

FIVE DAYS in VIETNAM: DECEMBER 2012

As Robin Williams would shout in one of my favorite movies: "Good Morning, Vietnam!" Yes, I have gotten up at 6:00 am to watch our cruise ship, the Celebrity Millennium, dock in Phu My as I begin my third tour of Vietnam...accompanied this time by my wife, Jany. I volunteered for all three tours. My first tour was on the USS Destroyer Higbee (DD-806) from 31-DEC-1968 to 14-JUL-1969. I had two primary missions:

- 1) Navigator off the coast of South Vietnam in order to provide gunfire support for ARVN troops
- 2) Communications Officer for plane guard duty behind Aircraft Carriers in the Tonkin Gulf in support of Navy pilots bombing North Vietnam.

My second tour was from 15-APR-1970 to 10-MAY-1971. During this year I had three primary missions:

- 1) Commander of 15 USA river boats with about 100 US sailors in the Mekong Delta up into Cambodia
- 2) Senior Advisor to these same boats with 15 US sailors as we turned the boats over to the Vietnamese Navy and continued to operate in III Corps and then south in Ca Mau in IV Corps.
- 3) Flag Lieutenant / Aide to DEPCOMNAVFORV, Admiral H. Spence Matthews, with field assignments in all four Corps of South Vietnam including 153 helicopter flights.

Today I look out the balcony of our stateroom on the starboard side of the ship and see a "brand new" Vietnam...a large industrial port with many cranes, cargo ships and over 40 buses standing by for our passengers ready to embark on shore excursions. There is one small motorized sampan between us and the dock and I wave to it. A man goes inside and then a little child comes topside and waves back to me. I know that I will need to wear my sunglasses today...not for the glare, but to hide nostalgic tears.

I then went up to the 11th deck on the port side and found the "Vietnam of 44 years ago"...very dense mangrove trees as far as the eye could see. There were more sampans and larger barges now between the ship and the shore-line about 400 meters away. Each barge had the Vietnamese flag flying...a big yellow "shining" five pointed star centered in a red background. The five points of the star basically represent the same principles as the five stars on the Chinese Flag:

- 1) The workers
- 2) The peasants
- 3) The Soldiers
- 4) The Intellectuals
- 5) The Young People

I then had breakfast by the Aqua Spa and a woman came by and asked me what excursion I had planned today. When I told her that I was going to visit Saigon...which I had not seen for 41 years, she wept and said: "Please don't make me cry. You were there during the war and it reminds me when I was five years old in 1945 and the bombs were falling all around my house in Berlin." Yes, war is terrible!

What follows in this 12 page article are my impressions as a tourist of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), the Cu Chi tunnels, Imperial Hue and Hanoi. In *italics* you will read how the cruise ship described these excursions in their .pdf file. In **bold italics** were the reasons I wanted to take the excursion. In normal type will be inserted my comments after the excursions. We all needed a Vietnamese "landing card" which was stamped every time we left the ship. In addition I needed a Vietnamese "visa" in my passport for \$50 since I was staying over-night inside the country.

Saigon 15-DEC-2012 Overnight and 16-Dec-2012

The drive from Phu My port to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) is about 2 hours. Your very first view of Southern Vietnam will be the amazing scenery, tranquil rice paddies, rubber plantations, and Buddhist temples along the way.

Our driver was “squatting” near the bus...in the same position that I saw so many Vietnamese “rest” so long ago. Our tour guide was a 30 year old Operations Manager with Pacific World, who spoke outstanding English. You will read more about his own “story” later. Yes, we saw rice paddies with some water buffalos helping to plow the fields. However, some farmers were using tractors now. Half way to HCM City, we had a rest stop to use the “happy rooms” for 15 minutes and to visit a local market.

Your first stop in HCM City is at the History Museum. It was built in 1929. It houses an excellent collection of artifacts illustrating the evolution of the cultures of Vietnam, from the Bronze Age Dong Son civilization to Cham, Khmer and modern day Vietnam. Here you find Cham art, ceramics and traditional costumes.

This was actually our stop after lunch and it included a “Water Puppet” show. This type of show was first presented in the 12th century. Our show was performed by five people in waist deep water who were behind a screen. In front of the screen was a pool of light green water about 15 meters by 10 meters. The puppets surfaced in front of us and performed. These puppets included sea serpents, dragons, fishermen in boats, fish and birds. It was more fun watching the expressions of the Vietnamese children in the audience than watching the actual performance. We then toured the museum which was converted from an old French Office building. It was well organized, not very crowded, but nothing particularly meaningful to me.

