

A MEMORABLE TRIP TO VIETNAM (12/98)

I have been making a business trip to VN about once a year for the past four years. This time is a short trip to attend a Cardiology Congress in Dalat.

I took an EVA flight from Los Angeles to Taipei with continuation to Saigon. My reason for selecting EVA is that they offer good seating accommodation and their arrival time is around noon. In the past I have flown through Seoul and arrived close to midnight in Saigon.

I cleared security without any problem in Portland. However, when I got through security in Los Angeles, they searched my handbag thoroughly. I had to turn on my laptop. Then, when the security lady saw my pacemaker simulator, which is a small box with a plexiglas top with wires attached to a pacemaker, in spite of all my explanation she did not know what to do and was afraid it was a bomb! She called her supervisor and the supervisor told her to treat it as a security item, which means I had to either get a waiver from the airline (fat chance!) or I had to check it in. So, I went back to the airline counter. They have told me that I should need to check it in. They put my simulator in a paper bag, had me fill out a form and told me to claim it back at the Tan Son Nhat airport.

We left LA just before midnight Wednesday and after a 14 hour flight landed, 2 days later, in Taipei for a 3 hour layover. Since the terminal we arrived at was far from the one we would be leaving from, they had us wait in a group and then one of the airline attendant took us over to the other terminal. The airport remodeling is now complete (they were a lot of renovation in my past 2 trips through Taipei). Some of the people on the flight found a good deal on cigarettes. They bought cartons of (Dunhill?) cigarettes for \$9, which would have cost them \$16 in Little Saigon in Orange County.

Airline regulation calls for only one piece of carry-on luggage. But invariably, a lot of people would be carrying 2 or more larger pieces of luggage (This is Asia, where rules don't count for much, unless enforced strictly!). During the transpacific flight, with the 747, they apparently did not care. But with the flight to Saigon being on a smaller plane, they cracked down on this overlarge luggage situation. A ground attendant started making the round of the waiting area and insisted that wheeled luggage be checked in on the spot. When we went through the gate, they required further baggage check-in. A couple sitting next to me in the lounge, had their wheeled suitcase forcibly checked in. A couple of minutes later, one of the people in the lounge asked me whether the couple has to pay for over-allowance (apparently a lot of people had checked in a little over their 60 Kg limit and were carrying extra luggage to avoid paying the over allowance)!

After three and a half-hour flight, we landed in Saigon, just before noon on Friday. The city now has about a half dozen skyscrapers. Unlike my previous trips, the plane now parked right in front of the terminal. Even though the terminal was only 100 feet away, we had to take the bus. The temperature was comfortable, except for the humidity.

I went through immigration without any problem and did not leave any money behind. Waited a long time for my luggage, two large ones, that Alaska Airlines has stuck some bright red "Heavy" stickers on. Got a cart and put my luggage on it. Since I was bringing my laptop on this trip, I have declared it and indicated that I will be bringing it out. I went through the customs area at the end of the hallway, the one used if you have to declare items. This was partially because of the laptop, partially because I was bringing some pacemaker programming equipment for the hospitals in VN (those darned things weighted close to 40 pounds each and were responsible for my two pieces of luggage, which weighted 65 pounds each!). I explained that I did not list my pacemaker programmers because these were duty-free (no duty on medical equipment) items any way. They x-rayed my luggage, have me opened my pacemaker programmer and powered it up. Did not look like a PC (that I could sell on the open market!), so they gave me back my customs form with the indication that I have brought in temporarily (ta.m nha^p) a laptop and a printer.

As I was wheeling my luggage out, I remembered the pacemaker simulator that I was forced to check in. I went out and found my relative, had him watch my luggage and, after a short detour in the departure area to get directions, went back in the arrival area, past customs. I went to the lost and found counter. At that time the EVA airliner was just getting pushed back for its return trip to Taipei, so the EVA ground attendants were all on the tarmac. Only Air VN ground attendants were there. My "security item" was of course nowhere in sight. So, they had me fill out a claim form. As I was doing that, another passenger on a Thai Airways flight came over to claim his item. It was just a pair of sharp pointed scissors (I guess the security folks in Bangkok were afraid he could try to hijack the plane with those sharp scissors!) Just as I was about to leave, I saw the EVA ground attendants walking back. The lady that was helping me fill out the claim form hailed them and they came over and had me sign the claim form and I got my package back. I walked through the customs area without any problem.

