



North Vietnam

MORE THAN HANOI

WORLD TRAVEL AS LIFESTYLE SERIES

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2020

The look at North Vietnam in late January through February offered so many changes and non changes from the visit in 2011 (Hanoi...More than Coffee, previously on iBooks). There are now four-six lane expressways squirting out of Hanoi; roads that charge a toll but are well constructed. In contrast, Old Hanoi, with its charming narrow streets, has very few traffic lights. The airfare from Philadelphia on United Airlines was \$1278/return. It was now possible to get an online visa for \$12. To have the visa entered into the passport on arrival cost another \$25. Old Hanoi has a variety of good three star hotels. The hotel we

used in 2011, The Joy Journey, is now a hostel with no private rooms. I booked a suite in The Spoon Hotel (aren't these wonderful names?) for 600,000 Dong/night including breakfast. That is \$24 a night with "order off the menu" breakfast! Within an hour I was contacted by Lucy from the reception, who gave me her WhatsApp connection. This





was a good start for a constructive one month relationship. I was accompanied by my Dutch friend, Marjan Vuurman, who lives in Costa Rica. Her travel savvy, fluency in four languages and warm demeanor took away the rough edges of the difficult task of international travel. While FaceTiming her Mother from the empty ANA executive club in the Haneda Terminal (Tokyo) at 4 am, she was approached by a smiling attendant who bowed and handed her a note:

“Kindly go and sit in the soundproof booth to continue your call.” The fatigue from the 18 hours of flying was relieved by our burst of uproarious laughter. It was then a miracle they did not kick us out of their fancy facility.

Old Hanoi

O

ur arrival on ANA from Tokyo at Hanoi's Noi Bai International airport was delayed until our visas found their proper place in our passports. The car from the Spoon Hotel was in no rush; seemed as if no one on the road was in a hurry; the city of 8 million souls gave the feeling of calm. As we entered Old Hanoi, the thick traffic mandated a snail pace. The Spoon Hotel was 16' wide and 8 stories high. The reception was in the front with the dining room in the back and the stairs and elevator in between. Floors 2-8 contained three rooms each, some of the rooms in the front having an outside



porch. Our room (701) had a nice walled porch. There was a time in Vietnam when buildings were taxed by their width so this is why many buildings are strikingly skinny.

We learned from the reception desk that money changing was easy, about two blocks away. A row of money changers were located in the same block, so we chose the one in the middle. They handed my passport back without looking at it. The exchange rate was 23,455 Dong/American dollar. My \$200 grew to 4,691,000 Dong in seconds. There were no coins; 100,000 was a bit over \$4; so that was a good guide for easy figuring. In 2011, the Dong was 20,000 to the dollar so the inflation was not excessive.

By now we were hungry for dinner. We asked some guys who were having coffee in front of a lounge who gave us directions to the Bún Bò Nam Bò that was only two blocks in the opposite direction.



Their specialty was fermented beef noodles. The food was prepared in the front by the street with the two room dining area full of

customers. We were seated opposite a European couple. The woman was Dutch so that was an instant connection for Marjan. They had been working in Vietnam for a few months but were new to Old Hanoi. They were raving about their food tour the night before. With a fellow by the name of Luke. Seemingly on cue, Luke and his new evening clients walked in so Marjan took his email and booked us for tomorrow night. Luke was a lifelong resident, English speaking entrepreneur, who gets food tour customers from Trip Advisor. His two opening promises were:

"You will have plenty to eat and no diarrhea: guaranteed."

We visited six venues, I say venues because some of them were too small to be called restaurants. All were family businesses with only a few items on the menu; in Old Hanoi the restaurants with large selections on the menu are not the best. We began with beer and ended with ice cream; all special and tasty. The itinerary:

1. Bia Hoi: Local draft beer- intersection between Dao Tu/ Hang Buom Streets (beer quarter). The name for street in Vietnamese is Pho. It can also mean soup or prostitute depending on how it is pronounced. Be careful!