Leave the museum for photo stop at Notre Dame Cathedral and nearby Center Post Office, the neo-classical structures dating back to the 19th century. They are also considered as two among six well preserved colonial architecture buildings still remain in the city.

This was actually our final stop of the first afternoon. There was a church service going on at the Cathedral, so we did not go in. The Cathedral was completed in 1880 and was very beautiful...a smaller version of Notre Dame in Paris. The Post Office was open on Saturday until 20:00 and had about 30 customers waiting in several lines for five clerks...who did not seem to be in any hurry to process the mail (a sign of one of the negatives of a Communist Govt). All I wanted to do was buy six post-card stamps. However, I had to leave to catch our bus before I could buy them. The good news was that right next to the bus we could buy ten post cards for \$1 from a street vendor. The next morning I bought the six stamps very quickly in our hotel lobby.

*A short drive takes you to the former Presidential Palace, now known as Reunification Hall. **It is famous when a North Vietnamese tank crashed through its front gates on 30-APR-1975 signaling the end of the Vietnam War** (Vietnamese call it the American War). The palace has changed little and is now a museum. Tour the reception and dining rooms of the president’s quarters, and the basement with its archaic American made telecommunications equipment still in place and strategic military maps lining the walls.*

This was actually our first stop in the morning...and the “best” of the day. The tour company had reserved the Palace just for their tours today. Since we were one of the first groups it was not crowded and we had plenty of time for the tour. This was in stark contrast to our tour two days before in Bangkok, Thailand of their Grand Palace...where the crowds dominated / spoiled their magnificent temples. At the entrance to the Presidential Palace were replicas of the two tanks which crashed through the front gates. There was also a second flag (to accompany the Vietnamese Flag) of a large yellow hammer & sickle on a red background. Inside were statues of Ho Chi Minh (born in 1890 and died in 1969). Inside were many green ceramic elephants: BUFES (like the two I bought back in 1969) and temple dogs (like the one I bought

back and is now on display in my youngest son's house). Most impressive to me were the maps of actual troop positions which were preserved throughout the Palace. One chart in particular showed the number of "foreign" (**primarily from SEATO that was established on 8-SEP-1954**) troops in South Vietnam by country on 29-JUN-1968:

1) USA	Hoa Ky	541,933
2) South Korea	Dai Han	50,355
3) Australia	UC	7,379
4) Thailand	Thai-Lan	2,423
5) Philippines	Phi	1,825
6) New Zealand	Tay-Tay-Lan	523
7) Taiwan	Trung Hoa	31

Continue the drive to a lacquer ware workshop where you see how talented the Vietnamese workers at their art work. Lacquer paintings, wood carvings and egg shell embedded paintings are unique.

We actually did this in the afternoon. There was a demonstration of this process in the hot humid entrance to the building...with five Vietnamese sweating over their work. Then we all got to go into a beautiful air-conditioned store. The finished art available to be bought and shipped directly home was truly amazing. This art ranged from very small pictures to very large pictures, from wine holders to screens to very large pieces of heavy furniture. I bought a 333 beer for 70 cents. This used to be called 33 beer (ba moui ba) when I was last in Vietnam, but now it has an additional "3".

After that you will proceed to a deluxe hotel's restaurant in town for lunch.

There were many other tour groups on the 4th floor of this hotel for a buffet lunch. We had our own tables reserved for our tour number "22" and there were many types of food arranged on different tables throughout the restaurant...from sushi to noodles to fish to chicken. It was crowded with long lines, so I headed directly to the dessert table...with no line and was the first to try many delicious desserts. For the rest of my lunch I had a Coke and two pieces of bread.

Drive to the booming China town where more than half a million Chinese Vietnamese are living in this vivid and bustling town. Cho Lon is literally "big" market and more commonly known as Chinatown. With its crowded streets and shop-houses, the names are certainly appropriate! The streets are full of life and color, with bargaining being conducted at numerous street stalls. There are hundreds of hidden temples, shrines and pagodas. A stop will be made at Ben Thanh market and Dong Khoi Street where you can browse and check your bargaining expertise for thousands of local products ranging from food, clothing, household products, art, paintings and handicrafts.

