

13. Good evening, Viet Nam

(Day 21) My holiday has a week remaining, but today is the last full day of cycling. I am heading 100 kms north to Nha Trang, a beach resort and backpacker haven. I experience intermittent rain, sun and headwind but then see the most beautiful, complete rainbow I've ever encountered. Rainbows must be common here, as the morning sun shines at a perfect angle on the mist captured in the valley below the mountains -- atop which is the Central Highlands. Even locals are glancing at this rainbow which stays perfectly semi-circular for about 10 minutes before vanishing bit by bit into the enveloping mist. This is an exceptionally pretty part of QL 1, coconut-tree lined, away from population centers, with Cam Ranh Bay visible for a long stretch. This nice ride marks the end of this trip: 72 hours in the saddle, 1250 kms. The end of Proust is also in sight: just a hundred pages away.

(Day 22) Nha Trang is a water sports nirvana and a seafood eater's paradise as well. I had wanted to go deep sea diving, but unfortunately this is the storm season and diving will not resume until mid-January. I am here a few weeks before the tourist season begins; there are not many local or foreign tourists on the beaches or in the hotels and restaurants. Still, the line at the train station is longer than I am used to (a dozen people instead of just one or two). A lot of Vietnamese are traveling during this Christmas season; I am not able to book the particular train I want to take back to Ha Noi. Instead, book my second choice and must settle for a hard sleeper, as soft sleepers are all sold out. Fortunately, my foam sleeping mat will turn the wooden bed into a softer mattress. I am getting a taste of what it is like to travel in this country during the peak season; it is not a pleasant taste.

I have two days to kill before I take the train. One will be devoted to finishing M Proust (The story concludes in a resort named Balbec which, appropriately enough, is a sort of French equivalent of Nha Trang). The thing to do in Nha Trang, according to the guidebook, is to take a tour of the nearby islands with Mama Hanh's Green Hat Boat Tours. This turns out to be a full day of snorkeling and bathing in the South China Sea, between and during bouts of eating (a 20 course seafood banquet followed later by a tasting of several dozen different tropical fruits) and drinking. At one point each of us is kept afloat by a lifesaver as we drink Mulberry wine and waft in the ocean. Just what one might do in Balbec, if it were in Viet Nam, I suppose.

I do indeed complete (Day 23) the last of M Proust's 634 pages and am eager to proceed to the next volume when I return to southern China. During my week remaining in Viet Nam I will read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. Both of these are brilliant works; in hindsight Greene's short novel can be read as a prediction of American involvement in Indochina and as a prophesy of its inevitable defeat. With sad irony, the message he conveyed in the early 1950s was not heard by the architects of the failed American policy that was to come.

(Days 24, 25) Now it's the 31.5 hour train back to Ha Noi for a few days of tourism. As I mentioned, this train, which is called the S-6, was not my first choice in the schedule, as it

departs late in the evening (for me late is anything after dark) and arrives early in the morning. But it is the only train, other than the one that was fully booked, which goes through the Hai Van Pass during the day. It was night the previous two times I trained through the Pass; when I cycled it in May, cloud cover was so low that visibility was negligible. Today is clear; the ride offers spectacular vistas -- indeed, one of the most scenic train trips I have ever taken. As the S-6 with its 13 cars snakes around the mountain, I don't need to leave my bunk to see the ocean, the waves lapping the cliffs, as well as the intermediate valley that's layered in rice paddies, vegetable fields and bamboo growth. The ascent and descent of the mountain takes almost two hours, about the same time it requires on a bicycle. I cannot exactly see the main road, which I cycled in May; it is overhead somewhere, cut into the hills. Two other passenger trains have been relegated to the siding to let the S-6 pass; we seem to be trying to make up some time we lost last night. As we approach the second of these side-lined trains, our engineer toots his horn; his colleague in the other engine toots back. They continue to respond to each other's toots -- I don't know what the musical term for this back and forth noting is called -- to the delight of passengers. Whenever I stick my head out the window for the best view, I am noticed by the train personnel, who never miss a chance to smile back to me. The track through this wilderness is laced with railroad personnel; some hold up flags to halt intersecting traffic, of which there is of course none. Others, presumably the maintenance crew whose job it is to dejunglize the roadbed and right-of-way, seem to be on morning break. I suspect Vietnam Rail is not short of workers.

