

**Friday, January 5, 2007**

We had lunch at Ha's house today. After that Casy went with Ha to a salon to get manicures and wash their hair. Casy paid 30,000 VND. Newton stayed at Ha's house to listen to his classical music and check his e-mail. During this time there was a power outage for about an hour. Power outages are common in Hanoi, with one happening every week or so. They usually happen in the daytime during peak hours of electricity demand, and can last between several minutes to over an hour. We went with Andy, Ha and Phong to Pho 24 for dinner at 7PM. Newton paid 200,000 VND for the whole group. We went back to our hotel and packed for our train trip to Sapa.

**Figure 1: Andy, Heng and Newton in front of Ha's house. Most streets in Hanoi are lined with shops and restaurants. The storefronts form continuous facades broken by small alleyways that lead to houses in back. Ha's house is behind a café (below left) and is accessible by a 3 feet wide alley (below right). The address of the alleyway is 30 Le Duan Road, as noted in the blue number 30.**



We took a taxi to the station at 8 PM, and lined up to board our train, which left at 9PM. The station was full of people, and over a dozen lines of track crossed through the station. The station was quite backward and consisted of a big lobby in front with ticketing booths on the side. Behind the station were the lines, and arriving trains stopped here. There were no dedicated walkways for passengers to walk between the trains and the train station. Instead, passengers on the train would step onto the ground and walk to the station; stepping over rail lines in the process. There were also no signs indicating which rail line was for which train; instead passengers would ask the train workers milling around the tracks for directions.

**Figure 2: Bottom left; the courtyard in front of Ha's house contains a large tree. Even in the middle of a city like Hanoi, many residents grow trees and other plants to add beauty to their surroundings. At right is the doorway to Ha's house. The decorations from the wedding day will be left up for awhile after the wedding.**



We walked about 20 minutes along the tracks before finding our train. We boarded, and found our cabin. We had five people in our party but we had booked a cabin for 6 persons so we would not have to share the cabin with strangers. This left one bed empty, which we used to put our luggage. The cabin was quite small, about seven feet deep, nine feet high and seven feet wide. There was one small window at the end opposite the cabin door, and three bunk beds on each sidewall. The two bunks on the bottom were ~1.5 feet of the ground. The two bunks in the middle were ~ 4 feet of the ground. The two bunks on top were ~ 6.5 feet of the ground. Therefore, each bunk had about 2.5 feet of vertical clearing. Newton and Phong took the two bottom bunks. Casy and Ha took the two middle bunks. Andy slept on one top bunk and the other top bunk was where we put our bags. Each bunk came with a pillow, blanket, and mattress. There was a small light by the head of each bunk for reading.

The train ride to Sapa lasted overnight and was horrible. Beside our cabin was the restroom, and throughout the night passengers using the bathroom would wake us up. The restroom was actually composed of two compartments, a toilet and a room with two sinks. The toilet was a hole in the metal floor, with a water flush, and no toilet paper. The room beside it had two sinks with bar soap and faucets with cold water. It was quite unhygienic. The train made stops in several villages, and often slowed down and sped up as it took bends in the tracks. These were quite jerky and there were times it felt that the train was sliding on the tracks instead of rolling over it smoothly. The ride was very noisy and bumpy, and we barely got any sleep. The worse thing was that passengers in other cabins would smoke, even though there were no-smoking signs in each cabin. The central air conditioning system would circulate this smoke across all the cabins. And the cabin windows did not open. Luckily, after an hour on the train, train workers walked through each car and told everyone not to smoke. Newton and Andy chatted outside the cabin since

they could not sleep. The train workers also told us to lock our door when we slept to prevent thefts of our belongings.

**Figure 3: The inside of our train cabin, and an outside view of the train station at Lao Cai**



We had a fright at the beginning of the trip. The train had oversold its tickets and the train conductor was inclined to force us to give up our sixth bed to a stranger who happened to have a ticket to our cabin also. Luckily, Ha and Phong argued back, and the conductor's boss happened to walk by during the argument. He probably realized we were foreigners, and did not want to make a bad impression on us so he let us keep our sixth bed.