

**Saturday, December 30, 2006**

Today we were taking the tour to Ha Long Bay so we woke up at 6AM and had breakfast at the hotel. The tour van was supposed to pick up us at 8:30 AM but actually arrived at 8:00 AM. Newton and Andy were not ready yet so the tour van had to wait for us. We finally left at 8:15 AM. The tour guide seemed somewhat mad at us as we boarded the van. The van was full to capacity with 17 people, including Casy, Andy and Newton. Helen wanted to join in, so the tour guide sat on the floor besides Casy. The ride to Ha Long Bay took three hours and was very uncomfortable. Our tour guide said we would have a 15-minute break in Hai Duong City but that never happened.

**Figure 1: At left, Newton and Casy standing behind our tour van in the parking lot by the pier. At right, Helen, Newton and Andy stand by a SUV in the same parking lot. Many tour companies use SUV's to accommodate Western tourists who are too big to fit comfortably into local vehicles.**



We arrived in Ha Long City at 11 AM and parked by the pier. This was a coastal city, and both fishing and marine tourism were big industries here. Our guide went looking for a tour boat while us tourists walked around taking pictures. Numerous cruise ships were docked at the pier, and the amount of money tourism brought in was quite visible. The parking lot was paved very nicely, and there were several large tourist offices here. Many of the locals working the tour ships had uniforms, and the shrubbery was trimmed into fancy shapes. Newton bought a bottle of water for 10,000 VND. We also used the restrooms, and got charged for it. Casy had to pay 3,000 VND, while Newton was not aware of the fee, and just walked in. After about half an hour at the pier, we boarded a wooden boat for a 4-hour cruise in Halong Bay.

The cruise took us out to Halong Bay, which is a scenic area of coastline that was dotted by many small, rocky islands. On the tour, Newton exchanged 128,000 VND with Helen for some Chinese money. She had just come

from China, where she was visiting her family. Lunch was served on the boat, and the dishes were Vietnamese salad, huge garlic-fried shrimps, deep fried fish, rice, spring rolls, squid, stir-fried vegetables and fresh fruit. The fish and shrimp were served whole, including the head and tails. This is the default way of serving seafood in East Asian countries such as Vietnam; the animal is served whole. There are advantages to this. First, you can see the whole fish, and thereby know you are getting what you ordered. How else would one know a difference between a filet of catfish and a filet of grouper? Second, you get more meat, and some people prefer to eat the meat by the tail, or by the head. Drinks were not included, so we bought sodas for 15,000 VND.

**Figure 2: The steering room of our boat and the ship's captain.**



**Figure 3: Lunch on board in the ship's galley.**



**Figure 4: The bow of our ship at left, and the portside at right**



**Figure 5: Some of the islands that dot Halong Bay. The islands are all quite rocky though covered with lush tropical vegetation.**



The boat took us to an island to visit Thien Cung and Dau Go Caves. Both are very big and spacious inside so it was quite easy to walk around. Both are also major tourist attractions as there were paved walkways around the insides of both caves, and the walkways were lit with electric lights. After visiting the caves we boarded the cruise ship and departed this island. On the ship, the tour guide asked all of us either we wanted to go kayaking or to hang out on a beach and visit a temple on the top of a mountain. The passengers of the ship took a vote and the beach

option won out. So we sailed towards another island. By the time we got there, the tour guide said we only had 30 minutes to stay on this island. So we all rushed to climb to the top of the mountain. The path was paved, but the grade was quite steep and each of the 365 steps was small; not meant for large American feet. It was quite arduous to get to the top, but once at the top, we could sit and relax in an open-air temple that had a great view of the bay.

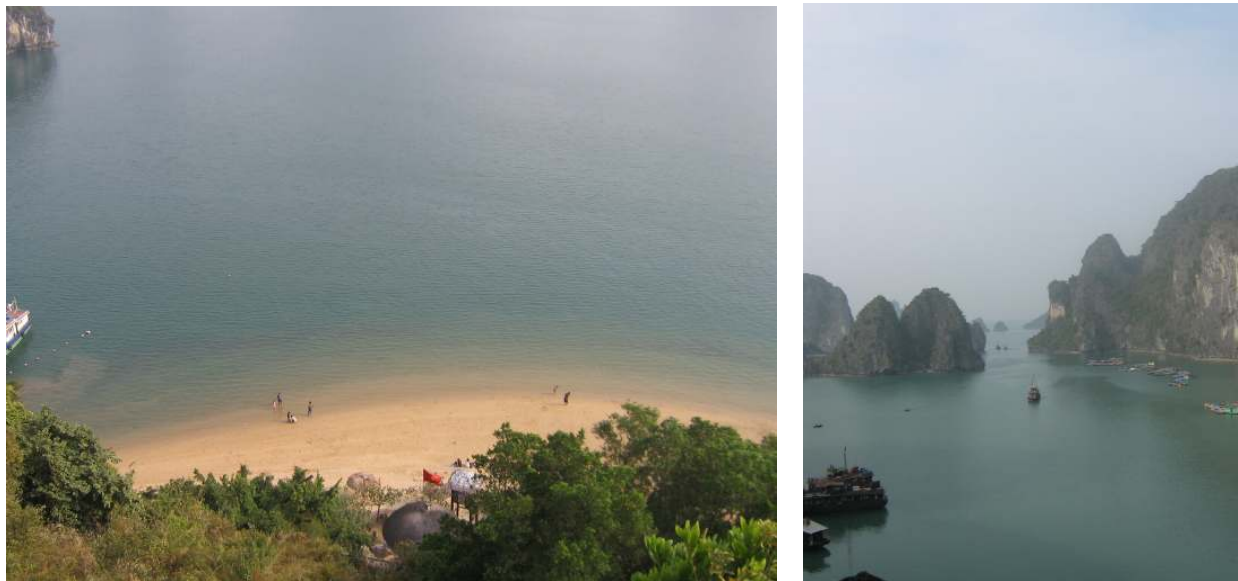
**Figure 6: Our boat docked at the island of Thien Cung and Dau Go caves**



**Figure 7: Thien Cung and Dau Go Caves**



**Figure 8: View from the temple atop the island mountain; at left is the sandy beaches of the island. At right is a view of the bay and the boats that sail through it**



**Figure 9: At left, Helen and Casy pose in front of a view of the bay. At right is Newton stopping to rest while walking up the steep staircase to the temple. The mist in the background occurs naturally all year round and is basically low-hanging fog. Note that it is not the same as the smog that hangs over the cities.**



**Figure 10: Our cruise ship was one of many that docked in Ha Long city.**



We left Halong city around 4 PM and took the van back to Hanoi. We arrived back at our hotel at 7.30 PM. Casy called Ha and asked what was the plan for tonight. Ha said John was inviting us to come to his father's birthday party at Ngon Restaurant. The restaurant was a 5 minutes walk from our hotel but we did not know which way so Ha decided to drive us there one by one on her motorcycle. This was the first time Newton rode on a motorcycle in

Hanoi. Dinner at the restaurant lasted for 2 hours. John asked if we want to go somewhere that night but all of us were too tired so that was it for tonight.

**Figure 11: Newton's first ride on a motorcycle in Vietnam. He survived.**