2. Banh My: Vietnamese sandwich- 14 Hang

Buom Street

3. Bun Bo Hue: Fermented beef noodles - 60 Bat Su Street.



| PHỞ BÌNH - BÚN BÒ HUẾ | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------|-----------------------|--------|
| PHỞ / RICE NOODLE SOUP | | BÚN / RICE NOODLES | |
| Bò Tái / Eye round steak | 40.000 | Bún bò Huế | 40.000 |
| Bò Chăn / Brisket | 40.000 | | |
| Gà / Chicken | 40.000 | Bún gà / Chicken | 40.000 |
| Gà / Egg rolls | 40.000 | Tái / Eye round steak | 40.000 |
| Tái chín | 40.000 | | |
| Eye round steak and brisket | 40.000 | NƯỚC / WATERS | |
| Tái giò | 40.000 | Trà đá / Ice tea | 2.000 |
| Eye round steak and egg rolls | 40.000 | Lá vối / Lát ougolia | 2.000 |
| Chăn giò / Brisket & egg rolls | 40.000 | Cocacola | 10.000 |
| Gà giò / Chicken, egg rolls | 40.000 | Lavie | 10.000 |
| Thịt cốm / Mix | 40.000 | | |
| 11h30 - 15h00 | | | |
| Phở xào | 50.000 | | |
| Stir-fried rice noodle | 50.000 | | |
| Mỳ xào | 50.000 | | |
| Stir-fried beanton noodles | 50.000 | | |
| Tái lăn | 50.000 | | |
| Áp chảo / Sautéed rice noodle | 50.000 | | |

4. *Pho Chien+ nom dau hu sot chanh leo: deep fried pho+tofu tropical salad with passion fruit sauce- Liu Rui Restaurant -12 Hang Manh Street.*
5. *Bun Cha: Grilled pork with rice noodles-12 Dinh Liet Street*
6. *Kem Xoi: sticky rice or coconut ice cream- 95 Hang Bac Street.*



For those who prefer the more conventional Western treats, they were available in the same neighborhood with traditional American fast foods. The competitor to Starbucks was Phuc Long where the ambience is as good as the fare. Vietnam is second only to Brazil in the coffee production of the world. Their gourmet

coffee is Weasel; yes, the beans go through the Weasel first. I had a Weasel ice coffee with carrot cake at the Silk Path Bistro... delicious!

Old Hanoi is





easily walkable with the Hoàn Kiếm Lake in the middle. It features many narrow, crowded streets with few traffic lights. The formula to cross the street is to pause on the curb with a small, sincere prayer; and then begin walking in a slow, deliberate manner and everything coming from all sides will go around you. Do not hesitate by second guessing or there can be trouble. I remember crossing a 5 point intersection when I heard a fuss behind me and suddenly there was a motorcycle wheel paused 1 inch from my left foot and a man's voice was heard in my right ear,

"Sorry!"

He was off before I was able to reply,

"No problem, sir."

If a driver decides that he is going the wrong way; he will do a slow u turn in the intersection; no problem. Just think of all the money



the city saves by not having traffic lights. Where there are traffic lights they are moderately observed.

It was such fun to walk out the door of the Spoon Hotel and explore; to the left the flower ladies and fruits, meats and fish for purchase on the right. These were all family businesses where their housing existed just behind them. The neighborhood had shops for



buttons, buckles and tin. Old Hanoi is also a Mecca for pearls, silk and jewelry.



A clothes dryer, Hanoi style, is on the right. Really cool...Ha!

There are over 5 million Catholics who cherish St. Joseph's



Cathedral. Nothing like flowers to brighten a dreary day.



Hoàn Kiếm Lake is surrounded by a walkway with many floral gardens and cultured trees. A patriotic garden was replaced 2 weeks later with a new planting done by many hands in one day. The



red bridge and tower was popular every day.

The 1000 year old Municipal Water Puppet Theater was not to be missed. It features talented musicians and puppeteers who do a charming show. Many of theses artists are young; their skills can be spellbinding and humorous. The effort is unique to Vietnam; the audience is smiling when they exit the theater after the show.



Yes, you can buy most anything in old Hanoi. Eating dog is something that really gets the attention of foreign visitors; maybe the rumor is a myth.

“Lucy, where can we buy dog meat?”

My question made her wince, her answer was vague.

“Don’t know, but maybe only a few old people will eat dog.”

