

Friday, December 22, 2006

We woke up about 4:30 AM today as our time clocks were still screwed up. We showered and headed down for the hotel breakfast, which is served free every day from 7AM – 10AM. The breakfast was quite impressive and consisted of multiple cold and hot dishes. Cold dishes included fresh local fruit such as papaya, pineapple, bananas, pears, apples, dragon fruit, sapodilla, oranges, French bread, sandwich bread, and various cheeses and sausages. The fruits were all locally grown so the bananas, apples, pears, etc, looked and tasted somewhat different than what is found in American grocery stores. Hot dishes included stir fry noodles, spring rolls, porridge or noodle soup, and other fried dishes such as fried banana or fried corn.

After breakfast, Ha and Phong came by to pick us up and took us downtown to meet other friends and Ha's cousin. We met up at Highlands Coffee Shop. Starbucks, Coffee Plantation and most other American food chains do not (yet) exist in Vietnam but it seems many local businesses are based loosely of similar ideas. For example, there is a StarMaxx coffee store chain here, and the store design, exterior and interior, look quite similar to Starbucks. Likewise, instead of Coffee Plantation, there is a Highlands Coffee. Here in Hanoi, Highlands and StarMaxx seems to have cornered different parts of the market. StarMaxx coffee shops are usually located on street corners in the less expensive parts of town. Highlands Coffee shops, on the other hand, are usually located at the most visible and priciest locations, usually by main tourist attractions or city landmarks. We went to the Highlands Coffee by Hoan Kiem Lake, which is a famous lake in downtown Hanoi. We met up with one of Ha's cousins, Tron, and his wife Phoung. He told us to call him John. They live in Hanoi, and are groomsman and bridesmaid at Ha's wedding.

Figure 1: At left is Highlands Coffee, at right is the bridge connecting the lakeshore to Ngoc Son Temple



After breakfast, we split up. Ha went to run some errands. John, Phong and Heng walked us a little around the lake to show us where things are. They then left to hang out while we walked around the city by ourselves. We walked around the whole of Hoan Kiem Lake, which was not hard since it was probably 1 mile long by a ½ mile wide. This freshwater lake marks the commercial downtown of Hanoi as many shops are located around it. The lake itself is rimmed with a park with benches and shady trees; just like any lake in a US city. There is a small temple on an island in the lake, with a red wooden bridge connecting the island to the lakeside.

Figure 2: Crossing the bridge to visit Ngoc Son Temple, and the front entrance at right.



We paid the 3000 Dong/person to cross the bridge and visit the temple. This is a famous historical sight in Hanoi. Supposedly, some 2000 years ago a local peasant standing by the lake saw a huge turtle surface with a sword on its back. The peasant took the sword, and with it, united the Vietnamese people in a successful rebellion against their Chinese overlords. Afterwards, he took the sword back to the lake, where the same turtle surfaced to take it back. This seems oddly reminiscent of the King Arthur story with Excalibur, though I doubt many locals know this. The temple on the lake is called Ngoc Son Temple, and inside one part is a huge stuffed turtle on display inside a glass case. The turtle was caught in the mid 20th century, and is supposed to be descended from the legendary turtle with the sword. The temple itself is Buddhist as Vietnam has been a Buddhist nation for over 1000 years.

Figure 3: Altar inside Ngoc Son Temple at left, and outside the front gate at right.



After spending an hour at the temple we walked around the lake around the city. One place we visited was Saint Jones Catholic Cathedral. This was built during the French occupation of Vietnam and is quite beautiful. We noticed that church workers were putting up Christmas decorations around the place. The neighborhood behind the church was gated off. I believe this was where the local bishop lived, along with the church workers. While the front of the church opened to a main street, the back and sides of the church was enclosed by a large wall, decorated with paintings and engravings of scenes from the Bible.

Figure 4: Saint Jones Cathedral in Hanoi; front façade at left and wall paintings in the back at right.



There was an elementary school by the front of the church. It was about 12 noon when we visited the church, so one shift of students was coming out, and another shift was coming in. Public school in Vietnam has different times than in American schools. In America, students go for 6 – 8 hour stretches M – F. In Vietnam, half the students attend school in the morning, like 6 AM to 12:00, and the other half attends in the afternoon, like from 1 PM – 7 PM. In this way, a school that can hold 1000 students in America can service 2000 students in Vietnam; half in the morning and half in the afternoon. Also, students attend school Mondays – Saturdays here. Students in Vietnam also have to wear uniforms, and each school has different uniforms.

Figure 5: Students waiting outside a local elementary school during lunchtime. Notice the uniformed students in the right foreground, and the western tourists in the background. School buses are rare here so students walk, bike or are driven to school by family or friends.



Ha met us outside the church and took us to a barber for me to get a haircut. I needed one to look respectable for her upcoming wedding, and so needed a haircut. Many hair salons in America are actually run by Vietnamese families. After that, we went to a saloon place where both Casy and Ha got facials. Ha wanted to look nice for the wedding, and was getting a facial every day before the wedding. The salon was on the 3rd floor of a building in the city. It turns out that Ha's father owned this building, and his private medical practice was on the 3rd floor also, across the hallway from the salon. The salon was run by 6 young women; all in their early twenties or late teens. The girls convinced me to get a facial as well. This was a new experience for me. I lay down on a bed that was clearly too short for me. One lady came and put towels on my face to clean it off. She then rubbed soap all over my face. After this, they wiped it off, and proceeded to apply and remove a series of different crèmes and gels onto my face. Finally, one girl wiped my face with hot towels.

Figure 6: Newton gets haircut from a local barber



Ha got a more extensive treatment. The lady treating her popped each and every single one of her pimples, which took about an hour. We had lunch at a Pho restaurant next door while waiting for her. When she finished, she took us to the famous Vietnamese Water Puppet Theater. This is a stage performance using puppets on a stage of water. The puppet performance recreates a famous story from Vietnamese mythology, accompanied by live music performed on musical instruments indigenous to this country. The water stage is used because the setting is the banks of a famous river running thru the country. The entire performance occurs inside an auditorium that seats about 300 people, and the stage is a large shallow water tank with the back half covered. Puppeteers hide in the covered back half and operate the puppets.

Figure 7: Water Puppet Theater as seen from the street



The show itself is complete with singing and fireworks, and lasts about 1 hour. Unfortunately, this led to a lot of smoke filling up the place, and we had front row seats. By the end of the show, Newton was in tears from all the smoke. Worst of all, Newton had to sit by a really fat guy who smelled like he had not showered in weeks. The show is distinctly Vietnamese in origins and storyline, but is watched entirely by foreigners. Most locals view it as childish rubbish, including Ha and Phong. Many locals see it as part of school field trips and do not care to repeat the experience when older. We agree with them. After watching it once and suffering thru the smoke and entirely Vietnamese oratory, we do not want to watch it again. We went home after this.

Figure 8: Stage for the Water Puppet Theater. The green pond in front is where the show takes place.



Figure 9: Fireworks included as part of the show smoked up the auditorium



Figure 10: Puppeteers take a bow after the show. To the left of the stage are musicians and the story narrator; the lady in the left foreground.

