

Monday, January 1, 2007

After last night's festivities, we woke up at 11 AM, missing the hotel breakfast. Phong and Heng had gone to Halong Bay with their parents, and Andy went along. We did not want to go because their bus left at 7AM, and we had already visited it. Ha stopped by the hotel and we decided to get lunch. Ha, Helen and us took a taxi (1000 VND) to a vegetarian restaurant but it was closed because today is New Year's Day. So we walked around the block and saw a café. We went inside. They served different types of Vietnamese, American, and Chinese dishes. Ha told us to wait inside the restaurant while she went to pick up her best friend from high school. The price for lunch was reasonable at 100,000VND.

Figure 1: Lunch at a café. From left to right is Ha, Helen, Newton, Casy and Ha's friend.



After lunch, Ha and her friend left to hand out wedding invitations. Wedding invitations are traditionally delivered in person by either the couple, or their family members, several days before the wedding, unlike in America where invitations are mailed out months before hand, with replies required. Ha gave Casy direction on how to get to the hotel, so Helen and us walked back. We took pictures along the way back, and stopped at various stores.

Tourism is a very big industry in Vietnam, and many families have left the countryside to work in shops in the cities that cater to tourists. Many of these stores sell trinkets and hand made artworks. One unique artwork that we have only seen in Vietnam is pebble paintings. A pebble painting is like a regular painting, except the picture is made of colored pebbles glued onto the canvas. The pebbles are small in size, each one about 1 mm to 1 cm in size, with different colors used. We came across several stores specializing in this art form. Newton thought about buying some, but they were quite heavy, and quite delicate as any jolts or shakes would knock some of the pebbles loose, thereby ruining the painting. The paintings we saw ranged in size from small ones 1' x 1' to large wall murals that were over 10 feet wide. The subject matter was also quite extensive, with naked women, nature scenes, Chinese

proverbs, and historical events being depicted. There are minimal prohibitions on what can be depicted in art in Vietnam. Commonly depicted images were temples, pagodas, scenes from Vietnamese village life, and nature scenes such as storks, goldfish and rivers; all in all quite similar to what is seen in art all over East Asia.

Figure 2: Some of the pebble paintings we saw on display at various shops. At left is a gallery of paintings, most of which featured traditional East Asian scenes. At right is a pebble painting of the Last Supper.



Figure 3: Newton poses in front of a temple.



Along the way to the hotel, we passed by the convention center where Ha and Phong were holding their wedding. This was a big white, rectangular building in a new part of town. There was a major roundabout in front, along with a small parking area. Private ownership of cars is fairly new and rare in Vietnam, so dedicated parking lots are rare

and most places have only curbside parking. Owning a new SUV can be quite expensive. Specifically, the police will preferentially ticket SUV drivers and impound SUV's for minor traffic violations. While the owner tries to retrieve their car, the SUV will have its good parts taken out and replaced with bad ones. The stolen parts are then sold on the black market, and the owner ends up getting a lemon vehicle. The only way to prevent this is to bribe the police ahead of time. Therefore, SUV owners in Vietnam tend to be wealthy and politically well connected.

Figure 4: At left is the building where Ha and Phong will hold their wedding. At right is the roundabout in front of it.



One of the stores we stopped by sold handbags. Specifically, it sold designer-named handbags at (relatively) cheap prices. For example, a handbag that would normally sell for \$200 - \$300 in a US department store would sell here for \$40 - \$60, depending on the buyer's bargaining ability. Whether the bags were original or pirated goods we are not sure. Casy bought a Coach bag for Newton's mother. We got back to the hotel at ~2PM, and rested for a while. This part of the country had gone one month without rain so the air pollution, especially in the city, was quite bad. Because of this, 1 - 2 hours of walking in the city can take a toll on your body. At 3PM, Casy and Helen worked on a Power Point slide show on Helen's laptop. This was a collage of pictures of Ha and Phong that would be played to romantic music during the wedding as guests walked in and took their seats.

At 5 PM Helen was getting hungry. Casy called Ha and she told us to come over. Helen and us walked to Ha's place, and from there we took a taxi to a restaurant. The specialty of this place was pigeon, and Ha ordered it, along with noodles and stir-fried vegetables for Casy. Newton tried some pigeon, which was stir-fried with dark soy sauce. It tasted fine, but there was very little meat on the bone, and took too much effort to pick the meat out from the bones. The restaurant itself was a small two-story building and space was tight. Our table was set up against a fridge where soda was kept so every minute or so Newton had to lean forward so the waitress could open the fridge and get some drinks out. The place was very crowded and each of the 10 tables was full of guests. Between the crowd and the tight space, the place was very dirty, with food, silverware, chopsticks, soda cans, napkins and the occasional cockroach on the floor. Such an atmosphere would not last long in America, but this was standard at

many places here. We split the bill, which came up to 50,000 VND for Casy and Newton. This restaurant was in a neighborhood full of shops and bars, so after dinner we walked around. We stopped at a local bakery and bought some cakes for dessert. The bakery was an open store with a display case up front by the sidewalk and the kitchen in back. Newton paid first, spending 18,000 VND on 3 pieces. Helen and Ha paid next while Casy looked for other cakes. Newton walked around to look in the kitchen and spotted a baker smoking while putting some cream on a cake. He quickly walked back to the counter where Casy was about to purchase some stuff for him. Newton said no thanks, and quickly scooted all of them out of there. Outside the bakery, Newton told the others what he saw and we all agreed to carefully look over our cakes before eating them. We also agreed never to come back here.

We arrived back at Ha's house at 8PM. We chatted with her parents in their living room, looked at the engagement pictures and made fun of Ha. The engagement pictures were taken at various scenic places, one of which was a farm where soybeans were fermented. The smell was quite bad, and Ha had quite a time trying to smile for her pictures. Their living room is about 12 feet wide, which is small compared to American households, but is typical of living rooms in Vietnam. After an hour, Helen and us walked back to the hotel. Along the way back, Casy bought a 1-gallon bottle of drinking water for 15,000 VND. Andy, Phong and Heng had returned from Halong Bay and were resting at the hotel. Andy gave us a box of mung bean candies he had bought. Newton exchanged 200,000 VND for Chinese money from Helen, thereby completing his collection of Chinese money. We went to bed at 11PM.

Figure 5: At left is a picture of Ha's family sitting in the living room. From left to right are Ha's father, cousin, two aunts and mother. Notice the small fridge in the background at right. Appliances in Vietnam are also generally smaller than those found in America. The picture at right is of a centerpiece used during the engagements party.