When I asked a friend from the neighborhood, his answer was



“...Up that way from your hotel”.



Sure enough, up about seven blocks along the railroad, I came upon this scene. Old customs die hard.

Fine crafts and designer shops are never far away when one meanders slowly through the old quarter.

SaPa

*I*n the northwest part of the country near China lies the town of SaPa. In 2012, it was a village; now it is a city with many high rise buildings, mostly hotels, surrounding a lake. The world comes now to hike to the hill tribes: Hmong (52%), Red Dao (25%), Tay (5%) and Giay (2%). SaPa can be chilly because it located

at high altitude near Fanispan (10,312 ft.) - the country's highest mountain. There are officially 54 ethnic minority groups making Vietnam high in diversity. About 80% of the population of 90 million persons in Vietnam are from the Kinh tribe. The tribal situation makes the country unique in all the world.

We were met by Chu and her friends in the lobby of our hotel, The Golden Villa. Her full name is Lythichu Ly, a member of the Hmong Tribe. She was an instant ray of sunshine who barely came to my shoulder



while standing in her green boots. She will escort us down to her village (Lao Chai) only 14 kilometers away.

“The trail might be muddy today; would you like some boots?”

“No thanks, we’ll take our chances.”

We had no need for contacting some athletes foot fungus from previous hikers.

Chu, who graces the cover of this book, at that moment was four months pregnant.



The trail was steep and slippery and she would always be out front waiting for us to catch up. Many times she would look back and smile,

“Are you ok?”

Our excuse was that the gorgeous scenery and photo taking was retarding the progress. There was no possibility that we could be exhausted! We were saved after 2 hours by our arrival at the coffee break which also included snacks.

Our hiking mate, Sílvia Cartechini from Barcelona, Spain, was successful with the sausage before her mother rescued her. She



showed much energy for the difficult trek.



*C h u ' s
h o u s e ,
w h e r e s h e
a n d h e r
h u s b a n d
l i v e w i t h
f o u r
o t h e r s , w a s
a l s o a p l a c e
f o r t h e
m a k i n g o f
i n d i g o . H e r
h u s b a n d
w o r k s t h e
f i e l d s w h i l e
s h e
p a m p e r s*



the foreign visitors. I loved her practical kitchen.

Silvia was privileged to make a photo of Vu, who is now 100 years young. She has aged gracefully, proved by my photo of her in 2012. Her home



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is in a neighboring village.

Hard to enjoy lunch when there are so many buying opportunities.



The water buffalo is used to help build and maintain the terraces which are a continuing, gorgeous site for all. Someone

became creative with some fresh buffalo exhaust.



Other scenes from in and around the village:







Two years ago a cable car lift was completed over to the peak of



Fanispán. The terminal from SaPa features a fancy mall and hotel so close to the hill tribe villages; and yet so far. This is the view the

passengers have on a clearer day.

All are welcome to enter the church even when it's raining.

We are now friends





on Facebook with Chu. Her English, easily understood, was learned exclusively from her clients. She announced in June, "I born she on 19 in May. Her name Lyn. She now one month and one week."

We waited by the lake for our luxury van to take us back to Hanoi.





Halong Bay

Once upon a time, there was a dragon who was such a problem that he started a war with the folks around Hanoi. After a long battle the dragon was backed into the sea, just beyond Haiphong where it perished. The humps of the dragon, almost 2000 of them, all different, are now islands. They can be a mere rock pillar or a place where thousands of people live and work; all



surrounded by turquoise colored water.

“Lucy, we want a small, wooden, old boat for three days.”



She booked “The Venezia” which did not disappoint. Our suite with private bath was accompanied by six course meals all made by



men. Our 16 neighbors on board were from Australia, Italy, France, Bangladesh and Colorado who made good camaraderie.



On the top deck we were taught how to make a good spring roll on the first night. Rice vermicelli was used for the wrapping and it ended with a dip into a spicy fish sauce.

By day, a



rock outcropping looked different at high tide, or much later at low



tide accompanied by a private white sand beach.

