

Vietnam in March....

This was certainly a 'red eye' flight! The four of us met at the IGI airport for the flight which left New Delhi at midnight. Four hours on a very disappointing Cathay Pacific flight took us to Bangkok, where after a 2 hour stop we took a Vietnam Airways flight to Hanoi. The flight to Hanoi was 1 ½ hours. So you know what I mean by a 'red eye' flight. We arrived in Hanoi like Zombies at 9.30 am local time. At the immigration, I suddenly found that all of them had gone while I was left 'stranded'. Without explanation I was kept standing at the counter while my passport went up and down, for a good 20 minutes. I could see Bijjan moving back and forth outside the immigration wondering where I had disappeared!

That was the arrival into Vietnam! Sam from the travel agency was there to meet us and take us to the hotel. When you reach Mauritius you see the country side covered with sugar cane fields, reach Vietnam and you see lush green paddy fields on either side. It was a very soothing sight. The houses had tiled sloping roofs like the Bombay of my childhood. The drive to the Intercontinental Hanoi, West Lake, was 45 minutes. The hotel is on stilts in the West Lake. There was general approval all around. But of course as soon our bags came into the room, we discovered one bag was missing. Fortunately it was an extra carry bag which did not carry anything urgent, so we did not miss it much, but loathed the fact that it cost us \$36 ultimately to get it collected!

After a break of 1 ½ hours we set out. Of course we were famished by now, so the first stop was at Pho 24, a chain which specialized in 'Pho' which means Noodle Soup. With that base there are various options that you can add to it. We had a taste of the local beer which was good.



Thus satiated we walked to the Temple of Literature, which was right next door. The Temple of Literature (Van Mieu), dedicated to Confucius, was founded in 1070 by Emperor Ly Thanh Tong. In 1076, Vietnam's first university was established here to educate Vietnam's administrative and warrior class. The complex is in a tranquil park-like site in the heart of central Hanoi. The top three students are recognized by recording their achievements on a slab of stone, called stele. The stelae are mounted on top of giant tortoises that line either side of the temple.

Ho Chi Minh Square was the next stop. As the name suggests it is the mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh. This strongly reminded me of the Red Square in Moscow---only not as big. Ho Chi Minh lies there embalmed, just like Lenin. The wideness of the road here was very reminiscent of Moscow too. One side was the memorial, and a wide road separated a patch of green lawn where Taiwanese women with their signature hats were weeding. They sat in such a way, that you could not see their face at all. The guide told us not to ask them to look up, as then they would demand money for being photographed! We could not go inside the memorial as it closed at 11 am everyday.



The weather was pleasant, so we walked the length of the street towards the Presidential Palace. The palace is not open to the public, but we saw a line of guards on the staircase. Sam explained to us that this seemed to be the special day when the ambassadors of various countries came to pay their respects to the President. Just then we saw some of them leave in their limousines. Ho Chi Minh's house on stilts was very interesting. It gave us an idea of how sparsely he lived. The complex is really beautiful with a lake and a forest. It also has a One Pillar Pagoda whose origins date back to the foundation of Hanoi.



After this we were ready to rest our feet a bit and have some coffee. Vietnamese coffee is like the South Indian Filter coffee, with a similar contraption, except that it sits on your cup and you have to wait till it filters—and ofcourse it gets cold for us who drink it hot. The coffee was good though. I did not know till then that Vietnam was one of the largest exporters of coffee to the world. Next was the Ngoc Son Temple. This temple is on an island at the North end of Hoan Kiem Lake and is

connected to the mainland by a bright red bridge. The temple is dedicated to the hero Tran Hung Dao, who defeated a force of 300,000 sent to invade Vietnam by the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan.

The water puppets were the last item on the agenda for our first day (by now we were fading out due to exhaustion!). The puppet show was certainly different as the whole performance was in water. Had we not been tired we might not have found the show a wee bit too long.

