



Club member Nathan Russo with 4 companions made a trip from Northern Thailand to Luang Prabang in Laos and then on to Ho Chi Minh (Saigon), Vietnam. He gave the following presentation to the Club showing numerous photographs during his narration (only a few are included here).

April 10, 2011

Luang Prabang, Laos to Saigon, Vietnam

Dangerous roads, CIA secret airbases, rough trains, beautiful beaches and a city full of beautiful parks-

Every since I first came to Thailand 5 years ago someone is always telling me about this fantastic place called Luang Prabang. Then last year I read a book called "The Ravens". This was a group of US Air force guys, who got rid of their uniforms and flew secretly as "Forward Air Controllers" in Laos to lead attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Since this area is only 200 miles east of Luang Prabang, what other reason did I need to visit this much talked about place.

There are many ways to get to Luang Prabang, by air with Bangkok Air (\$250 to \$400 r/t) depending on time of year or 2 day trip down the Mekong River from Huai Xai across from the Thai border town of Chiang Khong most easily reached from Chaingrai. There were five of us on this trip so we hired a minivan for 2,300 baht from Chaingrai one morning at 6am and arrived in Chiang Khong at 8:30 am. I had arranged everything with a company called Lanchang Easy Trip. I had met Khun Noi also known as Thakan on a previous trip to this area and she seemed to know all about the river trips and Luang Prabang - www.discoverylaos.com. We paid 1,650 baht per person which included crossing the river to catch the "slow boat" for the two day boat trip down the Mekong and one night's lodging at Pakbeng at a very basic guest house, the evening of the first day.

In retrospect it would have been better to have stayed at Chiang Khong the night before the river trip if for nothing else but to get up at a more reasonable hour. Also we could have found out the day before exactly where to meet Noi for the river crossing to Laos. We did eventually meet up with her in the morning after a couple of calls to her mobile. Whether you will be in Southeast Asia a week or 6 months, I cannot emphasize enough the value of having your own mobile phone number for instant access to help. Noi was a lot of help getting us down to the small ferry boat which transported our group and all the bags to the other side of the river without mishap - these are not the most stable boats around.

On the Laos side there were very many people all trying to get their \$35 visas at the same time. These 2 day riverboats only go on certain days to Luang Prabang so you need to check with a company like Easy Trip by telephone or when you are in Chiang Khong to find out exactly what days the boats go. These boats are about 15 ft wide and over 100 feet long and they are anything but cruising in the lap of luxury.

Kuhn Noi gave us the option of another type of boat for just 6 people but it was 6,000 baht per person for the two days but my friends did not want to go this route. In retrospect if I ever did this

trip again, other than flying into and out of Luang Prabang I would never do the 1,600 baht slow boat again.

You are told that the boat leaves at 10am but you will be lucky if the boat leaves at noon. Also you will be lucky if they only put 100 people on your boat- we had over 150 people on our boat with not an inch to spare. Everyone's bags go under the floor boards of the boat in no organized fashion. You should watch where they put your bags otherwise you may have a hard time finding them when the boat comes to shore. There is no real organization for getting the bags when the boat comes to shore - locals from the towns come aboard uninvited and carry off bags as soon as they come out from under the floor boards- I had to rush off the boat with my carryon bags to catch the guy who ran off with my bag. I have no idea where he was going. Once we had joined up ashore with our bags we headed for our guest house which was just up the street from where the boat came in so we did not have to carry the bags too far. Easy Trip also arranged the guest house at Pakbeng, Laos- the night stop. We had dinner at a restaurant a few feet from the guest house and went to bed early. We were told the boat would leave at 9am so we were aboard by 8:00 am to make sure we got a good seat but again the boat did not leave till 11am after squeezing even more people aboard than the day before.



The first day's trip was 8 hours and the 2nd day was no exception. We arrived at Luang Prabang about 7pm in the evening.

LUANG PRABANG

If you had been to Luang Prabang just 5 years ago, today you would not recognize the place - it now has every trapping possible for the tourist. There are massage salons everywhere and from my unofficial research, 60% of the hotels will cost you \$100 per night or more. That is saying a lot for a country that has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world. I have no idea who was staying at these high priced places or if they got big discounts but it was not our group. Yes you can still find nice \$25-\$45 guest houses but who knows for how long. I guess the place is just getting too popular, but I am not sure why. The town does have a lot of charm about it maintaining its heritage and the surrounding countryside is beautiful but not sure it is enough to make me want to endure 2 days of a rough river trip or expensive airplane ticket to get me there a 2nd time. If there was just an easier or cheaper way to get there.....

