

12 Home

Last minute preparations and phone calls, including one to GRJ, which reveals that I should have received a ticket. Eventually it is emailed to me and I print it out. Gordon and Ann have arrived at Audrey's and I join them with Helen and Val for a drink, but not food as I plan to go to bed early. Which I do at about nine, for a predictably poor night, getting up at five.

13 November Home to Hanoi

I have a pot of coffee.

Malcolm arrives at five to six to take me to Heathrow. It's still mild and the roads are reasonably quiet and we arrive soon after 6.30. The check in is open at seven for the eleven am flight and I am third in line, and so have little time to wait. Security is equally speedy. I get my bottle of water cheaper by buying a telegraph and getting the water free!

There is plenty of time for breakfast at Dining Street, with porridge and 'English Rarebit', followed by some reading and downloading a TV programme. After a visit to the observation platform it is time to go to the gate. The plane is full but boarding is efficient, and the plane is quite new and comfortable (Dreamliner).

On board I listen to a lot of podcasts and some music, keeping an eye on the better than average maps on the seat back screen. Lunch/supper arrives about two hours after take off, with chocolate cake, vodka and tonic, red wine. No sleep.

Saturday 14 Hanoi

Breakfast is two hours before landing (ie 3.15 Vietnam, 10.15pm UK). Yogurt, fruit, spicy beef and noodles.

Immigration is fast and efficient, but the luggage takes nearly an hour to arrive. My guide and driver are waiting and the drive into town takes about a half hour. I check into my day room, and after a shower have a reasonable second breakfast. I have a short walk around the local street to get some cash from the ATM (second time lucky). I get 1.5 million dong, which is about £60 and stamps for postcards from the GPO; 12k. The temperature is such (about 22) that I don't need a jacket. I also fiend the cathedral which is large but mostly concrete, and after a short look around resolve to go back with the camera.

After sorting myself out and a rest in the room for an hour or so I am back out at about 11.30, but don't feel the need for food after the two breakfasts. I walk to the local lake and by a meandering route through the old city with lots of shops, both for locals and tourists, and cafes, including many on the pavements. The cathedral is closed for the lunch break. There are also a lot of motorbikes and motor scooters. The maps in the guide book are rather better than the one supplied by the hotel, although both have their misleading moments. I get as far as the west lake with a spectacular pagoda. The weather is humid with thick cloud, and the view over the lake is limited, and the water is rather smelly.

I take a rather more direct route back passing the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum, which is protected by wide pavements which no one can use, and plenty of guards. I get back to the hotel about five as it is getting dark, and have time for another rest and another shower, before checking out at 8.30 in time to meet my guide, Nana, at 8.45. It's a short car ride to the station, where I get some biscuits, and then onto the train where I have a four berth compartment to myself along with four bottles of water, toiletries and instant coffee. The compartment is comfortable with proper bedding, plenty of lights, power sockets and AC. Nana is travelling on the same train, but I suspect in less comfort.

It's a bit noisy with jointed track and someone coughing in the next compartment, but the earplugs deal with the noise and I have a decent night until about 5.30.

Sunday 15 Sapa Hotel Victoria

We get to Lao Cai at 6.30 to dry but overcast morning. We walk to a restaurant near to the station and I have a fairly basic breakfast of chicken noodle soup, a cup of coffee, diluted juice and an orange.

We soon meet the driver and are under way up the winding, but good, road to Bac Ha for its extensive market. It takes about an hour and a half to reach the 1000m small town. There are plenty of people around including local women in their colourful costumes. There are lots of vegetables, meats, animals and birds and souvenirs. After walking around we stop for a cup of very strong, good Vietnamese coffee. Then it is a walk for about an hour along a road into the country, past farms and houses. The driver picks us up and takes us back to another restaurant for a decent meal of pumpkin soup, spring rolls, cabbage, lumps of beef in a broth and a piece of watermelon. I have a bottle of beer for 35 000.

