

DIARY
Natural Focus's
2015 Vietnam Tour
13th to 30th January



Sunset on Halong Bay a great introduction to Vietnam

During 18 very full days in Vietnam a group of 11 Aussies, all veterans from various GO BUSH Safaris, made a tour of Vietnam organized by Poo who co-opted some wonderful Vietnamese local guides for various parts of the tour that went from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City.

The tour included:

- Three village homestays with three different ethnic groups, and a variety of accommodation
- 7 of the 8 Vietnamese World Heritage sites:
 - Temple of Literature (Van Mieu) (Hanoi)
 - Imperial Citadel of Thang Long (Hanoi)
 - Halong Bay (Natural Site)
 - Trang An Landscape Complex (Mixed site)
 - Complex of Hue Monuments
 - The ancient City of Hoi An
 - The My Son Sanctuary
- Seeing some of the impacts of the American / Vietnam War 50 years ago.
- A former Army soldier turned birdwatcher and the son of a Viet Cong soldier who became strongly anti-communist following the North's victory guided us.
- We visited three National Parks, Cuc Phuong, Bach Ma and Cat Tien.
- We travelled almost the full length of the country to see the diversity of the climates, geography, people and culture.
- We understand why "happiness" is in the Vietnamese motto.

Arriving in Hanoi Monday, 12th January

There were 11 Aussies in our group and they arrived in five different ways. We are still not sure how many others because apart from Poo there were several Thais including Sami, her 16-year old sister Da, and Ing, who all made their own way to the Hanoi Hotel Romance. Then there was Pat (Poo's mother) who will join us for six days in Hanoi who was staying in a nearby hotel.

Simon had arrived weeks earlier to go bird watching with Poo in various places. ULN arrive from Darwin after a bumpy trip via Kuala Lumpur. Judi and Bob hadn't met Gail before but they picked her out of the crowd at the Sydney Airport because she looked like a GO BUSH safarist. Thus they were on the same flight from Sydney via Ho Chi Minh City where they had a smooth transfer to their link to Hanoi. Gillian had to travel from Rockhampton and so couldn't be on the same flight as the rest of the Queensland contingent. The rest were Jenny, Pam, Diane, Su and F.L. They had a later start in Brisbane but after a very bumpy flight through monsoon clouds they put in a cold five hours in Guangzhou where the rain didn't abate. They finally reached the brand ne Hanoi International terminal at midnight where workers were still unpacking and putting finishing touches to the superb new terminal. That was the joy and all went smoothly except for Dianne whose luggage didn't accompany her on the flight. So it was after a 24 hours on the move that they arrived at the Hanoi Romance Hotel.

Eve of tour Tuesday, 13th January Hanoi

Today wasn't on Poo's itinerary that was due to begin on 14th January. We had all arrived a day early to be ready and to look around. It was therefore with some surprise that after a magnificent breakfast poo got us together and gave us a new amended itinerary that included this day for seeing two World Heritage sites in Hanoi and the Mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh who was the founder of modern Vietnam having led its release from Western colonial rule/influences.

Thus we set out for a day of action beginning with a walk around the city led by Chung who will be accompanying us for the next six days. Chung is an English-speaking Vietnamese guide who has worked with Poo previously and who lives close to our hotel.

Hanoi is a city of 8 million people who seem to have at least 5 million motorcycles that they seem to

crowd mostly into the part of the parts of the city that we were exploring. 50% were parked and 50 % were determined not to stop for lights, other traffic or pedestrians and they weaved their way around with such dexterity that it had to be admired even if it was causing us such inconvenience. There was almost a total absence of electric motor cycles and three wheeled motor cycles (tut-tut or equivalents) we were later to learn that as a deliberate disincentive from owning motor cars the government places a 100% sales tax on motor cars and this makes the narrow streets much less congested than they would otherwise be.



Hanoi Briefing by Poo on our unscheduled day to explore this city's cultural treasures

After our surprise reunion with Poo's mother who was staying at another hotel we walked to the St James Roman Catholic cathedral that was built in 1886 as a replica of the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. We didn't get inside the grand edifice that looked a little grimy on the exterior. We did however see some interesting reliefs on the walls surrounding the cathedral with a spectacular depiction of the most critical events of the New Testament. Alas some of the imagery was obscured by the overhead wire-scapes that draped almost every street as well.

Our next stop was a World Heritage site, the Temple of Literature inscribed in 2011. We arrived at this site near the lake with wonderful gardens that were apparent from the moment we alighted from our taxis. This place of learning that has existed for over 1,000 years where the leading teachers, especially Confucius, are venerated. Alas it seems that teachers in Vietnam do not hold such prestige and we heard that teachers are paid as little as \$US200 per month. In the temple there were great statues to the most esteemed teachers. Outside a number of students in academic garb were posing for formal photographs in this place. The very attractive surrounds of manicured gardens and

many elevated bonsai trays are testament the gardening and learning belong together.

We had lunch in an adjacent restaurant where the food and the smoothies were magnificent before heading off to another World Heritage site the Imperial Citadel. The taxi ride took us through the main administrative centre of this ancient city that still exhibits so many French traits. The eye-catching edifices of the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum, the new Parliament House, and the headquarters of the Communist Party stood out. However there were many other elegant buildings in this precinct. The Citadel has been demolished, extended, replaced in various forms by the various Chinese, Vietnamese regimes and the French. Its last famous incarnation was as the military HQ for the Viet Cong during the Vietnam (American) War. Hanoi was mercilessly bombed by the Americans. Much of Hanoi's population had to be evacuated. The bombing didn't deter the Vietnamese leaders who went into bunkers deep under the citadel.

Following this tour half went on to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum where they witnessed the changing of the guard while the others returned to the hotel to catch up on various matter. We reassembled to head off to a marvellous display of the water puppets before going to yet another magnificent meal. Again the access was via several flights of steep stairs. It was a very full and great day and the tour hasn't even officially started. It was also a great way to forget about jet lag. Better still Dianne's suitcase arrived and she could sleep in clean clothes.