Cho Lon and Saigon used to be separate cities. Now along with several other neighboring areas they were renamed Ho Chi Minh City (abbreviated HCM City) after the fall of Saigon on 30-APR-1975. There are over 10 Million people living there of the 91 Million in the entire country. Vietnam is the 14th largest country in the world...now one of the leaders in exporting coffee, rice and rubber. YOUTH dominate the cities with the average age about 23 and the average annual salary of about \$2,000. However, the "downtown" area is still referred to as "Saigon". How do all these people get around? There are millions of motor bikes being driven everywhere...in every direction...with multiple people on board. In some areas there are big streets with several lanes reserved only for these motor bikes. How does one cross the street with all this traffic? We were told that one should walk slowly across the street and all vehicles (motor bikes, cars, trucks, buses, etc.) would simply "avoid hitting us". I tried it once (imitating a blind man crossing the street) and it worked! I walked thru the crowded markets in which the aisles barely had enough room for two people to pass by. I did not buy anything.

Stop to visit inside the Sea Goddess temple namely Thien Hau. It is dedicated to the Goddess Protector to the sailors according to the Chinese legend. The temple is famous for its unique architecture. Many coils of incense are hanging on top of your head by believers to the Goddess. Over here hundreds of Chinese and Vietnamese pay visits to the Goddess daily.

This temple resembled one I had visited in Hong Kong three months ago. It was old and the smell of burning incense filled your lungs. There were many more tourists there than Buddhist praying.

*Just located in the heart of the city, the historical Rex hotel and colonial style People Committee Building are famed for its history. A photo opportunity will be made at this location. **Rex hotel is famous for American officers and journalists for its well-known roof top bar, which was named "Five o'clock follies".***

Several people in our tour went there after dinner for a drink. It was two blocks from our hotel. I stayed at our hotel after driving thru the city with every street and store decorated for Christmas with bright lights and signs in English. Although 85% of Vietnam is a mix of Buddhist, Confucius & Taoist (officially 85% atheist per the Communist party), everybody was out doing their Christmas window-shopping...with many actually buying presents.

*Dinner will be served at one of the best local restaurants in town. **Overnight at the Caravelle Hotel.***

The dinner was Vietnamese in an upstairs room, but it had poor acoustics...and thus very noisy. The food was OK and I did well with my chopsticks. My highlight was the nice red wine. Our hotel was truly FIVE STAR! Our room was magnificent on the 16th floor with great views of the city. The service was excellent. I looked out our window in the morning at 6:30 am to see very few motor bikes and a peaceful city. The breakfast at the hotel was similar to the one I had at the Ritz Carlton in Hong Kong. The highlight was the Vietnamese coffee that took five minutes for them to brew my own cup and then you add some sweet condensed milk. This reminded me of the Carnation milk that I drank 41 years ago from a can with the writing in French: Lait du Sucre. After breakfast I wrote two post cards...using some of my Vietnamese to my So Mot (#1 son, Bill) and to my So Ba (#3 son, John). I mailed these since I had their addresses. I will send one to So Hai (#2 son, Brian) tomorrow. Right before boarding the bus there was a free jazz concert under-way on the steps of the Opera House that was across the street from our hotel. Here we saw the motor bikes parked and used as seats by the locals.

Check out before meeting your guide in the hotel lobby. The two hour drive southwest from the city to the Cu Chi Tunnels is a pleasant foray into the surrounding countryside. It is hard to believe you are entering a former war zone of such strategic importance. The busy road passes through tranquil rice paddies where entrepreneurial villagers use the hot roadside as a platform for drying all manner of produce.

On the drive our tour guide told us his personal story of being a "boat person" and what life was like in the early years of a united Vietnam under Communism. The land in the South that was owned was "redistributed" to North Vietnamese soldiers and to those who had been loyal to the North. We passed a beautiful military cemetery in which only NVA and successful VCs could be buried. Over 140,000 South Vietnamese fled the country by air or mostly by boat. A typical boat could hold about 80 people and was camouflaged to look like a normal cargo boat. There were four possible results for these voyages:

- 1) Get picked up by a "friendly" foreign nation and taken to freedom in their home country.
- 2) Reach another country and be put into a refugee camp. There most learned excellent English.
- 3) Get caught by the Vietnamese Coast Guard, taken back to Vietnam and be put into prison.
- 4) Get caught by pirates with the women being raped and then all the people being killed.

Our tour guide and his family suffered the third fate above. The men on board were forced to swim in just their shorts to the Vietnamese Coast Guard cutter to insure that they did not carry any weapons. They all were taken to a Vietnamese prison and were put into very small cells / boxes. Our guide was five years old and stayed there for two weeks. His mom stayed there for three months and his father stayed there for six months. Grandparents sent food and money to the prison to try and make the stay more bearable. They learned the TWO key rules in Vietnam:

- 1) Do not say anything against the Communist Government.
- 2) Do not forget rule #1.

