

Monday, December 25, 2006

We awoke at 6.30 AM, showered and went down to eat breakfast. Today we were going on a tour to Tam Coc and Hoa Lu. Newton saw the tour van arrive at the hotel at 8AM and the tour guide came in at 8:15 to get us. This was slightly early as we were supposed to be picked up at 8.30 AM. There were 14 people in the van already so we made it 16. There was a lady from New Zealand, a French couple, and a French family consisting of a husband, wife, grandmother, a son and daughter. The two children looked Vietnamese but spoke French so the French family had probably adopted them. There were two college-aged French girls who were friends, and two Malaysian guys about Newton's age that lived in Singapore and London. Last was the driver, and the tour guide, a short Vietnamese guy also about Newton's age. The van was very small and cramped. All the seats were bench seats so there was not enough space for Casey and me to sit together so Casey sat beside the Malaysian guy that lived in London and Newton sat in the back seat with the French girls and the guy that lives in Singapore. The drive from Hanoi to Hoa Lu lasted from 8:30 AM – 11 AM. We did not switch to a bigger car, so the ride was very uncomfortable, and there was no air conditioning either. At the beginning of the ride, our tour guide had said we would stop halfway for a restroom break, but the tour guide fell asleep so we did not stop. It was sunny today with almost no clouds in the sky.

Figure 1: Temple at Hoa Lu: Front gate at left and courtyard at right



Hoa Lu is located 100 KM away from Hanoi in Ninh Binh Province, in the south of the Red River delta. Ninh Binh is considered by locals as one of the most beautiful parts of Vietnam due its lush forests, beaches, and rivers. We

arrived at Hoa Lu, which was a small town built around a temple of two kings: Dinh and Le. Our tour group walked around until 12:30 PM taking pictures. We spotted no industry of any kind here so the town probably relies on tourism as a principle source of revenue. As such, there were a lot of gift shops. Newton bought some embroidery artwork from one of these stores. The selling price was \$10 but he bargained it down to \$6.

Figure 2: Inside the Temple of Dinh and Le. At left is the chariot used to carry the kings. At right is the altar inside the temple. The statue in the background is of King Dinh. Fresh food offerings are placed in front of the statue every day. Ancestor worship is a common practice in all East Asian cultures.



We went back to the bus and drove to Tam Coc to visit three famous caves. The English name for Tam Coc is “Halong Bay without water.” We arrived at Tam Coc at 1PM and ate lunch at a local restaurant named The Long. The food was already included in the tour price, but not the drinks, so we got bottled water at the restaurant for 10,000 VND. We noticed that every bottle of bottled water we saw had the Evian brand name. This French influence is probably due to the long French colonial period in Vietnam. This town sits astride a river, and the piers are the biggest part of town. Numerous canoes were tied along the piers, as this was the place where tourists would hire locals to take them down river to visit the caves. Even though today was Christmas, there were a lot of tourists here, and the locals were out in full force hawking souvenirs, food and drinks, and arranging canoe rides.

Figure 3: Tam Coc boat dock at right. We had lunch on the 2nd floor of the Long restaurant.



Our tour guide found several canoes for us and we started down river at 2PM. Our canoe had two rowers, a husband and wife couple, and us. The ride lasted until 5PM. The ride consisted of us going down the river until it ended in a marshy swamp, and then us going back up the river to the town. Along the way, the river passed thru three big caves, and the boats went thru them. This was the main attraction of this tour, riding on a river thru a series of caves in total darkness; the caves had no interior lighting. The river itself was shallow, about 5 – 10 feet deep in most places. We sat on the boat the whole time. Going one way, we went about 1 KM before encountering the first cave. Along the way, we passed by rice paddies and private farms on both sides of the river. The first cave was several hundred meters long and took about 15 minutes for us to row thru it. After it, we traveled about half a kilometer until we reached the next cave, which was about 100 meters long. After that, we traveled another kilometer and reached the last cave, which was several hundred meters long. Behind the last cave the river was dammed up such that boats could not go any further. This was a rest stop as the rowers stopped to rest themselves and allow their passengers, us tourists, to take lots of pictures. There were also boats that did not carry passengers; all they carried were their rowers and soda, chips, bottled water, and other snacks. These would come up to the boats with tourists and try to sell stuff. One of these came up to us, and the lady rowing it tried to sell us food, which we declined. She then said that we should buy a drink for our rowers, so Newton agreed and bought two cans of soda for \$1 and gave it to them. After about 15 minutes, they started rowing us back. We noticed that neither rower drank the soda Newton bought them. We figured it was basically a scam; the rowers would give the soda back to the hawkers and the whole process would be repeated the next day on a new set of tourists.