My relative came out to the airport on his Honda. He got me a taxi to take me home. Taxi fare has gone down considerably. Last year it cost me close to \$8. This year, for the same trip, the cost was less than \$4! The dong devaluation, about 25%, did not account for all the difference. Competition was the key factor. I believe the rate to be 5KD (\$0.40) for the first Km and 4KD thereafter. I talked to the driver. He indicated that on Nov 9 they had some pretty bad flood in Saigon. Part of the city had over 1 meter of water in the street. He indicated that his passengers had to squat on the seats in his taxi to stay dry. He had to pay 100KD to have his seats cleaned after the flood. Traffic was not bad on this day (Friday). He indicated that rush hour is from 7 AM to 8:30 AM and from 4:30 PM to 6 PM. During rush hour, any taxi ride will take considerably more time. I asked him about the hurricanes. He indicated that last week they had a bad storm in Central VN, not as bad as Linda last year.

SATURDAY

My first night in Saigon was fairly comfortable thanks to the rain. It really poured! The evening was relatively quiet from about 12 PM till 5 AM.

Borrowed a motorcycle from my relatives and started visiting other relatives and business colleagues. It has an 80-cc engine. I was told that I may be flagged down by the traffic cops, because it is above 50cc, and a motorcycle driver license is needed. A foreign driver license is not valid, but 50KD (USD4) can remedy this lack of documentation. The streets appear to be relatively clean. The authorities have cleared the small river that ran through the city. This used to be almost built over with houses on poles. Those houses have been demolished and the river is being dredged. They have started to reinforce the riversides with stone walls. There is a lot of skepticism that this effort will not last and very soon the houses will be back.

Went to a book store. The store was well ventilated. You have to check everything at the entrance to the store. I was carrying a raincoat and my hat and had to check both of them. They have shelves closely spaced. Lots of nice ladies in blue a'o da'i to help. I picked up a couple of dictionaries. As I was walking around, one of the attendants offer me a plastic bag to carry the books. I like the service!

Went to talk to a physician friend. I was told that things are changing. Technical expertise is now appreciated again in the current commercial climate, even in a city hospital. The old guard directors with political connections are under a lot of pressure to shape up or ship out.

He told me that one of his patients recently went to China for a kidney transplant. I remembered the CBS 60 Minutes program about how the Chinese government was exploiting capital punishment to sell organs. He was aware of the criticism of the human rights organizations but he had a different point of view. He told me that the Chinese government has been seriously cracking down on drug trafficking and have meted out death sentence for anybody caught. So, they have a lot of executions. Apparently the condemned trafficker can elect to donate. If he does, his family will receive a small amount of money and the body will be released to the family after the execution and the organs removed. Else it will be dumped in a mass grave or cremated. This is certainly a different perspective from the CBS one! The operation costs USD15K and covers all the cost until the usual discharge. The patient will be assigned an apartment-like unit where family members can stay and cook if the patient does not like Chinese cuisine (too greasy!). This hospital is in the countryside in Quang Dong province. I asked him about the kidney transplant

program in VN. A few years ago, he introduced me to a physician who was part of this program. He indicated that Vietnamese expertise is still being developed and the lack of a patient data base to match with deceased donors from accidents makes it difficult. Currently all donors are from living relatives of the patients. This is a drastic decision.

Visited relatives from France. They are now retired. He is an engineer; she is a pharmacist. They spend the winter in Saigon, and the summer in France. They plan to migrate back officially instead of just visiting. When I saw her last year, she had plans to start pharmacology laboratory (she was on the staff at the medical school in Saigon before emigrating officially). But she told me the reality is the graft and corruption makes it impossible to start a private business. She told the story of a university professor in Hanoi who received a grant of laboratory equipment from a university in Belgium. He needed authorization to import the equipment. He was told that in order to collect the appropriate signatures, a fee of 10-20% of the value of the equipment would be required. Since he only got the equipment, he did not have any money . . . so Vietnam lost a laboratory! Any way, after six months of trying, she decided to have a leisurely retirement.

Visited a relative and got to talk about the subject of adoption. I was surprised about the doubt in her mind. She told me that she saw a lot of French women coming to church on Sunday with adopted babies. A lot of these babies have congenital or mental diseases. So, she was wondering why do all these Europeans want to adopt Vietnamese babies? She wondered was there some new drugs or therapies that are being developed that they needed children to test!!! And my relative is an educated lady! I spent time to explain to her the western thinking about population control. I sure hope I convinced her because I cannot understand how vicious rumors like those can get started! I was interested in this subject because a friend in the US was planning to come to VN to look for a baby to adopt. Since her husband's family has been out of VN since 1975, she did not have any contact. The official route was through an adoption agency in the Midwest and they wanted her to come to VN and go to an orphanage a couple of hours north of Nha Trang to get her baby. I was very surprised she had to go that far out of the way, so I promised her that I will find out more on this trip. Talked to a relative from the provinces. She has a son in law who is a secondary teacher. Viet Nam is well known for private tutoring. She told me that the authorities in her province now forbid private tutoring. So, her son-in-law has to hide the fact that he is doing it with students who are really behind in his regular class. I do not believe that this is true in Saigon where relatives always complain of the black mailing by the teachers.