Day 1 Wednesday, 14th January Ha Long Bay

We had another breakfast at the Hanoi Romance Hotel. There were over two dozen items on offer at the great beautifully presented smorgasbord breakfast plus tea, coffee, juice and fruit. Then it was a pack up from one of the best three star hotels I have experienced and confront the melee of traffic to board our bus in a nearby larger street and extricate ourselves from this metropolis for what turned out to be a four hour journey to board our boat at Halong Bay. In fact there was so much ribbon development along the 170 kilometres of highway we weren't sure when we had left the city. We had one what seemed to be an obligatory stop at a government run tourist trap before arriving at a private island owned by a very rich construction-property developer mogul. Here there was a chance to renew our cash reserves before transferring to a lighter in the massive marina that could have been

on the Gold coast except for the size and shapes of the boats.

Our ship was the V-Spirit 12 one of a large fleet. However tourism on Halong Bay is massive. There were 100 similar vessels to ours on the water some larger. Our ship had 16 on board including our five Thai companions and a crew of 12. We spread out into the 12 cabins and enjoyed a sumptuous lunch that was difficult to fully enjoy as we cruised past dazzling karst scenery while we were inside the cabin. This didn't deter us over the next few days recording thousands of images between us of this spectacular area that to us really justified its place on the World Heritage List.

Our first stop was an island with a beach. Several cruise boats targeted this island where short-tailed Macaque monkeys had been introduced. The beach was about **100 metres** long but in this part of the country where clean sandy beaches are a rarity they were very proud of it. Most of the group ascended the 370 steps to reach the summit of this small island where *Acacia manjium* trees were naturalized. They found though at the summit only a couple of hungry monkeys and no view but it was some introduction to the flora of Halong Bay where over 400 species have been recorded.



Short-tailed Macaque

We then moved on to an anchorage near our destination of a grotto where the group had an option to go kayaking. A couple of the young girls took it up and displayed their prowess in front of Long Nose's camera. However F.L remained aboard to capture some of the imagery of the sunset as we sat surrounded by about 100 tour boats.

Chung, our local Vietnamese guide said that Halong Bay attracts about 1.5 million visitors a year. In the peak season as many as 10,000 tourists at a time are out on the water taking in the view. Most tourists don't see a lot of the World Heritage site because they prefer to stay overnight in the luxury

of mainland hotels every night and venture out only for day-trips.

After the grotto excursion we spent the rest of the daylight on the top deck enjoying fresh fruit and an alcohol free Happy Hour prior to dinner. There was a toast at dinner to Poo and the crew for an excellent first official day of the tour. Following dinner, another culinary delight, Long Nose was able to utilize the TV screen to present some of his amazing images of his recent visits to Ambon, West Papua to see whale sharks. This was followed by Kakadu in the Wet and the tour he did with F.L & Su in 2010 through Bali, Suluwesi and Ternate. We retired at 9.30 for the least amount of rocking ever experienced at sea during a windless waveless night.

Day 2

Thursday, 15th January

Halong Bay - Cuc Phuong National Park

The day began at 6.30 with most ascending to the top deck with Tai Chi lessons prior to breakfast.



The top deck was wet with a very heavy dew that took until after noon to finally disappear. After a bacon, eggs toast and jam breakfast we headed across to a cavernous cave. There were many stairs to climb into various chambers of this cave and it seemed that the wide path could comfortably accommodate the hordes of people swarming through to take in the interesting formations and the grand size of the cave.

It was then back to the boat where the next item on the agenda was rolling Vietnamese spring rolls. For Go Bush veterans this should have been a breeze with square rice paper and the very finely chopped cucumber, carrot, ham, egg, noodles and lettuce. Since most were not really novices this was one of the easiest cooking lessons. With that we packed up and cleared our room and took in more of the scenery as we prepared for a grand early lunch

befitting the style and cuisine we had been accustomed to. Then with lunch over and bar bills paid we headed for the marina. There were more stunning formations to be observed on our way in,

Closer to the marina we saw many more day trip boats with passengers who will never experience what it is like to go through a full day and overnight cycle in this most impressive World Heritage site.

Leaving the millionaire's island to observe before the causeway I was astonished an extensive forest that was a pure stand of *Acacia mangium*. It must have grown so fast that it looked like a natural forest. On the bus we were told that it would be a 4 to five hour journey to our next destination Cuc Phuong National Park. It turned out to be six hours to cover the 250 kilometres. This was something that Go Bush veterans have had some previous experience with.

There was an unscheduled stop to take a group photo at another impressive karst outcrop area that as recently as June 2014 was admitted as Vietnam's 8th World Heritage site. It is also the first mixed cultural-landscape site. Tran An Scenic Landscape complex in Ninh Binh Province is characterized by stunning karst scenery. It is interesting that it was inscribed at the same World Heritage Committee Meeting that also inscribed the Guilin Karst complex in China that many of us are familiar with. Unfortunately the light was fast fading when we arrived and there was just enough time for a group photo on the site. We discovered a river that like the very well constructed road that we were travelling on threaded its way through the karst outcrops that in many ways resembled the karst outcrops in Halong Bay. The magnificent road we had travelled on since leaving Ninh Binh city passed through some wonderful paddy field landscapes and just near the end we could see the recently built Bai Ninh Buddhist pagoda, reportedly the tallest in the world. It seems evident that the government is planning to capitalize on the scenic attractions of this area and turn it into a tourist hot spot. That was evident by the road that has been built to encourage tourist development.



As we arrived at the Cuc Phuong National Park HQ in the dark over a very rough road dodging people, trucks and motorcycles the sound of branches brushing past the bush also had some familiarity. Cuc Phuong was established as Vietnam's first National Park in 1968. It appears that at the time of establishment there was a lot of effort put into establishing infrastructure including lodges roads public toilets etc. However there has been little maintenance since and it looks as if the anticipated number of visitors never eventuated. Thus there were two restaurants but they could operate only one at a time as seemed to have happened when we turned up for dinner at 7.30 and were redirected from the White House Restaurant to one operating near the entry station. However we had a wonderful dinner there before returning to our respective lodges by the lake.

