

**Sunday, December 24, 2006**

We took a van tour to Chua Huong, which is known as the Perfume Pagoda in English. The van picked us up at our hotel at 8:30AM. The van stopped by another hotel to pick up two other tourists, and then headed out of the city. In total, there were eight people in the van; a German couple, two Taiwanese men, the tour guide, the driver and us two. The van stopped along the shoulder of a major road that served as a makeshift bus depot. We got out of the van and moved into a bus. Our tour guide, Chen Nguyen, said we were switching to a bus because it was bigger and would give us a more comfortable ride. They did not use the bus to pick us up from our hotels because the bus was too large to maneuver thru many of the city's streets. We drove for about an hour, and stopped for a quick bathroom break at a gas station. We then drove for another hour until we reached a small town beside a river. This small town is the jumping off point to reach the Pagoda, as there were hundreds of dark red, metal canoes docked along the riverside. These canoes are used to ferry people to the Pagoda, which is about two miles down the river.

**Figure 1: Town beside river where we boarded the canoes. Note the stacked canoes along the waterfront.**



The Pagoda itself is a major tourist attraction and a pilgrimage site for Buddhists. As such, the town probably lives off of tourism, as I did not see any industry here. All the restaurants and stores were lined up along the riverbanks. Our bus was one of many tour vans and buses there. We walked up to the riverside where our tour guide found us canoes and rowers to take us to the Pagoda. This being a Saturday, there was about 100 other tourists there, and the locals were out in force trying to sell stuff to us. One common item for sale was straw hats made by the locals. We noticed that those foreigners already wearing one were bothered less. We noticed two different styles, and Newton correctly assumed the purely conical ones were for women, and those with a rounded top were for men. Newton bought one hat from a lady for 10,000 VND and put it on. Casy did not want one.

**Figure 2: Yen Wharf is where the canoes dock, and where tourists and locals work out fairs for canoe rides to the Pagoda. Our tour guide and the Taiwanese tourists ride in one canoe.**



Our tour guide found us rowers, so we boarded two metal canoes. The German couple and us sat in one canoe with a middle-aged lady as our rower. Our tour guide sat in another boat with the two Taiwanese men and a teenage girl as their rower. The ride took about one hour over a smooth river. The scenery was extremely beautiful. On both sides of the river were rice paddies owned by the local villagers. Behind and beyond these paddies were hills and mountains as far as the eye could see. All was green and covered in lush vegetation.

**Figure 3: A red footbridge spans the waterway. On the right shore is a tax station. Every one of the tourist canoes had to pay a tax to pass. Signs along the riverbank warn all boats to pay the tax**



**Figure 4: This river is also used for shipping and trade. At left is a small port where stores and restaurants serve both tourists and rowers. The picture at right shows a canoe filled with logs being rowed upriver.**



**Figure 5: Lush scenery along the riverbanks included the occasional Buddhist altar at left. Even though we were in the countryside, signs of progress were everywhere, such as electric power lines shown at right.**



Besides the rice paddies, the only human constructions along the riverbanks were the occasional Buddhist altar or village hut. We saw several farmers working the rice fields or fishing. Chen told us that many fish, crabs, and other food animals are caught here and served in the local restaurants. After an hour we docked at a pier at the base of a mountain. We walked up and visited Trinh Temple and Thien Tru Pagoda. Both were located along the side of the

mountain. All along the bus ride, canoe ride and now here, Chen had told us about Vietnamese history and culture and solicited questions from us. He would sometimes quiz us, and one question he stumped us when he inquired us as to the difference between a pagoda and a temple. A temple is a place to worship gods and a pagoda is a place to worship famous dead people like scholars, war heroes and statesmen.

**Figure 6: Thien Thru Pagoda is a very large complex consisting of multiple buildings and courtyards.**



We walked around the Pagoda complex first followed by the Temple and took pictures. Newton donated 2,000 VND to the temple. Buddhist temples, like churches, are (usually) non-profit entities and rely on donations from followers and visitors for upkeep. Next, we had lunch at one of the local restaurants. The food was already included in our tour price, but drinks were extra. The meal was Vietnamese home cooking; rice, tofu, stir fried vegetables, fried eggs, and fish.