The sleep was good and the breakfast the next day was excellent! Having enjoyed every bit of it, we left for Ha Long Bay. The speed limit in Vietnam we discovered was 50 kmph! The drive was slow, but it did not bother us in the beginning, as we were absorbing the landscape. Paddy fields were a major part of it, and then there were cemeteries. It was a revelation to all of us that the Buddhists also buried their dead. Only the ones that could not afford the land, cremated. Sometimes there was a grave right in the middle of a paddy field. The architecture of Vietnam is quite varied. It has touches of French and there were the sloping tiled roofs and then the very ugly modern houses. One thing which a lot of houses had was a covered terrace and they had a rotating chimney on the roof top. Another fascinating thing was that there were men standing along the highway with bags full of baguettes! They wait for buses to stop and buy. Baguettes seem to be quite a staple food all over---a gift of the French!

Before reaching Halong Bay we stopped at a 'rest stop' which turned out to be a shopping stop. The highlight of this place was the marble statues. They also had a huge covered shop, with all their handicrafts---embroidery, lacquer work, wood carvings, stone jewelry, clothes, etc. Needless to say we ended up spending more time (and money) than we had intended.

Thus we reached Ha Long Bay, which was to be the crowning glory of our trip. Ha Long - Bay of the Descending Dragon is often touted by proud Vietnamese as the world's Eighth wonder. One of the main attractions of Ha long are the bay's calm water and the thousands of Limestone Islands (more like hills) dotting the seascape. The Bay's water is clear during the spring and early summer. Some of the islands are quite large and there are small alcoves with sandy beaches where swimming is possible. Ha Long bay lies in the northeastern part of Vietnam and is 165 Km from Hanoi. Due to the precipitous nature, most of the islands are uninhabited and unaffected by a human presence.



A small boat took us to our Junk (the traditional Vietnamese boats converted into hotels). As we climbed up into the Huong Hai Junk, we were greeted with a drink and after freshening up we had a delicious seafood meal, served impeccably. If you are a seafood lover, here is the menu to make your mouth water: Steamed shrimps in Beer, Clams, steamed Crabs, Stir fried squid, rice and sautéed greens of morning glory. All this brought to us one by one, so we could savor each dish. The crab of course is always difficult for me to handle unless the meat is taken out (which I know is something the crab lovers would be shocked at). But we were not in India, where they would do so for us on request! Following Gunmun's directions we managed to salvage some of it.



The afternoon was spent visiting the Sung Sot Caves. Situated in the centre of the UNESCO-declared World Heritage area, the Sung Sot or Amazing Grotto is on Bo Hon Island, and is one of the finest and widest grottoes of Halong Bay. Ascending to the grotto, the way is covered by trees and foliage, and consists of great paved stone blocks. Inside, it is partitioned into two chambers; the first one being similar to a wide theatre hall. Many stalactites hang from the high ceiling, with numerous forms and shapes. A narrow passage leads to the second room, where a flow of light meets visitors. The chamber is so

immense it could contain thousands of people at one time. It is situated on Titov Beach. The French named it "grotte des surprises" (grotto of surprise). The next stop was at the Titov Beach which had a path leading to the Dong Pagoda at the Summit of Yen. Of course it was a steep climb to the view point. Since it was drizzling, many people stayed on the Junk. Bijjan and I joined the trekkers. I went only half way up and returned. Some of the tourists were enjoying the beach which had facilities for swimming and other sports and a small restaurant too.



I enjoyed climbing on to the top deck of the boat and looking around the bay. In spite of the light rain, it was extremely peaceful. As the cocktail hour drew close, we realized that it was not a very inviting thought to have drinks in the room. On asking if we could have our drinks in the dining area (it was still drizzling on deck); we were told we would have to pay corking charges of \$7. So that is what we did before dinner. Dinner was a bit disappointing, as it was heavily fried. The salad and sautéed vegetables were very good though and so was the soup (stock thickened with arrowroot, with flakes of seafood, shredded chicken, coriander leaves and a few pieces of carrot). The presentation and garnishes in these countries is highly commendable. It certainly makes a dish look extremely appetizing. The salad was simple---rings of cucumber arranged in a circle along with carrots in the centre, drizzled with a mixture of sugar, vinegar, garlic, salt and chilli powder. The vegetables were a combination of steamed French beans (crunchy) and cauliflower, sautéed in garlic and onion with salt and dash of fish sauce as seasoning—absolutely yummy! By 9pm we were in bed!

