

Tuesday, December 26, 2006

We awoke at 7 PM and ate breakfast. Ha called and said that her cousin, Hien, could take us to visit the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. We agreed and Ha said he would stop by at 9AM. He was late and showed up at 9:45AM. The hotel told us that the mausoleum was only open from 9-11 AM on Monday and Wednesday so we were somewhat worried. From our hotel, Hien called a taxi driven by one of his family members. This taxi took us to the Mausoleum while he rode his motorcycle, as he had class at 12 PM. We arrived at the Mausoleum, which was in the middle of Hanoi. We paid the 18,000 VND entrance fee, 9,000 VND per person, and entered the front gate. The entire place was patrolled by soldiers and security was high here so Casey had to check in her backpack.

Figure 1: Ho Chin Minh Mausoleum in the background



Inside the entrance was a long, white building containing a classroom with wooden desks and a large screen TV at one end. The TV showed a movie about Ho's life in Vietnamese. We sat and watched the movie for ~15 minutes as the room slowly filled up with other visitors, both Vietnamese and foreigners. A lady then walked in and instructed us to line up outside in a straight line. She then led us to the Mausoleum. Along the way, the line went thru a metal detector and a checkpoint where everyone had to take out their cell phones, cameras, and all other electronic and recording equipment. These were stored in an office and their owners were given receipts to hold onto. After this, we walked to the Mausoleum single file. We entered the Mausoleum, walked up a staircase and through several hallways before we entered a large chamber that contained the body of Ho Chi Minh. The body was lying face up inside a huge glass case in the middle of the chamber. Four armed soldiers stood motionless around the case. The pathway wound around the edge of the chamber such that we entered on the right side of the Ho and exited to his left. The line thru the Mausoleum was quite long and the space between one person and the person in front of her was about 6 inches. Newton and Hien were talking about Ho's life while standing in line and a soldier pointed at them to be quiet. Silence was strictly enforced inside the entire building and the only talking was by soldiers

herding visitors thru the building. The flow of traffic was also enforced as soldiers made sure no visitor could stop anywhere in the building. Therefore, we saw Ho Chi Minh's body for 2 – 3 minutes at most.

Figure 2: At left, Newton and Casy stand in the courtyard in front of the Mausoleum. At right, Casy is taking a picture of Newton and Hien standing in front of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Newton is holding the pamphlet describing the Mausoleum.



After exiting the building, we retrieved our camera and cell phones from the checkpoint, walked around and took pictures. In front of the Mausoleum is a big courtyard that is a gathering place during national celebrations. Before the Mausoleum was built, this was where Ho Chi Minh made his declaration of independence from France after WWII. Beside the Mausoleum was a big park with several attractions located there. One of these was the house Ho Chi Minh lived in during the war against the French and Americans after WWII. This wooden two-story house had a bedroom, kitchen, dining room, and a meeting room where Ho met with his generals during the war. The entire place is a historical sight protected by the national government, and soldiers were present to make sure no one defaced the property. Nearby was the One Pillar Pagoda, which is named such because it is a small, one room pagoda that sits on a large concrete pillar in the middle of a small lake. It is a famous religious sight in Vietnam. A staircase leads from the lakeside up to the entrance of the Pagoda, and there was a long line of people waiting to go up. Like all religious sights, there was a box to donate money in front of the pagoda, and Newton donated 500 VND. There were a lot of people, foreigners and locals, visiting both the Pagoda and Ho's residence. Many of the foreigners were European tourists who spoke openly about the Vietnam War and their memories from that time. Hien told us that Vietnam has been politically stable after Ho's death, with no coups, revolutions or political assassinations. Ho never had kids, and many Vietnamese praise this lack of children because it prevented a power struggle over succession that is common in other countries where children of former leaders try to attain power themselves based on personality cults and name recognition.

Figure 3: Ho Chi Minh's house at right, and official sign at left.



Figure 4: One Pillar Pagoda



Major roads ringed the entire complex, making this place one of the most accessible points in the whole city. We walked along one of these roads to visit the Presidential Palace. This big yellow building is equivalent to the US White House in that Vietnam's president lives here. This building, like many other new, important buildings, is painted yellow using Citroen paint. The French company Citroen built a yellow paint factory here decades ago, and when they left, the Vietnamese took over the factory and used the yellow paint to paint many of their new buildings.

Figure 5: The Presidential Palace at left. At right is a picture of the gift shops located between the Presidential Palace and One Pillar Pagoda.