Went to a send off party for a relative who has married a Viet Kieu in the US. It took him a little less than 2 years to get her over. I was told that this was fairly fast. Faster, I am told, is to go the fiancé visa route, which takes from 6 to 12 months.

Shooting the breeze with my relatives in the cool evening. I was told about the flood of the An Dong market. The An-Dong market is a multi-storied market. They have a basement, which is below street level. The architects designed the basement for parking and miscellaneous storage. However the greedy management decided not to waste this valuable retail space so leased part of it out. Apparently the better dry good stores went in the basement. During the flood of Nov 9, water poured down the basement from the street. So, damages ran into the millions of USD! I read in the newspaper that the merchants asked the market management for help to cover their loss. The response from the market management was negative. Those merchants are in a very bad shape. Small commerce is typically based on borrowed money. So, a lot of people are going to be out of business.

Watched a TV program about the upcoming VAT in January. VAT (thue'^ tri.gia' gia ta(ng) is a 10% value added tax that will kick in on January 1, 1999. They have skits on TV to explain what it is and why it is every citizen's responsibility to make sure to pay the VAT. Currently there is a 1% sales tax on official receipts (bie^n lai ddo?). But most companies do not offer bie^n lai ddo?, so manage to skip paying the sales tax. There is also a 45% income tax for large companies. Enforcement of these taxes has been very difficult and are a source of large bribes to the tax collectors. The VAT, which has been immensely successful in Europe, is meant to force a paper trail that makes cheating difficult. Any way, it looks like the price of non-food items will jump 10% starting January 1, 1999.

SUNDAY

Caught up with the newspapers. There was an article about a film being made about the VC sabotage captain that was shot by General Loan, and the photograph of the incident was held as the proof of the atrocity of the RVN army. They were going to make a hero movie out of his life. It was confirmed that he was indeed a dda(.c co^ng, not a regular VC soldier, which was what I argued on the Vietnam forum earlier this year.

Hosted a group of German visitors, who had come to attend the cardiology conference in Dalat, at a bo` ba?y mo'n dinner. The place was packed. The food was good, but not the way I remembered and not the way it is served in the US. Instead of using bu'n, they offered ba'nh ho'i. Then for the nhu'ng da^'m part, they have both sliced beef and beef stomach. For the finale, instead of congee (cha'o), they have (small white star) noodle soup.

MONDAY

The plan was for me to go together with the German delegation to Dalat in a rented mini- bus (I qualify as part of the German delegation since my company is German!). Departure time is 1:30 PM.

Since I had the morning to myself, I went to visit a super market. The price is probably a little higher than in the market, but they offer a clean environment and you get to handle the merchandise, without the store owner looking over your shoulder or trying to sell you on the excellent quality of the merchandise. The imported items are outrageously expensive. I needed a 9V alkaline battery. I got a US made Duracell battery for USD3! Actually, this is no worse than picking up this item at the airport in San Jose at twice the price of the usual store I go to.

We started out on time. There were the driver and six of us, so it was very comfortable. As we drove down the quay, be^'n Ba.ch Dda`ng (or whatever its name is nowadays), I saw a brand new Marriott hotel that was completed but shut down. Is it a victim of over building? I am amazed at how crowded the area surrounding Saigon is. It was harvest time and we saw farmers by the side of the road thrashing the rice by hand. Passed the biggest supermarket in VN in the Thu Duc area. I was told prices are very good there, but access is a problem. This is my first trip to Dalat in over 30 years. How big the Ho^' Nai area amazed me now. A big church is almost every few blocks also! Then we encountered an area where they grew tobacco plants on the side of the road, I believe this is after Ddi.nh Qua'n. The driver was "relatively" cautious (compared to the kamikaze driver I had when I went to Vung Tau 3 years ago). Still the Germans were scared. We drove into Dalat around 7 PM.