In three days we had experienced four of Vietnam's eight World Heritage sites.

Day 3 **Friday, 16th January** **Cuc Phuong National Park**

After some early morning walks around the lake we assembled for breakfast at the White House at 7.30 am.

At 9.00 am we set off to walk to the Turtle Conservation Centre. This was established in 1998 and is home to some of Vietnam's most endangered turtles including some that are nearly extinct in the wild. Some species that are extinct in the wild though are in the hands of private collectors. ULN suggested that there needs to be greater consideration given to encouraging private collectors who have such critically endangered animals to surrender them so that the remaining rare animals can be put in a captive breeding program to help restore the populations for the future.



Lots of photos were taken and a fair bit of turtle handling was undertaken. We were shown the techniques used by poachers to catch turtles. In the past it was for consumption but now the high price on the black market is encouraging

Alas! We tarried longer than planned at the Turtle centre not appreciating that there was an earlier anticipated move across the road to the primates Centre. Thus we arrived late and did not appreciate that we had to be out of the centre by 11.20 am so that they could shut down for lunch. The Primates Centre was established in 1993 by the Frankfurt Zoological Society. That helps explain why the man in charge is a German who has lived here for the past 21 years.

There was also elsewhere in the park a third program for Carnivore and Pangolin Conservation that we didn't see.

After yet another superb lunch we had a late start off to undertake a 7-kilometre walk at the other end of the park. On the way we stopped to ascend and explore a cave used by pre-historic people for at least 7,500 years based on archaeological evidence. The evidence was there in the mounds of midden shells of what seemed to be land snails as well as cave paintings not dissimilar to the Bradshaw Aboriginal paintings in rock shelters in the Kimberley. Our walk revealed a splendid rainforest growing on the karst but little wildlife other than squirrels. This was despite so many prying eyes seeking to see the animals of this forest.

After dinner back at the White House two of those prying eyed shod in thongs braved the cold to retrace part of the way explore for frogs.

ULN didn't have such a very productive eventing for all his bravery but he managed to capture the image of a saratoga in the creek.

Day 4 **Saturday, 17th January** **Cuc Phuong National Park to Mu Village**

Four of the group braved the chilly morning and abandoned the warmer AC environment for a bird-watching tour, that they said was fabulous with at least 30 birds species being identified with the aid of Huon, a very good guide who took ULN, Gail, Diane and Simon on a walk though the area around the Primate and Turtle Conservation Centres. Amongst the many birds seen were sunbirds, flower peckers, grey headed pygmy woodpecker, Oriental pied robin, Japanese Sparrowhawk, Ashi drongo, six species bulbul, and a spider hunter. Lots of

gibbons were heard howling as the group returned for a late breakfast. It was a very productive morning.



After a late breakfast Pho, we eventually made our way through the National Park and then down the road we had only travelled into the park in the dark. It turned out to be farmed by Muong people who had been forced to vacate the park. The land could not grow rice because it was hilly and had no watering system. So the main crops were cassava, corn Sugar Cane and *Acacia manjium* which was turned into plywood. The cassava had been recently harvested and cropped up and left to dry on the roadside. As we went we saw much sugar cane being transported into a sugar mill by a miscellany of transport from ox cart to three wheeled motor bikes to an assortment of trucks. We didn't find the sugar mill but as we proceeded we saw many hectares of cassava spread out drying in the field. Apparently the cassava is sold to be processed into noodles.

It turned out to be Judi's 66th birthday and we stopped in a town on the way to procure two birthday cakes. It was a fascinating drive to our destination part of which followed the Ho Chi Minh Highway that now traverses the length of Vietnam from North to South. After a market stop and a few wrong turns we got on the road that led up and over a steep mountain. It was narrow and slow but we arrived on schedule at our lunch stop where a great lunch awaited. We then started the challenging trek down the road. We eventually reached a village and waited for everyone to catch up before heading down to a waterfall. It turned out to be a magnificent waterfall but most only saw the top. Da and Intrepid Guide though dashed off to the bottom to capture the full display. Fearless Leader was the last to leave the top viewing point but when he got back to the track he saw no-one so he headed back the village we had just come from but the others had gone the opposite way and after a series of bad directions he we finally reunited with his group

following his first ride on a motor cycle pillion in his life.

There was a wonderful dinner in the homestay of Quade thi Thuc (*Thuc* for short) that was challenging for those not accustomed to sitting on the floor to eat dinner. There was an interesting interchange as we learnt about the Muong culture, the two-child policy of Vietnam and a celebration of Jud's birthday with a cake that had been dutifully carried though the walk by Poo and Sami.

Day 5 Sunday, 18th January Mu Village to Mai Hich Village (Mai Chau valley)

We were not looking forward to the walk back to the bus that was mainly up hill including some very steep hills on a very rough road but the resourceful Poo and Chung engaged a truck to lift us up the hill. That left us a couple of hours to take a relaxing stroll around the village and observe what happens even on a Sunday with people walking.

Then it was time to travel up the hill in the truck. There was a great improvisation with a walk on ramp and even bench seats around the side but that was where the luxury ended. It took 1.3 hours to travel the 7 kilometres back to the bus. What we lost in puffing was made up by the bouncing as the lumbering truck lunged and bounced over innumerable bumps and even had to do a three point turn to make it around one hairpin bend.

We arrived back at the bus before noon and then had lunch at the restaurant we had used the day before. Then we began the rough road back to the bitumen where we paused to buy some fruit before descending the mountain and making another long bus trip north through endless villages and countless roadside stalls and vendors before joining Highway 6 heading from Hanoi to the west of the country. This road was wider smother and busier. It finally left the flat land and headed up a high mountain range and down the other side into the Mai Chau valley.

We left Highway 6 at Mai Chau and began driving south along the floor of this picturesque valley that is home to about 50,000 people and drove for more than another 15 kilometres to our destination in Mai Hich village. It was about 4.30 but the smog in the valley made it seem much later. In the poor light we set off to explore the village although in reality it was wandering amongst the fields, breaking down fences or detouring around them.