Cat Ba is the largest island that is surrounded by only 366 other islands in this section of Halong Bay. 13,500 people live here where there is a cave that has a hospital three stories high (Hang Quan Y) that was used during the war



against America. It also was a convenient place to hide leaders of the Vietcong during the bombings.



One could go for a bicycle ride... or anyone for fishing; or maybe a peaceful hike among the small family farms.

There was also a 2 hour window for some private kayaking and



swimming with the equipment supplied by the Venezia. It didn't matter that the day was cloudy; it did take away from the idyllic experience. The only other place in the world that is similar to Halong Bay is in the Andaman Sea between Krabi and Phuket, Thailand. The area has the same beauty but on a much smaller scale.



Ninh Binh

This is an area of North Vietnam that the average visitor never sees because it is seventy miles South of Hanoi and not as famous as Halong Bay or SaPa. The area is fondly known as “the Halong Bay on the land.”

The big attraction is at Tràng An which is part of the World



Cultural and Natural Heritage. It features magnificent limestone outcroppings among flat fields of rice that are connected by waterways and lakes. The waterways flow through many caves

which compel you to suddenly duck or lose your hat giving a



reward of a headache. Visitors have the choice of many excursions by small boats. We chose the three hour, four cave deal; it was possible to do nine caves! Our pilot was a lady who rowed the boat with her feet. She propelled



the boat for the whole time with no timeouts for rest. It appeared that it took less effort to use the legs rather than the arms. There were many customers so this was a good source of income for the



local people. We passed many different rock surfaces worn by



floods and weather both in and out of the caves.

The Dia Linh Mountain in the middle of the river looks like



the giant Pen Tower.



A few temples dedicated to past heroes of Vietnam serve to grace the scene. Some more significant photos:



Our pilot seemed pleased with her tip at the end of her work afternoon. The boat inventory gave evidence to the size of the





workforce in the area.

The entrance to Hoa Lú is massive but a little touristy. It was the capital of the country during the 10th and 11th centuries, encompassing the reign of the Dai Co Viet. It was a citadel that



had natural protection from invaders because of the limestone monoliths and waterways. The old walls around the pond had an



interesting tree. The temple had halls that were ornate.





The huge temple complex at Chùa Bái Đính is a complex of Buddhist temples. The visitor needs comfortable hiking shoes to get past the ascending display of 500 arhats (enlightened Buddhists) who line the roofed path to the triple-roofed Pháp Châu Pagoda. One





one them had an interesting position with his right hand. The blackened areas on the arhats have been caused by frequent touching.



The pagoda houses a three story high ornate bell. The bell is rung a few times a year during holidays. I could find no cracks



among the intricate designs. I loved the doors at the entrance that make you step over the high threshold. It was hard to depict the



bright colors of and around the main Buddha, but was able to get a closeup of the crown behind it. The tiny Buddhas that line the edges



are spectacular. The jardinières that flank the gold and bronze



Buddha would be too tall to fit in my house.



Hang Mua Peak was a tough hike of only 500 steps. My lunch



was not settling well so Marjan did the one hour trek. The view of the Tam Coc Valley at the top was spellbinding even on an overcast





day. Her appearance at the dragon caused some admiration from the other climbers.