The Cardiology Congress was held in the auditorium of the Army College (Ho.c Vie^'n Lu.c Qua^'n, which is on the site of the old Vo~ Bi. Dalat). Outside of the Army barracks, there is a large hotel run by the Army. Like every where in the world, academicians are not known to be good organizers. Even though we had indicated that we were coming and that we needed accommodation, they did not make any arrangement. Any way, they put us in the Army hotel, LaVy. We opted for single rooms, instead of the conference arrangements of 2 or 3 to a room (at the government rate of 50KD per day). It cost us USD25 per day. We also picked up the tab for the driver. Since none of us have received any program, we went back to the registration area and asked for it. Sorry, but they mailed out all the programs! We were told that the Opening Plenary session would be at 7:30 AM.

Because of the fee, the congress organizers expected attendance to be a paltry 500. Instead pre-registration ran over 1200. I was milling around the registration and found out that this is the first year when the conference organizers did not pick up the tab (completely). In the past, attendance was not only free, but the Cardiology society has to pay for all the accommodation. This year, registrants are expected to pay the government rate of 50KD per day (about USD 4) for the accommodation, plus the annual society due of 100KD (USD7.50). The Cardiology society will then take care of everything else.

Because the pre-registration exceeded their expectation, accommodation turned out to be a problem. They originally only reserved the larger but less fancy hotel in the complex. They ran out of room and had to get

the other hotel. This is where we went. However, because this latter hotel was booked late, the hotel had already booked a wedding party that was due to take up the whole hotel the evening of the first day of the conference. So, the arrangement was that we would have to move after the first night temporarily to another hotel. The other hotel will have space but again only for a day, then back to the hotel again. The hotel staff will move our luggage! What is a mess.

The room was nice. Two full beds, bathroom with full size tub (the hot water was not turned on initially in our wing, so we were told it will take 15 minutes), small fridge with drinks, small TV with CNN, French TV, Indian TV, desk decent by the US standard.

I took a look at their overseas telephone rate. Except for Asian countries, the US has the lower rate at USD5 for the first minute and USD4 for additional minutes. Western Europe is 5.75. I was amused that they listed Alaska separately from US!

Remember that this a military-owned hotel. Well, when we came in the kitchen was closed.. at 7:30 PM, even though they advertised that they are open until 11:00 PM! So, we went out for dinner. We came back around 9:00 PM. By 10:00PM, the light in the registration area was turned off. The staff has retired to the couches in the lobby.

TUESDAY - THURSDAY

I couldn't sleep, so I was up early and was typing. Heard a distant trumpet reveille at 5:00 AM, from the barracks! Lousy weather, rain, rain all night! At 6:30 the phone rang and it was the staff wake up. I did not order any wake up call, but since I was awake, this was OK! Had breakfast of fried egg and bread, OJ and coffee.

Got a pass for our car and drove through the barrack area to get to the auditorium. This was really poorly organized. They have exhibition booths in the courtyard of the auditorium. The conference has one main sponsor and a number of cosponsors. The conference finally got started around 8:30. So far 600 people have shown up. The auditorium was packed.

They had entertainment of a local dance group, a chorus of the ladies from the organizing committee, and a loud brass band. The opening has the usual dignitaries at the national level, provincial and local levels. Midway through the opening ceremony the lights went out! Apparently the organizing committee only invited the provincial and city biggies but forgot to invite the big chief of the utility company and forgot to grease the paws of the electrical utility operators! The province chief was on the phone to the utility company but was also given the usual bureaucratic run around! The Army kicked in their generators after about 20 minutes. Remember the electricians if you organize a conference in VN at a public place! Last year, X-ray technicians did a trick on us because we forgot to tip them ahead of time!

By the way, no salute of the flag nor national anthem singing even though this is an official meeting of a state sponsored professional society. It is also interesting that the Cardiology society claims to be the largest medical specialist society with over 800 due paying members, except for the general medical association. Some of the other specialist societies have from 20 to 100 members.

This year there was just one meeting room. They have organized a main session and a satellite session for each half day. In the first 2 days, they never enforced the duration for each paper. The worse culprits were the big profs! On the third day, they did start enforcing time limits. In my opinion this conference was too commercial. Some of the professors presented clearly commercial papers prepared by the pharmaceutical companies, without themselves having ever used the product! These should have been delegated to the satellite sessions, but the pharmaceutical companies wanted the prestige of the main session. Last year, they had at least two parallel sessions and one could go to the other session if one was becoming bored. There was no such luck this year. The worse thing about this year is transportation. The conference was held about a mile from the hotel where the meals are served. Buses took us back and forth because we had to cross the military school. So there was no taxi or Honda o^m available. The buses will not run until the end of the satellite sessions. So we were held hostage by the satellite sessions! We were served typical

Vietnamese meals. The first day there was lots of beer and soft drink available at the table. The second day, there was no drink available, nor the third. On the third they even ran out of rice, even though only a third of the delegates remained.