The car takes us back down the road to Lao Cai, stopping for some photographs. After crossing the Red River we join the main road snaking up the other side to Laos, and we leave it at Sapa at 1650m and get to the hotel just before four. The room is comfortable with a bath and shower, and soon I am doing laundry and having a bath listening to the Goldberg Variations. At six I have my dinner in lonely splendour, with more pumpkin soup, trout rillettes with watercress salad, chicken with sweet potatoes and Tiramisu 'with passion'. After a walk around the town I am back in my room by 7.30. I opt for an early night after HC, but it's rather warm (23°) with no AC and only a fan; an episodic night.

Monday 16 Sapa Hotel Victoria

Up at 6.15, bath and to breakfast at 7.15. All the usual items on the buffet, plus congee.

I meet Nana at nine, but the driver is delayed by an early job. After a few photographs near to the hotel we walk down the steps to meet him in the square. After a short drive, we walk through a touristy village (Cat Cat) and down a lot of steps to the river and a waterfall. The views are very good with some sun, mist, clouds and just a few spots. Then we walk up the other side. There are houses to visit, weaving and several examples of a water powered rice pestle and mortar. The car picks us up for the short ride into town to the Gecko restaurant for an early lunch of potato and bacon (gecko) soup, veg spring rolls and tea.

At 12.30 we drive down into the valley for another walk. It's about three and a half hours of gentle walking almost completely downhill, following the river along tracks and good paths. There are plenty of other people, more especially as the afternoon progresses. We pass through the villages of Lao Chai and Ta Van. The weather gets better and better with some warm sunshine, and there are good views of the hills and their terraced sides. Half way along we stop for a drink; I have ginger tea. The car picks us up and as we return up the road there are two stops for views. As everywhere there are plenty of locals selling trinkets.

Back at the hotel there is time for a bath and change before Nana picks me up and we walk around the corner to the Red Dao House for supper. I ordered it for 5.30 before the groups arrive and I get a good meal: Sapa soup (bacon and potato), sweet potato 'rissoles' with papaya salad, pork with rice and aubergine and fruit. A glass of red costs me \$6.

Back for an early night but virtually no sleep.

Tuesday 17 Sapa Hotel Victoria

Up at 6.30, bath and breakfast at seven. It's a sunny, windy day.

I pay my 70k to enter the Ham Rong park. It's a bit too cute for my liking, but the limestone formations are interesting, and there are some good views, including Fan Si Pan, the highest mountain in Indochina. And it's got free WCs!

Back to the room for reading and packing. I check out and meet Nana at twelve and we walk to the Calico restaurant leaving bags at the hotel for the driver to pick up. The Calico is owned by the same people as last night's, and the food is much the same. I have Sapa soup, a spring roll with salad, chicken, veg, rice and fruit, with a glass of Watermelon juice.

We leave at 1.30 for a short drive, and the afternoon is taken up by a couple of village (Ma Tra and Ta Phin) walks in the sun with very good visibility, although the wind picks up. We visit one house with a modest home stay, and end up at another which is much more sophisticated and drink tea. Then it is the hour's drive to Lao Cai, stopping at a monastery which was destroyed in the upheavals following the defeat of the French.

Supper is in the same restaurant where I had breakfast on Sunday, and is better but not up to the standard of the meals that I have had in the last few days. I sit in the restaurant till 8.15, then for a while in the departure lounge, and eventually in the fine train where I have a comfortable two bed compartment (comfortable but noisy). We leave soon after nine. I have a gin and tonic with a couple of other Englishmen, but no one is eating.

Wednesday 18 Hanoi Hotel Melia

The train arrives at 5.15 and we get to the hotel free a short transfer. The room isn't until nine but I can have a shower in the spa, followed by breakfast ('pants' in British and American English leads to an embarrassing misunderstanding). The latter turns out to be chargeable, but it's waived when the misunderstanding is explained. GRJ arrives, and I go out for a walk, but people are thrown out of the Cathedral even though the notice says that it is open. Back at the hotel I get into

my room, but the bath tap doesn't work, and so maintainence. When I see my trousers I see what the American was talking about. I try washing them but it's something tarry on the seat. Surely things must get better.

