

## Vietnam Travels

February 20 to March 5, 2013

So when I left Khamheng and Kon at the Lao/Vietnam border, I was weeping and I'm sure Chung, my guide for Vietnam and Tu, the driver were less than thrilled. But I knew I had to put Laos behind me and look forward to new adventures in Vietnam.

Chung and Tu



### **You Want to be a Millionaire?? Then come to Vietnam!**

With the Dong (name of the local currency) at a little over 20,000 Dong to \$1 USD- you are an instant millionaire the minute you change \$50. And the strangest place I changed it was at the Lao/Vietnam border (did I mention that it was at the top of a mountain and it took two days of mountain driving to get there, and another two days to get to Sapa???)

After you are stamped in to Vietnam -- easy process as the guards have more important things to do like drink tea and play cards --- one asked me if I had Kip (Lao money) to change and how much. Yes. Do you want to change to Dong? Not knowing the exchange from Kip to Dong, I said yes. Out came a huge roll of money from his pocket and he counted out 1,000,000 dong. "But I owe you more" -- and he opened a drawer and pulled out a bunch of crumpled bills. The Bank of the Border Guards -- it couldn't have been easier.



### **Sapa**

Everyone knows about the minority groups in China's Yunnan province. Well, guess what, just a few miles away over the China/Vietnam border is the town of Sapa in Lao Cai Province with even more minority groups. These hill tribes still live and dress

Flower Hmong Women  
at Ccat Ba Market

in traditional ways. Two years ago on the OAT trip, my guide Lee Trien told me about this wonderful place and I wanted to visit ever since then. It is a perfect accompaniment to the Lao Elephant Festival though next time I plan an overland trip I will find out just how much mountain driving is involved.

Sapa was everything I hoped for. A lovely hill station with vestiges of French architecture, friendly people, a nice market and a good place to walk around as there aren't that many motorbikes trying to run you down. This is where the colonial French went to get away during the hot Vietnamese summers. It has a good market to wander around and because it is a trekkers jumping off point, lots of stores selling made in Vietnam North Face and Colombia Sportswear.

The Victoria Hotel is wonderful. I had a room with a balcony overlooking the well-kept gardens. Weather is chilly and foggy in the mornings and temperatures are cool and not like the furnaces of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).

Chung gave me a walking tour thru the town and soon we were followed by a bevy of young Black Hmong girls selling trinkets. There are various groups of Hmong in this area: Flower Hmong, Red Hmong and Black Hmong, each distinguished by the colors they wear. They look so young, yet some sport babies on their backs. "You buy from me?" It is heartbreaking to say no but how much junk jewelry or (badly) embroidered tote-bags can you have.

I loved this place! I got the same feeling as I do in Darjeeling or other India hill stations. People are young, hardy, healthy, air is fresh and everyone realizes they are in a very special place.

### **Does This Make Me Look Fat?**

And Chung, bless his heart -- turned out to be a good shopper! He helped me understand the differences in quality of things Made in China (cheap) and Made in Vietnam (better quality). And as we walked through the market, I could see what he meant. We ended up shopping with a store owner he knows -- Lee, who wouldn't sell me certain items -- "poor quality" she said. I was looking for a North Face jacket for a friend and she went into the stockroom to find me the best she had. It's gorgeous and I only wish she had it in my size too.

Later when Chung and I were at Cat Ccat and Bec Ha markets and I would try stuff on, he'd take a photo so I could see how I looked and....he'd give his opinion which was usually right -on. He was good at telling me



what the price should be so I would know to stop bargaining and bring out the money.

### **I Can't Believe I (almost) Ate the Whole Thing!**

Chung told me about a special fish of the area and kept calling it "Salmon" --- hmmm strange ..... as salmon need rivers and I didn't think there were big enough rivers here. But I was ready as I love fish. And it was on the menu, but known by its real name -- trout. This is the same high altitude trout found in the Andes and on which I OD'd on during several trips in Cuzco, Peru. (remember "trutcha a la plancha?").