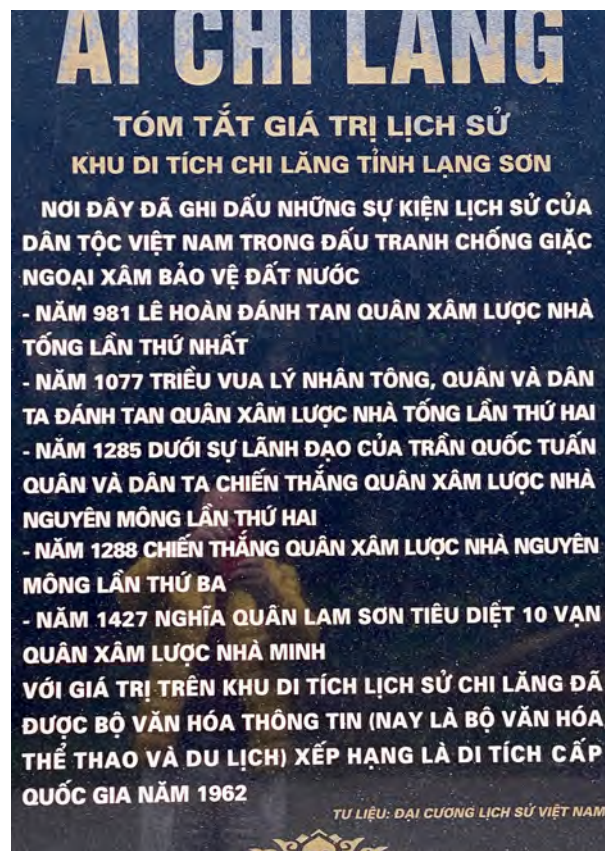
Bàn Gióc

*M*r. Bui Tri Nha and his driver met us outside the Spoon Hotel in Old Hanoi to grace us with a three day, private tour of northeast Vietnam, the whole way to the Chinese border. He is a bachelor who lives with his parents near the hotel. It is traditional for the male child to live at home until and after he marries. He will look after his parents in their old age and then take over the house with his children. We will be traveling in a circle about 750 miles to partake of the many treasures of the region.





The folks of Vietnam do not look kindly to China. This is due to the fact that China has been unsuccessful with a military invasion once every one hundred years for the last one thousand years. For the first 6 hundred years beginning in the 10th century,



they came through the valley Chí Lăng, Thỉnh Sơn. It was easy to come in the 20 km long valley but once in, they could not get out



alive because they had to exit through this narrow pass where they would be slaughtered by the Vietnamese soldiers. The Monsters face Mountain was smiling at them near the pass. This is an area



of grapefruit production within the mountains. This is a pulley



Grapefruit flowers



*system to transport the fertilizer to the highlands.
Lunch was excellent but a little spicy.*



The colorful pagoda, Dền Mẫu Dong Dang, at Cao Lỗ had an interesting dragon. It is also known as Mother's Temple.





The fortress (French Blockhouse) in Thach An was



overthrown in the fight for the independence from France in the 1950's. In this part of Southeast Asia, the French had built these bunkers at the top of mountains for defense purposes. It was here where the successful war began in September and October of 1950 which meant victory for the Viet Minh.

Our homestay for the night was in the village of Phia Thap, Tỉnh Cao Bằng among the Nung Tribe. It was a farming community where the income was supplemented by the making of incense.





This traditional craft has been handed down for many generations making the village well known. The materials for the incense are all native to the local karst areas.

Bamboo is used for the sticks. The ingredients are bark from the Bombay ceiba tree, sawdust and the leaves of the Bau hat tree that



forms the glue to hold it all together. The bottom of the sticks are dyed red after drying. The processes requires laborious hours which helps with the livelihood of the village. After the incense sticks were finished, they were left out to dry on the pathway. They were gathered up and put indoors for the night.



Our host was employed by the police and his wife worked at



the post office. It was up to Grandma to look after the children and





cook for us as well. We were blessed with one hour of sunlight



before nightfall when we could explore the well manicured farm land. They were blessed with some small tractors to make it easier for the water buffalo. The following photos describe the scene much better than words.







Our room was upstairs on the lefthand side of the house. The hot shower and cold

toilet were

located down the

stairs. The beds

consisted of mats

on the floor. If

you are tired

enough, one can

sleep on

anything. The

primitive,

sleeping facilities

were private

enough. Grandma

made our meals

in the fireplace.



Rural Vietnam has a love affair with rice wine. A keen competition occurs between families as to who makes the best rice wine. It is not actually a wine; more like a liquor at 40% alcohol. The tradition at meals is to belt out a four line shout in Vietnamese and then bottoms up. Your host will fill your shot glass immediately afterward...and then on to another very important



toast. In Ninh Binh , we had some British lads at our table who kept their glasses empty so the waiter had to keep bringing out new pitchers of the stuff! It was a good night to retire early.

*I ask Mr. Nha if the villagers own their farms.
“Oh no, the government owns all the land. If you want to farm, you can apply for a 50 year lease and then you pay rent every year to*

the government. If you want to plant a forest, the government has trees for you to plant.”

