

Commentary...

Travels in 21st century Vietnam

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Columnist

Vietnam. For many, it's more than just a place; it's an era. Vietnam affected the lives of an entire generation. Although I never actually set foot in the country until earlier this year, Vietnam forever changed my life. It changed — and even ended — the lives of others I knew.

My family has a history of military service: my father in World War II; his father in the National Guard during World War I; and two of my great-grandfathers fought in the Civil War. So, when I graduated from Oregon State University during the Vietnam War, there was no question in my mind that I would follow in their footsteps. As I always assumed I would, if the need arose, I did as my father had done in World War II and joined the U.S. Coast Guard.

As an unintended consequence, instead of pursuing a career in biological research as I had planned, I ended up making the Coast Guard my career. Most of that career was ashore; but I also served on two ships, both of which saw action in Vietnam — although not while I was on board. We had one three-month deployment off the Asian coast, but that was as close as I got.

So, it was primarily with historical curiosity that I approached our cruise ship visit to Vietnam earlier this year.

The Vietnam we saw

was a vibrant, prosperous, cheerful, unified nation under communist leadership — a scenario that we fruitlessly fought a war to prevent. I wondered how visiting Americans would be perceived, but our guide pointed out that the average age in Vietnam is 31, and only 12.8 percent of the population was even alive when the war ended. By way of comparison, I visited post-war Japan — in a military capacity — 25 years after World War II and was well-received throughout the country. By the time I visited Vietnam as a civilian tourist, that war was nearly 50 years in the rear-view mirror; so, I probably should not have been surprised.

Although the official name is now Ho Chi Minh City, our first stop is still often referred to as Saigon. An attractive, modern, clean city, Saigon has everything you'd expect in a modern city of 10 million people — impressive skyscrapers, nice parks, museums, McDonald's, Starbucks...

I found myself wondering what those who sacrificed their lives here 50 years ago would think of Vietnam today.

We visited Saigon at the start of the lunar new year celebration and were fortunate enough to be swallowed up in their elaborate downtown Flower Festival, which kicks off a week-long new year's party. The streets, some closed to traffic, were packed with festively dressed celebrants.

Entertainers, vendors, and families mingled with the enthusiasm of a never-ending parade of fashion, finery, and fun. Everyone was friendly toward us and didn't seem particularly curious about visitors.

The most notable aspect of vehicle traffic is that motorbikes outnumber cars probably 20 to 1, with eight million in Saigon alone. At stoplights, many intersections look like the mass starts of marathons, except the bunched-up competitors are on motorbikes.

Despite the fact that the Communists are the only political party, our guide said they have elections every four years "just for fun." The red national flag, with its central gold star, is seen everywhere, along with hammer and sickle party banners. We visited interesting museums and the "Reunification Palace," formerly the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace. Some visitors on private tours saw the "War Remnants Museum," but the cruise line doesn't like to take Americans there because they find it shocking to learn about the war from a Vietnamese perspective.

Our second port was Nha Trang, which is near the former U.S. bases at Cam Ranh Bay. The port has a modern new cruise ship terminal that cannot be used because a cable car tram to an island amusement park was subsequently built too low for ships to pass under!

The highlight of Nha Trang was a 2,000 year-old



PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

A typical Vietnamese marketplace.

Hindu temple site that now serves all of the country's religions. We also climbed 208 steps to the site of a giant Buddha statue seated on a lotus blossom. Later, we "enjoyed" a wild, bicycle-driven rickshaw ride through downtown traffic, where stoplights and traffic controls seemed to be mere suggestions.

Da Nang, the former site of another major U.S. base was an interesting two-day port call. Still present are the gigantic concrete-reinforced Air Force Quonset huts that were built to protect aircraft from mortar attacks originating in the nearby mountains. A friend of mine was stationed there during the war, and one of his vivid memories is of a metal casket bearing the body of a friend being shipped home. Some of those structures on

the old base are now in various commercial uses, but most have been abandoned to overgrown vegetation.

From there, we also visited Hue, near the so-called demilitarized zone, the former border between North and South Vietnam. Much of the fiercest fighting took place in this area. The scars of war are gone now, and access to the north has been made much easier by a new four-mile tunnel through the mountains.

Upon leaving Da Nang, we sailed north, toward Hanoi, into the Gulf of Tonkin, which lent its name to the precedent-setting U.S. Senate Resolution that gave President Lyndon Johnson sweeping war powers in 1964 and sank us deep into the Vietnam War.

Next: Hanoi, a half century later.

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