They do, and the rest of the day is fine. I spend the morning resting and doing more laundry, which dries well in the climate.

We meet at one for our Hanoi sightseeing with a mixture of coach, walking and cyclo. The weather is warm and humid, and when the sun comes out it feels very warm and strong. We walk past the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum, but it isn't open, the one pillared pagoda, the Temple of Literature and such. At the latter there are many prospective students celebrating with lots of photos in their gowns. The cyclo ride is through the old city, and I get a wave from the couple that I saw on the train last night.

Back to the hotel for a rest, and out at 6.30 for dinner, at the Wild Rice restaurant, which provides a good meal with lots of bits and pieces. Two million Dong on the return and bed at nine, after a hot chocolate, for a good night.

Thursday 19 Hanoi to Ha Long

Up at 5.30 for breakfast at six; I'm the first there, and enjoy a good meal. We are due to leave at eight but it is more like 8.30 by the time the bags are sorted out and put on the truck that is taking them ahead of us. The journey to Ha Long takes about three hours and is partly spoiled by the over amplified rantings of tour guide Ha about his childhood and family. Half way we stop for industrial scale WCs, workshops and shops. Towards the end of journey the mountains are in sight, as is the railway line, but apparently only serves freight, and the trains were 'as slow as cycling'. At the port there is a lot of building of hotels, and a lot of boats lined up for the cruise. Ours is for just our party and proves to be comfortable with two decks of cabins (en suite with AC), restaurant and a sun deck on top. After a 'welcome drink', and time to settle into cafe there is a good buffet lunch.

I spend the afternoon relaxing, taking lots of photos of the wonderful scenery: lots of karst islands. Others go off on various side trips in small boats and swimming. Supper is served at 7.15 and again is good with five courses including sea bass, although I share a table with two rather dull couples.

To bed at nine for a good night until three when I doze until about five when the light starts outside. It has been raining, and there are plenty of clouds but a break to see the sun rising.

Friday 20 Ha Long and overnight train

The morning passes gently with a mixture of weather, but no rain. Breakfast is at seven with coffee, cereal, fruit, croissants and brunch is at nine thirty with the above plus all sorts of cooked dishes. We sail around the bay and back to the port between 10.30 and eleven. When the bags have been loaded on to the truck for transport to Hanoi, we are underway on the coach, with plenty of time and it seems that sometimes the stops are to pass the time. The first is to see the entry to some of the underground hiding places, and a village for singing, dancing and refreshments. The next is the same place as yesterday and the third at a supermarket in the suburbs of Hanoi.

I elect not to have meal that is optional (\$18), but it turns out to be at the same restaurant around the corner from the Melia that I planned to go to; I had my own choice around the corner from the party with a couple who also didn't want the full meal. At 7.10 we transfer to the station, and are soon installed on the train for the 8.10 departure. I am in my four bunk compartment.

Saturday 21 Hue Hotel Indochine

A poor night with a lot of jolting, and rather too warm. The breakfast box that we were given is inventive with boiled egg, roll, croissant, banana, satsuma, muesli, cartons of milk and juice, tea and coffee sachets.

It's a pleasant journey as the light gets brighter with lots of paddy fields and villages and the hills not far away to the west on the Laos border. We get to Hué about an hour late at 9.45, and have the short transfer to the hotel for which La has arranged an early check in, and so we can go straight to our rooms after the usual welcome drink.

It's a good large room with a balcony, but shower. I elect not to go with the group for lunch but to Mr Cu's Mandarin cafe for a tasty lunch of Spring Rolls, stir fried pork and vegetables with a glass of Watermelon juice, and I get some of the postcards produced from his own photos. It's warm and sunny on the walk back to the hotel, but the clouds develop for a cooler grey afternoon with some rain.