Breakfast was at 7 am after which we went in a bamboo boat into a lagoon through the Luon grotto. These numerous little islands that make up the Halong Bay create an awesomely picturesque landscape. Here the cliffs stretch vertically out of the pure blue and smooth water. Crossing through the cave we entered the lagoon, which was absolutely gorgeous! We were transferred into a different world, enclosed on all sides by the 'islands' with just the little opening we had come through. The serenity was only disturbed by the chirping of the birds. We were all lost in savoring this, when suddenly the peace was shattered by the arrival of a motor boat!!

Back on the Junk we started moving towards the wharf, which was still 2 hours away. It was extremely relaxing to sail through the bay. Before leaving we were given a sumptuous lunch at 11am! I cannot go on without telling you what we had. We had some potato and carrot soup, sautéed shrimp, vegetables sweet and sour, rice, fried spring rolls filled with chicken, shredded oyster mushrooms and some herbs, and there were sautéed cabbage and carrots.

Thus, sadly, saying good bye to the cruise on the Junk, we reached the wharf where Sam was waiting for us. After a brief stop over at the shopping place we drove towards Hanoi. We wanted to visit an art center and I was very keen on seeing the food market. We found the art centre closed so we headed for the market. These markets are always very interesting. It was fascinating to see how the vendors, while awaiting customers, were carving things like carrots for garnishes. They are so adept at this art that they do it effortlessly. Even cutting the fruit is done in floral patterns! The Vietnamese use the green beetle nut (supari) unlike the dried one we use. They have beetle leaves (paan) too. It is always interesting to see similarities in a foreign country.

It was 4 pm on a very cold afternoon that we reached the Hanoi Westlake. We decided to have tea in the bar outside, but it was so cold that we ended up in the main lounge. Once there, we decided to have a drink instead and ordered some sandwiches to go with it. The Chicken and green asparagus sandwiches with mayonnaise and some nuts (walnuts or hazel nuts) in it were absolutely delicious. By dinner time we were not ready to go anywhere, so ended up ordering a pizza in the room. We had a very early flight to catch and had to

leave the hotel at 4.30 am for the airport to catch a flight to Da Nang. The hotel gave us packed breakfast which did not look appetizing, so we gave it to Sam since we expected some snack on the flight. Alas! We were served nothing but water and colas! I was immediately reminded of the Indian belief of not leaving home on an empty stomach.

At Da Nang airport we were met by Tuan the guide and Tao the driver. Needless to say we asked him to take us to a breakfast place before going any where else. He took us to Café Truc Lam Vien which seemed to specialize in breakfasts. Tuan left us there to meet again in half an hour or so. The place was buzzing, but we could not communicate enough to ask them for salt! We ordered some eggs and one Chicken and Noodle Soup (Noodle soup is a common breakfast dish). The soup was quite tasty. It was like a chicken curry made in thin gravy and lots of noodles added to it. It was a cute place though, even though not as clean as most places we had been to so far. One thing we had been marveling about was how clean this country was. And so it was, almost throughout.

Our first stop was the DaNang Museum of Cham Sculpture. The collection was begun by French archaeologists and experts from L'École Francaise d'Extrême Orient (EFEO). Some artifacts were sent to Paris and others to the Ha Noi and Sai Gon (now Ho Chi Minh City) museums, but many typical objects were left in Tourane (now Da Nang). It has a lot of old statues of Indian gods too. The weather was warm here. We had got spoilt by the pleasant weather in Hanoi and Halong Bay! Next were the marble mountains—rather we stayed at the bottom of it, as none of us wanted to climb with the sun beating down on us. So we saw a few shops and wished we had not, as the prices here were half of what we had paid at the ABC shop near Halong Bay!