The quality of the truly technical papers was variable. This was mainly a get together and if quality was enforced there would not be too many papers presented. The quality of the papers in the satellite (commercial) sessions was also very variable. They were advertisements aimed at physicians. A few were blatantly inappropriate: one was videotape about the company and its facilities!

Besides the 5 physicians in the German delegation, there was about 10 French physicians. They came in to present their papers on the afternoon of the second day and then went sight seeing. The French physicians gave presentation in French. The German gave their presentation in English. Most of these presentations also have Vietnamese slides side by side with the French/English slides. The presentations by the foreign speakers from the pharmaceutical companies were accompanied by both Vietnamese slides and oral translation.

This year there was a series of big storms (storm #3,4,5,6) on the coast. A number of delegates from the North took train to Phan Rang with connection to Dalat or went on the last leg by bus. Well, because of the storm over 400 did not make it in time. The lucky ones, were the ones that started early to spend the weekend in Saigon. The not so lucky ones are those who started on Saturday or later. They got stuck in Quang Tri and could get back to Hanoi. Then if they can make the arrangements, they can then fly to Saigon and get transportation to Dalat. The unlucky ones are those who made it to Da Nang but then could not proceed nor turn back because bridges have been washed away both North and South of Da Nang! They had to go up in the highlands to make their way south. One delegation showed up on the last day of the conference! There was the story of one delegation that was travelling on two mini-buses that were washed away as they tried to cross a flooded section of road. They were lucky to be rescued by local people with boats. Well this will remain as a memorable conference.

One of the delegates told me that she was from one of the northern provinces. She was part of the "not so lucky" group that was stuck in Quang Tri. Since she was the only one from that provincial hospital, she called up her hospital director to get permission to go back to Hanoi and fly to Saigon. Her director has to get the approval for spending the funds from the province chief. She got the OK but was told to collect lots of medical prospectus and get lots of free samples. She said that the railroad gave her a refund only for the Quang-Tri to Dalat part since they were running to Quang Tri!

Most physicians from Hanoi and Saigon were sponsored by large pharmaceutical companies that organized the trip from Hanoi to Saigon and the bus to Dalat, and even provided them hotel accommodations. They also organized tours. The second day and third day, about half the delegates were away on tours organized by these companies in spite of the pleas by the organizing committee not to do that. In my opinion, the committee should have asked the pharmaceutical companies to pledge not to organize tours during sessions, but they forgot to secure those pledges. But it is also partly the responsibility of the organizing committee. Instead of having parallel sessions with good themes, they have an amalgam of papers. So, if a physician was interested in a few of those papers, he may have to sit through all of them, so he went out to enjoy himself instead. The weather was not good during the 3 days of the conference. It was drizzling most of the time.

Any way, I presented my paper in the morning of the last day. I then walked back with a friend to the hotel. Put my stuff away and got on a Honda o^m to the market. The cost per ride is 5000 VN Dong to the market and 10000 VN Dong for beyond. We drove by the train station. The train now will go to Phan Rang where you can catch the Saigon train. No more direct couchette service from Saigon like in the old times! The market is fairly clean.

The upper story is for the clothes and other souvenirs. The bottom is for the perishables and other dry goods. My friend bought one of the wooden image made out of a mixture of woods with different natural color. Afterwards, we went to a store that sold silk embroidery (tranh the^u lu.a). We went to the largest store that had a production area above the store. Some of these embroidery were magnificent. The price is

steep, USD600 for a 4'x5' scene, and in the thousands of USD for larger pieces. A 4'x5' took over 4 months to complete by a team. The needlepoint is very fine. While admiring the work, we were talking with the sales lady and she told us that the owner was a relative of Nam Phu+o+ng Hoa`ng Ha^u (the only and last queen/empress of the Nguyen dynasty since that dynasty did not like to confer any "first" title like tra.ng nguye^n, tha'i tu+?, hoa`ng ha^u . . . until the end!). Nam Phuong HH was renowned for her needlepoint. The owner learned this skill from the family of NPHH. Nice story at least!

We went back to the hotel for lunch. My friend had to go attend the executive meeting of the cardiology society to vote on a new executive committee and decide on the site for the next congress in the year 2000. (They decided on Hue^^ for 2000).