We set off on the bus to the river, for a short boat ride to the pagoda. It's damp and there is a little half hearted rain. After looking around the extensive grounds we get the bus to the Forbidden Citadel which is of the same format as the Forbidden City in Beijing, but in much worse state of repair. A lot was destroyed during the war, and reconstruction is slow. Again damp and grey.

Back to the hotel for rest and then out for dinner. This involves a 'surprise', which after a bus and minibus ride to an open air restaurant involves dressing up as mandarins, temporarily, and parading around the garden. But the food is good although it's a late night getting back to the hotel around ten.

Sunday 22 Hué to Hoi An Anantara Resort

After a reasonable night until five, I'm up for breakfast at six, by myself, with an excellent buffet. After organising my bags (main luggage goes ahead), I have time to walk around to the modern Catholic Church before our departure at eight. I like the church, and people are arriving and preparing for mass, whilst others are preparing and eating breakfast on the pavements.

There is coach transfer back to the station for the train at nine. A lot of people get off, but the coach is filled up with others getting on. Although it is only a short ride, the journey talks to and a half hours along the beautiful coastline. We get off at Da Nang, with a steam loco outside the station, for a coach to an upmarket supermarket and then to the marble mountains. They are not what I expected; some limestone hills with lots of steps and caves and temples, but also some good views of the rampant resort development and the large town. It's warm, humid and sunny.

It takes about half an hour to drive to Hoi An where a warm welcome is awaiting us with the ever present welcome drink. Another comfortable room, this time on the ground floor with a terrace overlooking the pool. I take some laundry to Ha's recommended Number One, and do more in the room for tomorrow. After organising myself and a rest, there is time for a walk along the river and through the town at sunset for photographs.

Back for a shower and another good meal at 7.30. Back in the room the AC is efficient and the night is not too bad, although with a nightmare of being in a play without having learned my lines.

Monday 23 Hoi An Anantara Resort

Up at six for a shower before breakfast at 6.30 on the balcony overlooking the river, with another excellent buffet, and my first view of a router mounted on a palm tree. The sun is shining, but the clouds gather and there is heavy rainfall as I sit on the terrace outside my room.

At nine we set out for a walking tour, which inevitably slow and there are visits to shops and workshops as well as two temples and a house, again with retail opportunities. We have chance for a morning drink at the Tom Tom cafe, before returning to the hotel to pick up those who didn't do the tour, but who wanted to join us for lunch. This is at the silk centre and it's OK with time of course to look around and spend. Back to the hotel for a rest, and then out for a walk downstream along the river and then the road through the fields, with one invitation to enter a house among the fields. Back in time before it gets dark. I collect my laundry (150k) and the lady says that she has got out the stains. Some puzzles and an early bed for a reasonable night.

Tuesday 24 Hoi An to Nha Trang Novotel

Up at 5.30 for packing and a shower before breakfast at 6.30. Then there is a pleasant couple of hours reading and puzzles on the terrace before leaving at 9.30 when we are waved away by the woman at the Number One laundry; she must have done well by us.

By now there is strong, hot sun. We have two stops in Da Nang: for a marble factory and pictures of the Dragon Bridge. There is time at the station to download The Times. We depart on time on the train is much the same as last time but the journey is much longer from 11.41 to 21.21. The scenery is not dramatic but lots of farming countryside with some hills and woods. We have a packet lunch with rolls, yoghurt, banana and pineapple.

As we head south the weather clouds over and there are heavy showers. The last four hours is in the dark. The busy city of Dha Nang is warm and humid, and the coach ride to the hotel is just ten minutes. We soon have our keys and very soon are eating a reasonable buffet. I get to bed at about 10.30, for a reasonable night.

Wednesday 25 Nha Trang Novotel

The room is comfortable with a large balcony overlooking the sea, but noisy with a busy road immediately below. The wifi is particularly efficient. I have breakfast at seven but not as peacefully as yesterday.

