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SAIGON DAYS AND SAIGON NIGHTS

"Let the tourist be cushioned against misadventure; but your true traveller will not feel that he has had his money's worth unless he brings back a few scars"

- Lawrence Durrell

(Cu Chi, Vietnam)

I came here as a tourist - not a traveler. The traveler, I believe, does not have a return ticket, there is no sense that the trip will end. The trip back home occurs only when exhaustion or a lack of funds makes it imperative.

But this is a fixed schedule I am on. I will only be in Cu Chi, a small village on the outskirts of Saigon, for a few hours. I am drawn to the place because it was here that some of the bloodiest fighting of the Vietnam War took place as American "Tunnel Rats" tried, against great odds, to dislodge thousands of Viet Cong guerrillas from their vast network of inter-connected underground bunkers.

Before seeing an actual tunnel, we are led first to an outdoor display of weaponry, laid out in orderly fashion on a concrete floor in an open-air small pavilion. But these are not the gun turrets that little children climb all over from Lexington to Antiedam. The Americans look closely and then, hesitatingly, we reach out to touch the black metal sharp-tipped daggers imbedded in the green, Viet Cong Army green, wooden boards. First we see a circular device that pierces the body in three different areas as the trap is sprung, then a floorboard, revealing a box lined with two foot long metal spears.

It goes on and on, this display of booby-traps used against our soldiers. We are all quiet, as though in some conspiratorial way we have all tacitly understood that to speak would be to interrupt the thoughts of those who were there once before.

"It is better to maim than to kill" offers the interpreter. But then, moments later, our short local custodian of the tunnels, points to one of the devices and with a slight hint of a smile, explains that "we this one you will definitely lose your leg - at least".

Then we move on to a clearing in the woods behind the raised platform. Again, with a slight smile, we are asked to find the door leading to the tunnel. We see tress ahead of us, and a few leaves on the ground. We brush our feet across raised sections of the ground. We find nothing. The former soldier is now smiling. he is daring us to find the entrance to his tunnel. It has now become personal. We look even harder.

After a few moments, he walks forward a few steps and picks up a perfectly rectangular piece of earth. It is about the size of a legal pad. Then, he slowly lowers himself into the ground, eventually disappearing.

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We look around, a group of Americans standing in the woods in 95 degree heat. Some of us are wearing coolie hats to keep out the sun. Not one of us could ever have fit into that hole.

(The Streets of Saigon)

We're heading into Saigon from the outskirts past thousands of tin-roofed open-front stores, cafes with single braziers, and scooter repair shops. The driver honks incessantly at the swarms of bicycle and motorbike riders that surround all sides of our vehicle. Even at 40 miles an hour, we are constantly surrounded by humanity on two wheels. Looking out my window I see two teens on a bicycle, one waving his arms behind the driver, offering "wings" of stability as the bike tries valiantly to keep up with motorized traffic. There is a family of three and then two or three motorbikes carrying students with books tied to the back. An old man in a coolie hat carrying bamboo sheets measuring eight feet or so in width, placidly pedals, ignoring the soot and the sounds and the speed of those passing him by. I glance back out of the window and see his stoic face framed by a white goatee and thick white eyelashes. He is at least seventy years old. I begin calculating the possibilities of what this man must have seen and felt in his lifetime.

Later, I venture out into the Saigon night, a kaleidoscope of blurred impressions. Young people in flowing white shirts and white pants, beautiful women in white with perfect complexions and long, jet black hair ride side saddle on a motorized promenade to nowhere. There are discos and dance halls and the latest kick, a group of Karaoke bars scattered about the city and open until the last crooner goes home.

These young people in motion, blazing past me in the night and then again as they repeated their circle through the streets. They are all dressed up with no place to go. The hot phrase in Saigon is "song voi". It means living fast. But if you travel very fast but travel in a circle, have you actually been anywhere?

Our group heads for the Blue Ginger, one of the city's newest and best restaurants. We enter the restaurant, located in a combination factory and loft housing district, through a lengthy corridor leading to several cavern-like dining rooms and a sunken bar. I peek in and see what looks like about a dozen ex-pats and a few local beauties. They're playing Hammer on the sound system.

I go back to the restaurant where the meal service is beginning a trio of perfectly coiffured young women begin playing a series of melancholy love songs about Vietnam as it was or could have been. We start with chicken and baby corn soup followed by delicate rice paper rolls, and then soft, shrimp and scallion ravioli. Vietnamese food was always one of Southeast Asia's most creative cuisines - then the French came and refined it further. Today, Vietnamese cooking is far more sophisticated than Chinese or Thai, for that matter.

The food kept coming, next was beef in "lot" leaves, flavorful with hints

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of ginger and sage. The Cha Ca Hanoi or traditional Hanoi fish served with a fresh dill wrap, caused several of us to pause. Just which “Hanoi” waters were these fish calling home? But I’d come too far to be too cautious and I came away with a crunchy outside and an almost sweet inside. It was a memorable piece of fish.

A bowl of vegetables appeared next, looking like a painter’s palate of primary colors. There were bright greens and yellows and shining reds, colors that were set off by the fried tofu with which they were served.

The sautéed chicken with lemongrass, real lemongrass, was a delicious afterthought, soft and scented.

The three musicians never smiled but they half nodded whenever the appreciate audience applauded.

I didn’t want to leave but then again, this was not Vietnam. This was some entrepreneur’s idea of a business to attract visiting Americans and Europeans who could afford to spend thirty dollars on a meal. Back out on the streets was reality. Four of those meals would equal the average annual income of a majority of Vietnam’s inhabitants.

I ran into a Canadian college student on the street in front of the Rex Hotel. He told me that I should visit the Dan Sinh Market next to the Phong Son Tu Pagoda. This is where they sell second-hand military gear, everything from gas masks to field stretchers. He told me that I should think about getting a used flak jacket.

“A lot of guys were picking them up for Bosnia”, he told me, “but now they’re really cheap”.