Our first night was at the Alounsavath guesthouse where we met the owner Khun Phonsiravan. We had made the reservation through Easy Trip and Khun Noi because I could not find any emails direct to any hotels in Luang Prabang. Now I have the cards to a few of the reasonably priced guest houses and it will be just as easy to make the reservations myself. The Alounsavath is a very clean guest house right on the Mekong River. The rooms cost \$35-\$45 per night depending on view and they have the basic amenities of TV, air conditioning and hot water. Breakfast is included and you eat breakfast at their outside area overlooking the Mekong River.

We may have stayed at another guest house after the first night if it were not for Khun Phonsiravan;

a woman who spoke perfect English, had lived in America for 10 years, had a green card to go back to America any time she wished and had a current California driver's license. She also knew everything there was to know about Luang Prabang and she could get us motorbikes in good condition to get around on, although quite a bit more expensive than Thailand or Vietnam at \$25 per day.

So what do you do when visiting Luang Prabang for 3 or 4 days? Well a lot of the things to do are 25-45 kilometers outside town, so the traveling in itself takes time- waterfalls and caves to visit and then of course like most rural areas in Southeast Asia there are a number of elephant camps and preserves where you can do a half day of riding elephants through the jungle. One camp even had a program where if you come early in the morning, you can go down to the river and help the mahouts' wash the elephants.



In the main part of the town, just walking through the small streets and allies will help you to absorb the culture - something new around every bend in the road. There are restaurants of every price range throughout the town. You can eat lunch and dinner for \$3 per person or \$35 per person. There are cooking schools/restaurants like Tamnak Lao where you get to make your own lunch or dinner learning as you go about the Lao cuisine for \$30(www.tamnaklao.net). Another cooking school is Tum Tum Cheng, where for \$30 you go out in the morning to the local market and pick up all your food and then return to the restaurant to learn the secrets of cooking Laotian food and then eat the fruit of your labors from 1-2pm. It might be something I will do if there is a 2nd trip. Other restaurants our group liked were the Blue Lagoon, Coconut Garden, Biblio Bistro, and voted the best bang for the buck in town by the group was Phousi Restaurant and Guesthouse next to the Royal Museum. The rooms here are just \$25 per night and are very nice accommodations and the cooking was excellent.

A few other guest houses you might want to try in the \$30-\$45 price range, just in case Alounsavath is full, are Oui's Guesthouse run by a very nice lady Khun Ot , Villa Somphong , and Riverside Guesthouse. All of these place are a few streets behind the Mekong River but face the Nam Khan river - Luang Prabang is surrounded by rivers. If you want something a little more upscale but not so much to break your pocketbook you might try the Villa Deux Rivieres - a little less than \$100 per night situated on the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers.

The Royal Museum, which was the family home of the Laotian monarchy before Laos became the People's Democratic Republic of Laos is a must see. There are also lots of temples around the town which make nice sightseeing while you are in Luang Prabang. One place which I found by accident while traveling through Luang Prabang with a new friend, Kao, was a small hillside restaurant in the middle of a stand of very large bamboo overlooking the Nam Khan river - it was called Dyen Sabai (www.dyen-sabai.jimdo.com). What a picturesque spot and the food and music set the perfect mood for a very restful afternoon. These people also operate another restaurant called La Pistoche that is probably quite unique for any place in Laos- a public swimming pool for \$2 entrance fee and at night from 6-8pm, depending on when it gets dark, first rate American and French films shown outside on a big screen. This place is located just outside of town at Ban Phong Pheng Village (about a \$1 tuk tuk ride).

I'm not sure when I will go back to Luang Prabang even though it was well worth seeing this first

time. My suggestion to those who have not been there is- get there quick before all the reasonable guest house rooms are gone and the place turns into a real tourist trap and loses all its charm.

On To Phonsavan - The CIA Hideout

After 3 days in Luang Prabang, we were ready to tackle another difficult leg of our itinerary - the road to Phonsavan and the Plain of Jars. This area of Laos, which during the American-Vietnamese war was the home of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, had more ordinance dropped on it than all the bombs dropped on Germany in WWII. It is no wonder that we found the locals here not quite as charming as those in Luang Prabang that got off almost scot free during the war.