Mai Hich is comprised of ethnic Thais. This part of Vietnam had been part of the Thai Kingdom about

400 years ago when the French started their colonization of Indo-China. The French fought a war with Thailand that ended with Thailand ceding all land to the French that now is included in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. That resulted in some Thais being cut off from their homeland and becoming Vietnamese citizens. They are one of the many ethnic minorities now in Vietnam. They still retain much of their traditional Thai culture including building wooden houses on stilts, weaving, dancing and language.

Back at our Homestay where we had good hot showers and all slept in the same room we had access again to our large cases and cleaned up before dinner. It was a great dinner with us all at the same long table including our host family. We were advised though that there would be a few girls from the village that would be coming to perform for us after dinner.



None of us could have anticipated the amazing interaction that awaited us at the concert. The dancing was very entertaining with seven beautiful young women all under 20 years of age and some 17. The music was also very good except for Sami's discordant gong playing. However once the last dance of skipping over the clapping poles had been completed, the interaction became very lively as one by one we were inveigled into joining in the dancing and also endlessly sipping the "happy water" (rice wine) through long bamboo "straws". It was a very happy group of Aussies that made their way to our common bedroom where almost everyone was oblivious to any sounds made by anyone else once the lights went out.



Day 6 Monday, 19th January Mai Hich Village to Hue

It was an early morning and sad departure from Mai Hich after such a wonderful and memorable evening. The valley was full of fog and we settled in for a long drive to the Hanoi airport

There is little to report of a slow trip. We left at 8.00 am and stopped only for lunch. It was slow in the valley with a maximum of 40kph but on the highway the steep roads prevented us going any faster. However once we were down from the mountains into the flat Red River delta the traffic was slowed by road-works. The whole Highway 6 appeared to be an almost continuous road construction zone until we finally reached the Freeway leading the last section into Hanoi.

On the mountain we discovered that the many roadside stalls selling orchids were selling stock that had been illegally pilfered from the forests. We passed many plywood factories with veneers left out to dry in the sun. These included some veneers of white cedar.

For a while we were able to reach speeds of 90kph until we reached the city limits and encountered endless motorcycles and traffic lights. Despite electric cycles costing only \$US500 and motor cycles costing over \$1500 there were very few electric cycles although the proportion went up dramatically when we reached Hue. Most of the electric cycles were used by students who all had to wear distinctive uniforms to school and pay fees.

We travelled across town to pick up another freeway to the airport where we discharged Put who was flying back to Bangkok and rushed to the domestic terminal where confusion and chaos prevailed at the check-in with Poo having to purchase an extra fare for Ing who wasn't on the Airline's manifest. We made the flight with no minutes to spare thanks to a quick and easy security check.

The flight to Da Nang was uneventful with nothing to see from the plane but when we arrived in Danang it was raining. We were met by Nitt, a Vietnamese student of Thai and Japanese languages. She accompanied on our two buses that laboured though the darkness and much slow traffic to get us to Hue in three hours. Almost every road journey we have made in Vietnam has been underestimated in time by at least an hour and this was no different.

We checked into the Vina a very comfortable hotel and then after handing in our dirty laundry to the reception set off for a late dinner at a nearby restaurant. The item on the menu was a hot pot. It

was though hot in more ways than one and indicated that we had left North Vietnam and arrived in South Vietnam noted for having much spicier food.

Day 7 **Tuesday, 20th January** **Hué World Heritage**

After an interesting more western style breakfast at the hotel we gathered at 8.30 for a tour of Hué. We were introduced to our local guide, Huy, who spoke very good English and was a University graduate tour guide with a major in English.

With Bob and Judi missing affected by a lurgi and a desire for a quiet day there were all 14 able to squeeze into a single bus and immediately headed to the Citadel.

Here we went on a three-hour working tour and learnt not only about the royalty of the past and their pre-eminent position but much about Vietnam and many social issues. For example, we learnt that eunuchs were very important people and often amassed a lot of wealth and the eunuchs actually volunteered for the role because of the privileges that went with becoming the foster fathers for the princes of the royal household. The Vietnamese rulers though were aware of the power and influence of the eunuchs and tried to counter by deliberately excluding them from any counsel involving decisions.

Some Royal households must have been very large as the first Emperor had 142 children. The Third Emperor had none. There was so much more we learnt about the powers and privileges of royalty and the feudal system so despised by the Vietnamese socialists that it was only 25 years after the end of the Vietnam War that the Government started restoration of the Citadel that had been the scene of intense fighting in 1968 that had destroyed much of the very significant site. Once work began aided by the Polish Government within 11 year the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List along with other components including other sites that we visited particularly the Thien Mu Pagoda and the Khai Dinh Tomb.

After emerging from the Forbidden (purple) City of the Citadel we went to a lovely lunch of mainly pork spring rolls and pork and noodles. From there we went to the Pagoda with seven levels. In front of the pagoda we boarded a Dragon boat for a trip up the Perfume River. We all thought that it would be a return voyage but were surprised when the boat pulled into the bank and we were told that we would be returning to Hue by our bus waiting for us

above the riverbank. However that was not before we had explored the magnificent royal tomb for an Emperor who died in 1925. The preparatory craftsmanship preceded the Emperor's death by several years and continued six years after his death. Gillian was most impressed by the use of ceramics to adorn this stunning tomb.



We had some free time at the Vina hotel but most opted to utilize it to explore the markets or do some shopping.

Our dinner tonight was not so spicy but very nice especially the duck stew and improved more with some Danang wine. That was topped though when we opted for coffee near the Vina where one person who shall remain nameless (and several others) indulged in rum coffee, a delightful brew.

Day 8 **Wednesday, 21st January** **To Bach Ma National Park and Hoi An**

The plan was to be on the road by 8.30 but we were moving at 8.25. (This as unusual.) However we didn't quite get away. A staff check of Jennifer's room at the Vina found a cushion that she had left behind to dispose of. They sent a motorcycle courier to return it to her. About 10 minutes after leaving he drew up beside our bus and passed the cushion through the bus window while we were still on the move.