The menu listed it in various French/Asian fusion ways, but not the way I like it best -- whole and grilled. With Chung's help and the maitre d' running back and forth to the kitchen to talk with the chef, it was deemed I could order off the menu. They offered a 1kg fish (2.2 lbs) which I thought would be fine as it included the head, tail and bones.

So I show up at my reservation time - 7pm. The maitre d' AND the chef come to me to say they could not find a 1kg fish in the market so they will prepare a 1.5kg fish for me. I didn't realize this was 3.3 lbs! We re-did my order dropping the risotto, thinking that just the fish and vegetables would be enough.

Boy was I right. The maitre d' served me herself and brought out an ENORMOUS fish with its head and tail flopped over the edges of the oval platter (not plate!). Chef Hugo came out to see what I thought and wished me "bon appetit". I ate, and ate, and ate but could get only thru a quarter of the fish and very little of the vegetable. It was a smart move to cancel the risotto. Each of the waiters came by to take a look at this behemoth of a fish too.



| The Fish!

When I had my fill, Chef Hugo offered to make me a salad with the leftover fish for the next day to take with me to Cat Ccat. I'm sure I'm the only person who ever left the Victoria hotel with a bag of beautifully packaged leftovers. That silly fish lasted me two more meals.

The nice by-product of the experience was getting to know Chef Hugo. Two days later when I returned to the hotel restaurant (I spent one night in Cat Ccat for their Sunday Market), he not only selected my dinner, but invited me into his kitchen to see it being





put together. And he prepared his specialty dessert for me - Crispy Dark Chocolate Truffle -- fried chocolate!

The presentation was unbelievable and I hasten to say that it is probably the best meal I've ever had in my whole life.

Chef Hugo's signature dessert -- Dark Chocolate Truffle (fried chocolate) with a banana milkshake and mint parfait. Yum!

### **I Can See China From My (Car) Window!**

The distances we drove within the Sapa District are not that far, but it takes time as roads are so curvy and often not very good. At one point there was such poor visibility that we stopped at a roadside booth to sit and let the fog lift a little. Tu is an excellent driver and is on these roads each day. His small SUV is very maneuverable.

He and Chung took me on a little detour on the way back from Bec Ha Market to the Vietnam/China Border. Cross a "friendship bridge" (behind me on this photo) and you step into Yunnan! I just didn't realize how far north in Vietnam I was.



After Sapa, I took the overnight train from LoCai to Hanoi and Ann Tours had reserved a 4 berth compartment just for me and all my luggage. It was a much better experience than I expected. The two lower beds were made up, there were 4 bottles of water in the cabin, and a basket with cookies and candies. Chung was on the train too and shared a compartment with other people. We had a nice restaurant dinner before boarding and the train leaves at 8:30pm and arrives in Hanoi at 5:30am. He got me to the Essence Hotel to have breakfast and leave my extra luggage before I continued to HaLong Bay, and here we said goodbye. I really liked Chung. He usually guides motorbike tours in the Ha Guiang (further north and more wild than Sapa) Province. This might be the first time he guided an older woman, but he treated me with care and respect and was an excellent and informative guide too.



## **A Return to HaLong Bay**

HaLong Bay is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is full of karst landforms and because of its location near the sea, it's often foggy which makes it a photographers delight. Two years ago the OAT group spent an overnight on a "cruise" but it wasn't that good an experience. The boat was old, most of us all got flea and mosquito bites and worst of all, the managers wouldn't let little "floating markets" near us so we could buy shells and pearl jewelry. That boat's "gift shop" had the same items at much higher prices. Well, I wanted to erase that memory. So Tony Nong (main man at Ann Tours) gave me a few suggestions including Paradise Cruises, which are the best boats on the bay. So I enjoyed a three day, two night program full of activities and wonderful service and food. I ended up having most of my dinners with Jared, a 30-something stock-trader from Australia. His

girlfriend was sick (flu, I think) so he and I shared a table. They had just done a very difficult trek in Sapa and I think it just wore her out.

