and then we had over two hours at leisure before taking another short shore excursion. This one was to one of the smaller islands in the delta which was the site of a French Roman Catholic Monastery in the late nineteenth century. Apparently many missions were set up on the delta islands rather than in the cities because the newcomers were not welcomed in the larger communities. On this island they must have done a good job, however, because 95% of the population remains Catholic to this day. (Surprisingly the percentage is about 20 throughout Vietnam).

Over the years the monastery has been used for a number of purposes, including as a concentration camp for the South Vietnamese officials during and after the war. It has also been used as a shelter home for widows and is now occupied by over a hundred nuns.

We visited the church on the site which is quite colorfully painted on the outside but inside is a rather stark all-white with very little statuary or paintings. An adjoining graveyard contains the remains of many of the missionaries who settled here.

The monastery is set in a large garden area with many trees, shrubs and small ponds. Apparently they still try to be somewhat self-sufficient and provide foodstuffs on site. Not least of this self-sufficiency is a two acre rice field which provides, we were told, over 6 tons of rice per year, thus allowing some sale of the surplus crop.



There had been a brief but intense thunderstorm in the area just before we left on this excursion and, although we saw only a few drops of rain, the already high humidity levels were raised even further. It was good to return to the air-conditioned cabin and take a cooling shower.

The ship sailed immediately after our return and at 6:30 we enjoyed cocktails on the sun deck before having dinner.