After taking a short nap, I decided to go back to the market. I wanted to take a ride around the city so went shopping for a rental bike. I got a Korean bike for 10KD per hour (USD0.75). So, I drove around the city looking for the places where I spent my summer vacations in my much younger days, over 30 years ago. The weather was not cooperating. Before lunch it was clear. After lunch a fog has descended on the city and was thickest around the lake. I rode the bike in the fog and had to occasionally stop to clear my glasses from all the condensation. I found all the places without needing a map. I rode to the Cam Ly waterfalls. It is now a tourist trap with entry fee. I looked from outside and decided it was not worth the entry fee. I then rode out to Than Tho+? Lake. I was really disappointed. The old lake that I remembered was between pine hills on three sides. Well, most of the pines have been cut down for firewood. The far end of the lake has been filled for agriculture. So, the current lake is probably only half of its size 30 years ago. I was so depressed I did not even bother taking pictures. I rode the road to Vo~ Bi. Dalat. I remembered walking this road 35 years ago to visit an uncle who was a cadet there. They have now put a locked entrance, way before the old main gate. (The hotel I am staying at, is by the new entrance which is at the other end close to the city) I then went back to the main lake (Ho^^ Xua^n Hu+o+ng) and rode up to see the nuclear reactor. I remembered being very impressed with it about 40 years ago when I had the opportunity to visit it with my father. It is still there and is making the radioisotopes used to cure cancer. Most of the far quarter of the lake was bordered by a golf course that ran from the lake to the University. This golf course was there back in the 60's. However, nowadays in this age or proletarian quality, it is fenced in! The fog cleared by the time I brought back the bike, of course! To rent the bike I had to leave my visa with the owner. I did not want to leave my passport.

Talking about the fence around the golf course, I remember that back in my younger days, in Dalat there was not that many fences. Nowadays, there are fences around all official buildings!

In general the layout of the city has not changed. However, there is now very little green space left in the city. Almost every space has been developed. Apparently this has affected the weather which is now much warmer than I remembered it, but definitely cooler and drier than Saigon.

Since the German physicians did not understand the sessions (there was no assigned translators unlike what happened at the congress in Saigon 2 years ago) except for the opening ceremony and their session, they went out sightseeing. They were planning to go down to Nha Trang but changed their plan due to the storms. So, they left early on the morning of the third day of the conference. That was OK with me because I have enough connection to find my way back to Saigon. Any way, through a couple of physician friends, I managed to hitch onto a pharmaceutical delegation and travelled with them back to Saigon on a chartered 50 seat bus from Saigon Tourist.

For the last night in Dalat, they have organized a trip to savor ru+o+.u ca^^n (rice wine sipped out through a cane) at a K'Nor village, a 20 minute ride outside Dalat. We were supposed to have a campfire but couldn't because of the rain. So, we settled in their long house. In the old times, this would be the communal house. But nowadays it was more for the tourists. The inside was supposed to be blackened by the smoke of the kitchen. But I checked and found it was painted black. The natives don't live inside the long house either. They have small brick houses around it. Our hosts were the chief (o`ng gia` la`ng), who is only middle aged, three men who formed the band and three girls who made up the singing trio. In the center of the room were two urns of wine. In the back were two clay charcoal stoves with some beef strips

being grilled to serve as appetizers. It was fun so sip the wine straight out of the urn. The fermented sweet rice was at the bottom. One has to pour water at the top to keep the wine flowing to the bottom through the fermented rice, to suck the alcohol out, and to be sipped out. A buffalo horn is used to pour the water in. Our hosts sang some ethnic songs, and then turned to sing Vietnamese songs about the highlands. They were pretty good singers. We had a grand time sipping the wine and enjoying the songs. Our group reciprocated with songs also. It was interesting to observe the difference in behavior between the two groups of physicians. The physicians from Hanoi were more outgoing from sipping the wine to partaking in the entertainment, singing, dancing. The group from Saigon just sat on the side. They did not even participate in the group dance around the room.