Oh yes, I now remember that this is a communist country. I come from a capitalist country. If I do not pay the property taxes on my farm in Pennsylvania, my land will revert back to the government.

“Wait a minute, our political systems have more in common than I thought!”

Marjan had her hands full with this young man.



Breakfast was basic but tasty with the coffee but no bacon or toast. After breakfast, Marjan’s new friend, had to look after the chickens.





The morning was socked in foggy. The thick air made the scenery surreal. The white dots are bags of fertilizer.



We met a fellow in the Nung Village of Phuoc Sen who made all types of cutlery from car springs. His farm tools are necessary for the cultivation of the local rice paddies and fields. I bought a



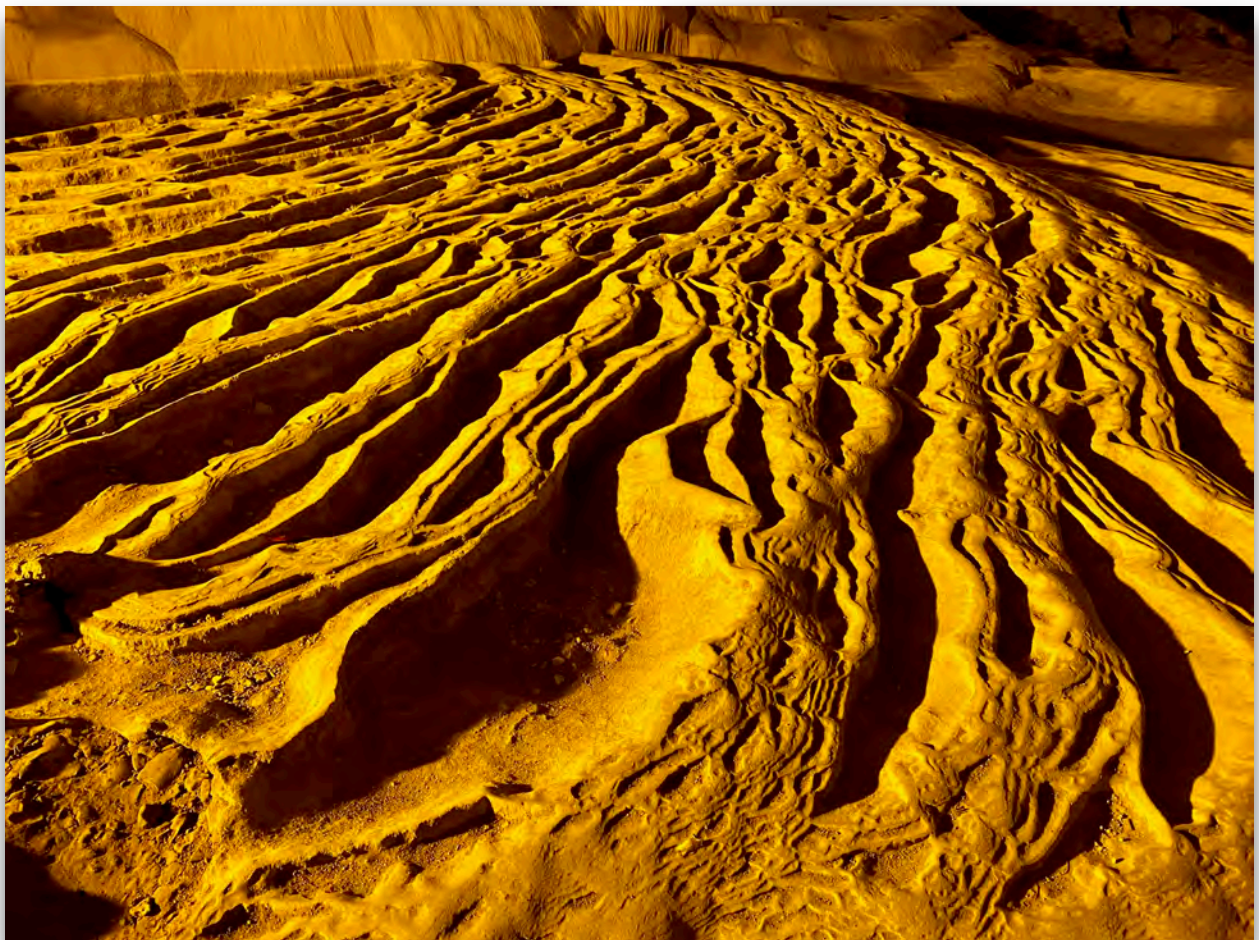
curved machete for outside that had a wooden sheath and a small cleaver for the kitchen.