Today there are over 4 million Vietnamese living overseas with over 1 million in the USA.

*Upon arrival at the Cu Chi tunnels, a short documentary video will show you the history of the tunnels. **The black & white film was shot during 1967 and is a little bit anti American.***

With this background, I was prepared to see the film. However, our tour guide told me that the American Cruise ships did NOT want this film shown to their passengers. I objected and he took us all to see it right away. I also then pre-briefed our tour about what they were about to see...and even suggested that they could elect to not view it. The film was clearly a VC propaganda vehicle. The key phrase that caught me was their description of the B-52 carpet bombing of the area by "those CRAZY AMERICAN DEVILS who were trying to destroy our land & homes and to kill our children". The film showed many young VC women soldiers firing guns, setting traps and hiding in the tunnels. Some were shown receiving medals for killing the American enemy. The film was very graphic with some of the action probably "staged". It did not upset me, but I still remember the Vietnamese woman and her child who stepped on one of these land mines (now called IEDs in Afghanistan) in June of 1970. As I have written in previous articles...the woman was blinded and bloody and her child was missing an ear. On board the medevac helicopter I held their hands to comfort them. "I can still feel their grasp today."

*Your guide explains the underground network, display of tools and weapons used by the guerillas, and provides insight into the ingenious methods that the Vietnamese soldiers employed to remain undetected. **Work began on the tunnels in 1948, and they eventually extended to 120 miles.** Originally constructed to fight the French by the Viet Minh, the tunnels were later expanded up to 12 meters below ground in hard soil using rudimentary tools. **The open and well ventilated tunnels contained underground meeting rooms, kitchens, a hospital, and sleeping areas. Most only 60-70 centimeters (2 or 2 ½ feet) wide and 1.5 meters (5 feet) high, the tunnels had thick roofs capable of withstanding the weight of tanks or the impact of bombs weighing up to 100 kilograms (200 pounds).** Some have been enlarged to accommodate western visitors at the site. More adventurous and agile tunnel explorers can experience an unlit passage which has not been enlarged for the comfort of visitors. You will be tested to find hidden tunnel entrances and be given insight into the ingenious methods that the Vietnamese soldiers (Viet-Cong) employed to remain undetected and frustrate their enemies. In the tunnels closest to the surface the actual rooms may be open to the sky above, with the tunnels in between fairly short. Approximately 1 ½ hours is spent at Cu Chi tunnels.*

Several of our tour went down into a very small dark entrance to one of the tunnels and "popped" out of the camouflage for pictures. I elected to go down one tunnel that was 20 meters long and had some lighting. I crawled on all fours (hands and legs) for about three minutes to reach the other end. How could up to 2,000 VC live every day in these tunnels...coming out only at night? I understand that the US Army knew about these tunnels and labeled this area a "free fire zone" for all planes to bomb at will. This bombing had little effect on the tunnels. It was not until the leader of the local VC was captured and the entrances discovered that the entrances were destroyed and all the VC evacuated them in 1968.

*On the return drive to port, **lunch will be served at a local restaurant owned by a former Viet Cong guerilla** located on the bank of Saigon River. Enjoy a delicious cuisine at the restaurant while taking in the scenery of a green field surrounded by the flow of canals.*

I did not get to meet this former VC female. If I had, I would have told her how nice a restaurant she had and to congratulate her upon her business success. The one question that I would have liked to have asked her would have been: "How have your views changed / been modified / or stayed the same over the past 40 years?" I was told that her job as a VC was to go to Saigon and to recruit other young people to come to Cu Chi and to "train / brain-wash" them.

There were several on our tour who had been in the military, but had not gone to Vietnam. A few of the women asked me questions during these two days. At the end one woman asked me how I now felt. I said: "I was pleased with the success that Vietnam has had. Most of the people looked happy and all the youth seemed to be living in peace."

Hue/Danang (Chan May): 18-DEC-2012

First site from the ship are the high mountains in the area around the Chan May harbor. This reminded me a little of the magnificent bay around Danang Harbor in which our Destroyer anchored in 1969 as I went ashore to deliver books to US Servicemen in the hospital.

The travel time from Chan May port to Hue is approximately 2 hours each way. Hue has long been known as the Imperial City of the Nguyen Emperors, rising to glory during the reign of 1802 to 1945.