About 40 kilometres south of Hue we passed a shallow lake with fishing enclosures across it. In the morning mists it was most attractive. Alas, we didn't have an opportunity to capture the image of this tranquil scene.

It transpired that this lake was Dam Gau Hai and while admiring this we turned off the busy highway to enter the Bach Ma National Park. We stopped at a very empty Visitor Centre at the bottom of the mountain that was blasting out very loud music.

The underemployed attendant there had no more to do than the gatekeeper who raised the traffic barrier to allow us into the park.

Bach Ma had been a French hill settlement retreat to escape from the oppressive heat on the coastal lowlands. This was evident not only from the large and slowly decaying buildings near the top but by the road leading to the mountain summit. It was all well constructed and cement all the way with no potholes and only one other vehicle used the road this day. In a land where roads elsewhere are lacking this was an example of glaring colonial extravagance.



At the summit (or where the road ended) the main group set off in dense cloud to walk to the summit. Cloud obscured much of the potential views at the summit but not the caves and tunnels dug by the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War when a full battalion was based here.

It was here that the Fearless Leader's lurgi caught up with him. It had laid low others during the tour including Judi, Bob and Su so he didn't set off to the top where the cloud made it difficult to see much. We then all retreated to a Restaurant that was ill-stocked to feed a group of 19. Luckily Poo and Ing had foresight and purchased the makings at the market near the Visitor Centre beforehand.

We then set off on another walk to a waterfall that yielded little in observations before boarding the buses to descend the mountain where visibility was reduced to mere metres. At the bottom there was much consternation from the drivers because of smoke billowing from the buses. It turned out to be overheated front brake pads.

Then it was back on the highway heading to Hoi An about 160 kilometres south. The road works were almost continuous except when we entered a long tunnel through the mountains near Danang that seemed to be about 10 kilometres. One of the characteristics of the driving was the incessant beeping of the horns when overtaking any vehicle

and the very chancy occasions of overtaking large trucks when there was on-coming traffic.

Our Hotel in Hoi An was very comfortable. It was here that the Fearless Leader finally passed out. So no more can be said of the evening

Day 9 Thursday, 22nd January Hoi An World Heritage site

The Fearless Leader was still hung over this morning from the lurgi so while he slept Su and the women went on a shopping expedition to get some clothing. Later he became vertical and joined Su in exploring this cultural World Heritage site

About 11.30 F.L. was roused enough to explore the ancient town which had in the middle ages been a bustling international sea port with ships from Japan, China and Portugal coming here to trade. As the harbour silted up and there were larger ships the trade moved elsewhere and so Hoi An remained as a sort of time capsule of the architectural influences of foreign traders. There are many old surviving timber frame houses of this boom period (1,107), lots of religious buildings and pagodas and many meeting/community halls. The most identifiable component though was the Japanese covered bridge.



Japanese covered bridge in the Ancient City of Hoi An is the centre of the World Heritage site

Everyone enjoyed the free day. Jennifer got carried away with her shopping and is anticipating taking an extra bag home with her. Some went to the beach some just sauntered around sampling the cuisine. At night most of the women went to the Red Gecko Restaurant that was well named. They actually have a red gecko pet. The crew plus Simon and ULN made themselves a seafood banquet back at our hotel.

It was a productive recovery day for everyone.

Day 10
Friday, 23rd January

My Son Sanctuary World Heritage site

The morning's news was that the dreaded lurgi had laid low Gill. She seemed so stricken that during the day most people were considering what options might be available until she recovered. In the morning she looked a pale grey but by evening her colour had returned and she was determined to continue the tour with us even with a 4.30 am start.

We were a little confused when a truck came around playing Mr Whippy like music. Instead of dispensing ice-creams it as summoning residents in the kindest way to bring forth their garbage.

My Son Sanctuary was the seventh World Heritage site we have encountered on this tour. We were introduced to the site by the voluble guide Mabo. My Son and Hoi An were both inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999 at the same session. This site like Angkor Wat was uncovered from the jungle by the French. However since then there has been further deterioration notably the bomb craters resulting from the Vietnam War.



The guide books main omission in describing this ancient cultural site was that it seemed to be devoted to worshipping worshipping sex or rather the male phallic symbols that have all been now removed. What is remarkable is the quality of the original bricks used and the fact that no mortar seemed to be used. It seems the secret ingredient that helped the bricks and the structures survive so long was honey blended with the clay and the fact the brick surface was precisely flat although and joins in the bricks were bevelled. The bricks were of such quality that they could be carved and many of the carvings still survive in a very recognizable way. However despite very deep foundations the best-preserved tower now has a lean.

Work is proceeding to renovate and repair some of the structures but there is a lot of work to be done

Our visit to the site concluded with a display of some exquisite Vietnamese dancing and music. The dramatic music feature a flute played by a musician practicing circular breathing who held a note for an amazing time in a display of showmanship.

One of the more remarkable things noted during the visit to this site is that virtually the whole former jungle has been replaced by a forest of Australian wattle trees. Whether this was the result of deforestation during the Vietnam war or not couldn't be established.

Back at Hoi An after a noodle lunch the women and Bob headed off to a cooking lesson. The main dish prepared was green papaya salad with prawns and pork and spring rolls and rice pancakes. It was a shopping lesson. They all arrived back well fed at about 6.30 and the male contingent took off to the Red Gecko for a meal they didn't cook for themselves.

Day 11
Saturday, 24th January
Hoi An to Dalat

The day started uncomfortably early with us being packed and ready by 4.30 for a quick breakfast at our favourite hotel and then boarding the bus for the hour run up to Dalat. With little traffic there was little blast of horns unlike our dash to My Son Sanctuary the day before. We arrived in comfortable time for our 6.30 flight but alas it was not to be. The airline announced that the plane had been delayed in Da Lat by bad wether although when we arrived in Da Lat there was no sign of anything but the most benign weather. When we boarded the Russian built plane it appeared to have been waiting on the tarmac. Perhaps the pilot slept in. Some wished we could have too.

