

Title:

An Excursion by Road to Dalat

Word Count:

2100

Summary:

An account of one of the numerous journeys the author took by road in South Vietnam in an effort to discover the country and its people. This was from Vung Tau to Dalat and then back to Saigon.

Keywords:

vietnam,south vietnam,asia,travel,road travel,vietnam war,vietnam holiday,vietnam memories

Article Body:

We were driving around probably not too sure where to go. We must have been heading to Saigon when I saw this sign post on the right saying Dalat. I had heard the name. It was an old French hill station far to the north of Saigon. It had the good reputation of an agreeable place to go. It brought to mind tales of one of the old British hill stations of the RAJ. Simla? Anyway my curiosity was roused and I asked PB if she had been there and she said no. I turned right and off we went.

We were able to come to these decisions without any discussion which was good. On the other hand we didn't know how far it was. It certainly wasn't near. We didn't know what the road was like. I am not giving distances. I would have to check them on a map. I had no map then. Anyway even with a map I would not have been much better off. A detailed military map was the last thing one wanted to be caught with and anything else was worse than useless. The conditions on some of the roads were appalling and it was not unknown to travel mile after mile on second gear. Traffic jams in Saigon were monstrous and in the country side a blown bridge could cause a bottle neck with traffic three lanes deep on either side and no way for any vehicle to get through to clear the bridge. Or for that matter just a blown bridge and not a soul about. To compare a journey then with whatever distance is marked on a map today has no bearing on the reality of the situation as it was then .

What perhaps was surprising was the fact that the Vietnamese continued to travel the roads. Their driving was appalling. Driving licenses could be bought. If you were a foreigner you were always wrong. You could, had to, buy your way out of any accident. I read that coach drivers drove at high speed in the hope that if they set a mine off their speed would carry the driver over safely and only blow

the rear end off the bus. The accidents were horrific. The Viet Cong set up road blocks and took away whoever they considered an enemy. I remember reading that a French consul in the highlands had his car break down, got a lift on a passing bus, was taken by the Viet Cong at a road block and reportedly died in captivity. The French usually considered themselves above this war and therefore immune. It is possible that having known war for twenty five years when I arrived in 1965 the Vietnamese had developed a certain fatality to it. I switched the number plates of my car and then we continued through an area of rubber plantations. By the time we reached rolling grass covered hills it had begun to enter my somewhat sluggish mind that there was no traffic on the road. I also knew by now what no traffic meant. I hid my identity papers and threw away my X numbered plates. The few villages that there were seemed lacking in activity. Once we passed a lonely catholic priest on a motor scooter. The road climbed steadily and we talked a little. PB was from Hanoi. They had also had a house in the country and been relatively well off. Her father, a nationalist, had been taken away by the Viet Minh one night and never seen again. The family moved south after Vietnam was divided. There was an uncle, a colonel, who had been a province chief. I think all province chiefs were military, possibly with one exception to try to prove the country was not exactly a military dictatorship or something. He had been on the wrong side in one of the numerous coup d'états. There was another tragedy in her life, but it is not for me to talk about here. Every Vietnamese had his own share of tragedies linked to the war. Her English was excellent and she had this delightful habit of mixing her adverbs and adjectives up.

We decided I needed another identity. I suggested being a French catholic priest. I was often mistaken for one in the province where I worked. PB pointed out that her presence didn't lend credence to that. I suggested being a press reporter. We rejected that, but later I was to join an obscure press agency, get the necessary papers, and use that cover in my off duty time. I would also work as a freelance. We settled on my being a teacher. I was to become one at some future date. Once when we were driving in the delta, I think near My Tho, and had stopped to buy some pineapple from a young boy by the road he had remarked that I was English. He had a brother studying in England. I worked with, was paid by and had a lot of friends who were Americans, but alone in the countryside they were the last people I wanted to be associated with. The road started to climb again and still no traffic.

We now looked out on the most beautiful green I had ever seen. Below us there was wave after wave of all the shades imaginable, forest or jungle, I can't remember, but it was utterly lovely. Whatever shade of fear we were suffering from also disappeared. I think we had just put it away and pretended to ourselves it wasn't there. In any case we were committed now and it was too late to turn back. At one point I saw the backs of soldiers looking into the forest,

and the sound of bursts of machine gun fire, and then nothing. Next we reached a high plateau with gently rolling hills covered with tea or coffee plantations. I should know which, but this is written after a forty year interval and although some of my memories are crystal clear as though they happened yesterday others are blends of colours and some only grey.