There are rain showers, and temperatures in the middle twenties. I spend most of the morning on the balcony, and go to a small restaurant of lunch. Two recommended in the guide have disappeared, but Truc Linh 2 yields a decent meal of fried spring rolls, chicken with ginger and rice and a beer.

In the afternoon I take a walk to the cathedral, station, Long Son Pagoda and through the commercial town, returning in heavy rain. I take a pot of tea in the lobby with one of the couples before having a snack supper in the room. Big bags are out at 7.30pm for overnight transport to Saigon (limitations of commercial vehicles in the city centre). I slip in the shower, bashing my back. Bed at night for a reasonable night.

Thursday 26 Nha Trang Novotel to Saigon Grand Hotel

Up at 5.30 for a small breakfast at six, and a turn outside. The weather is much brighter with warm sun. I have to return to my room to collect the hat and we leave soon after eight to catch the 8.35 train, which is on time, as ever. The accommodation is the same as the last one.

For the first half I have a woman next to me who wants the curtains drawn. We have a very sparse packed lunch from the hotel. For the second part I have a Vietnamese Air Traffic Controller next and we have a substantial conversation, including his comments about the government. We get to Sai Gon soon after four, where the weather is warm and sunny. It takes us a quarter of an hour to the hotel, and we are soon settled into the comfortable, if rather packed, rooms.

I go out to one of the restaurants recommended by the guide, across the road, the Hoang Yen, which proves to be good, but rather more expensive than the book suggests. I have chicken with ginger, fried Spring rolls, aubergines and a glass of red for 500k.

A decent night.

Friday 27 Saigon Grand Hotel

A good breakfast at six, although Viennoiserie are not so good as at the last place, and a stroll down to and along the river. It is extremely busy and the air is very bad. The sun is shining as it does all day.

At eight we leave for the shortish but very slow drive to the underground tunnels, firstly through the clogged suburbs and then countryside. It's an interesting visit, but I'm not sure that it is worth the time taken. The return doesn't quite so long, and we are back for our lunch, which is reasonable, soon after two. I leave the groups to visit the cathedral, but it is very noisy and one is only allowed into a little bit at the west end.

When I get back I find that I had left the do not disturb sign on and so the room wasn't cleaned, and more importantly, no new bottles of water. That is soon settled, and I have a quiet evening followed by a reasonable night.

Saturday 28 Saigon to Can Tho Victoria Resort

Up, breakfast, and away at eight. The coach takes a couple of hours into the delta to Cai Be, where we get onto a boat for a sail along the river. There are fruits on board to try, including bananas, rambutan and longan. I decline the possibility of the rowing boat through the narrow backwaters, and sail around to meet the others at the far end. Then it is along a fairly narrow passage, almost grounding as the tide is out, and then the propeller gets mixed up with plastic bags. A man in the river frees us and we get under way.

There are various stops for lunch, good, in the open under a palm roof. The dishes include elephant ear fish. Also there is a stop to view the making of sweets from rice, with a large garden, including lots of orchids. The boat then takes across the river to Vinh Long where the coach picks us up for the hour's journey to Can Tho, the big city of the Delta. We stay at the Victoria resort, belonging to the same group as the one at Sa Pa, and just as good with large grounds and facing the river.

After a shower I talk a stroll along the river side for the sunset and flowers. I have a couple of gin and tonics (happy hour) with the Scots couple, and later it is time for supper. It turns out to eat another good Vietnamese meal rather than the European promised, and I have enough Dongs of a glass of red.

To bed at 9.30 for a reasonable night.

Sunday 29 Can Tho to Phnom Penh Sunway Hotel

I decline the early trip to the flowing market in favour of a leisurely breakfast outside facing the river. The croissants aren't as good as in Saigon, but there's some good fruit. After a group photo, we leave at about 8.15, on two speedboats, each taking about twenty people. It's rather noisy, but comfortable and the hours pass pleasantly enough, with podcasts (the noise reduction is useful), photos and reading. The scenery is OK, but the land is very flat.