Our host at Alounsavath had a cousin with a minivan who offered to take us to Phonsavan for a very reasonable \$120 (everyone else wanted \$200) . In retrospect it might have been too good to be true. The road to Phonsavan over the mountains from Luang Prabang might be mildly described as treacherous. Having read the book "The Ravens" by Christopher Robbins about the forward air controllers' secret American airbase in Laos during the Vietnam-American war, it was now very understandable why the communists did not quickly overrun any one particular town in Laos. The geological challenges of getting equipment and men into position to do any battle would be almost impossible - Phonsavan and the Plain des Jars was another story entirely different. My friend Werner who lived in a very mountainous area of Germany during the war and had been to the Alps said he had never seen so many hair pin turns in his life.



Our home in Phonsavan was a hotel called Mally. I learned about this hotel from one of the "Ravens" that I managed to contact after reading the book. He and a few friends had visited the area a few years ago and stayed at this hotel owned by Sousath Phetrasy, a former Colonel in the Pathet Lao communist army who were the enemy of the "Ravens". Like many former enemies, however, there seemed to be "mutual respect" for the bravery shown on the battlefield and as this one "Raven" explained to me Sousath was most hospitable to the group. So based on this information, this is where we stayed.

The downstairs area of the hotel is a museum/restaurant loaded full of war memorabilia. There are even bomb casings outside decorating the hotel as only a colonel in the communist army could do. Sad for the family, the colonel died two years ago, his daughter is a TV presenter in Vientiane and his wife would now like to sell the property.

Our experience in Phonsavan was much different from Luang Prabang. We went there with hopes that I would be able to go to Long Tien location of the secret airbase for the CIA during the war. What we learned when we arrived was, not only was this place very much off limits unless you went through a lot of paperwork and waited a few days for approval, but going anywhere in this area was tightly controlled. Unlike Luang Prabang where getting a motorbike without giving your license was possible, I could not rent a motorbike to save my life without forking over my passport, which I will not do anywhere in the world, let alone this place.

On the first day of touring with the driver from Luang Prabang even our driver got into a lot of

trouble because he did not have the proper kind of license to do business in this area of Laos. This put him in such a bad mood that he wanted more money to continue the tour for the day and when we refused he decided to take us back to the hotel. However, we did manage to see the Jars on the Plain of Jars. I had departed from the group prior to his making this decision to find a motorbike to do my own tour but ended up finding a 25 year old Hmong guy with a motorbike to take me on my own sightseeing trip. When I went back to the hotel to get a few things to go to the old provincial capital of Muang Khoune which, during the Vietnam-American war was called Xieng Khouang, Soudath's wife seemed very concerned for my safety. Even though I told her this guy was known to me from the internet, she said the local police could still give us some problems. Evidently it was not a normal thing to see Laotian people with foreigners riding on the back of their motorbikes. Also she said there was crime in the area by some of the poor people and the unwary traveler should watch themselves- she asked my new friend to make a copy of his ID for my safety and he agreed. She also suggested we go to the police to get their approval so we would have no problems along the 30 kilometer trip to the other town.

We did go to the police for permission explaining to them that I had known Oudomxay from the internet. They did not seem to be too impressed and maybe even disturbed since he was not a licensed tour operator in the area just like our driver from Luang Prabang. They asked to see my passport which I gave them. When they seemed to take an unduly amount of time looking through it, I told them I had changed my mind about the tour. I had to ask for my passport back a 2nd time before they gave it back to me. This area is definitely not as tourist friendly as Vientiane or Luang Prabang. And as far as I am concerned, the only reason to come here is to see remnants of the Vietnam-American war which are easier to see in a friendlier environment in Vietnam or to see the jars on the Plain of Jars.

As we left the police station, Oudomxay told me we would not have any problem with the local police this Saturday because the police in the town were off on the weekends - what a nice job. We then went to some war memorials honoring the communists who died during the war and then off to lunch at an out of the way restaurant.

Our conversation at lunch revolved about the current condition of the Hmong people in this area of Laos and stories his father told him about the war 35 years ago. He told me that all Hmong around the world were mourning the death of General Pao, who was the military leader of the Hmong resistance movement against the communists during the war. I did not know until he told me that General Pao had died in California earlier this year. Just 3 years before he had been indicted by an American federal grand jury for trying to export weapons to Hmong in Laos - he never gave up his aspirations to free Laos from communist control.