The bus ride up and over the mountains provided a nice view of the area...and traffic. There are three "good" things that the driver of the motor bikes need:

- 1) Good horn
- 2) Good brakes
- 3) Good luck

The large lagoon on the other side of the mountain was quite interesting. It was over 7 KM long and only one to two meters deep. It was used to catch fish & shrimp and for irrigation. You see many people working in the rice paddies wearing "conical" hats. These serve multiple purposes: food could be put inside the top for lunch later, water could be carried in them, they could be used as a fan, they could provide protection from the sun and could be used as a mask. Along most of the road we saw the one train track that runs from Saigon to Hanoi built by the French. It is still used today and takes 28 hours for the 1,000 KM trip.

A short comfort stop will be made on arrival at the Century Hotel before commencing the tour program.

This beautiful hotel was built in 1901 by the French and was in outstanding condition...with modern conveniences, but still the old colonial charm. We also came back to this hotel for an excellent buffet lunch. Ho Chi Minh studied in Hue (pronounced "way") in 1917 & 1918 and Charlie Chaplain stayed in this hotel in 1939

*Probably the most famous symbol in Hue is the Thien Mu Pagoda (Heavenly Lady Pagoda). The seven tiered tower at the top of a steeply stepped entrance is perched overlooking the tranquil Perfume River. Inside, a garden of bonsais is quietly tended by novices, whilst in the main temple building you will often see a dedicated monk chanting recantations. An unusual feature of this pagoda is the vehicle thought to have been driven by the monk who caused horror around the world when he **self-immolated in the streets of Saigon in protest against the repressive Diem regime in 1963.***

This was actually our second stop on the tour. The setting on the hill overlooking the bends in the Perfume River was very beautiful...in "harmony" with nature. The Pagoda was built in 1601 and the seven tiered tower in 1824. There are seven steps to represent the first seven steps that Buddha took when he was born (either in fact or as seen in a dream by his mother). We did see the white car that is mentioned above which is kept here since the self-immolated monk was a friend of the Chief Monk of this Pagoda.

*Continue sightseeing at the Imperial Citadel. It was built on a similar plan to that of the Forbidden City in Beijing. Construction commenced in 1804 under the instruction of the first Nguyen Emperor, Gia Long. Passing through the impressive Mon gate you will continue over a flourishing lotus pond to reach the main pavilion – the Palace of Supreme Harmony. It was here that important ceremonies took place and recent reconstruction has seen this building restored to its former splendor with regal red and gold columns and ornate furnishings. Sadly, much of the ground beyond the **Palace suffered badly during the taking of the Imperial Citadel in the Tet Offensive of 1968**, and beyond the damaged walls entrepreneurial farmers have started their own plots in the fertile land. You will also see the immense Dynastic Urns, each one depicting a different region of Vietnam and the Pavilion of Benevolence, which dedicates a throne to each of the revered Nguyen Emperors.*

This was actually our first stop in Hue and the primary reason I wanted to take this tour. I wanted to see one of the key areas (of over 100 cities) that the VC attacked on the Lunar New Year (Tet) in 1968. The VC were able to occupy the Citadel for twenty days and then left after heavy American bombing and shooting. Although the Tet Offensive was a military loss for the VC with over 30,000 killed across South Vietnam and less than 1,000 Americans killed, it was a tremendous psychological victory for the VC and provided a huge lift to the anti-Vietnam War movement in the USA. It was then very obvious that the VC were well organized, armed and able to even penetrate the Imperial Capital in Hue and other areas. Many of the American Public and Politicians now wanted no part of this war. There is very little damage visible from the American bombing of the Citadel. The only real damage we saw on the tour was done by the French in 1947 when the Viet Minh occupied the Citadel.

In the afternoon, you will also see Tu Duc tomb which is considered one of the most beautiful tombs in Hue and interesting in an Emperor's life.

This was our last stop with a lot of walking...up and down steps. It was not very interesting, but we were getting tired. However, we were clearly not as tired as the North Vietnamese who carried supplies along the 11,000 KM of the winding (fishbone shaped) Ho Chi Minh Trails from North Vietnam thru Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam. The heavy bombing of these trails by the US Air Force did little to stem the flow of these supplies. Gasoline for use in the south was transported in Russian trucks and later thru pipelines.

Hanoi, Halong Bay: 19-DEC-2012 Overnight and 20-DEC-2012

Ha Long Bay is a UNESCO historical site with a maze of rock formations rising majestically throughout the entrance to the harbor where the ship anchored. These “little hills” were spectacular...and one felt like you were on another planet. However, reality hit as little Vietnamese boats approached with children begging in English: “money, money, money”.