I arrive Hanoi 4 am Christmas morning (Day 26). Riding through Ha Noi's streets at this hour could be worse. In fact, it is worse at just about any other time of day or night -- when there's traffic, noise, fumes, urban decay and hazards. Now, however, the roads are empty, pleasant. I will spend the next four days here as a tourist, mostly as a pedestrian. For today I have booked via the Internet a trip to the Perfume Pagoda, one of Ha Noi's premier sights. The Pagoda is actually a set of temples in an isolated area, so isolated that the only way to get there is an hour rowboat ride, after a 2 hour mini-bus ride. The destination is worth all this travel time, however, just for the scenery. There is no place on earth quite like the landscape of northern Viet Nam or the China that abuts it. Verdant rocks the size of buildings pop up out of the water, just like in Guilin or Ha Long Bay.

The next two days are allotted for a must-do trip to Ha Long Bay, which lies east of Ha Noi. At this time of year the weather is apt to be lousy; fortunately it is fine. I say I *must* see this scenic spot in order that my friends in China will know that I have been to Viet Nam. Chinese who visit this country tend only to see Ha Long Bay; most don't even get to Ha Noi, much less to the southern part of the country. For me to visit Viet Nam, like I did last time, and not visit Ha Long Bay (again), well, no Chinese will deem my trip a worthwhile visit. I'm saving the last two photos in my camera for Ha Long Bay just to prove I have been here.

Ha Long Bay has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage landmark. It is the pinnacle of Viet Nam's natural beauty, and for this reason a tourist might want to save it for the end of a visit. I've seen a lot of natural beauty in my time; my cynicism causes me to take with a

grain of salt descriptive labels such as `breathtaking` and `marvelous,` which my guidebook bandies around. Ha Long Bay, however, deserves all the praise one can muster. It is a thousand Guilins, in its own way as beautiful as anywhere on earth.

My last full day in Ha Noi is devoted to three items. I disassemble and arrange the bike in its air travel bag. Second, I visit the Museum of Ethnology, one of the best of its kind in the world. During my trip to the Central Highlands, I saw very few Montagnards (highlanders or mountain people). I know these ethnic tribes exist; during my May trip their counterparts were very much in evidence in the northwest. But the Central Highlands is so developed, so urbanized, Vietnamized if you will, that the ethnic minorities seem invisible. To see them, one would have to go further afield from the cyclist's path. I go to the museum, and see what I missed a few weeks back.

My third stop is to pay my respects at the Maison Centrale, the former prison that was once inaffectionately called the Hanoi Hilton, where American soldiers once were held captive. Part of the prison has been preserved, the rest of the land redeveloped into a business center, Ha Noi Towers -- a not too subtle juxtaposition to indicate how Viet Nam is keeping a eye on the past as it looks to the future. This prison visit allows me in a personal, private way (there is no guestbook where I could jot down these thoughts) to reflect on how lucky I was not to have ended up here, or dead or injured, or in Viet Nam, or in the military at all two or three decades ago. As I stand here looking at the cells that once held Americans my age, I feel so lucky that I was not one of them -- men, who deservedly get my respect, caught up in a foreign policy, which does not deserve nor get my respect. Unfortunately, American foreign policy has been nothing if not consistent over my lifetime; it is just as wrong and as evil today as it was two decades ago. But this trip to Viet Nam has shown me hope. American foreign policy can be overcome. It can be survived. This small nation, like Chile that I visited last year at this time, has a bright future despite the destruction wrought by past American foreign policy. Today there is also hope for people in places like Cuba, Yugoslavia and Iraq and any country that produces a leader detested by American politicians -- foreign leaders whom American politicians choose to punish by inflicting pain onto their peoples. It is too bad wars can't be fought just between politicians.

I recommend Viet Nam as a place to visit, whether for bicycling, or tourism or reflection on the past, or just reading Proust. My next trip in two months will take me cycling through Morocco, Spain, France and bits of Switzerland and northern Italy. I suspect these places will be a bit different from Viet Nam, but just as enjoyable. Hope to hear from you soon.