Over the Laotian mountains and crossing the border to Vietnam and Vinh

If you do get to Phonsavan make sure you know the days and times the bus goes to the Vietnamese coastal town of Vinh – it does not go every day and when it does, it is usually very early in the morning. Also make sure you buy the ticket the day before and that you have Kip (\$1=8,000 Kip). The ticket from Phonsavan, Laos to Vinh, Vietnam on the north central coast of Vietnam was just \$10 and the length of the trip was over 400 kilometers and took about 12 hours- it was slow going. The bus was not air conditioned so we were happy we were not traveling



at the hottest time of the year and for the most part the tops of mountains were all shrouded in the clouds. The scenery for the duration of this leg of the trip was spectacular with jagged mountain peaks, deep green valleys and terraced rice fields. Crossing the border into Vietnam at a mountain pass was an interesting experience. We had to get off the bus with all but our larger bags and check out of Laos which was fairly easy except for how to find the toilet. You then walk about 200 meters to the check in immigration building for Vietnam. There you turn in your passport, sit down and wait for them to call your name. Our bus was the only one there at that time and within a half an hour everyone had checked through immigration. Our bigger bags were brought into immigration and each person was asked if they had anything to declare before entering the country. Everyone got back on the bus and we were off once again. About one hour later we stopped in a very non-descript mountain town for lunch and a toilet break. I told Werner not to eat the vegetables that came with the soup but he could not resist - this was not a restaurant that would have gotten anyone's sanitary seal of approval. Werner was then sick for the next two days. A rule of thumb that I have tried to abide by when traveling in the countryside of SE Asia is- if it hasn't been boiled, fried or baked first - don't eat it.

After lunch within one hour we were out of the mountains and driving down Rt 7 in Vietnam in the middle of a huge plain with rice fields as far as the eye could see on both sides of the road. For the next six hours all the way to Vinh all you could see out the windows of the bus were people plowing fields with water buffalo and planting rice. The water buffalo is still the beast of burden in Vietnam - tractors are a distant third.

It was about 7pm and almost dark by the time we reached the bus station in Vinh. We were tired and hungry and the Lonely Planet guide did not offer much close by so we stayed at the Hai Café Guesthouse on a quiet street behind the bus station and we all agreed it was the worst place we had ever spent the night (not very sanitary conditions) with all kinds of stuff hanging down from the high ceilings. In the morning when we took a walk to find breakfast, less than 400 meters on the main road just down from the bus station we found a 3 star hotel catering to the Vietnamese and foreign business traveler - Thuong Hai - Vinh Hotel . We could have stayed here for just \$25 per night in an immaculate room with air conditioning, hot water, safety box and a buffet breakfast which was as good as any of us had ever eaten in Vietnam. We did have the buffet breakfast, which cost the amazing low price of \$2. So if you ever happen to be in Vinh, this is definitely the place to stay.

We had been to the train station the night before, but they said we could not buy a ticket for the noon train the following day until the morning; so after breakfast our cab driver from the day before (who spoke English) picked us up at the guesthouse and drove us to the train station to buy our tickets.

Vietnam Train Protocol 101 in Vietnamese language is not the easiest thing to learn in just a few minutes. If you don't communicate correctly you could wind up sitting on a wooden bench for 20 hours instead of sleeping on a soft mattress all night. Usually people will go to a travel agency to buy these train tickets but we did not have that luxury. The noon train was an SE7 train which was the worst class train. The SE1 and SE2 trains were the best class but they came much later in the evening and we wanted to arrive in Nha Trang the next morning. On each train, however, there are different classes of accommodation. There are sleeping cabin cars with 4 or 6 beds per cabin (with hard mattress or soft mattress), there are cars with bus style reclining seats with air conditioning, there are similar cars with just fans and then there is the lowest class car with just wooden benches. The key to getting the accommodation you want depends on where you get on

the train along the way from Hanoi to Saigon. The further south you get the less choice you have. We were about 450 kilometers south of Hanoi so our selection was not that great even though we tried to buy the best sleeping cabin accommodations possible. The five of us were split up into 3 different sleeping cabins and all the 4 berth cabins had been sold out. My berth was on level 3 a few inches from the ceiling and because it was so high up the air conditioning was almost non-existent. Thank god we were traveling at a cooler time of the year. I learned from my Saigon friends and a few people on the train that there is an on-line system, but it does not work well and the Vietnamese do not use it. If you have friends in Saigon or Hanoi or you have a travel agency there, they can buy the tickets in advance and they can have them for you when you arrive, but you will need to figure out how to pay for them. Also if you are boarding the train someplace between Hanoi or Saigon, then they will have to send them to you via courier service.