It was a bit like "Honeymoon With My Brother" (book about a guy who's fiancée cancels the wedding with only a week to go, he had hotels and first class tickets to Tahiti paid for, so rather than lose everything, he takes his brother. They find out they are really good travel partners and spend the next year seeing the world. They were on Oprah) whereas poor Jared, who had hoped for a really special time with his girlfriend got stuck with me!

Luckily Helen (girlfriend) was able to make dinner the third night and they even invited me to join them for dinner in Hanoi!

## **Punished by the Universe (in Hanoi)**

I'd so been looking forward to my one full day in Hanoi. Just after I returned from HaLong Bay I knew something was wrong. My throat started closing up, my ears were plugged up, and I had a drippy nose. Allergies! When they hit me at home (usually in late August due to ragweed), they knock me off my feet for about 3 days. Now on my one day in Hanoi, I felt awful.

Chung had helped me find a guide to spend the day as a "walk with me, talk with me" guide. He arrived at the appointed time and I felt miserable. He told me more of his background and come to find out he is a food expert and does food tours! My favorite!! But I lasted only two hours of our 8 hour tour, then had to return to the lovely Essence Hotel and stay in a controlled environment for the rest of the day-- rats!

## **I Reach New Heights (or lows, depending on your point of view) at Airport Check-in**

I've already mentioned my luggage. I over-did it in Bangkok and ended up carrying everything with me most of the time. Where I could, I'd leave the extra bag in storage somewhere (like Bangkok before I went to Burma, Luang Prabang before the elephant festival or Hanoi prior to HaLong Bay) then pick it up in a few days. But when you fly you take everything with you. I had one internal flight in Vietnam - from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City and was 18 kg (40lbs) over and I knew it. Luckily, Vietnam Airlines fee is 20,000 dong (\$1) for every kilo (2.2 lbs.) so I wasn't expecting to pay very much. "How much is it to upgrade my ticket to Business Class" -- the agent looked like a deer in headlights. He asked another agent who gave me the same look. Business class has a more generous baggage allowance and if the costs were not too far apart, etc. Apparently it is so difficult to change an already-issued ticket that the agent offered to charge me only for 10kg. Instant discount!

## **A Chance Encounter with Mr. L.**

I can't tell you his full name, but I will tell you this. He is the future of Vietnam and we better watch out. I settled into my seat on the Hanoi to HCMC flight pretty happy with myself - a big discount on luggage charges and an exit row window seat. Not bad. Then HE sat down. Young, wearing baggy shorts, oversize T-shirt and big sport shoes. He was skinny too. We said hello then settled in to do our reading. During some turbulence we started talking. He is Vietnamese but lives in Singapore (where he owned a restaurant for awhile) and is visiting his parents for a few days. He was interested in Sapa and took some notes. We had a big laugh when he asked what I did in Hanoi and I told him I came to buy red-cut-out notecards.

I love these cards. Two years ago I bought some at the Temple of Literature (Confucius Temple) and later felt I should have bought more. They are hand-cut and you open them to a pop-out. Some are extremely elaborate -- like the Eiffel Tower, or Sidney Harbour Bridge.

Guess who imports them into Singapore?? Mr. L.! He buys 10,000 of each design (there are about 50) at a time. And guess who brought the iPhone to Vietnam? Mr.L. again! Apple doesn't have an authorized seller or store here, so he brought hundreds in from Singapore and they sold on the black market for \$1000 as demand was so high. He recommended I try Vietnam's version of Starbucks - Trung Nguyen. He's probably involved in that too.

Amazing person. And he's only in his mid-30's. This is why Vietnam is sure to become a super-power. It has a young population of well-educated people who are willing to take risks and work hard.

## Ho Chi Minh City

I didn't request guide services in HCMC as my goal was to shop. But guess what.... by this point in the trip I was (I never thought I'd ever say this) shopped out. So the only things I bought were new eyeglasses (they have the cutest frames here), had beads restrung at Ben Thanh Market (huge market a block from my hotel ) and had business cards made. Lee Trien (OAT guide) asked me if I wanted to update the shopping page on his website which I put together for him two years ago, so I did some price checking at the newer markets like Saigon Square.