We were now ready to head for Hoian. Hoian is an old town which was originally a Cham seaport but has been influenced down centuries by traders from various cultures. The drive was good. DaNang is a nice city with wide roads and not so many people. We drove along the water front glimpsing the South China Beach, where the Americans had landed to attack Da Nang. We took the route through the Hai Van Pass. This is the highest pass in the country and one of the most scenic hillside roads in Vietnam. The drive was truly gorgeous with a spectacular view of Da Nang all the time with the blue sea touching its coast all along. Descending down on the other side had a different view. The view was of the land, the sequel of valleys and lagoons. The first stop in this descending journey is the village of Lang Co sitting on the tip of a long peninsula separating a shallow lagoon from the sea.

Hoian is basically an old town with a beach resort. It is also one of the world Heritage sights. The thing to do is take a walking tour of the town and spend time on the beach. We reached the town and started our walking tour. The shops were cute and very touristy. We did not do much shopping, but saw the sights along the way. Among the various popular assembly halls in Hoi An, is the Fukian Assembly Hall (Phuc Kien). This was our first stop. Fukian was right along the path we were walking on, which had shops along the way too. Besides the elaborate statues of Goddesses, it had beautiful flowering trees too. What took our attention were the large incense (agarbatti) spirals that hung from the ceiling. It took us some time to realize that these were burning! What fascinated me were also these pink flowers (forgetting the name). The museum I am afraid was a wash out where I am concerned. It was extremely dilapidated and 'dingy'.





We walked along the river and stopped at the Japanese Bridge. The bridge was built by the Japanese trading community in 1593 to link them with the Chinese quarter on the other side of a small stream. The bridge is obviously very solidly built, almost out of proportion to the small trickle which runs under it. At each end of the bridge is a pair of statues, one of them dogs and the other monkeys. According to oriental belief, plagues (earthquakes, floods and dryness) are caused by a sea monster whose head is in Japan, body in Vietnam and tail in China. Another legend said that the construction started in the year of the Monkey, and finished the year of the Dog, according to Chinese calendar.

Next to the bridge was a centre making incense. this was interesting indeed. I discovered also why agarbatti is called so. It is called so because it is made from Agar wood. There is a big bark of the Agar tree on display. The wood is shaved, powdered, dampened with water and shaped into incense sticks or shaped conical (dhoop). We also visited a silk factory which demonstrated the process of manufacture of silk, from the silk worm to the woven cloth! Another specialty is the embroidered wall hangings. Absolutely exquisite! Some of them looked like paintings or photographs from a distance! We tried to strike a bargain, but failed. Vietnam does have a lot of handicraft. A visit to an old home is also part of the tourist agenda. So we visited the Tan Ky House, a visit nothing to write home about.

Finally we decided it was time to take a break. So we checked in at the Victoria Hoi An Beach Resort and Spa. Victoria is a chain belonging to a French group. They all have a quaint character of their own. Bijjan went into the sea to test the waters and found the sea was rather deceptively calm. He had a tough time holding himself in place! Of course that is exactly what he enjoys!

In the evening we took a cab to the old town. Innova types of vehicles are pretty common in Vietnam for cars. We were only four but it could take in six passengers. I'd like to comment here about the taxi drivers and guides. Unlike Turkey and Greece, they help you with your baggage. In fact in Hanoi, Sam actually checked us in at the airport and left only once we had gone through to the departure lounge after security check et al. Another thing we noticed was that the guide never ate or drank with us even when invited.

The taxi dropped us at the Old town which they call Ancient Street. So we wandered around, feeling our way through. It took us some time to realize that we were on the same streets as the morning. They were rather empty comparatively, though some shops were open. We were looking for restaurants and those were the one's standing out. We had thought that the place would be buzzing and most people would come to this area for dinner, but were rather disappointed at the deserted look. We had been recommended the Cargo Club and Mango Bar, which we had noticed in the morning, but took us quite a while to locate them in the evening. There were large eating places also but very functional looking.