During the 20 hours we were on the train you could absorb the Vietnamese culture in a microcosm. There was every level of Vietnamese society on the train from college professors and bankers in training (whom I met) to simple country farmers. It seems like for the average Vietnamese person, the train is a mere necessity which most would like to do without if possible. It is not a fun experience. It is not a place to make new friends. It is just a way to get from point A to point B. On the other hand for us tourists it is a way to view for just a short period the lives of the Vietnamese people and an



excellent place from which to take pictures of the surrounding countryside. Because our train was the one with the lowest prices, we had many country folks on the train whose hygienic habits were not the same as let's say their city cousins. Also our train had many squat toilets, but there were some western style toilets but you had to find them. Two of the most interesting things I learned about Vietnamese train etiquette were 1) not everyone on the train had a ticket. Many really poor people who cannot even afford the lowest price ticket, get on the train by paying the conductor a small fee and then are allowed to stay in the lowest price car with the wooden benches. The people who have paid to sit on these wooden benches then must endure the freebies who sit between the benches on the floor or even in the isles themselves. Getting through this car on the way to the dining car was like running a gauntlet of human limbs- all in a day's work on the SE7 train. 2) The other interesting thing is what I call the Vietnamese grandmother syndrome. In Vietnam age still gets respected. Often an older Vietnamese woman will be in your cabin and she might be assigned a level 3 bed. But remember she is an older woman and can not climb to level 3 so easily. If she gets on the train before you, she might just fall asleep in your level 1 bed. I asked one of my Vietnamese friends why everyone on the train goes to bed in the middle of the day and their answer was - "the train ride is very boring, what else is there to do". I saw two situations where foreigners tried to get grandma to move and let's just say that the foreigner had to be satisfied with grandma's original berth on level 3. I asked several Vietnamese about what would happen if this happened to them and they said they probably would not ask grandma to move; they would just take whatever berth was open. When in Rome, live like the Romans.

For me the train was an insight to the lives of the Vietnamese people and how easily they accepted their tight living conditions without complaining or causing a fuss. I did make one new friend on the train and his name was Phoung, a civil engineer from Hanoi on his way to Phan Thiet near the resort town of Mui Ne to give a one week seminar at the local University. His English was excellent because he had lived in Australia for a few years where he got his doctorate.



The great thing about the train was that you could move around freely and you could pull the windows down outside the cabins and take great pictures of the countryside. I knew I would not be able to fall asleep on level 3 until I was really tired so I stayed up until they closed the dining car at 9pm and



then got out a book and read for a few hours sitting on a fold up chair someone had left at the end of my car. If you don't have too much to carry, a cheap fold up chair is great to bring on the train. You can put it any where and leave it on the train when you depart,

I finally went to sleep at midnight and got up about 6am in the morning. Our stop in Nha Trang was scheduled for 8am and it was pretty much on time. The train station is right in town so the ride to our hotel "Sea View" was very inexpensive. I had stayed at the Sea View 3 years before and Ms Linh and Ms Han were still there at the reception desk. This hotel is less than 50 meters from the beach in the heart of the city and the sea view rooms cost only \$25 per night and my room with no view was just \$12 per night. All of our rooms were clean, airy with air conditioning, TV and hot water and the staff could not have been nicer and most spoke excellent English. Their website seems nonexistent, but you can make reservation by sending email vnfullhouse@yahoo.com. Why they do not have an email representation of their name beats me, but their phone number is country code 84 583524333. If the Sea View is full, try across the street at the Blue Star where the rates and accommodations are similar - bluestarhotelnt@gmail.com. I discovered two other really nice hotels while I was in Nha Trang 1) Nha Trang Lodge Hotel overlooking the beach where even the \$60 standard rooms had a balcony with a beautiful view of the sea (stayed here one night); the room had all the amenities you could expect from a 3-4 star property, 2) if you want a step up from this standard you can stay at Nha Trang's only 5 Star Hotel, Sunrise Nha Trang. Here the standard rooms start at about \$125 per night, but they are spectacular as is everything else about this hotel including the Seafood BBQ buffet for \$25 every Friday and Saturday evening.