Since my friend is with the Hanoi group, I sat with them. We were grouped around one of the wine urns. I took a couple of sips but it just tasted like water. So, it was no fun and the physicians only took occasional sips. The other urn was at the other end of the room. It was in front of the band and this was in the area of the group from Saigon. After each has taken their sample sip, the Saigon group retreated to the side of the room. Since nobody was sitting around the urn and using it, my friend suggested that I go take a sip from the other urn so that he can take a picture of me with the band in the background. So, I went over, took a sip from the cane and had my picture taken. Boy, that urn was light years better than the urn I was drinking at the far end of the room. So, I told the guys when I got back. Nothing like good wine to motivate these physicians! They moved up immediately and took over that urn! Oh well, I was responsible for the northern invasion on this excursion! Those guys and gals sure know how to drink. There was almost always somebody sipping. They must have drunk over 4 gallons because they ran out of water and had to get the bucket of water from the other urn. I think that we got a bad deal from our hosts. The urn at the far end of the room must be a left over one from earlier events so had little wine left. The wine is just sweet rice wine, very light because nobody had any hangover the next day.

It was interesting to note the role of women physicians in the health care system. I met quite a few women who were heads of cardiology or directors of hospitals. This was not only true at civilian hospital but also held true for military hospitals!

On a couple of occasions, I sat for meals at a table dominated by women physicians. Well, being the only (relatively older) male and a Viet Kieu, those women poured out their charms at me. Please try this (they put food in my bowl!), try that, do you have enough, . . . they sure know how to make you feel welcomed, probably too much in my case! The ones from Hanoi were the one who tried to please the most. The ones from Hue were not so insistent. During the session, I sat next to a physician from Hanoi and he told me the true Hanoian women are the nicest! No comment from me on this subject!

Another was interesting colloquial. At dinner, one of the people ordered tea. He was asked whether he wanted regular tea or Lipton tea. He asked for Lipton tea. It turned out to be just bag tea, and not even regular tea it was an artichoke tea. Apparently "Lipton" tea refers to bagged tea!

FRIDAY

I had to get up at 4:30 AM to pack and then catch a taxi to the hotel of the group. Got there by 5:30 and had breakfast. Then off we went. With the bus, I had a better view of the side of the road since I was sitting higher than in the mini-bus on the way up, besides the fact that we arrived late in the evening of Monday. All the valleys around Dalat are now cultivated. Even the side of the hills were cut and terraced to allow planting. We went through the Dalat pass and then ended in the high plains around Ba^o Lo^c (Blao). On both sides of the road were tea and coffee farms. The tea trees are fairly short. The coffee trees were higher and not uniform in height. It was interesting to note the tea plantation of the Taiwanese. The tea plants were more regularly and more densely planted. I was told that the tea from these Taiwanese plantations are shipped directly back to Taiwan after the leaves have been dried. They will blend the teas in Taiwan. Coffee is subject to the vagaries of the weather. Apparently last year crop was not good. They expect a good crop this year. We made a pit stop in Bao Loc at a tea and coffee store. They served free tea and coffee. Almost everyone bought some tea or coffee. The tea price is 8KD for lotus tea and 9KD for jasmine (la'i) tea. We went through the Bao Loc pass. Our next stop was at Suoⁱ Tieⁿ just before the Banana pass (dde^o chuoⁱ) where we have lunch. This was by the side of the river. It is a resort owned by

Saigon Tourist, the owner of our tour bus. We arrived in Saigon around 2 PM.

The bus has a videotape and a monitor at the front. During the trip they played some videotape of a theatrical show, then some music video. After Bao Loc, they started a video karaoke contest that pitched the left side of the bus against the right side of the bus. They appointed the two eldest physicians on the two sides as the judges. It is a game of manually winding the videotape and then singing what came up. It turned out to be a draw all the way through. I was very interested in how the judges avoided declaring anybody a clear winner. I guess it takes years of political experience to be able to please everybody! But it kept the game going and everybody had fun! The price was not that significant for this group of people who are relatively well to do physicians! After lunch they had some more music and then played a kieu video.

A few words about the host company on this return trip. They are a large US based pharmaceutical company with their large headquarters by the quay in Saigon. The General Manager for VN is a lady, probably a pharmacist. The (Southeast Asia) area manager is a Thai from Bangkok. He came along on this trip. Even though he could not understand a word of Vietnamese, he went on all the trips. His staff felt sorry for him on the last night trip to the ethnic village because he definitely could not have understood anything. But his willingness to participate impressed them, especially because he had a cold and could have used that as an excuse to stay in his room!

Any way, came home and collapsed for 12 hours of sleep from the exhaustion of this trip (stress of the 4 days in Dalat, the heat on the return trip).

WEEKEND

Had some more discussion about the An Dong market. The basement as mentioned was used also for storage. At night, the merchants will take their merchandise and lock them up in the basement, where there was security. Some of the jewelry store owner panicked when the basement flooded and instead of toughing it out, they went and tried to retrieve their stock from the flooded basement. So, as they opened their storage cabinets, the jewelry items in the cabinets that were under water just floated away in the turbulence created.