Finally we did find the two restaurants and chose the one that had seating outside and some people eating too. So we sat at the Cargo Club. It was rather nice sitting out, except for the fact that we were accosted by hawkers all the time. With the drinks we ordered 'White Rose' which was rice flour dim sums stuffed with prawns and garnished with crispy bacon and fried onions. This was served with the typical sweet and sour sauce of vinegar, sugar and red chillies. The other snack was potato skins---baked potatoes, flesh scooped out, mixed with cheese and seasoned. The mixture is then filled into the empty skins and baked again. We had decided to go pub hopping, but when Bijjan went across to the Tam Tam, which was right across, it did not

seem exciting. So we sat on. As we finished a couple of drinks the street and the restaurants were full, with groups of tourists arriving! The whole place was now action packed! The dinner at the Cargo Club was being served on the first floor which included a terrace. So that is where we decided to stay on for dinner. There was a wait, but it was worth it. We got a table on the terrace side which overlooked the river.

The food was superb. We had almond and cashew crusted Sea Bass, grilled, crumb fried camembert and another dish of potato skins! We had planned to try their Crème Brule, but forgot! And so it was a very satisfied lot took a cab and returned to the hotel.



We started the morning early as usual, having breakfast at 7.30. We left the hotel at 8.45 and headed for Hue. The drive was mostly along the coast or the River Han. We had to back track a bit to drive up to Da Nang. Most of the drive was extremely picturesque, with the South China Sea all along. After that the drive through the lush mountain, going through the Hai Van Pass, which commanded a view of the Sea and Da Nang all along till we crossed it. As soon as we crossed it, there was a view point, which was no view since it was cloudy. There were some hawkers here,

who mobbed us as soon as we got out of the car! This gave us a pretty good idea of what tourists in India feel like! Down the mountain side we arrived at the town of Lang Co. The drive to Hue again was bordered with rice fields all along.

As soon as we arrived in Hue we headed for the first sight seeing spot, which was the Tomb of Tu Duc, the fourth Ming Emperor. Tu Duc's tomb is located in a narrow valley in the village of Thuong Ba, 8km from Hue. The Tomb was built between 1864 and 1867 and consists of a large surrounding wall filled with nearly 50 constructions of varying size. Entering through Vu Khiem entrance you first come to Luu Khiem Lake on which sit Xung Khiem Pavilion and Du Khiem Pavilion where the Emperor used to come to admire flowers, compose poems, and read books. Coming out we were tempted to have sugar cane juice, which looked pretty clean to begin with, but the glasses were very dirty. I had my homeopathic medicine immediately to counter any infection that may have set in!



We had lunch at a café called the New Space Café, which was right next to our Hotel, The Hotel Saigon Morin. Next was a boat ride through the Perfume River---the ride would have been more enjoyable had the motor sound not bothered us so much. We got off at the other end to visit the Thien Mu Pagoda. Also a monastery, this seven-storey octagonal pagoda exhibits the famous Austin motorcar that transported the monk Thick Quang Duc to Saigon where he burnt himself to death in protest against the policies of President Ngo Dinh Diem. The monastery was



interesting. The children were all there in their monk attire and heads shaven in a particular way. Their beds were wooden boxes on which they slept without a mattress, and the box contained their belongings. They all seemed pretty happy and content. These children go to regular school as well and can decide at age 18, whether they want to continue in the monastery or get on with life in the outside world. Many of them do go out and then contribute a lot towards the institution that brought them up. Walking out of the Pagoda campus we discovered a Paan (beetle leaf) creeper. Of course we did taste it.

We now drove towards the Citadel/Imperial City. The citadel palace complex is located on the North bank of Huong River (Perfume River), inside Hue city. It is a huge complex covering an area of 520ha. It was said to be protected by the two sand dunes: The Con Hen and Con Da Vien on the Perfume River, meaning the left, tiger on the right". Situated inside the Citadel complex, behind the Throne Palace, the Forbidden Citadel was reserved for the Emperor family. As described, it was vast and we felt rather end of it all. The most interesting part was a pond fish. It was great to see them all flock towards the thrown at them! Having finished our sight seeing we now headed for the hotel.



