

11. Sai Gon, the Paris of Asia

(Days 12, 13, 14) I fully expected to hate Sai Gon, I guess, because I so liked Ha Noi. The two cities couldn't be more different, and I don't think you can say you have really visited Viet Nam until you experience both places. This is the Paris of Asia -- or the closest approximation -- at least a Paris with Asian characteristics. Sai Gon is for tourism, not biking; I store the bike at the hotel and take to the city's streets in search of a certain design of place mats, an item my sister-in-law, who at 10,000 miles away is not the easiest person to shop for, has seen and liked. I am not a shopper -- my excuse is that I can't carry much on the bike, but the truth is that I hate, absolutely hate, shopping. Not just that I hate spending money and hate feeling the captive of merchants, but I especially loathe unmarked prices, and philosophically I remain as anti-materialist as ever. Viet Nam, especially Sai Gon, is a shopper's paradise, and even I, the curmudgeon shopper, enjoy wandering around the markets whose stalls sell everything. I find the item for my sister-in-law in a stall that sells only place mats (yes, shopping is quite specialized in Sai Gon's markets) and, with this success under my belt, venture to locate a magnet to replace the gadget that fell off the bike. The market doesn't have a magnet stall; a stationery store sells them, though. I buy one, but magnets come 8 to the package (US \$.78), gaily colored refrigerator magnets, all encased in plastic button mushrooms, so I will have 7 extra. I am able to cut into the plastic and fit the magnet onto the spoke. I tape it in place. It may work.

I like Sai Gon's wide boulevards and tree-lined streets as well as its dense, backpacker haven, the Pham Ngu Lao area. I walk over to see the former US embassy building, the one from the 1975 photos with helicopters evacuating people from its roof. I think it has been torn down since my guidebook was published (The book was published in 1999 but the information is often 5-10 years out-of-date). In its place are a set of buildings that serve as the present US consulate. I feel very proud to see the US flag flying. As a nation, we have accepted defeat like real victors. My pride sours a bit when I finally learn via Internet news the identity of the next president. Critics feel that his administration will have the intellectual depth of a dry river bed. I wish we'd just skip my generation of politicians, the baby boomers, and move on to the next era. If ever a torch between generations needs to be passed, it is now. Can those born in the 1960s and 1970s make as big a mess of things as we have?

I do tourist things this morning in Sai Gon. First, I visit the War Remnants Museum, which amidst propagandistic wording tells about the horrors of the 60s war. There's an interesting room devoted to anti-war protests of the time and another room that shows the works of photo journalists killed while on assignment in Indochina. I also visit the old Presidential Palace, now renamed Reunification Palace, architecturally quite interesting, and not as gaudy or opulent as one might expect. I treat myself to lunch in a classy French restaurant, paying six times the cost of my average dinner, but worth every dong, and still a fraction of the price of a similar meal in Paris or New York, but not quite French food at African prices. As I don't have the time or inclination to do a road tour of the Mekong Delta (QL 1 there would be hell for a touring cyclist), I book with a backpacker group which, for US \$15, provides a two-day tour, including

one night's paid accommodation, and provides about 6 hours on the Delta's waterways, a visit to a rice processing plant and noodle factory, a floating market (all sellers and buyers are in boats), and a jungle swamp. The latter, the Rung Tram Forest, is most interesting. During the American war this area was a secret Viet Cong high command post, and it has been preserved for political history. What's even more interesting is that this is a piece of real marsh jungle, what the entire Mekong Delta once looked like before people and before war -- in short, before this past century of environmental destruction and urbanization. We are paddled in small rowboats through the swamp, all of us silent, soaking in a sense of the lost past.

My 3 days allocated to Sai Gon and the Mekong Delta now expended, I'm back on the bike heading northeast into the Central Highlands again, this time by QL 20, which will climb from sea level for 300+ kms to the old French hill station of Da Lat, at 1,475 meters. I will do the climb over 3 days (15, 16, 17), with good energizing mountain passes on the second and third days. There is plenty of accommodation along the way. This would be wonderful cycling if it weren't for all the polluting vehicles. They make it a fairly miserable ride at times. Vietnamese women cyclists have the right idea: they pull down caps over their foreheads and tie bandannas over their faces, leaving only slits for their eyes. The trucks and busses that puff their way uphill on QL 20 leave in their wake clouds of black which seem intended directly for me. Several times I pull over to cough and clear my lungs. This is a hundred times worse than anything I had experienced on QL 14, a thousand times worse than the loop northwest of Ha Noi that I cycled in May. Air quality is even worse than on QL 1, the Ha Noi to Sai Gon highway, which is only polluted, noisy and crowded in built up areas, about 20% of the distance of the route. But QL 20 doesn't have much in terms of population centers. It is rural and lovely, as seen through the clouds of black. The pollution here -- maybe because vehicles are all the time climbing -- is more severe; and because vehicles are going so slowly, the emissions seem to be omnipresent. I cough my way into Da Lat, but finish another 150 pages of M Proust.

Next: Crazy Da Lat