I had dinner with relatives. As we ate dessert they made the comment that Chinese and Thai are swamping Vietnamese agriculture products. These products offered more consistent quality and are priced lower. Whereas we had some good mandarin orange, the price is higher than those from China. Even some tamarind (me) are now being imported from Thailand. The Thai are exporting a very sweet tamarind, unlike the sour one of Viet Nam. The durian production is also under threat from the Thai, who have developed an almost seedless durian.

We got to talk also about beers. Apparently in Saigon Tiger Beer (from a subsidiary of Heineken in Singapore) is considered the best (and most expensive). Beer Saigon (from the old BGI plant) is considered high quality followed by 333. I was told about the trial and tribulation of San Miguel (Philippines). Before they entered the market, they had an international market research firm do a survey of customers in VN and then they designed a beer to appeal to Vietnamese customers. It bombed badly because it was too pricey and did not fit the taste of most Vietnamese beer drinkers. They have now a different beer, lower priced, but somehow the perception that San Miguel is expensive stuck. I saw a promotion of 5 for the price of 4 for San Miguel beer. At the expensive extreme is Heineken and at the cheap extreme is the 1KD beer that cyclo drivers drink. My relatives also mention that each region has its favorite beers because of different tastes.

As I made my round of visits, I heard a lot of comments about the new Governor of the Bank of Viet Nam. He had a stellar rise from a modest beginning as a security officer. The joke is that he has been invited by Harvard U to give a course on how to fast track to become a Governor of the National Bank. He was quoted as stating in an interview that the East Asian financial crisis has had no impact on the Vietnamese economy . . . in spite of the devaluation of the Dong over the past year, the rise in layoff at major export factories. One of my friends' mother made the observation that the situation in Central VN must be getting

desperate since she has observed an increase in the number of beggars from those provinces. The recent storms have apparently devastated the economy of that region.

Visited a relative that ran a PC wholesales business. He has the Internet access (e-mail only) but only used it at night. Under the current promotion, night access is free. The cost is 400D(\$0.03) per minute during the day and there is no storage charge (this assumes that there is no large file and just simple message). Another relative is considering signing up for the Internet access for her girl in the eighth grade but is afraid that she will spend too much time on it.

To support her business, one of my cousins recently signed up for a mobile phone. It was interesting that you can choose your number (the last 4 digits anyway).

There is a lot of interest about sending your children to study abroad. Parents are trying to save money to do that. The favorite country is Australia. The stereotype that only children of high government cadres can afford it is not completely true. Through (clean) business activities, some of the technical and business elite has been able to save enough to provide 2 years of study abroad for their children and they expect that their children will be able to support themselves through part-time work past that initial time. So, they view the extra-curricular classes in English/French and computer as an investment.

Tested an interesting version of cha? gio`. It is sold as frozen food in the supermarkets. Instead of being made out of rice paper, it is made out of what looks like ba'nh ho?i. When deep fried at moderate temperature, it retains its crispness even when cold. And it does not stick to your palate like regular cha gio made with rice paper. If fried at too high a temperature, it is actually soft not crisp.

MONDAY

Made a last trip to another supermarket. The price in this one is lower than the one I visited last week. Took a taxi to the airport for under \$4. Apparently if you use the "Airport Taxi", you do not have to pay for the toll at the airport.

Went through customs without any problem. Had to declare that I was taking my laptop and printer out. They did not even bother to look at them. Went through immigration. The officer kept repeating "only 10 days?". I played dumb and kept saying "yes". I guess the faint-hearted would start slipping a few dollars here. I had all my papers, so just answered dumbly his questions.

Flew to Taipei on a 747. They bussed us from the terminal to the plane 100 ft away! The plane was late by 45 minutes. I was worried about my connection in Taipei with just 1 hour layover, but I figured that with 100+ passengers bound for the US, they will hold the plane. Sure enough, the plane to LA departed 45 minutes late. With a tail wind, we made it to LA on time. The US customs folks saw the two large pieces of luggage that I had and since I came from VN, they sent me over to the agricultural inspection station with the X-ray equipment. I passed through without any problem since I only have rice paper (I brought back over 15 Kg of ba'nh tra'ng for friend and relatives!) and a few dried fruits and lots of books (the book on pacemaker that I co-authored and chapters of which I have been posting every other weeks on the VACETS forum, was published at the Cardiology congress and released for sales to the delegates). I knew about the policy of no fresh fruit and no meat.

TT

12/98