

Hanoi



Picture this: several hundred motor bikes and cycles, interspersed with cars, fork to fender, swarming – full tilt – towards a four point intersection. No stoplight, no yield, no hesitation. Heads down, weaving, dodging and swerving like motorized prize fighters they punch through the center and, without pause, continue down the street to the next intersection for the next round.

Now, picture this: you need to get through this melee to the other side of the street. You'd settle for any one of the four. ⇐⇐

Good Morning Vietnam, more specifically Hanoi. Some observations:

On the approach to Vietnam's capitol, names and places begin appearing on the LCD screen at the front of the cabin: Da Nang. Hue. Hai Phong, Vientiane. Chu Lai, The Central Highlands.

The names are unsettling and ring harsh for anyone who came of age in the 60s and 70s. They were the stuff of banner headlines and grim, black and white nightly, new casts. They came with pictures of wounded GIs, civilians caught in the cross fire, flag draped coffins and the haunting moan of taps.

The words open a wound. A divided America. Conscripted warriors, mostly, returning home to an ungrateful nation; civil strife across the country, nearly 60,000 – no more than kids – killed; a million Vietnamese dead.

A generation carries the scars.

This was my first trip to Vietnam. I wasn't called up during the war, nor did I volunteer. Some impressions on the first visit:

Until recently, war was a way of life for the Vietnamese. For 2,000 years the country was in a near-constant state of siege: multiple Chinese occupations, Mongol invasions, proxy wars

underwritten by the Portuguese and Dutch, French colonial rule; and, as Cold War surrogates for the US and Soviet Union.

Today, the clash in Hanoi seems primarily economic, as Vietnam becomes increasingly tethered to the world economy. How does the relic of communism come to terms with the joys of capitalism in a country where 40 percent of the economy is still based on state-owned enterprises?

A walk around Hanoi's Old Quarter is an exercise in the city's mixed messages.

A 1,000 year old Buddhist Temple shares the street with 100 year old, multistory shop houses and Art Deco designed apartment buildings. Around the corner from a boutique selling stylish Western clothes, 25 foot bamboo poles – used as scaffolding as far back 400 BC – lean against the back walls of the same building.

Streetside, spiky-haired teenage boys ogle teenage girls in tees and tight jeans. Tweens with Hello Kitty backpacks giggle and gossip. In contrast, not far away, French colonial style government offices are guarded by pistol-carrying, teenage soldiers wearing scowls and shockingly bright green uniforms. One was not hesitant to unsnap the flap of his ancient leather holster when I didn't stop taking pictures of the building.

Not far away in Ba Dinh Square, sits Ho Chi Minh's massive, Soviet-style mausoleum. Here, the "Great Uncle" lies in state – except for two months each year when the corpse is sent to Russia for maintenance.

Trade is the lifeblood of the city's streets – and it's not always pleasant. Young entrepreneurs, street hustlers actually, are unrelenting, battering visitors with merciless pitches for everything from bananas to Bic lighters to motorbike tours. In sweet contrast, shy young women sell flowers from colorful bunches stacked in their bicycle's front basket.

As you wander the city, the people of Hanoi are gracious and welcoming. The war is ancient history. I'm a tourist, not an American or former enemy.

(When I returned from the country, a Vietnamese expatriate was horrified that I would eat at one of the traditional sidewalk grills. I did – provided I could see the food being prepared – thought I wasn't always sure which piece of what I was about to eat. For me, it was an important piece of the city. Best of all was the experience of sitting out front sit with the old men drinking Bia Hanoi beer and telling tall tales.

And cost wise, Hanoi is a bargain – everything – food, lodging, transportation.

But, there is the heat. Summer in Hanoi makes August in Tallahassee seem like a spring morning in the Appalachians. Outside, it feels like you're breathing with a wet wool blanket pulled over your head. Sordid, Soaked and sweating, I was waiting to cross the street, when a beautiful and concerned young Malaysian woman came up and asked “, “Are you okay?” With nonplused macho I wheezed, “Sure I'm fine”. To which she said, “You don't look too good and that Tiger Beer in your hand isn't helping.”

She smiled and crossed the street. I smiled and thought: where I single, younger, and hydrated.

By the end of the day, it's hard not to notice that the city is filthy. There's a coat of grime on the road a fire hose couldn't erase. Fruit peels, food wrappers, cigarette butts and assorted litter clog the walkways and gutters.

But magically, in the morning it's all gone. If you get up early enough, you'll see ancient shopkeepers sweeping it all away with string bound brooms, no different than what might have been used centuries ago.

I wanted to visit the Hanoi Museum of War, perhaps to better understand what happened. It turned out to be boring, unsettling and confusing. Among the endless photographs of North Vietnamese officials shaking hands, were displays of old weapons with captions telling visitors about the bravery of a young comrade who killed 10 imperialists with that particular gun. There were photographs of antiwar protests in the US, mostly out of context.

But the real challenge was the courtyard.

In the center, is a 20 foot conical shape – a sculpture of death – pieces of US aircraft – B-52s, F-4 Phantoms, Skyhawks – shot down over the country. Staring at it was unnerving; taking a picture would have been like photographing the vehicles from a fatal car crash.

As if in counterpoint, adjacent to the pile are examples of unexploded ordinance – five foot high dumb bombs, cluster bombs with chain link enclosures, incendiaries – some of what might have been dropped by those same planes.

In what was perhaps the most surreal episode of my trip, I was at the museum's outdoor snack bar when four guys about my age came out of the museum laughing, a day out with the boys. All were wearing some type of military unit pins on their shirts. They came over and looked genuinely glad to meet me. They asked me in halting English if I'd been to Vietnam before, meaning the war. No. They vigorously shook my hand before walking away. It reminded me of mid-field handshakes after a ballgame.

After lift-off on the way home, I marveled at perfectly round lakes that dotted the countryside outside Hanoi – feeling foolish when I realized they were bomb craters from a now distant war.

I guess you could say the war punctuated the trip's beginning and end

Did I enjoy the Hanoi experience? Absolutely. Would I back to Vietnam? Yes, but farther north to see country's ancient ruins and other antiquities.

It would take a lot less baggage.