There are enough things to do in Nha Trang to keep you busy for at least 4 days- lots of Pagodas to visit, Cham (indigenous people of Vietnam) ruins and temples everywhere, beautiful beaches, offshore excursions to islands for snorkeling or scuba diving and a visit to one of the premier entertainment facilities in Vietnam - Vinepearl. The Vinepearl is a mixture of amusement park, tropical resort and spectacular sea aquarium. It occupies a good area of a close by island. If you are not staying at the resort, the only way to get to the island is by a Swiss style gondola, similar to the ones that go up the mountain at ski resorts. The ride on the gondola going over the Nha Trang harbor gives you spectacular views of the city and the harbor below. It is very easy to spend an entire day at the resort which also has a great shopping plaza and wonderful restaurants throughout the property.



A few unique things which I especially enjoyed were a visit to the photo gallery of Long Thanh who is considered one of the most famous photo journalists in the country. His photos have appeared

in galleries all over the world www.longthanhart.com. While I was at the gallery, a Vietnamese TV station was doing a documentary on him and his work. Across the street from the gallery is a local restaurant that serves up the local Vietnamese dishes which are very tasty and very inexpensive. A very famous oil painting artist also resides in Nha Trang and his name is Tran Ha - 84 91 6861719 and email tran_ha20@yahoo.com. I wish he had a website, but he does not but when I looked him up on Google, this is the Tran Ha that I got <http://thehive.com/2009/09/01/model-elly-tran-ha-vietnamese-hot-girl/>. Not a bad website, but not my artist. His work has appeared in galleries all over the world. His studio is at #4 An Duong Vuong St, in Nha Trang. Call him to make sure he is open and if you can visit his gallery; you just might walk away with one of his pictures.

After 4 days in Nha Trang we were on our way to my favorite beach area in all of Vietnam- Mui Ne. This was my fourth visit to one of the nicest beaches to be found anywhere in SE Asia. It is in a unique topographical place in the country where the wind blows 365 days a year and even during the rainy season it does not rain very much - it is like a desert on the South China Sea. About 10 years ago somehow a decision was made by the upper echelons of the Vietnamese government that this would be Vietnam's first premier tourist beach area and it has lived up to its expectations every since. Luxury hotel operators from all over the world have come here to open exquisite properties with their Vietnamese partners. The nice thing about Mui Ne is that there are just as many moderately priced resorts as there are luxury resorts and in Mui Ne luxury does not necessarily mean luxury prices. During the high season from Dec 15 through April if you can afford \$100-\$120 per night, you can stay at The Bamboo Village, The Sailing Club or Blue Ocean Resort. These are 3 Star Hotels, but in my opinion have the quality of 4 star hotels. The Sailing Club may also have some rooms for less than \$100 per night. For hotels from \$50 to \$100 per night, there is a beautiful boutique hotel called Shades but there are also larger properties like Sun Sea Resort, Hawaii Beach Resort and Full Moon Beach Resort available for a similar price. There are less expensive hotels at Mui Ne, but most of these are not up to western standards. The rates are even lower if you visit Mui Ne after April 15.

There are so many good restaurants in Mui Ne adjacent to the hotels that you just have to go out and explore on your own. The restaurants offer as many different choices of western foods as they offer Vietnamese food. There are many Italian, German and Russian Restaurants- pizza is very popular in Vietnam. The Vietnamese restaurants I frequent every time I go to Mui Ne are Lam Tong very close to the Full Moon hotel and Hoa Phuong and Guava restaurants across the street and not far from Bamboo Village and Sailing Club. The Sailing Club itself has one of the best kitchens in all of Mui Ne. Whether you are looking for a juicy hamburger "American" style or a Vietnamese culinary treat, the Sailing Club will make you happy. And their manicured pool garden surroundings just add to the experience. On Saturdays many of the better hotels like Bamboo Village and Sailing Club have BBQ buffets - seafood and/or beef.

Night life is alive in Mui Ne with many discos and watering spots on and off the beach. These places are especially full at night during the times of the year when Mui Ne hosts world class sailing events for kite surfing, board sailing and small boat class championships. From December through March, the wind never stops blowing at Mui Ne and there is hardly a drop of rain. This coupled with the unique shape of Mui Ne beach with protection from the northeast waves in the winter makes this one of the top sailing venues in all of Asia. Be careful with your camera when the wind is blowing on the beach. Some sand got into my camera and the entire shutter mechanism would not work. Have no fear; the Vietnamese can fix almost anything for a fraction of the price in western countries. It took me and a friend over one hour to find the shop in Phan Thiet on a

Sunday, but in less than 2 hours I saw every part of the camera disassembled on the guys workbench, put back together and a month later and it is still working- price \$15.