Disembark the ship to board motor coaches for the approximately 3 ½ hour overland journey to Hanoi. Boasting glorious French colonial architecture and numerous lakes, Hanoi is the jewel of Vietnam’s crown, a little known blend of east and west with bicycles cluttered streets and a nation of people reluctant to join the frenetic atmosphere of their southern counterpart, opting for a more reserved and relaxed way of life.

It was a LONG drive with a rest stop half way to visit the “happy room”. There were no modern highways until the last half hour as we approached Hanoi. As we got closer to Hanoi we saw two of the new Manufacturing Plants: a very large Canon facility and the other for Foxconn to build Apple products.

Enjoy a touch of old Hanoi, very much evident today in the ancient quarter of 36 Streets districts. Explore on foot the myriad of streets that were traditionally named after the tradesmen that worked them – such as Tin street, Silk street and Grilled Fish street – before spending a little time shopping. You will have dinner at a renowned local restaurant to enjoy a taste of Vietnamese cuisine.

We were 45 minutes late departing the ship for the excursion, so we missed this walking & shopping and had to go to the water puppet show for their 6:30 performance....then dinner. We did see some of the beautiful sections of “old Hanoi” from the bus with the French influence. We were also told that Saigon was for “businessmen” and that Hanoi was for “poets”. There are about 6 million people living today in Hanoi...up from only 1 million 17 years ago.

After dinner you will witness a unique Vietnamese performing art at the Water Puppet Theater. The stage is a pool of water, the background a red tiled communal house. The wooden puppets seemingly walk on the water as the puppeteers skillfully maneuver them hidden by the stage set. Brightly colored animals and figures come to life as their stories are told. There are seemingly several “acts” which each tells a story – either about daily life in Vietnam or about ancient cultural beliefs. Everyday activities are depicted, such as rice farming, rearing ducks and fishing, all accompanied by songs and music performed on traditional instruments.

The show was in a much larger pool (about 30m by 20m) than the one we saw in Saigon. There were 16 people handling all the puppets and “live” music & songs performed by three beautifully dressed women and a small band to accompany the puppets. There was an audience of over 200 people. After the show we went to a sit-down dinner at a nice Vietnamese restaurant...with some local smells.

Overnight and breakfast will be at the Hanoi Intercontinental Hotel

The Hotel was outstanding and overlooked one of Hanoi’s 29 lakes within the city. It was in one of these lakes that LCDR John McCain III landed after bailing out of his Navy Jet on 26-OCT-1967. It was reported that many locals went out to grab and club him, but one Vietnamese man saved him from the crowd. This man is now 95 years old and lives in his same house. Breakfast the next morning was very well organized, clean and first class. However, it was attended not only by the hotel guests, but also by locals who wanted to also enjoy the great food and atmosphere on their way into work. I was pleased to learn that the Americans only meant to bomb military locations around Hanoi. Thus almost all of this beautiful historic city survived intact. The key bridge downtown was destroyed and rebuilt (once by American POWs) 14 times. One bomb was off target and did destroy a block of Hanoi and unfortunately killed 3,000 civilians. This event was clearly used very effectively for Propaganda by North Vietnam.

After full breakfast at the hotel, depart to the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, both a research center and a public museum exhibiting the ethnic groups of Vietnam. The mission of the Museum is scientific research, collection, documentation, conservation, exhibition and preserving the cultural and historic patrimony of the nation's different ethnic groups. The museum also serves to guide research, conservation, and technology that are specific to the work of an ethnographic museum. It is arguably considered Vietnam's finest museum.

We actually did this after lunch and it was our last stop before the LONG bus ride back to the ship. It was a nice two story museum showing the history of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam. I found the most interesting item inside was all the school children in their uniforms...having a good time.

*Thereafter you will visit Ba Dinh Square, also known as the Ho Chi Ming Complex, where the impressive marble and granite tomb where the father of the country lies in state. Walking from the former French Governor's Residence, you will pass tranquil lotus ponds at the entrance to Ho Chi Minh's cottage. In stark contrast to the neighboring residence, this cottage is a simple teak building designed in harmony with the surroundings and in the style of the ethnic hill tribe homes. **Ho Chi Minh's belongings, including books, radio and hat are on display and you can walk up the steps of his house to see his bedroom.** Further on, you will come to the rebuilt "One Pillar Pagoda", shrouded in legendary origins. Your guide will also offer you a detailed explanation of the intriguing abstract exhibits in the Ho Chi Minh Museum.*

We did this right after breakfast...leaving the hotel at 7:30 am. There were long lines of local residents (primarily school children to be "indoctrinated" about Uncle Ho) lined up "two by two" to walk into the mausoleum. Our group was allowed to enter the line ahead of about 75% of the people already in line. There were many guards in uniform along the route to insure that we all were quiet, respectful and kept on moving...everybody "two by two". Right outside the steps to the Mausoleum was a RED carpet for all of us to walk on. This RED carpet continued throughout our tour inside. One can see the figure of Ho Chi Minh under glass. It could have been his embalmed body or a wax model.