After about four hours we stop at the Victoria at Chau Doc, just before the border, which supplies us with a good lunch in the restaurant overlooking the river. Then it's back onto the boats for the short ride to the Vietnamese Immigration where get off, sit around and get back on. At the Cambodian equivalent we are waived through. Then it is non-stop to Phnom Penh which we reach at about 6.15 in the dark having seen a good sunset over the river banks.

After a quarter of an hour the luggage is assembled and we are in the coach for the short ride to the hotel. It's good to get out of the very humid and warm night; it's a shame that the luggage takes a long time to get to the rooms and several of us go to the buffet dinner (modest) while we are waiting.

Back in the room I do some laundry and have a bath. The AC is not as good as some, but I get a reasonable night, after starting the Val McDermid book that I bought in Nha Trang.

Monday 30 Phnom Penh Sunway Hotel

I get up at 6.30 for a modest breakfast. The Viennoisserie are very good as is the fruit. Back in the room I have a leisurely bath and get up to date with emails, before venturing out.

It's sunny and about 32°. First I go to the station which has been refurbished, and has a passenger train parked inside. The security man says that services will start next year. Then I take in the Art Deco central market, which is largely clothes and jewelry. And so back to the hotel to cool down.

At about 11.30 I set out again for lunch. This time it is along the riverside past the jetty where we landed yesterday. Then I head inland to the Friends restaurant, where, surprise, the groups has settled in and so I join them for my lunch, which is as good as ever. I hitch a lift to the 'Russian' market which I look around for a while and then make my gentle way back. It's hot though, and my ankle stops me from walking quickly. But I get back before five, taking a turn around Wat Penh.

There is time for a bath and a cool before we set out at 7.30 to the Foreign Correspondents' Club for a very modest meal, although the surroundings are interesting: lots of places to sit and drink, take in the views, watch people and look at the interesting photos on the walls. There's a thunderstorm, and we get back at 10.30. A short but reasonable night until 4.15.

Tuesday December 1 Phnom Penh to Siem Riep Angkor Palace Hotel

Up a five for breakfast at six and packing. Eric joins me for breakfast, and I cool down in the room before leaving at 7.30.

I am sitting on the back seat of the coach which turns out to mean sitting on the engine, and it gets very warm; otherwise the journey is just what I remember from last time with stops at food stalls, and some unsurfaced sections which are very uneven and slow. We get to Siem Riep about two or a late lunch which turns out to be modest. It takes a long time to get going, but that turns out to be a good thing as we get to the first of the temples in the last afternoon light approaching sunset.

We get to the hotel at about six, welcomed into the lobby to loud pop music, scarf and 'welcome drink'. The hotel has been changed; apparently there was a problem with the fire alarms in the Borei. Dinner is not scheduled until after 8.30 and so I stay in the hotel for laundry and an early night, which proves decent.

Wednesday 2 Siem Riep Angkor Palace Hotel

Up at 5.45 for a bath and breakfast soon after six. Officially it doesn't start until 6.30 but plenty is ready to start, and it proves good.

We leave at 7.30, to a clear blue sky with a forecast of 34°, on a fleet of tuk tuks. It's a comfortable way to get to the site, with a welcome breeze. We tour the site with

lots of stops, finishing the morning at Angkor Wat. Then it is the tuk tuk ride back into town to a spice shop, with free tea to encourage shoppers, followed by a reasonable lunch.

I spend the afternoon in the hotel. We go to a restaurant with 'traditional dance' but the music is very loud, and there are plenty of insects around.

Back at nine for anti histamine and bed, for a reasonable night until 4.30.

Thursday 3 Siem Riep to home

It's another warm (34°) with strong sun. It's good to have a leisurely morning with a very a very protracted breakfast in the garden, followed by a vey relaxed morning in the room. Lunch with some of the others in the hotel restaurant.

A shower at the spa at five, plus travelling clothes and departure for the short ride to the airport.

1.5 hours to Ha Noi with a meal and beer, a couple of hours at Ha Noi, and 13.5 hours to London, where Malcolm and Elaine meet me.