After this, we were supposed to walk up the mountain to visit Huong Tich Cave, a famous tourist attraction here in Vietnam. The base of the path was under construction; workers were laying stones for a new walking path. They said the entire path was under renovation and many sections were impassable. So we took the cable car instead. The cost was ~ \$6 per person, which we gladly paid seeing the condition of the trail. The cable cars were nice and new, with windows that could partially open to allow the wind to blow through them. The German couple and us sat in one car, while the tour guide rode in another car with the Taiwanese men. The ride was slow and steady, and we got to see the entire countryside below. It was quite beautiful. During the ride we got to see the trail path that led up the mountain. It was clearly under construction and it looked like a 2 – 3 hour strenuous hike up the mountain.

**Figure 7: At left is the cable car station at the bottom of the mountain. Casey poses in front of a cable car at right. An Austrian company built this cable car system.**



**Figure 8: The cable cars dock at a three-story station at the top of the mountain. Multiple red and yellow cars traverse the line at the same time. We never found out why there are both red and yellow cars. Both looked identical on the inside and outside.**



The cable car ride ended at a station about halfway up the mountain. From the station, we walked about 15 minutes on a rocky path until we came to a long staircase. At the base of the stairs was the entrance of Huong Tich Cave. The staircase was quite treacherous as the height of each step was about 9 inches and they were not straight. Some steps sloped forward and other steps sloped backwards. The mouth of the cave was humongous and a small airplane

could have flown through it if it were not for the presence of an equally huge stalagmite right in the middle of it. According to the locals, with a little imagination, the stalagmite looked like the head of a dragon sticking out. Newton's imagination was not that good, as he did not see much in the way of a dragon. There was a circular path that led around the cave's interior. The path began on one side of the giant stalagmite, and ended on the other side.

**Figure 9: Stone staircase leading down to the mouth of the cave. Casy is taking the picture and the cave entrance is behind her. So Newton is looking at the cave entrance. Huge stalagmites and stalactites occur inside the cave.**



**Figure 10: The mouth of the cave is partially blocked by a stalagmite that is supposed to look like a dragon's head. Inside the cave we saw a Buddhist monk praying.**



We took this path around the inside the cave. At the end of the cave was a Buddhist shrine, and a temple dedicated to several famous individuals. We were lucky today as there was a Buddhist monk inside praying. The entire path took about 15 minutes to walk around, though we stayed longer to watch the monk go thru his prayers. We noticed some vandalism along the cave walls in the form of writing and drawings along the lines of “We were here.” This was unfortunate as the cave itself was quite beautiful and impressive.

We walked out of the cave and back to the cable car, rode the cable car back to the Pagoda complex, and walked back to the pier. We got back on the canoe and were rowed back to the town. The canoe ride back was interesting as the German couple and us debated how much to tip the lady who was rowing us. I was unsure of local salaries here so we agreed that each couple would give 10,000 VND. We handed her the money at the end of the trip as we docked and she seemed angry and somewhat disappointed. I was not sure if we she was seriously expecting more, or was just playing with us to get more money. We quickly got out of the boat. As we walked with Chen back to our tour bus, we asked him if we should have tipped more. He was quite diplomatic about it and told us that daily salaries for the locals was in the range of 50,000 – 100,000 VND, but that their labor was quite hard and many worked in construction jobs such as laying bricks, carpentry, paving roads, etc... all of which using manual tools. He also pointed out the fact that many of the rowers were young teenagers or elderly people. After hearing this, we both felt somewhat guilty about giving such little tip.

**Figure 11: Some of the wildlife in this area included red lotus flowers and geese.**



Along the canoe ride there and back some canoes would pass by us and take our pictures using very large, professional – looking cameras. The camerawomen, as they were all women, would ask us to smile. After the canoe ride back, these same ladies came up and waved our pictures at us that they had taken, and ask for money.

Newton would have gladly paid except that they were charging ridiculously high prices; like \$2 a picture. Casy bargained with them, and got a deal of three pictures (with negatives) for \$50,000 VND.

**Figure 12: A middle-aged lady rowed our boat, while accompanied by her son. Getting on and off the boats can be quite hazardous, especially for large Americans like Newton.**



We got back onto the tour bus at 4PM and drove back to Hanoi. As tonight was Christmas Eve, many roads were closed to large cars like buses and vans such that pedestrians could walk along storefronts unimpeded. So the tour bus dropped us off down the street from the hotel and we walked the rest of the way. We tipped Chen 50,000 VND as we stepped out. We were quite happy with today's tour so we signed up for the tour to Hoa Lu and Tam Coc the next day. We did not eat dinner that night as Casy had her first bout of diarrhea.