

Wednesday, December 27, 2006

Today, Casy's bout with diarrhea turned bad and we stayed the whole day at our hotel or at Ha's house, where we went for lunch. Ha's father got us some diarrhea medicine for 51,000 VND that did not work quickly enough. The hotel got us Imodium, which seemed to work later that night. Since we did not go anywhere, today was a good day to reflect on all that we have learned about this country.

Figure 1: Lunch at Ha's house consisted of fried tofu, deep fried egg rolls, stir fried vegetables, rice noodles and some condiments. Wooden or ceramic chopsticks are standard utensils for eating in Vietnam homes and restaurants, with spoons included when soup is served. Meals at restaurants or in homes are served family style; everyone gets an empty bowl or plate and the food is served in plates from which everyone takes food.



First, Vietnam has mandatory military service for all citizens, men and women, once they graduate from high school. The few exceptions that are made are for those who leave the country, those with very rich and influential parents, and those who get admitted into the best universities. Military service here is different than in America. Vietnam rarely sends its soldiers abroad, and many end up serving as guards in the airports, at national monuments and on the borders. Most of the soldiers we saw on the streets were quite young, in the 20's usually. We also occasionally saw older men dressed in military uniforms. These men would often be sitting by themselves in the park, and Newton suspects they might be retired.

Figure 2: A group of Vietnamese soldiers walking down the road beside the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Notice the green garbage bin to the left of the soldiers. This is one of the nicest streets in the city of Hanoi as it is perfectly paved and there is a garbage bin. Most streets do not have garbage bins.



Second, many household items and daily objects here are downsized from what is found in America, or even in neighboring countries. Examples include vehicles, houses, staircases, eating utensils, garbage bins, food servings, clothing, and furniture. This is partially, but not wholly due to the Vietnamese people being smaller than the average American. Other reasons are also at play. For example, here, as in many other Asian countries, city streets are cluttered with tables and chairs of restaurants. Basically, to save on rent, many restaurants rent a building big enough to prepare and cook the food, but not enough to hold all of their customers. So, tables and chairs are laid out on the sidewalks and customers sit there while eating. This disrupts traffic, as pedestrians who would normally walk along the sidewalk have to pass by walking on the road. Likewise, many of the refuse generated by the clientele at these restaurants such as fruit peels, used napkins, broken plates and bent utensils get thrown onto the sidewalks and streets, thereby creating a mess that public street cleaners have to remove. As a response, the police regularly hold sweeps whereby they converge on a street full of sidewalk restaurants and confiscate all the tables and chairs that are sitting outside. In response, the restaurant owners purchase cheap plastic tables and chairs that can be easily and quickly stored, and cheaply replaced. To further minimize cost and maximize storability, the tables and chairs used are all quite small, and would not be appropriate for use anywhere in America except in daycare centers, preschools, kindergarten and elementary schools. This practice extends to many other types of stores, such as flower shops, tailors, car repair shops, etc, etc... So walking thru the cities and villages of Vietnam can be challenging, messy and sometimes dangerous as there is always the chance you step on something or someone.

Figure 3: Notice the small blue chair used by the worker at the flower shop in the picture at left. This chair is one foot tall, and is standard at many street-side restaurants, such as the one shown at right. For some unknown reason, all the chairs were either red or blue in color.



The use of streets by restaurants and stores is part of a much wider difference between America and Vietnam in the use of space by individuals. Specifically, in America, everyone parks their car or motorcycle in designated spots, and rarely in an unmarked spot. Not here; if there is an empty space people will park their vehicles in it. So one finds cars parked along the outer rims of roundabouts, along every street curb, on the sidewalks, at the corners of intersections, and parked facing both directions along one-way roads. In one instance we were walking on a one-way street where parking was prohibited along the left side. A police vehicle drove along and stopped in front of every car parked on the left. An officer would get out and tap loudly on the car's front hood until the driver came out. The officer would then point to the no parking sign and tell the driver to move on. We saw one guy move his blue pick-up truck after the being warned by the officer, only to circle around and come back to park in the same spot 10 minutes later. Similar practices were common as the police rarely give out written citations or issue fines. Warnings are just about it. Drunk driving here is probably not a big concern since everyone already ignores traffic signals and street signs so the police would be hard-pressed to separate drunk drivers from sober ones by driving behavior alone. It is also not uncommon for individuals to park their motorcycles inside stores. We first became aware of this when visiting Ha's father at his medical practice. He would park his motorcycle inside the front lobby. We then noticed this at many other places. Only restaurants and upscale places would keep motorcycles outside.

Figure 4: The concept of space usage is different in Vietnam than in America. Notice the motorcycles parked in a through way for people to make u-turns. Also notice the power lines hanging 8 – 9 feet above ground.



Figure 5: Motorcycles park in the inner ring of the roundabout on the left side. Notice also the white taxicabs parked two deep in front of the stores in the middle of the picture. People will park anywhere in Vietnam.



Another common practice here is many people would hang out on the streets doing nothing. Walking thru the cities and villages one notices that people, young and old, men and women, in groups or as individuals, will sit on street corners, by intersections, and in front of various buildings doing nothing except maybe talking on their cell phones

once in a while. A common sight at intersection corners or outside malls is seeing men sitting atop their parked motorcycles doing nothing, or sometimes even sleeping with their feet propped up on the handlebars.

Hanoi is an old city. The first buildings here date back thousands of years, and over time different rulers and architectural styles have added their flavor to this city. Each also left monuments that the locals have decided worthy to keep. Because of this Hanoi is somewhat like New York, Paris or Tokyo, where you can see a temple 1000 years old right beside an electronics store built last year. This does add flavor to the city as one could walk in any direction and see buildings of every size, color and shape within one block. Needless to say, there are no such things as Home Owners' Associations in Vietnam. One feature about Hanoi that Newton noticed is the prevalence of electric power lines at very low heights, often 7 – 10 feet above ground. This low height was acceptable for many reasons. First, 7 – 10 feet is quite tall for most locals, where men were typically in the 5' to 5'6" range, and women were even shorter. Second, this being a developing country, safety concerns are often placed second behind cost and ease of installation/access. Third, Hanoi is an old city so many homeowners probably do not care much for power lines strung from their rooftops. The situation is somewhat different in the countryside where electricity probably came later on in time. There, we noticed power lines were strung from high poles located away from where people would congregate.

Figure 6: Our hotel room at Pacific Hotel. The window behind us opened to the fire escape, and a brick wall behind that. This fire escape led directly to the kitchen; hence we awoke early every morning when the hotel staff started cooking breakfast. Our king size bed is actually two twin sized beds placed side by side. The bathroom is behind the camera.

