

Title:

Asian Affair Vibrant Vietnam & Sizzling Singapore

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Summary:

The contrast of this trip is evident in our photos from the contemporary garden paradise of Singapore to the new renaissance of traditional Vietnam. This is certainly an Asian affair never to be forgotten.

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Article Body:

I simply love aircrafts and long haul flights. We board award winning Singapore Airlines with about 30 hours to go. With 8 magazines, 6 movies, 4 meals and a sleeping pill, I arrive relaxed and ready to explore. American airports are still not people friendly. Singapore's ultra-modern airport invites you to linger with free internet terminals, a cinema, rooftop swimming pool, aromatherapy spas, oxygen bars, indoor nature garden with waterfalls and koi pond.

I'm escorting my smallest group yet with 28 singles. Over 60 had begged me to offer these destinations, but most bailed last minute claiming fear of bird flu. So it's like a vacation for me with this quality over quantity entourage of culture-vultures.

We begin with an orientation tour at the top of Mt. Farber with spectacular views. I can see the group is impressed with this sparkling metropolis located between Malaysia and Indonesia. Here is the leader of S.E. Asia, a bustling port that was modernized by the British Empire. It's called the "Lion City" and inhabited by 4 million souls. 76% are Chinese and the other minorities blend harmoniously. Singapore is a city, state, capital and country all in one and draws 8 million visitors per year, yet few Americans have yet to discover it.

We check into the opulent Regent Hotel of the Four Seasons. I'm given a suite and swear this wins the award for the most gracious staff on the planet. We've arrived at a perfect time now with the "Great Shopping Festival" on. There is nothing like some retail therapy to soothe our jet lag. Orchard Road, like a tree lined Fifth Avenue is a block away and center of all life. Shopping is the

national obsession and bargain hunting can become a blood sport here.

There are 150 mega-malls with some that never close. I'm a label slave and purchase a used authentic Rolex with documents for a fraction of it's original cost. We have only 4 days here. So much to do 24/7, its like Hong Kong on steroids. The Arts Festival is on with a multitude of venues. After dark, it becomes party city at the trendy Clarke Quay area by the river.

We have an astute and friendly guide named Farida who shows us all the sights along with a great sense of humor. We visit the lush National Orchard Gardens with 60,000 orchids, China Town with its markets and temples as well as Little India with its intense aromas and vibrant colors. Then on to the ultra-contemporary financial district, Merlion Park with its landmark fountain and the historic colonial area that was established by Sir Stanford Raffles.

We stop to sip a Singapore Sling at the famous Long Bar of Raffles Hotel where rooms start at \$700 per night. Other tours included Jurong Bird Park and the Night Safari at the zoo, considered the best in the world with its free roaming cages for 2500 animals. In free time, we ride rickshaws around town and take the cable car over to Sentosa Island.

Some of us opt to head back to the zoo for a Jungle Breakfast with the Orangutans. At night Terry & I dine on jumbo chili crabs and rice cakes. This vibrant island-state of Singapore is glistening clean with purple bougainvillea bushes lining the highways. All cars are equipped with alarms to sound if one exceeds the speed limit. No graffiti, no gangs and in this tightly "controlled democracy", it's the death penalty for drug traffickers. We all make jokes about getting caned for chewing gum or jay-walking.

Its been a leisurely visit here. I usually feel like Jack Bauer on the TV series 24 on my trips with non-stop itineraries. I feel rested as I board our 3 hour flight to Vietnam.

We arrive to another world with rice paddies, sampans, lotus blossoms, coconut milk and noodle soups. It's like time machine travel back to the 15th century in this graceful land that is steeped in history. It is far poorer than I anticipated. There is however, an alluring charm which is found in the gentility of these people with the sincerest of smiles. I am a fan of the Third World. Whereas Singapore was dynamic, Hanoi is culturally stimulating. The city is studded with lakes and shaded by tamarind trees. It is a dichotomy that bustles with Chi-energy and yet is tranquil at the same time.

We check into the deluxe Sheraton Resort, an oasis of calm amidst the chaos.