It is so dry in this area of Vietnam that going inland as much as 10 kilometers, you will find nothing but sand dunes. Once outside of Mui Ne in the less developed areas, you can take a tour of these kinds of places where you would think you were in the middle of Saudi Arabia - the cost is just \$5 per person. There are also tours of Cham (indigenous people) ruins and hot springs you can take. Ta Cu Mountain also is an easy day tour from Mui Ne. It is a 700 meter mountain with access to the top of the mountain via ski gondola from Switzerland which takes about 15 minutes. Once you get off the gondola and walk up the mountain another 50 meters, you will see the largest reclining Buddha in all of Vietnam; completed before the end of the Vietnamese-American war - 49 meters in length. The gondola was built after the war ended.



The town of Phan Thiet itself, just 10 kilometers and a 7,000 dong bus ride from the Mui Ne resort area, also makes for an excellent half or full day excursion. It has an excellent market in the middle of town with lots of unique Vietnamese crafts to buy and also many inexpensive seafood restaurants along the Caty River which runs right through the middle of town. The Caty Hotel overlooking the river is the highest building in town with a rooftop restaurant. The food is excellent and at night you have a fairytale view of the town with its brightly lit bridges crossing the river.

Five or six full days is plenty of time to get the full Mui Ne experience complete with relax time by the pool or the beach, which we all really needed after the Laos part of the trip and the train ride down from Vinh to Nha Trang.

From Nha Trang to Phan Thiet and Phan Thiet back to Saigon we used one of the many tourist bus companies in Vietnam- two of the best known are Sinh Café aka The Sinh Tourist and Hanh Café which operate the Open Buses on the route from Hanoi to Saigon. As more and more tourists arrive in Vietnam, my personal experience is that the service of both of these companies has deteriorated; but you do not have much other choice vis-à-vis the reasonable price of the tickets. Minivan travel in Vietnam is getting more and more expensive because of the high price of petrol. If you have 4-6 people in your group however, it is a viable and more comfortable experience than the bus. Our own Sinh Café bus was really a minibus (25 passengers) and jammed to the gills with people and baggage and the air conditioning left a lot to be desired. Also we almost had to have a mutiny on the bus before we could get the driver to make a toilet stop.

It is a 5 hr trip from Mui Ne to Saigon and if you recognize your hotel while traveling along the streets of Saigon do what you can to get the bus to stop otherwise you will wind up on De Tam street, the main office for Sinh Café in Saigon, with yet an additional taxi ride to your hotel. Since it was a minibus, I managed to get the driver to stop right in front of my hotel- Thien Xuan. Me and my friends have been staying here for 3 years now and the place actually has improved with age. Yes the price has jumped from \$35-\$40 per night, but you now get a buffet breakfast on the 10th floor roof with beautiful views of the city. The rooms are small but never ever have I had a problem with hot water, air conditioning or the internet. And the best part of staying here (108 Le Than Ton St) is that you are in the geographic center of District 1, which is the geographic center of Saigon -

you can walk to everything although the average ride in District 1 is just 20,000 dong or \$1.

This presentation would take 2 hours if I were to tell you everything about Saigon that I know, so here I will just highlight a few of the attractions. You could easily spend one week in Saigon and not be bored, but try to spend at least 3 full days here. If you have more time, then you can explore the Mekong delta (full day or 2 days) or go to the Cu Chi tunnels - Viet Cong hideouts during the American-Vietnamese war which are located just outside the city limits. In the few minutes I have left for this presentation, I will give you what I think are some good places to stay, some excellent restaurants for lunch and dinner and some close-by attractions to visit.

Hotels Saigon

As I have said, for 3 years I have stayed at the Thien Xuan hotel in the middle of Saigon for just \$40 per night for 2 including breakfast in the morning. However its amenities are somewhat lacking. So if you need a swimming pool and a spectacular gourmet breakfast buffet, safe in your room, etc and you can afford \$80-\$120 a night, you can have a real treat by staying just across the street from Thien Xuan at Liberty Central or a 5 Star Hotel, the Rex made famous for all the journalists who stayed here during the American-Vietnamese war. These are all high season prices and all of these places offer discounts during the summer months.

Restaurants in Saigon

Saigon is like any other large commercial city in the world when it comes to restaurants. You could eat lunches and dinners out for months at different places that most of us would consider to be excellent meals- district one near your hotel has some of the best restaurants in town.