The man and woman rowing us would take turns rowing, or sometimes they would both row as they both had paddles. Along the way back, the man took over rowing and the woman opened up a metal box at the back of the boat. She pulled out a bunch of embroidery and tried to sell them to us. Some of them looked nice and some did

not, but her initial asking price was quite high, \$2 - \$3 per item, which we figured was the same price they would sell for at Wal-Mart. So Newton pointed to two items, and told her \$1 for both of them. She glared at him, moved her finger along her throat to communicate her opinion that he was cutthroat, and proceeded to store all her items back into the box. She did not say a word for the rest of the trip and just rowed quietly.

Figure 4: We are approaching the first cave at left, and inside the first cave at right.



Figure 5: There was an occasional farmhouse along the riverbanks.



Figure 6: The locals ambush the tourists at the end of the river by stopping and pressuring us to buy stuff.



Figure 7: Locals fishing for shrimp and crabs along the riverbanks. Tourism probably pays better than living of the land, as our canoes were metal, while those used by the locals were usually wooden.



The waterway itself was very green and one could not look past six inches into the water due to the mud and vegetation in the water. Both banks were covered with either plants or rice paddies. Beyond the banks lay grass fields, hills, and mountains just beyond them. This was all private land, farms that were owned by the locals that were rowing these tour boats. Along the way, we saw the occasional villager fishing, working in the paddies,

tending to livestock or doing other work along the riverbanks. Our tour guide told us that snails, crab, shrimp and fish were all caught in these waters and consumed by the villagers.

Figure 8: A cemetery along the riverbanks at left. At right is a picture of a temple on a hilltop.



Figure 9: The second cave is about 100 meters long so one could see out one end while entering the other end



Figure 10: Several bridges spanned the river. Some were so low that we had to duck when passing under them. To rest their limbs, many locals would alternate rowing with their legs and arms.



We noticed that tourist money was in high demand here, and the tourism industry was well organized. The locals trying to sell stuff quoted prices in US dollars. The boats used to ferry the tourists were the best looking in town. Newton suspects that the boat rides might be a government monopoly as all the boats looked exactly identical to each other in shape, size and color with the only way to differentiate them apart was by their license plates that were firmly attached on the inside wall. The river traffic was well organized, as boats traveling downriver stayed on one side of the river, and boats returning upriver stayed on the other side of the river. The river traffic would have been better organized than Vietnamese street traffic except that they would sometimes bump each other as they passed each other or in narrow regions of the river. There was a large amount of construction going on, probably due to all the investment that was coming in to support the increased tourism. Surprisingly, for the importance of tourism to this area, we were disappointed by the amount of vandalism and pollution in this area. The former consisted of graffiti on the rocks and cave walls. The latter included plastic bags, soda cans, and other solid refuse found here and there along the river, both in the water and on the banks.

The row back was quite slow, and we noticed the tourists on other boats would help row. To speed things up, we took turns rowing while the woman rested. By the time we got back to the town, Casy told Newton to tip the rowers 20,000 VND because the lady was very rude in trying to sell us all the stuff and we had helped them row the boat. Newton felt sorry for them, having to row both of us such a long distance, and gave them 50,000 VND. The guy rower was in the back, with his wife up front, so Newton gave the tip to her.

Figure 11: License plate for the canoe we rode in.



Figure 12: Casey takes a picture of Newton and the two rowers. The wife is to the left of Newton, and her husband is behind Newton. Notice the difference between the two hats. The conical top is for women and the hat with a rounded top is for men. We helped to row the boat, as shown in the picture at right.



At the town we boarded our tour van and drove back to Hanoi. We arrived back to the hotel at 8 PM. Our tour guide today was not very good. Both on the drive to Tam Coc and returning back to Hanoi, he would ask us if we had any questions. After that, he sat down to sleep. During the boat rides in Tam Coc, he never told us anything about what we were seeing. For this, we only tipped the tour guide \$1. At the hotel, Ha called Casey and asked us if we wanted to go out with them because today is Christmas day. We were very tired so we said no and went to bed at about 10 PM.

Figure 13: Vandalism in the form of graffiti was quite common in this area if one looked closely, like at the base of the caves. This in spite of signs in English and Vietnamese warning against vandalism.