Flying over the mountains from Danang to Da Lat one couldn't but help wonder about how many times these same mountains have been overflown by American military aircraft spraying tanker loads of Agent Orange and the last impact that this has had on this country. No environmental assessment would have justified such barbaric actions that destroyed so much of the countryside, the natural environment and for no net military gains. More could be said. So much of Vietnam's former natural forest is now growing Australian wattles and eucalypts.

We then tried to squeeze 12 people and all their luggage into one Mercedes a little smaller than a Sprinter. It was an obvious impossibility resolved by four cramming into a taxi and racing us to our hotel. It seems that the Da Lat airport is at least 40

kilometres from Da Lat City and we heard to Mercedes clear the traffic in its way as we exceed the standard 80kph.

We dropped off our luggage at our hotel, the Pink House as our rooms weren't ready and were met by a new guide Tut who preferred to be called Eagle. Tut's girlfriend is in Sydney studying business and has been there for two years. Tut's interest in Australia has encouraged him to pick up much of the vernacular.

Our first stop was the Royal Summer Palace where the last King of Vietnam held court before evacuating to Paris where he lived out the last of this 85 years in luxury while his country went through two wars. Apart from his lavish life style he is remembered for giving the country its name that has meaning and inspires passion. Until it was named Vietnam it was known as Amman or CochinChina.



After lunch we went for coffee at a nice café with a view before going to the railway station and catching a quaint train. It was advertised as a steam train ride but the steam train was only for show. Our train was hauled by a diesel loco but it was a real blast. The engineer was blasting the horn that made our buses horns sound weak for most of the way on the 8km journey

We were advised that we would be passing through flowers all the way but it wasn't immediately apparent that the endless greenhouses made of bamboo and plastic were not only for a little hydroponics and vegetables but a diverse array of flowers for the cut flower trade. Flowers have made this hill town retreat at 1500 metres above sea level famous as have artichokes that are an improbable emblem of the city.

Da Lat seems to be to Vietnam what the Atherton Tablelands are to Cairns — a place to escape from the oppressive tropical heat of the coast lowlands and an opportunity to grow crops that can't survive in lowland conditions. The French knew a good

thing. They abandoned over 1,000 grand villas when they were defeated in the war of independence.

Our last excursion was to walk from the railway station to a nearby pagoda. This was something we hadn't imagined for the grandiosity and craftsmanship. It is a huge and still evolving complex. The ceramic craft was dazzling but the whole complex defies an adequate description since it is so contemporary and still evolving. It was on a scale of imaginative design similar to the white Pagoda near Chiang Rai that we once saw.

There was one more surprise in store before the day's end. We headed off to a waterfall. To view the waterfall involved descending and ascending several stairs. The RTH's charged off but the ones with less huff and puff opted to go down and up on the roller coaster. For Fearless Leader who has driven Coasters (buses) up and down some exciting tracks this coaster ride had more adrenaline pumping. At one bend those not game to take the controls were urging him to ease off on the brakes and let it rip. Common sense and self-survival prevailed. In the was back some of the huff and puff had vanished from the urgers. All but Jenny took the easy but less dramatic ride up the hill.

We returned to the Pink House hotel and took up our luggage up many stairs and discovered that Judi who had missed the afternoon activities



Day 12
Sunday, 25th January
Dalat to Cat Tien National Park

The day began appropriately for this "Little Paris" with crispy French bread rolls. Overnight Judi had been diagnosed with Bronchitis and was loaded up with medications and instructions by a Vietnamese doctor who X-rayed and did all the diagnostic tests at a private hospital for a total fee of \$50. However the advice was that she and Bob should skip the Cat

Tien National Park and meet us in Saigon 48 hours hence.

We said our farewell and got away from the Pink House Hotel at 9.30 and headed up to the Crazy House. This is certainly an amazing piece of creativity and architecture.

Dr Dong Viet Nga, is the owner, designer, architect, structural engineers and construction director of Hang Nga Villa (aka Crazy House). She studied architecture in Moscow from 1959 to 1972 and worked in conventional architecture until she moved from Hanoi to Dalat when she decided to build this villa based on unshaped cubes with curves without depending on any classical principles. She started work on the Villa in 1990 and it is still under construction. She aims to finish the project in 2020.

After leaving Dalat, it seemed like a road lined with endless houses from the time we departed the freeway near the airport. This was one of the two highways from Dalat to Saigon and even on a Sunday with fewer trucks on the road and no masses of children going to or from school it was busy and so was our bus horn

We stopped for lunch at a popular roadside restaurant and again a little further on for a comfort stop. The only remarkable thing to note about our journey though was the extent of coffee growing in this part of Vietnam. Vietnam is now one of the world's major coffee exporting nations.

We eventually squeezed into the Green Grove Lodge near the Cat Tien National Park. Alas the bus had more trouble squeezing out and the branch had to be amputated to enable the bus to escape.

Once we had been implanted in our rooms we still had plenty of daylight left. Poo suggest that we should gather at 4.00 pm to walk to the National Park entrance. We gathered as scheduled but instead walked to the river where we boarded two boats that were chartered to take us on a river cruise. Little did we realize that the Dong Song River was boundary of the National Park?

Despite our discomfort in the two small river craft, it was a fascinating two hours on the water observing the changing scene on-shore and the wildlife along the river. One tree was white with roosting egrets. Elsewhere flocks of greyish herons disturbed from their roosts circled above us. However seeing a leafless tree in the open clad in nothing but green parakeets was the most memorable scene as well as the smog enhanced sunset. It was a great afternoon outing and compensated for the less than inspiring scenery on our bus journey.



The euphoria of the trip though was tempered for Su who learnt news on her arrival back at Green Hope Lodge that the eldest of her five sisters had just passed away in Japan. Su opted to grieve privately rather than impact on the group spirit.

Day 13 Sunday, 26th January (Australia Day) Cat Tien National Park

At 5.00 am a truck passed down the nearby road giving three horn-blasts as regular 10 seconds. The question as there a lot of traffic /animals /people on the road or was this a reveille call for all and sundry.