A couple of my favorite places for lunches is Cepage on Le Thanh Ton St in the Lancaster Building, upscale international, or Lemon Grass if you want Vietnamese upscale. For a quick fast lunch, there is an Italian food chain called Al Fresco's which is a favorite of the Saigon office workers or if you want eye candy with your lunch (only during the week) you could try the Number 5 Bar at 44 Pasteur St. This place calls itself a sports bar complete with big screen TVs and is well patronized by the expat community in Saigon. It offers some really good British and European meals at very reasonable prices and has a big variety of local and imported beers. Another reasonable place for breakfast outside your hotel for lunch and a favorite with the locals is the Creperie and Café on Han Thuyen, a small street off the circle that goes around Notre Dame church, which is one of the main tourist attractions in Saigon along with the Saigon post office across the street from it. If you are around the church on Saturday morning or afternoon, you will see many pre-nuptials doing their wedding pictures in various locations around the church.

For dinner out in Saigon your choices are limited only by your time and your pocketbook- there are restaurants for every price range. If you want a really good Vietnamese meal with the best bang for your buck in town and an upscale setting, you cannot go wrong by visiting Hoa Tuc on a cul de sac off Hai Ba Trung St across from the Hyatt Hotel. Two other restaurants on the same small street that are very popular with the locals are Bistro Lounge (French food) and Vasco (Spanish food). There are several inexpensive Vietnamese BBQ restaurants in town, but two that are very popular are Barbecue Garden (cook your own food on gas grill outside) just around the corner from Thien Xuan hotel and Quan Nuong on Than That Thiep St (very noisy place) where they cook the BBQ for you. Just downstairs from Quan Nuong is the posh Temple Club, which is a popular place for the Vietnamese businessman to take clients to dinner. On Pasteur, a few streets down the block

from Number 5 Bar is Quan An Ngon, probably the most popular family restaurant in Saigon for the Viet Q (returning Vietnamese). These are the expat Vietnamese who come back to Vietnam from time to time and they can take 10 people out for a fabulous traditional Vietnamese meal for less than \$100 including drinks. Because of the communist connection with Cuba, there are many Spanish themed restaurants in Saigon, but one of the most popular is La Habana on Cao Ba Quat St and if you want fine Italian cuisine, it's La Hostaria again on Le Thanh Ton or Basilico next to the Intercontinental Hotel. Also on Le Thanh Ton, a stone's throw from the Saigon River is hands down the best Sushi restaurant in Saigon - The Sushi Bar. There are four of these places in Saigon and any time you go here you will find Japanese expats munching down on Sushi and Sashimi. If it is good enough for them, it is good enough for me. And if buffets are your style, the lunch buffet at the Intercontinental Hotel (\$25) or the dinner buffet at the Caravelle Hotel can not be surpassed for quality and variety. You will not have to eat for a week after you've eaten at either of these places.

Saigon Attractions

The three attractions in my opinion not to miss are 1) Reunification Palace which was the headquarters for the South Vietnamese Government, 2) War Museum and 3) for \$10 you can take an elevator ride up the tallest building in Vietnam to the 48th floor of the Bitexco Financial Tower - the views are spectacular on a clear day. Eventually they told us that on the 49th floor there would be a very nice restaurant and if you ate there, the elevator ride would be free.



There are many other sites to take in just a short walk from your hotel in District 1 including Notre Dame church and the Saigon post office opposite it, as mentioned before, and don't miss spending some time at the Ben Thanh market which lies on a big traffic circle between Le Loi and Le Thanh Ton streets. Anything you can find anywhere in Vietnam, you can find at this market. While traveling around Vietnam, unless you think something is so unique you must have it.... wait till you go to Ben Thanh and buy it there even cheaper. Even though locals and tourists alike shop at Ben Thanh, the wealthier segments of the Saigon community now have 3 upscale shopping malls to visit and they are all in District 1. The newest is called Vincom and looks a lot like Central Festival and is across from the oldest mall called Parkson. Another mall not far from both of these, is Diamond Plaza. A trip to these malls and all their trappings will give you further insight into the modern lives of the Saigon population.

As you might have guessed from this presentation I like Vietnam a lot and starting this year will probably split my time in Asia between Thailand and Vietnam. In fact to get away from the madness of Songkran in Pattaya, I will go to Saigon to visit friends from April 14 to April 20th before returning to USA on May 1.

Thank you for coming to listen to the presentation today and please feel free to ask some questions which I may or may not have answers to.