The hotel experience was interesting. After having gorgeous hotels with magnificent restaurants in Sapa and Hanoi, I was at more modest hotel. But I had a great room with a jacuzzi tub in the bathroom and it was walking distance from Ben Thanh Market.

### Leader of the Pack or.....Hey, where's my seatbelt!

On the HaLong Bay cruise, an Australian couple told me what fun they had on an HCMC foodie tour.

You are picked up by a girl on a motorbike, visit five different areas of the city and eat street food at three of them. Sounds good. Yotrien (pictured) picked me up at 5:30, handed me a helmet and we zipped away on her fire-engine red motorbike. She is beautiful, smart and speaks English well. Our first stop was for a vegetable and meat soup and rendezvoused with the other travelers. There were 12 of us - Canada, Singapore, Malaysia and the US. Each person has their own driver/guide who comments on sites as we zoom past. At each stop, the main guide would talk about the area and the food. Most tourists stay in Zone 1 which is center city. But we visited Zone 7 - the richest to Zone 4 - the poorest. How about this menu: jumping chicken (frog), quail legs, goat, big, fat grilled prawns (shrimp), jellied coconut water and that was just for starters. No way would I have ever gone to these areas of the city on my own or even dared venture there and I doubt if I would have tried the street food. At one stop the music blared and people danced by us gang-am-style -- strange.



I was mostly terrified riding on the motorbike and think I screamed when there were some close encounters. You are so vulnerable as busses and cars use the same lanes. Yotrien was the lead girl, so as leader of the pack she drove the fastest. It turned out to be very social as when you are stopped in traffic or for stoplights, you talk with the people around you. At the restaurants our driver/escort sits with us and explains the food and shows us how to eat it.



## **A Little More on Traffic**

HCMC is a fast city with lots of car and motorbike traffic making it very hard to cross streets. Even where there are signals or policemen, drivers don't pay attention. And you're not even safe on the sidewalk as this is considered free parking for motorbikes or another lane when traffic is extra heavy. It was rare for me to cross a street by myself. I'd wait until a local came by and I'd cross with them, or if there was a policeman, he would help me cross. By the second to the last day, I decided I didn't want to cross any streets anymore and I would only walk and visit stores around my block. I found everything I needed: a day spa (where I spent my last morning), a mini-mart, the Trung Nguyen (Vietnam's Starbucks) and some restaurants. I was happy..... and safe.

## **Done with Dong**

I figure I've gone thru 10 million dong in cash Vietnam. By my second to the last day in HCMC I decided to use USD only and there were no problems. Everyone took it and seemed to prefer it. Luckily for us.

## **And Finally.....**

I was impressed with the services Ann Tours ([www.anntours.com](http://www.anntours.com)) and Tony Nong who coordinated everything from the Lao/Vietnam border post to the transfer to Ho Chi Minh International Airport on my last day. Mr. Thanh from the main office handled some of my distress calls and took care of whatever I needed. There were some blips -- so if you ever deal with them, take copies of your credit card statement to show money for the trip has been transferred. I think this was just an accounting problem, but it created havoc for me as I was already traveling in Burma and had to get Joe to find the paperwork and send me the info. And if you remember, Burma has very little internet or international cell phone access.

Also, in Thailand, Lao and Vietnam, local sim cards and pay-as-you-go talk time is so inexpensive there is no reason not to have a local phone. You need it to be in touch with your drivers and guides, and also to call the company when problems surface. When I couldn't find the driver on my arrival at HCMC airport, I called the office; when the hotel didn't have a record of my reservation, I called the office. When the hotel wanted a voucher (which I was never given), I called the office. A local phone is absolutely necessary.

I've often said that frequent-flyer miles are the last great bargain on earth. I used my Delta miles to fly business class to Bangkok (Vietnam Airlines) and home from HCMC. Delta put me on partner Korean Air on the last leg (13 hours) which had great service and I used the lounge in Ho Chi Minh (beautiful!), Bangkok (huge) and Seoul (excellent) during the layovers (including the 8 hour one in Bangkok), enjoying the magazines, buffets and shower facilities. Then drank Perrier all the way home.