Our fabulous guide named Hong will be with us for 6 glorious days. His first lesson was in teaching us how to cross the streets. The traffic of 7 lanes is horrendous with 2.4 million motor scooters. "It's called the Chicken Game." Hong says. "Don't run, don't stop, just walk slowly so drivers can predict your direction." That afternoon I stand in fear stranded 20 minutes curbside as this lesson goes against all instincts. There are entire families on a single scooter, called the "Vietnamese sandwich." Everything is transported on these mopeds, 8 piglets, a dozen chickens upside down, a TV, a tree and more. Pollution is bad. The inner city looks tired and worn. Suddenly there's a monsoon downpour. People drape ponchos and it becomes raincoat city. It dissipates as quickly as it began and life goes on.

The sun shined on our daily tours which included the Temple of Literature, One Pillar Pagoda, the French Quarter and the memorial to Ho Chi Mihn. We line up with hundreds of people to enter the tomb where his preserved body is visibly encased just like Lennon in Moscow. Communist armed soldiers command us to silent reverence, no cameras, umbrellas, sunglasses and arms at our sides. Later we visit Hoa Lo Prison, or Fiery Furnace. Built by the French in 1896, thousands of political prisoners were tortured here until 1954. We view the dungeons with leg irons, torture equipment and "head cutting machies." In the 1960's the Vietcong used this as a prisoner of war detention center for American pilots shot down during the Vietnam War. It was our captive pilots that sardonically named this place "The Hanoi Hilton." We also do a walking tour through the Old Quarter where each narrow lane was named for its ancient craft: Silk St., Coffin St., Grilled Fish St., etc. Hong leads us to a food market with turtles, sea slugs, pig heads and other unmentionable creatures for sale. Thit Chow is dog stew which is considered peasant food here. Country rat is ceremoniously served at all birthday parties.

Most of our meals are included with elaborate breakfast buffets and 10 coarse lunches. Every restaurant is affordable. One evening my dinner menu presented salad of jellyfish, deep fried eel, ginger crickets and sticky rice with tender roasted pigeon. It seems the Vietnamese will eat anything that moves because "it tastes like chicken."

We attend the Water Puppet Show, a ancient art form unique only to Hanoi. This blend of music and dance on water was the source of entertainment of villagers long ago. We then scatter to explore the city, Asia's oldest capital. Some go for massages and pedicures at prices that can't be resisted. Some shop for souvenirs while others have clothes tailor made for them. I have an embroidered silk dress cut to my body in 4 hours for \$45. We also visited the handicraft villages for bargains in art, ceramics and lacquerware. The currency is a great challenge for us as \$10,500 dong equals 65 cents. We felt like

millionaires yet it was disheartening to learn that the annual per capita income is just \$320! We tip generously throughout.

Vietnam's pulse is found in its cities whereas its decorous grace is found in its villages. We head out through the countryside for a full day cruise at Halong Bay. The air is fresh as we pass rice paddies, duck and prawn farms. It is rice harvest time and hundreds of rice farmers are bent over their ponds. Timid children wave as we drive by. We arrive at this natural UNESCO World Heritage Site and board our private wooden junk boat. Quietly we sail into a dreamscape that looks surreal. 3,000 islands of sheer limestone cliffs emerge from the emerald sea. There is a timeless, haunting quality to this scenery. Nat. Geo. calls it "magic in stone and water." We enjoy a seafood lunch with fresh caught crab and prawns. It's a perfect day in the sun for escapism and serenity.

The highlight of the trip for me was our group cyclo-tour through Old Hanoi on the last day. We turn a corner downtown to see 28 bicycle-rickshaws lined up to peddle us individually for an hour through the narrow scooter filled lanes of oncoming traffic. There are some near-misses at the red lights which are always ignored. We all laugh as locals stare. Terry at 6'4" is considered huge even in America. Here he looked like King Tut seated on a throne as his 90lb. driver peddles him effortlessly in line with our group. We later go our separate ways for independent exploration. After several hours, I found myself lost in an area of town with no taxis. I had to get back to join others for dinner. No choice but to hire a ride on a scooter. Dressed in a skirt with my arms full of bags, I mount the tiny seat and we're off. On the highway, I wrap my arms and legs around my driver like an octopus. He laughs the entire way to the Sheraton.

We fly back to Singapore for a good nights rest at the Le Meridian before our long flight home to Los Angeles via Tokyo. I reflect on another journey well done with new insights gained on history and cultures. It was like visiting two different planets within one vacation. The contrast of this trip is evident in our photos from the contemporary garden paradise of Singapore to the new renaissance of traditional Vietnam. This is certainly an Asian affair never to be forgotten.