

Thoughts from Hanoi

October 2004

I got the call to give a presentation to Vietnam Airlines and that meant a trip to Hanoi. As I had never been to Hanoi before, I was really looking forward to the trip. We took United Airlines to Narita and JAL to Hanoi arriving at about 11pm. We had a car waiting for us from the hotel and it was an interesting drive. We would be going on a modern 6 lane highway and all of a sudden, it would end and we would be on a two lane dirt road with hairpin turns. Then, we would magically appear on a city street for a while, then a dirt road, and then a highway again. We finally ended up in Hanoi where we checked into our hotel, the Hanoi Hilton. They really called it the Hanoi Opera because it was next to the Opera house, but still.....

We had meetings the next morning, but got a chance to get around in the afternoon. Walking around there was fascinating. There was a big traffic circle in front of the hotel and Opera House.



It was loaded with cars, bicycles, cyclo's, and motor scooters (I believe every 3rd motor scooter must be delivered to Hanoi). There were no

signals and no seeming order. They never seemed to hit each other. The closest thing I can relate it to is the behavior of flocking birds. You know, where there are masses of birds wheeling around in no apparent order, but never collide. Well, crossing it was fun. We cut across the traffic circle and the salesman (who has been there many times) said, "Walk steady, don't run and don't stop...they'll miss you." And they did miss us.

The city was very interesting. A lot of French influence (go figure). The Opera House is a scale model of the one in Paris. The hotel (to the right in the above picture) is about the tallest building.

We went for a walk in "Old Town" and it was very interesting. The buildings had that hint of French architecture, but were very old. You could not see any bomb damage here, but were told by an ex-pat that the shrapnel marks on the Opera House were fixed in 1994.



The streets were tree-lined and the weather was surprisingly good. We were somewhat surprised at the affluence. There were color TVs and plasma TVs for sale all over. All priced in Dong (about 15,000 Dong to the dollar)...that means they were for Vietnam folks. I was told that the bicycle to motor scooter ratio had inverted in the last

several years and that cars were becoming more and more popular. Here is a traffic light scene.



We found that they carried EVERYTHING on those motor scooters. We saw glass doors, windows, dirt, and whole families carried. Here is a shot of one guy going (or coming from) the market.



The "cyclo's" were the main "taxicab" of Vietnam for years, but now seem to be there mostly for the tourists. One of the guys I was traveling with had a bad foot. We would walk for as long as he could stand it and then take a cyclo back. Actually, it was a pretty civilized way to get around. Not too fast, open air. Here's a view during one ride.



You also got the chance to chat with the driver. Funny, they were always older than me and had daughters about the age of mine. I guess that goes along with asking for a 100,000 dong tip.

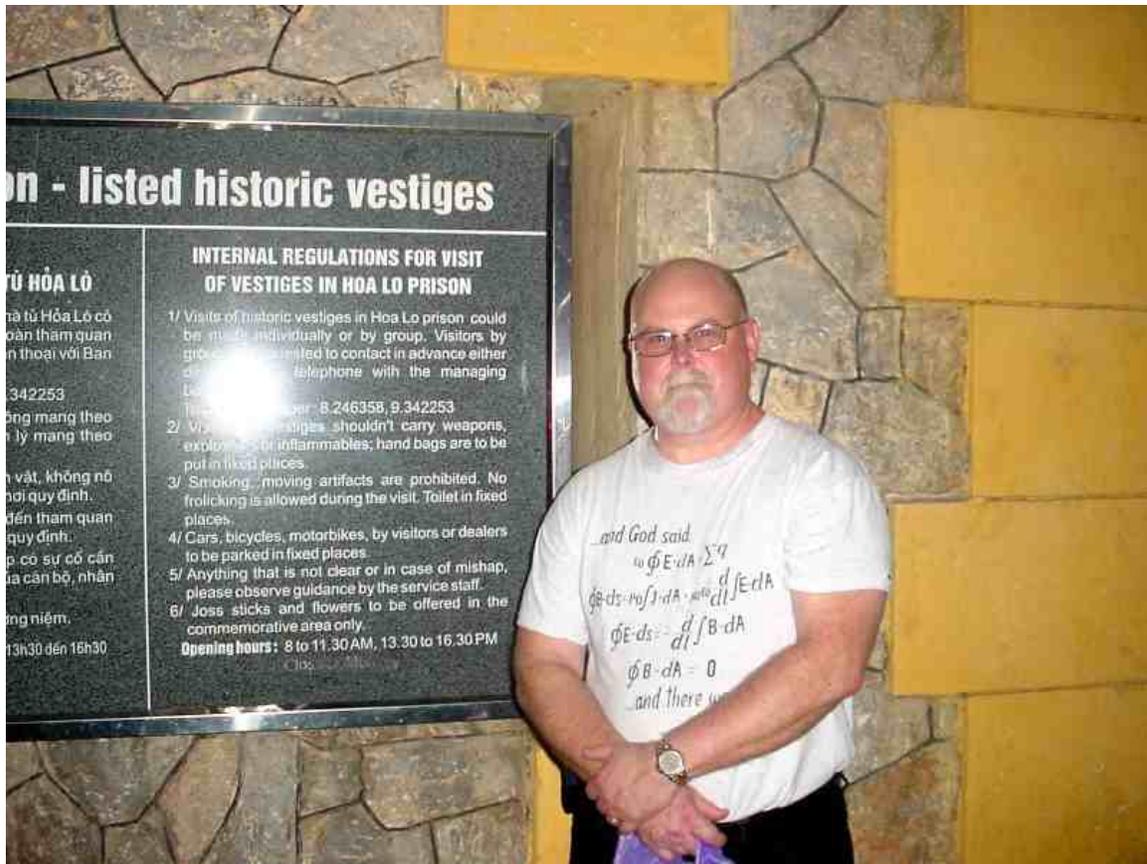


We were told by the natives that the affluence came from America. It didn't start until the US and Vietnam had their "coming together" meetings in the early 90's.

There is a big building boom going on. A lot of new houses are being built, but most are in the townhouse, French style.



One evening we took a hike down a street to find some gifts for home and to see the original Hanoi Hilton. I was able to find a carved stone box for Janice in a large mall. It was obvious that 95% of the mall was for the Vietnamese as most of the prices were in dong. There were some small tourist spots with native artwork. The Hanoi Hilton is called the Prison Museum here. We got there too late to get in, but did get a good look at the outside.



It did not appear to be a great place to visit. I'm told from colleagues who have visited that the primary part of the museum is dedicated to showing how the French used it to abuse the Vietnamese. One guy who had served during the war, however, reported that it was difficult seeing a display of flight helmets with names he recognized. During the visit NO ONE mentioned the war. I think they want to forget it and move on.

We went out to dinner a couple of times and had some great food. After one dinner, a Kiwi ex-pat Vietnam Airlines employee wanted to take us to a bar. So, we ended up in "Saloon 14", a country and western bar. After spending about 15 minutes in a C&W bar in Hanoi, listening to American music as played by a Filipino band....we decided that the US had won the war after all...it just took a little more time.