One kilometer from China is the cave Đông Ngườm Ngao in the village of Trùng Khánh. The three of us were alone on the three quarter mile trek through to see a smorgasbord of rock formations.

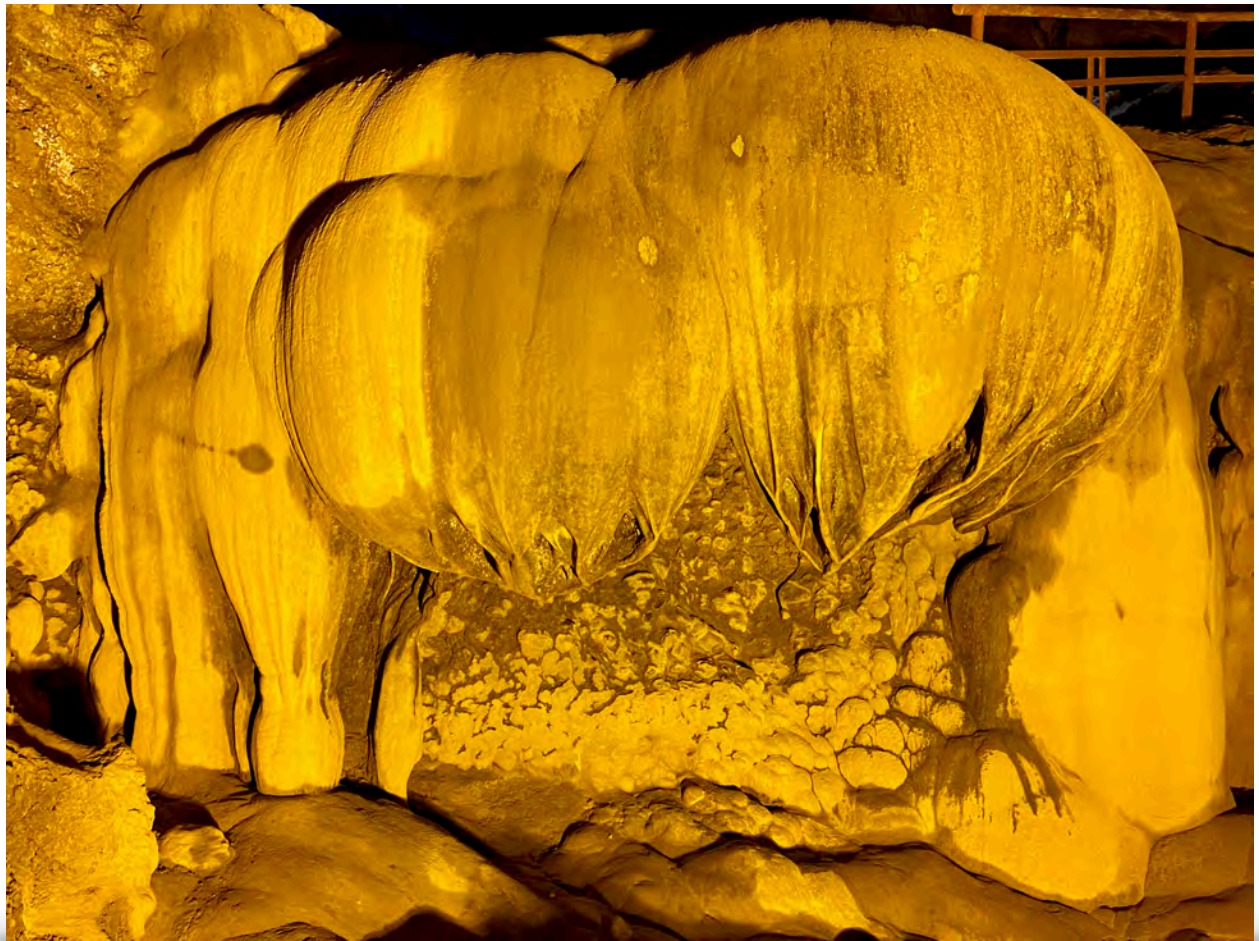


Stalactites and -mites were in such abundance. It was both massive and intricate with a variety of colors. This has been all accomplished by time and the erosion of the rock by the river that flows through generously in the rainy season. For me, this spelunking was almost as spectacular as the famous falls nearby. Our exit was well up the mountain from the entrance.