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The rooms of the hotel were huge. We walked up to the down town area for dinner. As in all these places, this area was buzzing with tourists looking for food and fun. We chose The Carambole, which specialised in crepes. So between us we had mushrooms and cream, ham and cheese crepes and one order was grilled fish. Apart from the fish, the crepes were great and so also the dessert crepes we shared later. Food in these countries is pretty reasonable.

Early morning of the 8th of March we left for Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), after breakfast at the hotel. We arrived in Saigon by 10.30 am. This time we were greeted by a girl guide—Yin, a young girl in her late twenties. We decided to do a bit of sight seeing before checking in, as check in time was not before 12noon. Yin told us as to how in Vietnam generally, the girls got married around 23-24, but in Saigon they usually married around 30. She herself had been in the profession for 4 years.

Saigon is a huge city and teeming with people and motor bikes! Supposedly there are 4 million bikes and a population of 8 million people! Driving through took some skill to dodge the crowds. In Hanoi, Sam had taught us how to cross the road. He said once you step down the curb to cross, just move at a steady pace, not stopping at all. And we discovered later, that it actually worked. We also realised why it worked! The speed limit in Vietnam is very little, so there is no chance of getting knocked down. Try the same in India and you will surely be knocked down! A typical sight is girls with masks on the bikes. I had asked Sam (our first guide in Hanoi) as to why only the girls wore masks. He said that they were worried for their complexions, though they were all trained in Ninja for self protection! It was remarkable to see how they were with loaded coke crates on their bikes, and the like.

We went to a pagoda which was near Cho Lon (China town). I think it was the Ong Bon Pagoda. It was interesting to see how they had a wall covered with slips of paper representing the donations by various people. There was a huge incense burner near the entrance. There was a Goddess of wealth too. Like all other temples and pagodas, this one was also colourful and elaborate.

After the temple we drove through the melee of China Town. I could quite understand, how people coming to India from the West, wonder how we drive in the crowds! The place was teeming with people on foot, on bikes, in cars, etc. The shops were pretty gaudy looking. It was also a whole sale market. Was really like our Chandni Chowk in Delhi or Zaveri Bazaar in Bombay! It had gotten pretty warm by now.



By now we were certainly ready to check into our hotel and cool off a bit, before venturing out again. So we checked in into the New World Saigon which boasted of hosting Bush and Putin! This was also a good hotel with very comfortable rooms. For lunch we walked up to a Pho 2000 Noodle and Rice restaurant. This too had Clinton's photographs all over, enjoying the food. I had a chicken curry and rice. The curry was quite Indian tasting, in fact more like the Maharashtrian flavour with some coconut too. It was brown in colour, so obviously did not have tomatoes in it. The rest had noodle soups with chicken or sea food. It was a very satisfying and tasty meal in deed.

Opposite the restaurant was the central market, which was like an air-conditioned market that we have in some places here, with rows of stalls. We had a quick glance through and headed for the Presidential Palace, also called the Reunification Palace. The Reunification Palace befittingly takes its name from the reunion of the Northern and Southern fractions of the country after a hard fought war that ravaged not only Vietnam but also neighboring Laos. The 1960's architecture and well-appointed rooms befit a high ranking government official as was the case when the South's leaders occupied the premises. Today, it emits a spooky silence that is broken only by the numerous tour groups passing through.



By now the three out of four of us, had had enough of history and decided not to join Bijjan in a tour of the War Museum. So back we went to the hotel to relax a bit before going out for dinner to the Kouitellis' (a Lebanese couple known to GP) place for dinner.

The dinner was quite interesting. The hostess thought we were all vegetarians and prepared a table, full with vegetarian Lebanese spread! The Lebanese also seem very family oriented. So there were three generations present—the Matriarch, her two sons, one daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. After dinner we went to a bar called Saigon Saigon which was on the roof top of Hotel Carvella, which was 10 minutes walk from our hotel. The place was full, as it had live music too. Adeeb dropped us to the hotel after a driving tour of the Back Pack area. This area seemed to have a lot of eating places too.

