

Thursday, December 28, 2006

We awoke late today and just barely made it downstairs for breakfast. The first order of business was picking up our wedding pictures we took last week. We walked to the wedding studio and paid the balance of 2,180,000 VND. The pictures looked great, and we picked out 35 that they would make into a wedding album, and a DVD. We also got to pick one that they would frame for us.

At 2PM, Ha came by the hotel and we took a taxi to Vincom City Tower Mall. This mall is the biggest one in Hanoi, and probably one of the biggest in Vietnam. The mall was very similar to what is seen in other East Asian countries, and quite different than that found in America. The mall building was six stories high, with a movie theater on the top floor, and a food court on the fifth floor. Therefore, the mall was not spread out like in America. On one side of the mall were city streets, and many people would be dropped off here by their friends or on a taxi. Behind the mall was Vincom City Tower, a very tall office complex. There were clothing shops, electronic shops, furniture stores, jewelry shops, toy stores, and a pet store inside the mall. Due to trade restrictions between the US and Vietnam, most of the brand names on sale were Asian (Samsung, Daewoo, Toshiba) or European (Armani, Versace, Polo). This place was expensive by local standards, and the clientele here were probably wealthy.

Figure 1: The front door of Vincom City Tower Mall. Christmas decorations were still on display, including a Christmas tree and Santa and his reindeer at left. Legal restrictions against tobacco and alcohol retailers are not as strict here as in America; notice the Heineken ad across the front of the store.



Figure 2: Vincom City Tower was located right by the mall. Window cleaners are working today.



After walking around the mall for an hour or so, we had drinks at Highlands Coffee on the first floor of the mall. Casey drank Vietnamese tea and Newton had a Blue Ocean Soda. The total cost was 42,000 and we gave 2,000 VND in tips. Tipping is still not a big practice here in Vietnam and there is no standard percentage. Many customers often give 1,000 – 5,000 VND, regardless of the price of the meal. The coffee shop was at the front of the mall, so we could see all that was going on outside.

Figure 3: In front of the mall was a major intersection. Motorcycle taxis would hang out here and wave to foreigners and tourists offering rides around town. Highlands Coffee was located at the front of the mall. We relaxed at this expensive coffee shop while sipping some cold drinks.



Ha picked us up from the Mall at 4 PM and we went to the airport to pick up Casy's older brother, Andy. He was flying in to attend the wedding also, and this would be his first time in Vietnam. He lives and works in Jakarta, Indonesia, and is about the same age as me. His flight arrived a little late, so we waited for a while. Casy, Ha and Phong were anxious, as they had not seen him for several years. Ha, Phong and Andy knew each other from their days at ASU and working at Lee Lee's Oriental Market in Tempe, Arizona. Newton had never met him before. Finally, he came through immigration and we all greeted him. We got him and went back to our hotel. Ha had booked him a room just down the hallway from us. He unpacked and we headed out for dinner at Pho 24 with Ha, Phong and Heng at 8 PM.

Figure 4: Dinner at Pho 24. In the picture at left are Phong, Ha, Newton, Heng and Andy (from left to right). Heng and Andy get friendly in the picture at right. Casy took both pictures.



After dinner, we all went to a bar on top of Hanoi Tower. This bar is quite upscale and is known as a place where foreigners hang out. Inside were the bar, pool tables and a small restaurant. Outside, there was a swimming pool and a nice view of the city. The prices are expensive by local standards so few Vietnamese come here, but since all the bartenders and waitresses know English, many tourists come here. Inside, most of the guests were white people. John and Phoung met us there, and we stayed there from 9 PM – 1 AM. Andy and Phong shared their memories outside while smoking. John and Newton played billiards for a while, and then Phong and Andy joined in at 11PM. Newton ordered a Fanta soda for 20,000 VND. Fanta is one of the biggest brand name sodas in East Asia, and comes in multiple flavors like orange, strawberry, lemon-lime, etc... Newton, being a collector of foreign currencies, exchanged about 300,000 VND with Andy for Indonesian rupiah. After this, we went home to sleep.