The Bàn Giộc Waterfalls are fed by the Quày Son River which is the international border between Vietnam and China. It is the fourth largest falls in the world for volume of water behind Niagara Falls, Iguazu Falls and Victoria falls. It is 169 miles North



of Hanoi. For most of the year it is two falls wide but during the rainy season it reverts back to one. There is a road that crosses at the top of the falls. It is almost 1000 feet wide. The 197 foot drop is



divided three ways by rocks and trees leaving areas that people are able to hike. The overcast day did not deter from photographing this magnificent area. The right hand side of the picture is China where no persons were seen while the Vietnam side did have a few people. The Corona Virus covit-19, definitely affected the scene!





We headed down the steep and curvy “snake pass” to The Ba Bê National Park which has a large area of pine trees and limestone that surround a lake that stretches for over five miles. It is the largest freshwater lake in the country. I loved the scene with the low slung boats waiting for us. Our accommodation was across



the lake in a homestay with a Tay family. The building was



constructed in the traditional Tay fashion. Our dinner had unusual



flavors. Delicious!

Some Californian lads with bleary eyes joined us at breakfast. They had rented motorcycles in Hanoi for \$6/day and were exploring the country for a month. I commented that “Someday, you will have some grand stories to share with you grandsons...” He gave a forlorn look and gazed to the ceiling.



"When I get home I will tell my Mother to never feed me soup again!"

The road manners in Vietnam are "the bigger you are, the more you rule." A two lane road can instantly become six. If you are the little vehicle, you go for the gutter. This translates to: If you're a biker you will have the roadside weeds stuck in your boots. The downing of many soups was not the fellows' worst problem.

The morning was crisp so swimming was out of the question. The karst formations on the shore and the stunning islands were more than enough entertainment. The lake was flat because we



were the only boat, so life was good, and we headed down the

Nang. River to explore some villages on foot. The cow and the pig said,





*"Let the sleeping dog lie."
...So we had a midmorning coffee with a fish snack.*





I liked the photo of Mr. Nha checking his messages on the lake. He was an excellent host; his driver and friends were helpful





*as well. They made the journey extra special.
Another cottage industry is plywood. A fast growing pine tree is
peeled and dried in the back yard.*





Mr. Nha had to negotiate the special kinds of pho for lunch in



Bà Kan. Either beef, chicken, pork or fish...the price was negotiable. The service was swift and efficient and the cook just



happened to be pretty, so all was fine. We now had Mr. Nha, the driver and two of their friends in our entourage, no problem.



Within the rolling hillsides heading towards Hanoi we visited some tea plantations. Tea is not as important as coffee in the country but we were given the grand tour and

warm sendoff by the future owners.



Our visit to Hanoi and North was as tiring as it was wonderful so we had to be indulged in the spa.



Lucy gifted our ride to the airport which looked modern and new. The security was thorough, they made me take off my shoes and my watch. After the X-ray I grabbed my belongings out of the tray and my watch fell on the floor. I waited until we were awaiting our flight to Tokyo and I noticed that the back and

battery of my watch was missing. When we returned to security no one was looking and there on the floor were the missing parts.

For the first time ever, I lived the first 18 days of this trip without seeing the sun. I thought it was maybe the air pollution in the big city of Hanoi; but no, it was just as overcast in the mountains of the hill tribes. Surely the reader will agree that the photos in this book are beautiful anyway, notwithstanding the bad weather conditions. Can you imagine how much more gorgeous they would be in the sunlight?

We know that the country will be fine in the future because the bears will be looking for the safety of all.



Text by John Bucher Herr

Photos by Marjan Vuurman and John Bucher Herr

