

A Sojourn in Central Vietnam

By Dr ChangTou Liang



It's hard to imagine that about 30 years ago, going to Vietnam for a holiday was unthinkable, almost something out of a fantasy novel. I remember in the movie *Back to the Future Part II*, Michael J Fox's character travelling into the future and doing a double take when he sees a poster at a travel agency advertising popular surfing spots in Vietnam. When I was serving National Service and undergoing the rigours of basic military training in 1984, Vietnam was the unseen enemy, all ready to invade and plant its version of communist ideology into the hearts of its neighbours.

Yet in the short space of 12 months, my family has made three visits to the former war torn communist state, now pulling itself into the 21st century as an

emerging new economy. Wherever you go, the scars of the American War (what we refer to as the Vietnam War) remain, in the form of victory monuments, wrecked carcasses of enemy military hardware, tunnels dug with bare hands in defiance against American bombing, and tens of thousands of gravestones. Soon you realise why the Stars and Stripes could never prevail against the hammer and sickle. It is that very spirit that has transformed once hostile foes into welcoming hosts for visitors from overseas. Nobody here will turn up their noses to the smell of dollars, whether American, Australian or Singaporean.

Skyscrapers sprout like mushrooms after the rain in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), formerly known as Saigon,

infamous for its nightmarish gridlocked traffic. Hanoi, the current capital, retains its old world charm, centred around its quaint but vibrant Old Quarter. The natural karst glories of Ha Long Bay and the underrated Perfume Pagoda are just a few hours away.

Our most recent escape took us to the historic central towns of Hue and Hoi An. Both are easy connections from the rapidly growing Danang City, and are serviced by regular flights from SilkAir and Vietnam Airlines that depart from Singapore and HCMC respectively.

Hue is the former capital of the Nguyen Dynasty, and the Imperial City, within a walled citadel, is its main attraction, located immediately north of the Perfume River. Sadly, most of its

A scene of the serene Hoi An riverside



buildings including the Purple Forbidden City have been destroyed by war, but whatever still stands or has been restored is a glorious reminder of a past age. Once past the city gates and massive Flag Tower is the imposing Ngo Mon Gate. The three-storey high edifice is akin to a scaled down version of the Noon Gate of Beijing's Forbidden City. It is nonetheless impressive. Imagine a scene where the Nguyen emperors once surveyed their domain with flotillas of river barges, battalions of elephants, horses, soldiers and serfs, the noise of which must have gratified the monarchs to no end. Retreat through any of the Imperial City's five gates, and a rarefied world closed to imperial subjects awaits beyond. The Thai Hoa Palace and its throne room may

appear a tad underwhelming until one realises it is only one of few structures left unscathed by American bombing during the 1968 Tet Offensive. A South Korean project to rebuild from scratch with authenticity and accuracy the Forbidden City is five years in waiting, said our English-speaking guide Mr Son.

The opulence of the The Mieu Temple and Hien Lam Pavilion also offer clues to the cloistered emperors' loss of touch with reality and impotence of governance. These factors led to the French colonialists taking over the country, and after WWII, the rise of communism.

The royal mausoleums are the other reason to visit Hue. The "Sons of Heaven" would take their legacies to

their graves, and when one witnesses the ridiculous and painstaking detail in which their mausoleums were conceived, the insecurities and self indulgence that gripped these mere mortals become apparent. We had the pleasure of basking in the megalomania of three of the best. The final resting places of the Nguyen emperors were a poetic reflection of their personalities, foibles and frailties, etched in a heady combination of stone, nature's endowments and feng shui. The powerful second emperor Minh Mang (who ruled from 1820 to 1841) had his mausoleum constructed in the configuration of his name. With allegories of sun, moon and lakes arranged around its symmetrical axis, the symbolism was palpable and visually appealing.



Hoi An's open marketplace

The dreamy and scholarly fourth emperor Tu Duc (1847-83), who saw his empire torn apart by internal strife and external forces, was the most introspective. All its buildings, fronted by frangipani trees, are named after some variation on the theme of humility. The penultimate emperor Khai Dinh (1916-25) was the most wildly creative. His small but grandiloquent mausoleum, set against a dramatic wooded hillside, is an intoxicating mix of Continental and Asian themes, with porcelain and stone making an emphatic but ultimately sickly sweet final statement.

South of Danang is the riverside town of Hoi An, once the hub of seafaring commerce, populated by mercantile visitors from China, Japan and South Asia. Today, it is a chic stopover for tourists and day-tripping visitors who linger and laze in its cafes, restaurants and wine bars, watching the world go by. The old town is centred on three parallel streets, closed to vehicular traffic, each

with its distinguished line up of ancestral homes, clan associations and incense-filled shrines. Pedestrians, bicycles and wrinkled street vendors in conical hats ply the streets. A Vietnamese Malacca would not be a farfetched description.

A walking tour would begin from the west at the Japanese Covered Bridge, so named because it was built by the Japanese community in the 17th century, and links two sides of the town separated by a creek. Trying to ignore the many colourful souvenir, art and craft, and tailor shops can be a challenge, so seeking refuge in an "ancient house" becomes the antidote and an introduction into Hoi An's cultural heart.

Some of these houses have become glorified boutiques themselves, but the Duc An House on Tran Phu Street remains refreshingly non-commercial. Its frontage

is an old herbal medicine shop, with multiple drawers each labelled in Chinese characters the remedy proffered by the good physician. Step inside and it is a functional home where a family of four resides today. Ancestral altars, mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture and wall hangings, singing birds in a quiet air well all provide breathing space from the frenetic activity outside.

Each Chinese dialect group in Hoi An is represented by its respective clan association house. If time permits only one visit, let it be the Phuc Kien



The Japanese Covered Bridge in Hoi An

(Hokkien) Clan House, the most impressive and spacious of the lot. A series of ornately designed archways and open courtyards lead into an inner sanctum temple, with its assortment of deities and ceilings of incense coils. The aroma is overpowering as is a sense of familiarity. This scene of reverence and worship is repeated all over Southeast Asia, even in Singapore today.

We spent three nights in Hoi An, but it was far from an indolent sojourn. There was time for an excursion to the 10th century Hindu Cham ruins at My Son (somewhat undistinguished compared with the glories of the Khmer temple complexes at Siem Reap), a boat cruise down the Thu Bon River, an international choral festival at the Cua Dai Beach Resort, and the *piece de resistance*, an alfresco dinner by the riverside. Nothing fancy: sampling local hawker fare of noodles in soup, ban xeo (Vietnamese popiah) and pork satay, cooked before your very eyes, while sitting on low stools was one of my most pleasurable memories of the trip. After coming back home and watching *The Quiet American* on DVD, we found Michael Caine's character having his dinner appointment at the exact same spot! A strange coincidence it might have been, but being at the right place and savouring the moment is part and parcel, and *raison d'être* of having a memorable holiday. **SMA**



The symmetry and grandeur of Emperor Minh Mang's mausoleum in Hue



The Phuc Kien (Hokkien) clan house in Hoi An



Contrary to popular myth and misconception, Dr Chang Tou Liang still practises full time as a family physician in private practice. Besides taking well earned breaks with his fellow family physician wife Janet during his son Shan Ming's school holidays to visit popular destinations in Southeast Asia, he also spends much time as the classical music reviewer for the *Straits Times*. From 1997 to last count, he has written just over a thousand review articles for the national daily. He is also an enthusiastic amateur pianist and photographer. You can find his blog *Pianomania* at: <http://pianofortephilia.blogspot.com>.