

Thursday, December 21, 2006

China Airlines is based out of Taiwan. We arrived at Taipei about 6AM local time on December 21. We walked from our arrival gate to our departure gate and waited for our connecting flight. The Taipei airport is quite nice; very modern, shiny, spacious, well lit, well decorated and quite new looking. We walked around a little bit and I exchanged some US money for Taiwanese money for my money collection. We took flight 683 to Hanoi, Vietnam, which left at 8:30 AM Taiwan time and arrived at 10:35 AM Hanoi time, which is about 1 hour different from the time in Taipei. Hanoi is the capital of Vietnam, so we were expecting a big airport. We were wrong; this was a very small airport. It had one building with one terminal and under 20 gates. The entire complex with parking lots and runways was smaller in area than the ASU main campus with its parking lots. The airport was fairly clean but looked somewhat sparse on the inside. We noticed that some of the employees smoked inside the airport, but none of the passengers.

From the arrival gate, we got our luggage and went thru immigration. This consisted of a row of desks, each staffed by a member of the Vietnamese military; all younger than Newton. There was an equal mix of male and female soldiers, all dressed in unisex green uniforms, not fatigues. Passengers lined up for the first available desk, upon which she would go up and present their passport and visa to the soldier at the desk. We noticed that these soldiers did not talk much. The guy who checked us did not say a single word. He just looked at our passport, stamped my visa and Casy's passport and let us thru. Both Indonesia and Vietnam are part of ASEAN, and citizens of any ASEAN country can travel to any other ASEAN country. Casy has an Indonesian passport so she did not need a visa, and instead only needed a passport. Newton, being a US citizen, needed a visa.

After finishing with immigration, we walked out to the airport lobby where Casy's friend, Ha, was waiting for us. She had rented a mini van, and we took this to our hotel in downtown Hanoi. The driver was a family friend. The airport is over 20 miles outside the city, so it took about 45 minutes to get to our hotel. Today is supposed to be sunny, yet we could not see the sun, or even the sky. The sky was bright, but there seemed to be dense smog or fog covering the entire land. The daytime temperature was probably in the high 70s Fahrenheit. The drive between the airport and the city crossed miles of rural countryside that were essentially all rice farms with a smattering of other fruit and vegetable farms. There was also construction all along the way. Specifically, we could see pockets of buildings everywhere that were in various stages of construction. Yet many of the construction sites were idle due to lack of workers. It was lunchtime, Ha told us, and everyone takes of for lunch.

We arrived at the Pacific Hotel just after 12 noon and checked in. This hotel was just of the corner of a major intersection, and was seven stories high. The building was like a tall box. I would estimate the hotel was 20 feet across in width when looking at it from the outside road. It was about 150 feet deep and 200 feet high. The bottom floor was the lobby and check-in desk at the front, followed by the dining room, Internet café, and kitchen at the back. Two staircases connected all the floors. One staircase was up front behind the check-in desk, and the second

staircase was in back, by the Internet café. The top six floors have five rooms per floor, giving 30 rooms for this entire hotel. We had room 304. The porter took us up and opened the door to find the room had not been cleaned up. He put us in room 305 first while room 304 was getting cleaned up. Having been without a shower for about 36 hours, we both took showers. About two hours later we moved back to room 304, where unpacked and took a quick nap. Vietnam is about 14 hours ahead of Arizona in time, so our body clocks were totally screwed up. Ha had booked the hotel for us, and had also booked room 205 for her fiancé, Phong, and his brother, Heng. All of them are Vietnamese. Ha and Phong live in Gilbert, Arizona, and returned to Vietnam to get married. We came to Vietnam to attend their wedding.

Figure 1: This light-blue multi-story building is made of two conjoined buildings. The shorter one in the foreground is the Pacific Star Hotel. We stayed on the 3rd floor in the taller one in the background, which is the Pacific Hotel.



