

Sunday, December 31, 2006

Today was the engagement party for Ha and Phong. The day began early for the bridesmaids as Ha, Helen, Phoung and Casy went to the salon to do their hair at 10 AM. They were supposed to be finished at 12 PM but were not. This is traditional in Southeast Asia; there is no such thing as on time. The make-up lady was slow at her work, even though the ladies had an appointment with them, and there was another appointment afterwards. The bridesmaids got back to Ha's house at 1.30 PM. The engagement party was supposed to start at 2 PM with Casy and Helen going to the hotel where Phong's parents were staying. There was not enough time, since they still had to put on their dresses, so they ended up staying with Ha's family.

Figure 1: Images from the engagement party



The engagement party consisted of the following, all of which takes place at the house of the bride's parents. First, the bride goes upstairs (assuming there is an upstairs). Second, the bride's other family members arrive. Next, the groom's parents and other relatives come to the bride's house. All the older relatives; like the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles of the bride and groom sit down on chairs downstairs by the staircase. The wedding party and friends sit outside, or in another room. At the appointed time, the bridesmaids line up by staircase, then the groomsmen walk up and each groomsman gives a bouquet of flowers to one bridesmaid. The bride walks down the staircase in a special dress and is given her bouquet by the groom. Next, they say some ceremonial prayers and words, and are toasted by the family members inside. After this, the couple goes around taking pictures while snacks are served. Snacks consist of tea, beer, sunflower seeds, oranges and various cakes and cookies.

Figure 2: The groom's family brings cakes, flowers and other presents. At left the groom's brother brings some of these gifts in. These are laid out for display in the bride's house; see picture at right



The engagement party ended at 6 PM and about 50 of us went to dinner at a restaurant. It was located just down the street from our hotel. Phong's parents paid for the whole dinner. Our dinner party included the wedding party, some close friends and the immediate family on both sides. We took up two long tables. On one table sat the wedding party and friends. At the other party were the family members on both sides. This restaurant is unique and specializes in serving turtle meat, so dinner consisted of fried turtle meat, along with rice, vegetables, some noodle dishes and soup. Newton tried the turtle meat, which came in the shells. This was the first time Newton tasted turtle and remarked how it did not taste like chicken, but was good though. This place, like other nice restaurants, had no small tables and chairs outside. Instead, all the customers sat inside on properly sized chairs and ate of wooden tables. Alcohol is served out of glass bottles here; beer cans are a rare sight in Vietnam, which is interesting as soda on the other hand, usually comes in cans.

Figure 3: The engagement cake at left, under guard by Ha's parents at right.



Figure 4: Dinner at a restaurant down the street from our hotel. At left is the front façade of the restaurant as seen across the street from it. At right we see all the men sit around drinking and talking after dinner. Some smoke also as smoking is allowed indoors in most places in Vietnam.



Figure 5: One could pick out the turtle you wanted for dinner



After dinner Casy and Helen went to a nearby grocery store to buy some shampoo, body soap and lotion. It is winter in Hanoi so the weather was very dry. At 8 PM Andy, Helen, Heng, Phoung, John and us went to Sofitel Hotel to celebrate New Year's Eve. This is a 5-star hotel that had a New Year's Eve party on the top floor, which was about 20 stories up. We had to pay \$16/person to get in, but this fee included champagne and party souvenirs. We had to sit outside since all of the tables inside had been booked before hand. Most Vietnamese people do not really celebrate New Year's Eve as they have their own calendar with its own New Year. This is why John and Phoung picked this place as it celebrates New Year like in America. We noticed there were many American men there with local girls. Some of these were probably high-class prostitutes, looking at their dress. It was very cold and windy up there and Newton got sick. Casy ordered some Vietnamese tea for him (\$3.47) but the waitress did not understand and brought Vietnamese coffee instead. Casy gave this to Andy, and John ordered some Vietnamese tea. From the top of this hotel, we could see the entire city. At midnight, the hotel played some music, and many of the guests sang and danced. We left at 1 AM, headed back to our hotels and went to bed. At the hotel, the staff was also holding a New Year's Eve Party. They cooked a traditional Vietnamese dinner for the guests, and everyone sat in the lobby enjoying themselves over food and drinks. They invited us, but we were too tired and apologized, and went up to bed.

Figure 6: Us atop Sofitel Hotel for their New Year's Eve party. We sat outside, so the black background is the night time sky.



Figure 7: Our hotel also threw a New Year's Eve Party for their guests. The man smiling at left is the boss of the hotel.