After leaving the mausoleum we could talk and visit the other areas mentioned above in this complex. This gave our tour guide time to brief us in more detail about the role that Ho Chi Minh played in the history of Vietnam. Ho came from a well-to-do family and went to a French elementary school in Vietnam. He was further educated in France and Russia in the 1920s and then visited the United States. In 1930 he founded the Communist Party in Vietnam, but was found to be more of a "patriot" favoring nationalism of Vietnam than a "card carrying" commie. From 1940 into 1945 Vietnam was under the occupation of Japan per the agreements of Vichy France with Axis Powers. In 1944 Ho appealed several times to President Roosevelt for his support of an Independent Vietnam after the war. His requests were not heard or granted by the USA. Thus in Mid-August 1945 he declared an Independent Vietnam himself and set out to end the French Colonization/Rule. This was the beginning of the Viet Minh war with the French that ended with the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Ho needed money for his "rebellion" and again was turned down by USA. He got his initial "funding" from his own middle class people. Then in 1949 he made a pact "with the devil". Mao Tse Tung had finally gotten control of China with his Communist Party. Mao wanted a buffer zone to protect his new empire...one with North Korea and the other with North Vietnam. Thus he funded both countries in their "wars of liberation"...with strings attached including land reform. Some assume that Mao did not want a united Korea or Vietnam. He was OK with a democratic South Korea and democratic South Vietnam...as long as he had his buffer states in the north of each country.

Ho was successful in defeating the French in 1954 and was granted control of North Vietnam above the 17th parallel by the Geneva Accords. There were to be "free" elections in South Vietnam in 1956 for them to determine what type of government they wanted. These elections were never held and the puppet dictators in the South sought to keep their own control...with support of the SEATO organization to prevent the "domino theory" spread of Communism. It is interesting to note that in 1954 about 1.5M people migrated to the South from the North and about 50,000 people migrated from the South to the North. Thus more people sympathetic to the North were now living in the South and a small nucleus of "new VC recruits" were now living in the North...to be trained to later infiltrate the South.

In 1956 Ho regretted how he had treated the middle class in the North who had first funded his war, but who then lost their land. He went on the radio and publically apologized. This was another step in his “fall from grace” in the eyes of the Communist Party. However, the Communists needed the Public Image of the Patriotic Hero: Uncle Ho. Thus they continued to use him in the eyes of the world, but not with any real inside power. There were two real leaders of North Vietnam at this time: Le Duan the head of the Communist Party and General Giap who led the victory of the Vietnamese Military over the French and who would also lead the victory of the North Vietnamese Military over the Americans and the South Vietnamese. General Giap’s strategy was based on “time”. He felt that the Americans would be restricted by how many years they could afford (financially, politically & troops killed or wounded) to fight in Vietnam...while his Vietnamese “had all the time in the world”. Thus he would win a war of attrition. Does history repeat itself? What do you think is the Taliban’s strategy in Afghanistan? General Giap is very well respected by the U.S. Military then and even today. He has met with many of the USA Leaders in the 1990s to lead to the normalization of USA relations with Vietnam in 1995. General Giap is still alive today at the age of 102 and lives in Hanoi very near Ho’s old home.

Bottom Line: I had previously considered Ho Chi Minh a “nationalist” when he died in 1969 as one who wanted to unite Vietnam as one independent country. When Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City and Vietnam was ruled as a Communist Country after 1975, I then thought that I had been wrong. In touring Vietnam this week with two Red Flags (one with Yellow Star and the other with the Yellow Hammer & Sickle) and all the posters and monuments to the “Communist Way of Life”, I really thought that I had been wrong about Ho Chi Minh. However, after considering this new perspective of the Patriot and Face of the Country, but NOT the leader of the Communist Party, I once again feel that Ho Chi Minh was more of a “nationalist” who took support from any country that would give it to him...so “the end would justify his means”.

You will enjoy an electric car ride through Hanoi’s streets.

The guide called these “buggies” and they resembled large golf carts. There were five of us per buggy as we were driven through the narrow streets in-between all the motor- bikes to see Old Hanoi. The drive took about a half hour. Soon every street looked the same...with shops of fresh produce...hustle and bustle.

