

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

A LETTER FROM VIETNAM

"We must travel in the direction of our fear"

- John Berryman

(Danang, Vietnam)

I was not a soldier in Vietnam. It is, therefore, not for me to write of politics and suffering.

This is sacred ground. Too many Americans are buried here to view it any other way. The visitor, whether navigating the bustling giant bicycle path that is Saigon, or contemplating workers stooped over in the deep brown mud in a rice field in the countryside, is ever mindful of the fact that this was a battleground. It was also, at times, a human slaughterhouse.

One is never far away from the memories of the madness. Medals, GI watches, and imitation yet authentic-looking dogtags are for sale. So are models of Huey helicopters made out of Budweiser cans, a gift for the coffee table back in the states.

You see a great deal in Vietnam and you think far too much to call your time here a vacation. What must it have been like? Where did the enemy hide? Am I walking anywhere near a battle site? Could that man of fifty years, or so, have been the enemy?

Those who were there before, bottom line it by saying that it really hasn't changed all that much. Downtown Saigon is not the site of a tourist boom. It is a, sometimes dangerous, place where Americans tourists will be hassled and hustled. A Park Hyatt is under construction, presumably to house the advance battalions of a new invasion force, this time intent on the commercial westernization of Vietnam.

This is not a place for tourists. This is one of those countries for travelers, risk takers, those who are used to going it alone in places where the depths of poverty are all-encompassing.

If there is a difference in Vietnam it does not center around current conditions. It has to do, instead, with a sense of future optimism. This is a nation clearly on the brink of development.

The former leaders of South Vietnam are, of course, long gone. President Nguyen Van Thieu, who served as the nation's President from 1967 to 1975, fled the country and set up camp in a London mansion he dubbed "the White House". He later sold it and went underground.

Thieu's nemesis, Vice President Ngugen Cao Ky, fled and settled down in California where he ran a liquor store before declaring bankruptcy. The last American helicopter out left the rooftop of the American Embassy on the morning of April 30th, 1975, as Viet Cong troops were entering the city. A decade of fighting had ended and we never did make a formal declaration of war.

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Nearly a million South Vietnamese have fled the country since that last helicopter took off. Now, Vietnam says that it is ready for tourism. This beautiful country, more Chinese than most of us realize, has transformed much of the war zone. Now, with little of military history to divert the eye, the visitor begins to see the country as it really is.

I am on a bus going from Danang, which was once hailed as “The Saigon of the north”, to a village in the countryside. Danang was a city filled with almost a million people. When the war began it was a city with a booming economy. There were many fine restaurants, glitzy shops, and traffic. As the war progressed, Danang became a rest and relaxation center for GI’s. Prostitution and corruption flourished.

On March 29th, 1975, two truckloads of Communist guerrillas, a majority of them women, rode into Danang and up Phan Chu Trinh street. They declared, what had been the most heavily fortified city in South Vietnam “liberated”. They never fired a single shot except in celebration.

In fact, the only real fighting that took place at the close of the war seemed to be between soldiers and civilians desperately trying, by any means, to flee the city before the North Vietnamese main divisions arrived.

Two days earlier, Ed Daly, the president of World Airways, had flown a 727 into the city to try to fly out civilians. The plane was mobbed by soldiers with assault rifles. Some of the desperate clutched the plane’s landing gear as it took off, and someone actually threw a hand grenade onto the right wing. Only three civilians, two women and a baby, got on the last plane out of Danang. The baby had been thrown aboard by its mother on the airport tarmac as the plane was moving.

On landing in Saigon, the soldiers, members of South Vietnam’s elite Black Panther unit, were arrested.

Danang today is a cluttered, dusty, humid seaport town. The shops are constructed of wood and prodigious amounts of sheet metal. And in all of Vietnam, the most prevalent retail business is the small combination motorscooter wash and repair shop. A small, odiferous 50 cc motorcycle or, for those who can afford it, an actual motor scooter is the primary form of transportation. There are more bicycles than cars.

Like other places I was to visit in Vietnam during this trip, Danang has its fair share of walking wounded. The city that was visited by Marco Polo in the 13th century and Napoleon in the nineteenth, is now being visited by a collection of Australian, British, and German budget travelers. The backpackers are here as well. I hope they are all prepared for what they will find during an extended stay.

The visitor to Vietnam today is not met with strong pro-American sentiments. The crime rate is nearly out of control.

As in most Buddhist countries, women traveling alone are generally safe, in groups. Those who travel alone at night will almost certainly be verbally

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

abused by locals who have been drinking. Motorbike thieves called “cowboys” prey on tourists in larger cities like Danang and Saigon.

Corrupt police are a problem. Those who drive or escort foreigners are often shaken down for money. Police will sometimes ask to see passports at roadblocks and then demand a “fee” for the return of the passport.

One must be mindful where one steps. Four armies hurled ordinance at one another for nearly three decades. Since the war ended, literally thousands of Vietnamese have been wounded and maimed.

If the land is dangerous, no less can be said for the sea. Vietnamese waters, particularly in the warmer south, are home to sharks, jellyfish, scorpions, sea snakes, and stingrays.

There are children begging in all of the major cities. In the countryside, however, visitors are accepted readily by the locals and I was never approached by a young child.

One woman, traveling aboard the ship that took us to Vietnam, had a fetish about feeding the “starving masses”. She would steal boxes of cereal from the ship as well as fruit, packages of sugar from the dining room, anything she could get her hands on. We came to call her “Cereal Lady”. She claimed to travel frequently throughout the third world and her major project, in addition to feeding boxes of Special K to children who were not suffering from bran deficiency, involved the kidnapping of dogs and cats which she smuggles, one per trip, into the United States. She had lots of entertaining stories to tell and was very open in explaining how she would get local vets to sign off the official papers she carried with her. There is no quarantine period for pets brought into the States with properly signed papers.

In the early morning hours, soon after we pulled into a port, I would observe her tossing her cache of food overboard to youngsters on the pier.

There was another passenger that we named “Pencil Lady”. She had arrived in southeast Asia with a sizable collection of sharpened, number two pencils. Every time she spotted a child she would approach the youngster, reach into her shopping bag, and present one of the pencils. “Use this to get yourself a good education” she would admonish.

If someone had not already written “The Ugly American” I think I would be tempted. But I must stop now. Our government guide, who stands in the well of the bus out of deference to her passengers, begins to explain that “Vietnam is one of the most poorest countries in the world”. I know it is true, but in the pale sunlight, as she struggles with her university English, looking cool and calm, and very much alone amidst the sweating, taller Americans, I wished she didn’t have to say it.

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979