Breakfast of coffee/tea, eggs/noodles and water-melon was waiting for us at 5.45 am. At 6.30 am we walked down the road to catch the small ferry across the river to reach the National Park HQ. Here we deposited our backpacks and joined Duyen for our nature guided walk through the park. Duyen had been local who served in the Army but when the National Park opened in 1992 he left the Army to work in the park. He said he had no talents as a naturalist then but seeing what people were interested in he became a fast learner and he was very expert.



The idea that hiking poles would be necessary was mostly wrong as we strolled down the well-formed road with cameras and binoculars exploring the forests for all forms of nature.

We saw native bees, both small colonial (similar to Australian) and a large solitary one (size of rhinoceros beetle gathering pollen), termites, cycads and various trees. However before we had even passed the ferry Duyen spied a movement in the trees and was able to give everyone a very clear view of a female adult Yellow-cheeked Gibbon swinging at full pace across the canopy much faster than we could walk. We saw all sorts of other wildlife including squirrels, and a mouse deer that at first sight scurrying across the road was thought to be a giant rat. There was an amazing array of birds seen. 34 were listed but there may have been more ranging Hornbills to barbets, Mynas and parakeets to sunbirds and drongos, spider-hunters and pigeons to herons and bulbuls. It was a birdwatcher's delight.

Meanwhile ULN and others were discovering butterflies, moths and various plants and for them it was a naturalist delight.

There was then a time for R & R as we found our new digs for the night and had a splendid tuna and noodle lunch prepared for us by our Thai crew. Whilst relaxing on the deck of *Pterocarpus* the groups had close sightings of a mature female gibbon moving around at the back of the house with her young baby almost strapped to her breast.

If the first half of the day was impressive there was much better to come after lunch. ULN and Simon took off to explore Crocodile Lake Da Lai on a test of endurance befitting Crocodile Dundee. The rest of the group opted for the truck tour with Duyen in a different direction and a largely different habitat of grasslands while the Thai team remained behind to prepare a really sumptuous dinner for those back at the Park HQ.

We saw little heading out until we reached the grasslands with some artificial wetlands near a Ranger station. It turned out that there are 20 ranger stations around the National Park of 720,000 hectares for 140 Rangers. We met some of the rangers. They have six days a month off in one block to join their families.

The afternoon tally of bird species almost outdid the morning tally. We listed 32 species but our sightings were clearer and we all felt that we could recognize them if we saw them again with much more certainty. The list was just as varied from a green peahen and Indian roller to Asian bar owl and Red-eared nightjar and from a range of wetland birds including a Woolly-necked Stork to a close up view of a sunbird building his nest. It was a delightful tour for all but Pam who decided to brave her illness to join us but who had to be taken home early.

Those who remained continued notching up not only bird sightings but also two deer species, several barking deer and a samba deer. .



Day 14 Monday, 27th January Cat Tien National Park to Saigon

In the early morning many paths were followed. Three of the women opted to visit the Primate Rescue Centre, Fearless Leader and Su strolled along a newly formed cement path along the riverbank and through the tall ginger, The Thai crew focussed on domestic chores in *Pterocarpus*. What Intrepid Guide and Simon were up to we could only try to imagine.

As it turned out during the night ULN had gone out alone and waded knee deep into the lake and then waited until the crocodiles accepted him and then moved about as if he wasn't there while he snapped away. Crocodiles though weren't the only things that he and Simon photographed during this adventurous excursion. It was a very productive morning — AND — more remarkably, they returned to the Visitor Centre right on schedule. Most were amazed. We wait with eager anticipation to view his images that he is going to allow to be placed on Picasa to be available to anyone invited by Email.

Meanwhile Gail, Dianne and Gill had a most interesting visit to the Primates Centre that was run by a most interesting English woman lawyer who devotes her life to primates. It costs about \$9,000 to prepare each animal for release back into the wild. The funds are raised by societies overseas but the Centre runs on a shoestring budget without certainty of tenure that is renewed every five years.

It was a more subdued group reflecting on some very wonderful experiences and wildlife sightings as we took the ferry across the Dong Song to our waiting bus. We went back to the Green Hope

Lodge to collect our larger luggage and have lunch before setting off to the *Smokus Maximus* of Vietnam, Saigon (aka HCMC). It was an interesting journey through coffee, rubber, and cashew plantations, a large lake supporting floating villages and quiet country lanes to a super freeway into the city of 10 million people.

Moving around this city with its 5M+ motor cycles was really daunting as we found as we took a walk to a restaurant for dinner to witness one motor cycle crash.

There is such a marked difference between Hanoi and Saigon apart from the climate. The women wear different clothes (pyjama style) and everything is bustlier and more economically focussed.

The highlight of the night wasn't F.L. taking his second fall of the evening as he and Su walked to the markets. Rather it was on their way home when they were orienting themselves on the right street and a pickpocket bumped into him. Fortunately he had given his wallet to Su for safe keeping earlier in the evening. The only gain for the muscly pickpocket was his pocket-diary that she graciously returned a minute or two later after they had gone on.

Day 15 Wednesday, 28th January Saigon to Mekhong Delta

We were picked up at the hotel by a Four Seasons bus and a Four Seasons guide, Diep. It was an interesting explanation of Vietnam and life in Saigon from a guide with four sisters who comes from a small village of 130 people near Hoi An. The first thing we learnt is that there are 9.5 million motorcycles in Saigon. We had significantly underestimated the number. Diep has two — one for work and another glitzier model to catch girl friends. We also learnt a little of how life changed in the South after the takeover by the North. It seems that Diep's father who was against the former South Vietnam Catholic dominated government and fought for the Viet Cong was not impressed by the response of the conquering Northerners once they assumed power.

Our first stop was a tour was a tourist trap/comfort stop just prior to joining the freeway. However it was compensated for by the story behind the craft. The lacquer-ware has evolved being created by victims of Agent Orange. This affected Diep's parents and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese.

