

Wednesday, January 3, 2007

Today was the wedding. Casy woke up early at 7 AM and headed off with Ha, Helen, Phoung, Thuy and Phong's mother to do their hair and makeup. Newton, Andy, Heng and Phong showered and put on their suits. The plan was for the ladies to be done by 9 AM, walk to Ha's house, put on their dresses and be ready by 11AM. At 10 AM, they were still at the bridal store putting on makeup. Ha was panicking because her dress was at Phoung's house. From Phoung's house to Ha's house was about ½ hour. Ha talked on the phone while they did her hair. They walked out of the bridal place at 10:50 AM just as the groom's party arrived trying to find out where they were. The two parties were not supposed to see each other so it was kind of funny when both parties bumped into each other on the street. We all went to Ha's house at 11 AM where the ladies got dressed. Family members and friends were waiting. At 11:30 AM, Ha went upstairs while Thuy, Casy, Helen, and Phoung lined up by the staircase and waited for the groom party to come in and hand the bouquets to them. Phong then walked in and went inside the living room where their relatives were sitting. He wore a business suit. There is a traditional wedding suit for men, but few men wear it as it has gone out of fashion. Ha came down the stairs wearing a traditional Vietnamese wedding dress, red in color with gold embroidery. Phong greeted her at the bottom of the stairs, where they said some prayers. The family members toasted the couple and everyone came out for pictures. After an hour or so, everyone headed for the restaurant where lunch was being served. The wedding party, which consisted of the couple, the bridesmaids, and the groomsmen, headed for the Sol Melia Hotel.

Figure 1: Casy takes some impromptu pictures of the bride and bridesmaids putting on their makeup.



In Vietnam, a common wedding tradition is for the wedding couple to visit several nice places on their wedding day, and have their wedding pictures taken there. Ha and Phong chose the Sol Melia hotel and the Hanoi Opera House. We drove to the Sol Melia hotel first, where the couple had booked a room. We went up, took pictures, and then the men waited outside while Ha changed into a Western-style white wedding dress.

Figure 2: The wedding party relaxes at the bride's house before the wedding.



Figure 3: The bride and groom are toasted and then came outside for pictures with everyone.



Figure 4: After the pictures, everyone heads out for lunch.



Figure 5: The wedding party goes first to the Sol Melia hotel to take pictures. At left is the front door of the hotel. At right is a picture of the couple and the groom's parents



After leaving the hotel, we went to the Hanoi Opera House and took pictures on the front steps. As this building was in front of a major intersection, motorists would slow down and whistle or take pictures as they drove by. Some people even stopped and came out and stared. The Hanoi Opera House is the biggest performance center in Hanoi, and has the look of an American concert hall, with big pillars and patios along the front. The wedding couple got around in a BMW E240 sedan. Limos are rare in Vietnam so German luxury cars or American SUVs are the primary vehicles for chauffeuring people around. The chauffeur for today's wedding was an ambulance driver and was still wearing his uniform. Ambulance drivers in Vietnam are government employees, and are not well paid.

Many government employees therefore work side jobs in the private market, like working for weddings, as in the case of our chauffeur.

Figure 6: The couple was chauffeured around in a Mercedes Benz E240 driven by an ambulance driver.



Figure 7: The wedding party takes some pictures in front of the Hanoi Opera House



Figure 8: Lunch at a restaurant. At left, Ha gets several helping hands while trying to fit her dress into the seat. At right is the wedding party. From left to right are Phuong, Helen, Ha, Casy, Thuy, Heng, Newton, Phong, Andy and John. Each girl is sitting opposite the guy who will escort her during the wedding.



We then headed to the banquet hall. This was located inside a big white building downtown. It was a convention center, and rented out halls large and small for civic occasions. The wedding occupied the biggest of these halls, and it was already decorated when we went inside. The tables, chairs, floor, and even the windows were all decorated. At the front of the banquet hall was a large stage where the wedding ceremony would take place. To its right was the wedding cake, and to its left were a pull-down screen, a computer and a projector. The computer was playing a video collage of pictures of Ha and Phong, projected onto the pull-down screen for guests to see. This was accompanied by music, which Casy and Helen helped to pick out. The stage carpet was red, as well as the curtains behind it, and the carpet leading up to the stage. Red is the color traditionally used in Vietnamese weddings.

Guests started filing in at 4PM. None of the tables had names on it, so people sat where they wanted. The bride and groom stood by the entrance shaking hands and greeting guests. The rest of the wedding party helped prepare. The wedding began at 5PM. Everyone sat down. The couples in the wedding party paired up at the back of the wedding hall, while the parents of both families lined up on stage. Music started playing, the lights dimmed, and each couple slowly walked up to the front of the stage. Heng and Thuy went first, as Heng was the best man. Newton and Casy were next, followed by Helen and Andy, Van and Tuan, followed by John, his wife, and their daughter Nam, who was the flower girl. Van is one of Ha's cousins, and Tuan is her boyfriend. They had to work in the morning so they did not come to lunch, the Hanoi Opera House or Sol Melia hotel with the rest of the wedding party. Glittering confetti and ticker tape rained down from the ceiling. Meanwhile, behind each couple walked servants who lit firecrackers. This was quite loud and surprised Newton. Last came the bride and groom. They walked up, past the groomsmen and bridesmaids, and onto the stage where the MC was waiting. The MC announced the names of the bride and groom, their parents, and toasted them. The guests followed the toasts, and that was the entire ceremony. The bride and groom then walked offstage to the back of the hall, followed by their parents, and last, the groomsmen and bridesmaids. We took our seats and then the food came out. Everyone started eating while the bride and groom

walked around taking pictures with all the guests. Unfortunately, only one table was left open, and it was in the very back. This is where the wedding party ended up sitting.

Figure 9: The top left picture is the stage where the wedding ceremony will be performed. Notice the date is written day first, then month, then year. Beside the stage is the wedding cake, shown in close-up in the top right picture. At bottom left is the banquet hall in front of the stage. At bottom right is a tower of champagne glasses used for decoration.



The dinner consisted of shrimp, crab, rice, stir-fried vegetables, spring rolls and noodles. There was no dancing as dancing is not common at Asian weddings. There was a bouquet toss, and all the single men and women grouped to catch it. The couple stood together and flipped the bouquet over their heads. The best man, Heng, pushed Ha's

brother out of the way to catch it. Guests began to leave at 7:30 PM and by 8:30 it was just the wedding party and parents that remained. Many of us had not eaten much during the dinner as we were running around doing stuff, so the place set up a smaller dinner for us in one corner while the rest of the banquet hall was cleaned up. We also ate the cake. Unlike in America, the wedding cake is solely for the wedding party, and is not shared with all the guests. We took some last pictures and left by 10PM to go to Ha's house. There we had some final pictures, chatted a little bit, and looked over pictures. We got back to the hotel at midnight and went to bed.

Figure 10: The wedding couple went around to take pictures with the guests



Figure 11: The dinner menu at left, and some dishes at right



Figure 12: Eating the wedding cake.



Figure 13: The entire wedding party poses for one picture after all the other guests have left. In front from left to right are Andy, Helen, Phong, Ha, Thuy, John and Phoung. In back from left to right are Heng (Ha's brother), Casy, Newton, Van, Tuan and Heng (Phong's brother and the best man).