12th of March was our last day in Vietnam. We went on a cruise of part of the Mekong Delta. The drive to the wharf was an hour and a half. We did see some sleazy parts of Saigon along this drive. The highway was pretty much like India, with shops all along. The difference though was that these roads were much broader and they had a separate lane for motorbikes.

We reached the wharf and found that here also cleanliness was a bit lacking. Anyway, we had imagined getting into a big boat from where we would get into smaller boats for the islands. But it was to be a speed boat of the capacity for 10 all through! Our first island stop was to be introduced to the seasonal fruit. We had imagined on reading about the cruise that we would see boats laden with fruit! But it wasn't that exotic. In fact it was quite commercialized. We alighted to thatched sheds with tables all set for tourists. No sooner did we sit down that plates of cut fruit and tea were placed in front of us—talk of efficiency! These countries are really geared for tourism. Everything seems to be done like a mechanical drill. There were some local singers that serenaded us while we ate the fruit. The fruit was something we had been having at our buffet breakfast, so the whole thing did not do much. They also had some stalls selling local handicraft.

The next island was the **Coconut Island**. We were greeted here at the entrance by a girl offering us some coconut candy, which was the specialty of the island. The entire process of candy making could be watched here. To begin with there was the grating of the coconut, going on to pressing it for juice. The juice is then cooked in a large metal container with sugar and malt. The container has electrically operated churners fitting into it, to stir constantly till the right consistency is reached and the mixture leaves the sides of the pan. For some reason they kept adding more juice once the consistency was reached. The entire mixture then goes on to slabs, followed by setting and then cutting strips of candy. The strips are finally cut and wrapped individually for sale.

Besides the coconut candy, there were other candies to taste and buy and snake wine too! We had two brave hearts—Gunmun and Bijjan who tasted the snake wine too! There was also a stall selling crocodile skin purses and wallets. Having done with this, there was a horse cart waiting to take us round the island, which was good fun. A honey farm was part of the tour. Here they served us jasmine tea with fresh honey. For lemon they served Chinese oranges (Kumquats).



After the tea we walked to the edge of a canal, where we got into row boats, operated by women. We had to take two of them as they were not large enough for the four of us to fit in. It was women who rowed these boats. It was a very pleasant and tranquil boat ride through the canal bounded by heavy palms.

So back to the speed boat after this for the final stop at the island where we were to have lunch. Little Bamboo Gazebos were made into little dining areas. A tray of cold drinks was already placed on the table, to buy what ever we liked. The specialty of this place was the **Elephant Ear Fish**, a crisp, slow cooked whole fish. No sooner had we taken our beers that the girl assigned to us came up with our food. The whole fish was brought on a stand, and looked pretty dramatic. She set about making our first course---Taking noodle wrappers she placed some fish and spring onions, wrapped it tightly into a roll and served it with tamarind sauce. There were spring rolls made with some kind of rice vermicelli, filled with chicken. There was also soup with some fried rice. The steamed rice cakes in lotus leaves are something which I did not care for. They had a beef dish which we returned instead of which they served us a delicious pommello salad with shrimps. Dessert was one of the most delicious pineapples I have ever had.



Now was the return journey to the wharf and then on to town. I had noticed a fruit from the bus, which turned out to be the cocoa fruit. Unfortunately we could not reach one to try it out. We had to drive straight to a Doctor as we had sick Nita with us. The wait at the doctor's was long, so we meandered around the area, which was around the **Notre Dame**. It was interesting to see the activities around. There was a lot of street food. A school had just closed for the day, which brought parents to come and pick up their children, etc. It had been a long day and we were glad to get back to the hotel.

GP and I decided to go to look for embroidered paintings before retiring. She did find some and we came back to the hotel. GP and Nita were too tired to go out so the two of us decided to go to the **Back Pack** area for dinner. It is always nice to walk around these happening places and finding a place to eat. We had a couple of drinks and a Thai curry and rice. And that was our last evening in Vietnam! After this trip there was one conclusion we came to was that

one should travel in Vietnam in the reverse direction of what we did. In other words, start with the South and go upwards, as the weather improves as you go up North. Also be vary of the prices, which seem to decrease as you go from North to South!