We then went to the Ho Chi Minh Museum and paid 20,000 VND (10,000 per person) to go in. This museum is also quite new, and tells the story of Vietnam's fight for independence against the French, Japanese, and Americans during the 1900s. Inside were memorials to dead soldiers, displays of military hardware, newspaper clippings, and excerpts from the diaries of Viet Cong members, and other historical artifacts. After an hour or so Hien told us he had to go to his class at the local university. We called Ha, and she suggested we have lunch together. We agreed, and exited the complex. Hien hailed a taxi for us in front of the mausoleum. Hien took off on his motorcycle and we took the taxi to Ha's house. The taxi tried to rip us off because he knew we are tourists. His price ticker increased 1,000 VND every minute, along with additional raises for distance. Newton made a comment to Casy and the driver seemed to notice, so he hit some button on his ticker and the price went up slower. He had driven us for five minutes and the meter already showed 100,000 VND. Casy called Ha and told her. Ha asked to talk to the cab driver, so Casy handed him the phone. She talked to the taxi driver and told him to stop the car right now. The taxi did not stop and instead drove slower. We yelled at him to stop now. He stopped the car, Newton gave him 20,000 VND and we got out while he yelled at us. We were on Le Duan road. Casy called Ha and asked her how to get to her house. Luckily, we only needed to walk 10 minutes to get to Ha's house.

Figure 6: Ho Chi Minh Museum: view from the road at left and front entrance at right. At bottom is a picture of the main lobby of the museum, with a large statue of Ho dominating the wall.



Ha, Phong and Heng were waiting for us. They asked us what type of food we would like to eat, and Newton said at a nice restaurant. We had been eating at the equivalent of family restaurants and fast food restaurants since we came here, and Newton wanted to try an upscale restaurant. So we took a taxi to the Opera House Restaurant. The food was Vietnamese but the prices were in US dollars. The food was quite good, and served in a very beautiful manner. As thanks for taking us around, Newton paid for the entire lunch using his credit card, which was a total of \$52.80.

Figure 7: Lunch at the Opera House Restaurant. The appetizers (at left) were spring rolls were cooked on spears stuck into a pineapple. The flame was inside the pineapple. At right are the main dishes; chicken soup, roasted duck, and two vegetable dishes.



After lunch, we all had some free time so we walked around to do some sightseeing. First, we went to the biggest post office (Hanoi BU-Dien) in Hanoi to buy some stamps for souvenirs for Newton’s friends and parents in the US. Newton paid 50,000 VND for a stamp set showcasing 50 different traditional Vietnamese dresses. Apparently, I am not the only tourist interested in such items. Several hawkers were standing outside selling old Vietnamese stamps and quickly surrounded us when we walked up to the post office. It seems that Ha and Phong, having grown up in the USA and raised on American food, are much larger than the typical Vietnamese. Therefore, the locals thought all of us were foreigners.

Figure 8: The biggest post office in Hanoi



Next, we went to Anh Hoa bakery shop where Ha ordered the cakes for her engagement and wedding parties. Newton loved French bakery and bought slices of seven different cakes for 20,000 VND total. After this, we stopped at a tailor store where Ha tried out the dress for her engagement party. This was a traditional Vietnamese dress that is handmade for each bride. We then went to a local bank called Vinasiam to exchange some more of our US dollars into Vietnamese money. We exchanged \$500 to 8,025,000, which was a rate of \$1 = 16,050.

Figure 9: Anh Hoa Bakery has a crocodile made entirely out of chocolate on display. The Vietnamese learned bakery from the French, and there are bakeries on just about every street selling French bakery.



Figure 10: Ha tries on the traditional Vietnamese wedding dress



Figure 11: Inside a typical Vietnamese bank. On the back wall hangs an electronic board listing official exchange rates. Most transactions are done by hand and all receipts were handwritten. Bank security consisted of an armed soldier sitting outside. We did not see any video cameras in the bank.



Today was the birthday of Ha's mother, and we were invited to her party. One thing we learned about Vietnamese culture is that many things are done impromptu or at the last second. For example, in America, if someone has a birthday party, everyone who will be invited gets invited at least a week in advance. Not so in Vietnam; here you are often invited to a party the day of the party. And so it was with Ha's mother. Her family had decided on a party today, and we were invited two hours before it was to start. We did not have anything to give her, and thought of buying flowers. But Heng was planning to get her flowers, so Newton decided that we should buy her a cake. We were short of time so Ha took Casy on her motorcycle back to the bakery to buy a cake made out of passion fruit for 120,000 VND (\$7.50). We went to dinner at restaurant beside one of the city's lakes. The restaurant specialty was snail. A big bowl of cooked snails was placed in front of each of us, along with bottles of coke and Vietnamese beer. One had to use chopsticks to pry the animal outside of its shell in order to eat it. Newton tried one, and was fine at first. Then as Newton was about to eat the next one, Casy remarked that the black part of the animal looked like shit. Newton gagged, and could not eat any more after that. Ha and everyone else laughed. Rice and stir-fried noodles were also served for non-snail eaters like Casy.

Figure 12: At left is the main dish served for dinner; snails. We are back at Ha's house at right. Ha's mother cuts the cake we got her, one of two she got. Ha's father is to the right.



Tonight was the first time we met Van, another cousin of Ha's. She will be one of the bridesmaids at Ha's wedding. After dinner we went back to Ha's parents house to eat cake. We got back to the hotel at about 11PM and went to bed.