To digress. The old plantations had been owned by the French. I was to get to know a Vietnamese woman whose family owned one. I remember being given large bags of coffee grains freshly roasted, black and small, glistening with butter. The coffee in Vietnam was the Robusta variety. Very strong. It was usually drunk out of small glasses with lots of sugar but no milk. I used to drink far too much and my nerves suffered accordingly. The tea was drunk from large glasses, without sugar or milk, thank god. Outside Saigon at least it was usually free and accompanied whatever one was eating. On the rare occasions I stopped somewhere just to have a glass it was always given, so I usually bought a small cake or something. Anyway the water was usually of dubious quality and tea was safer.

We arrived at the civil airfield serving Dalat. Very small. No sign of any activity or any planes. I was to get used to, indeed to take part, in this Vietnamese habit, of going to an airfield for a flight and sit down and wait hopefully, looking up into the sky for hours for the sight of a plane. When no plane appeared that day they would go away and come back the next. The patience of the East. From here the road climbed steeply and the scenery changed again. One could have been in the Alps. The forest was now evergreen and there was a magnificent mountain off to our left. Unknown to us this was quite the most dangerous part of the journey and that mountain was full of tunnels infested with the Vietcong.

We finally arrived in Dalat. We had not seen a single motorised vehicle the whole journey, save for that lone catholic priest. I will deal with this town later when I was to get to know it much better. For us it was just a question of finding a hotel , a quick walk around, food and bed. The town maintained a rather French air. With my beard I easily fitted in. It was the one place in Vietnam where I was never exploited. There was no United States presence at all. In all my visits there I never saw more than one or two Americans. I do not want to criticise Americans in these articles. The problem was, the fighting aside, there was often an unfortunate relationship between the two peoples, both seeing the other's faults and never the qualities.

There was a curfew at eight o'clock. It was a town that had seen its heyday years before. Now it had the South Vietnamese military and police academies. It had the Couvent des Oiseaux. It was known for its vegetables which were sent by

road to Saigon. Its girls had a lovely healthy glow to their cheeks. All of this for later. We spent a rather restless night. There were continual bursts of small arms fire throughout the night. Will I ever tell of any happy one's. There were many, but evidently not at the end of our excursions. We had to return the next day. I only ever had two days off unless arranged otherwise and as all my trips were unauthorised I preferred not to talk about them.

The following morning I filled the car up with petrol, lit my pipe and we began the return trip. It was a lovely day, the air fresh and pleasant but not another car on the road. We descended what I would call the alpine part of the journey, past that imposing mountain now on our right, to the small airfield. We then continued across the area of what must have been a high plateau of plantations. I took some photos of PB, I still have them, at one point we stopped so she could buy some meat, buffalo(?) off a montagnard woman we came across, but we only had notes and the montagnard would only accept coins. Descending through the lovely green forests PB slept beside me. I was brutally awoken myself when the car hit a pothole, struggled to regain control of it and then continued wide awake. I dread to think what would have been the result of even a minor accident.

The drive was eventless and we passed again through rolling hills of tall grassland. As we approached the rubber plantations we stopped for a coca cola at some village. I have always found it the most refreshing of drinks on such occasions and gives one the force to continue. Then, surprise, a column of South Vietnamese armour approached from the south. The first vehicles we had seen in two days. I don't know what the US advisors made of me quietly sitting at a table with PB. Actually they gave a most friendly smile. Perhaps not for me. Driving on we were stopped two or three times in the rubber plantations by Regional Force soldiers who wanted to be recompensed for guarding the road for us! I always kept a carton or two of cigarettes for that and usually two or three packets would suffice. Reaching the Baria Saigon road PB wanted to go to Saigon, so I had to drive there and then back to Van Kiep. I think I must have driven a good eighteen hours during those two days. I could hardly move a muscle when I got back.

Three days after our trip the Viet Cong attacked the road in six places and held control of it for five days. Some time later two Decca employees driving in a jeep from Phan Rang on the coast up to Dalat went missing. In 1971, the British Vice-Consul, a certain Adrian, one of those very rare but most likeable of people was around at my house in Saigon and he told me that he had been interviewing a Viet Cong defector who said they had been stopped at a road block, taken prisoner and died in captivity. One was British and one American. On the other hand in the same period fourteen unarmed US civilian personnel in a US truck under I think Korean army escort were all killed on the same road when

their convoy was ambushed. One had to use one's judgement whether to be armed or not, and if possible what means to travel by. One should also pray not to have been born under an unlucky star.