The Mekhong Delta is the home for 19 million Vietnamese. It was developed by the French, who created many drainage canals and turned it into an enormous food bowl, allowing Vietnam to become

the largest exporter of rice in the world. Most is sold to Japan.

It was 70 kilometres from Saigon to the Delta. In the delta area we were introduced to another pagoda that began in the 19th Century (1849) and shows some traits of French influence in the architecture.

Then it was off to get on a boat for a ride on the Mekhong. This took us to a tourist trap where we explored the gardens, were sung to by buskers (albeit very well presented) and were then led to a "fun ride" in sampans down a canal very congested with sampans coming to collect tourists or fitting them out with conical hats and delivering them downstream. It was hard work for the paddle crew.



About this time a gastric wog hit F.L. and for a few hours there was a blur as we went to another restaurant and yet another for lunch all delivered by a river boat. Then it was back on the bus at 3.38 for what we were told was a three-hour run to our homestay. We crossed two branches of the Mekhong once on a bridge built by the Australian government as a gift and another built by the Japanese. They helped deliver us to the largest city in the Delta, Can Tho that has a population of 2 million people. However Can Tho wasn't the destination. It just happened to be where we rendezvoused with our host for the night who met us in a largish sampan.

Loading the 16 people into this sampan from the most primitive ramp in the dark was a challenge. When we were all aboard the vessel was pushed close to the Plimsoll line. Then we set off in the darkness for what seemed like an indeterminate destination and an ill-defined time schedule. Plying a canal or a maze of canals in the darkness was an uncomfortable feeling, exacerbated by the cramped conditions. However it got worse as we found that the sampan was progressively slowly sinking as people started felling was rising around their feet. As panic was about to break out we arrived at our destination homestay.

It was very basic but comfortable especially for F.L. who had a large vomiting bout prior to boarding the sampan.

Day 16 Thursday, 29th January Mekhong Delta to Saigon

If the boat ride the previous evening was a challenge the ride this morning would out do it in a number of ways except for the veil of darkness. We were promised a larger sampan and that was delivered and we were more comfortable. However before we had gone 500 metres the engine coughed, backfired and stopped. Our helmsman didn't hesitate. He divested himself of his outer pants, jumped into the mud and tied up to a jetty. He then grabbed a crank-handle and took off to walk home while we waited and speculated. Soon another sampan driven by our trusty helmsman drew up beside us. It was the same leaky boat that had given us angst the previous evening.

Our ordeal though wasn't over. We were following a different route to get to the floating market but the tide was at its lowest. That resulted in us collecting more plastic around the prop and touching bottom several times. However at one stage having cleared the prop the boat remained stuck in the mud despite the best muscle from our trusty helmsman. Eventually he received assistance from another young man in a larger vessel that was waiting for the tide to lift it off the mud. Then with skilful manoeuvring and careful navigation we managed to get through this shallows and out on to the river where we changed into a larger vessel to explore the floating markets. We were surprised that the leak the previous evening didn't reappear.

The Floating Market was very interesting because it seemed to work on a wholesale basis with lots of women in sampans pulling in to stock up with retail supplies. It seemed like a chaotic scene with all sorts of craft milling around the water staying just clear of the main channel where huge barges loaded to the gunnel with sand, gravel or timber were constantly passing. We sampled the fruit from a pineapple wholesale before making our way across the river and up another canal. Fortunately the tide had risen and this canal was just a little wider.

We stopped at a noodle factory. It wasn't an industrial scale plant, just a backyard operation with a handful of people working it. Two people dispensed out the rice powder slurry on to a large circular hot plate then as each was steamed for 15 to 30 seconds before being lifted off and left to

dry. There were hundreds of bamboo trays used to dry out the large rice paper sheet. When dried, these sheets are fed into a shredder and turned into noodles. The quality of the noodles apparently depends on the proportion of rice to cassava flour with 100% rice being the best noodles.



Then began the three-hour trip back to Saigon. We had planned to visit a school on the way but this had not been properly arranged and didn't eventuate so the gifts for the school will be distributed to schools in Thailand's Hilltribe area.

Apart from lunch a large roadhouse, there was no adventure reaching Saigon where we farewelled out Guide Diep and Driver Hai. Then at 6.00 pm Poo took us around the corner for our final dinner at a very fine vegetarian restaurant. There were formal thanks to Poo and his team, Ing, Sami and Da who guided us through the last 17 days

Day 17 Friday, 30th January Farewell Vietnam

It was difficult to appreciate that our Odyssey was officially ended. However two teams set out early after breakfast to take in as much as possible prior to our departure. The walking women charged off on a 40-minute challenge to reach the Notre Dame Cathedral. Uncle Long Nose, Fearless Leader and Su took a cab and miraculously ran into each other at the Cathedral. While the women walked back shopping on the way U.L.N., Su and F.L. stopped in at the Independence Palace.

The Independence Palace was at the epicentre of the Vietnam/American War. It was where the tanks crashed through the gates to "liberate" South Vietnam and then proceeded to mercilessly punish those who had opposed this "liberation". Thus it is interesting to reflect almost 40 years after that dramatic event how much the conquerors have since had to compromise to hold on to the South and to advance this amazing nation of 90 million people.

Epilogue

Reflecting back on so much over 18 days there are so many experiences to remember. Thankfully due to modern technology the group through images has brilliantly recorded these. Many new friendships were formed and indelible impressions were left.

For this diarist the philosophy of Uncle Long Nose resonates most strongly. When asked what it requires to be a great naturalist, Intrepid Guide said that it was **first necessary "to break out of society's framework"**. That he has certainly done. To some extent our sense of adventure and our preparedness to get off the well-beaten tourist track demonstrates that we are all not fully conforming to society's framework.



Japanese Bridge in World Heritage Hoi An

Manifest

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Guides:

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|----------------------------|--------------------|
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| Hue | Huy |
| My Son Sanctuary | Mabo |
| Dalat | Tut (Eagle) |
| Cat Tien | Duyen |
| Mekhong: | Diep |



The last symbol means no family violence

Independence, Freedom, Happiness