We woke up at about 4 PM, at which time Ha came by and took us to eat at a Pho place. Pho is the traditional Vietnamese food, a hot, clear chicken or beef broth with long rice noodles, green onions, mint and some meat thrown in. It is quite a complete meal, and comes standard at Vietnamese restaurants in the US. In Vietnam, Pho is not sold at most places. It is as common in Vietnamese households as macaroni and cheese is in American households, so few restaurants carry it. Instead, it is often sold at sidewalk stores and at dedicated Pho chains that sell different varieties of Pho. The most popular chain in Hanoi is Pho 24; each store is painted bright green inside and out, and the menu is standard at all places, kind of like McDonalds.

Figure 2: Lunch at a chain of Pho 24: At left are the side dishes that are served with each main course. At left we see the main dishes; Newton has beef pho and Casy, who is taking the picture, has chicken pho. She is a vegetarian, so her dish had the chicken on a side plate. The light brown things are actually made out of dough and used to dip into the soup. Slices of lime are provided for squeezing into the soup for taste.



After lunch, Ha took us to a branch of Hanoi Bank where we converted \$500 US to 8,000,000 Vietnamese Dong, which is the local currency. The exchange rate we got was 16,000 Vietnamese Dong for \$1.00. The bank teller asked for crisp \$100 bills and specified that the exchange rate was better (for us) for newer bills versus older bills, and for larger denominations like \$100 and \$50 versus small denominations like \$1 or \$5. Luckily, we had \$100 bills. From the bank, we walked around the city some more and stopped by a French bakery down the street from our hotel for some dessert. France used to be a colonial power here so there is much French influence in Vietnam, with French bakery and French bread being sold everywhere. We spent 43,000 Dong on the bakery.

Hanoi is a city of about 3 million people, and is an urban city with most of the residents actually living in the city. Hence there are essentially no suburbs. The traffic consists of cars, trucks, vans, motorcycles, bicycles, and cyclos, which are also known as trishaws in other Asian countries. A cycle consists of a tricycle, except with one wheel in the back and two wheels up front. The driver sits in back and pedals for locomotive power. Up front is a metal chair straddling the two front wheels. Passengers can sit here while the driver pedals them around town. Very few locals take this form of transportation as you are directly exposed to the traffic and car exhaust. But tourists love trying it out, and cyclo drivers in turn look out for anyone that looks different, like white people, or Asians that seem to be unusually tall, like me.

Figure 3: Scenes of local traffic include the cyclo (not cycle)



There are very few cars in Vietnam due to the high prices and high taxes on cars. Instead, most people use motorcycles. Seatbelts are not required for cars and helmets are not required for motorcyclists, except on highways. A driver's license is not required for operating a motorcycle, and car insurance is almost unheard of. Because of various trade sanctions and embargoes the US has had on Vietnam for the past several decades, most vehicles on the road are Japanese, Korean, or German. The most common cars were Hondas, Toyotas, Nissans, Daewoos, and BMW's. We occasionally saw an SUV or van, and these were usually company cars or taxis. The traffic is crazy here. Multiple motorcycles will squeeze side-by-side into one lane, vehicles run red lights all the time, and people will drive the wrong way on one-way streets. But there is order. According to the locals, the rule of the road is that if a collision ever occurs, the larger vehicle is to blame. So if a car and a truck collide, the truck is automatically at fault. If a person and a motorcycle collide, the motorcyclist is automatically at fault. Because of this logic, nobody is afraid of getting hit so everyone and everything uses the road at the same time, night or day. Pedestrians will walk out in the middle of a busy freeway to cross a street. Motorcyclists will make U-turns on one-way roads. Trucks will stop in the middle of a road to make deliveries. And people change lanes with rarely any signaling.

Figure 4: Standard-sized car here in Vietnam. This is a Hanoi taxi. All taxis have the standard yellow sign on their rooftops.



Figure 5: Traffic scenes in Hanoi show the large number of motorcycles, cyclos and scooters, and the paucity of cars. At bottom right is a line of cyclos riding together. The passengers are most likely part of one tour group that was picked up at one hotel and taken around the city as one caravan. Notice that many people are wearing facemasks to filter the smog and dust in the air they do not breathe it in. These facemasks are quite common with over 20% of the people wearing it on the street.