Then visit the Temple of Literature. Built in 1070 and then dedicated to Confucius, the Temple of Literature is a serene retreat from the busy streets outside, and later became Vietnam’s first university. Walk through tranquil five walled courtyards and see the pavilion where “men of letters” once recited their poetry before entering the Confucius temple of worship. The temple is a rare example of well preserved traditional Vietnamese architecture.

We learned that Vietnam practiced Confucianism for over 500 years. The main principle was about the “family unit” and that the father was the head of the household and that all must do what he says and to not question him. This principle is similar to Communism where the people are supposed to all be one big unit (share everything) and that nobody should question the Central Government. Thus the Vietnamese were prime candidates to “accept” communism. In many places this has led to corruption as rules & laws are not enforced (money settles disputes). This one-party system inhibits personal freedoms. The Vietnamese Government has its power in the following priority of offices:

- 1) Central Communist Party Leader (small inner circle like China)
- 2) Communist Party (3 million in Vietnam)
- 3) President of Vietnam
- 4) Communist Mayors of local provinces
- 5) Communist controlled Military
- 6) Communist controlled Police
- 7) Communist controlled Press

What about control of the tour guides? Every certified tour guide must be “reindoctrinated” for one week every three years. They must be very careful what they write, but can risk saying what they believe in order to gain more credibility with their customers.

Thereafter, visit Hoa Lo museum, known widely by the nickname “Hanoi Hilton” given to it by the Americans during the Second Indochina War as a POW camp.

This prison, Maison Central, was built in 1896 by the French. It was primarily used to intern Vietnamese pro-communists. It had cells to hold 800, but up to 2,000 Vietnamese could be there at any one time. You could look into four actual cells that had a plaque about which Vietnamese prisoner had been there. The “theme” of the propaganda was that the French treated the Vietnamese prisoners very poorly, but that the Vietnamese treated the American POWs much better. They said that there were about 300 Americans interned there between 1964 and February 1973.

Most of the old prison has been torn down and a new hotel has been built there. However, the front entrance and front walls are still there. In the far left corner of the prison are two rooms with displays about the American POWs. In one room there was a ten minute video about how the Americans attacked Vietnam with pictures of “atrocities”. This room also had a sample of a POW’s bed and some pilot’s clothing. In the other room there was a ten minute video about how well the Americans were treated. It showed them getting medical attention, eating better than a normal Vietnamese, playing cards & volleyball, and meeting foreign dignitaries and groups...inspecting their conditions. There was no mention of Jane Fonda’s treasonous visit. It concluded with pictures of the new clothes and souvenirs given to each POW as they were being released in February 1973. This release came after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords which followed the Christmas Bombing by the USA of North Vietnam in which it is claimed that the Vietnamese shot down 30 aircraft. The Vietnamese call this event the “Dien Bien Phu of the Air” ...signifying their victory over the Americans. There are billboards all over Hanoi recognizing the 40th anniversary of this event: December 1972 to December 2012.

Outside the prison along the lake in which John McCain parachuted, there is a small stone statue recognizing this event with the words USA Air Force and a shirtless American with his hands stretched up in the air (it could be in the act of surrender or in an act of torture).

Below is a poem I began in 1985, ten years after the fall of Vietnam. In 1995 I added the final verse after reading Robert Strange McNamara’s book “In Retrospect, the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam”. In December 2012 the fourth and fifth verses were inserted based upon my Five Days in Vietnam.

It can be sung to the 60’s country song: “Long Black Veil”.

Ten years ago on a warm dark night, we left Saigon on the last helo flight.

Children cried at the scene and we all agreed that the ones who were left would never be free.

The hawks said: "Joe what is your alibi? If you hadn't of left, they wouldn't have to die."

The doves said a word that is hard for me to say: "If you hadn't of come, they'd be alive today."

The death toll was high and the meaning not clear. Most stood far away and shed not a tear.

But sometimes at night when we swallow our pride, we remember with prayers all the ones who had died.

Ho Chi Minh is worshipped in Hanoi. His body is seen by every girl and boy.

Uncle Ho was a "commie"...or so it seems, or was he a "patriot" whose end justified his means?

General Giap is a hero, who's still alive. For 102 years he's had TIME on his side.

Were politics, debt and lives too high a price to pay? Is this now the same plan of the Taliban today?

"In Retrospect", a book by R.S.M., we read of mistakes that must not be made again.

Our futures are bright, but conflicts will not cease. We all must work together to pay the price of peace.

"Everybody knows from sea to shining sea. God Bless America, we're FREE!"

Thomas C. Leiser

Dai Uy, USN