

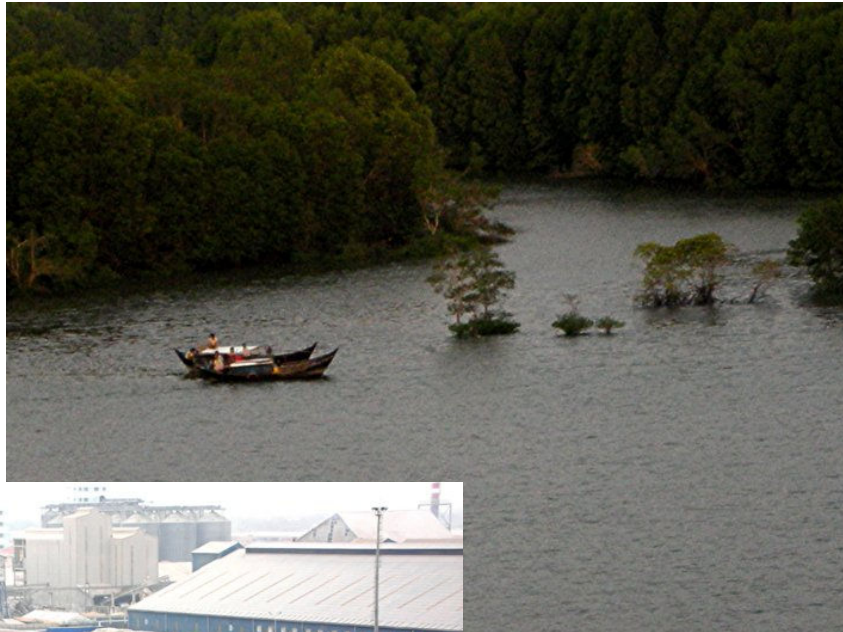
3/9/07 Day 53– Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) – Friday - 9 March 2007: **Update on passenger needing medical evacuation on Day 30 – 2/14/07.** Gayle talked to the dining room table mates of the passenger evacuated by helicopter on 14 February. She learned that they received email from Joy, the evacuated person. Joy spent a week in the Sydney, Australia hospital where the internal bleeding was stopped and she finally recovered enough strength to return home to Florida with her husband, Larry. She was doing fine when the email was written.

Now, on to southern Vietnam. We were originally scheduled to anchor in the harbor at Vung Tau, Vietnam but because of some conflicts in scheduling the ship was docked at the pier in Phu My (pronounced Foo May). We were happy about the change because with the new arrangement we did not have to use the ship's tender boats to go ashore. Phu My is near Ho Chi Minh City (aka Saigon) which is several hundred miles south of Nha Trang where we were yesterday.



About 7am the Amsterdam glided along one of the channels of the Mekong River delta which appeared flat and covered with a dense forest.

There were usually some small boats visible as we proceeded up the river.



We docked at the modern commercial pier of Phu My which we learned later was built just 3 years ago. The tour buses were lined up and ready for passengers.

This conveyer belt, ending in a spiral slide, was loading heavy bags of something onto a river boat near the Amsterdam.



We had signed up for a tour of Ho Chi Minh City which used to be called Saigon. Our bus was loaded with about 40 passengers and left the dock about 8:30am. In Vietnam the cars drive on the right hand side like in the US. Seat belts were provided on the air conditioned bus but we were not encouraged to use them like we had been in some other countries.

We traveled though the countryside as the guide (Mr. Sinh) described the passing scene and gave us some background information about Vietnam. We passed through rice paddies on both sides of the road. The guide described how they can get a crop about every 100 days. When the green fields turn yellow it is time to harvest the rice. He said Vietnam is an exporter of rice and that they still harvest the rice in the fields by hand. This provides much employment for their population which is about 83 million people.

This green field of rice is still growing.



This field has the yellow color and is close to harvest time.

Besides rice, other Vietnam exports are oil, coffee and tea.

We passed through a young rubber tree plantation. We never did find out the main use for the natural rubber in this age of synthetic polymers. Maybe NASCAR finds that it makes better tires??



The guide said that less than 10 percent of Vietnamese were Christian but at this roadside dealer for headstones, Christ was prominently displayed. Christmas is apparently a big festival time in Vietnam.

As we approached Ho Chi Minh City we passed an amusement park that looked like a popular place.



This large building is an apartment house. The guide said the flats can sell for as much as \$200,000 USD.

Our guide gave us what is probably a standard speech about recent history of Vietnam. He said that after the victory of Communist North Vietnam in 1975 the country was placed under communist control in all aspects of life and business. At first everyone suffered but blamed it on the need to recover from the war.



However, things didn't get better under communist rule and in 1987 a major shift in government policy took place. The controls on enterprising business people and foreign travel and communication were relaxed. This permitted an expansion of the business and trading economy. In addition, a national policy was established to encourage tourism as a means of boosting local economies. It was that specific 1987 policy change that has resulted in the visits of cruise ships like the MS Amsterdam.

The guide said at first after 1987 they had to use old Army vehicles to haul the tourists that came to Vietnam. They were not very comfortable. During the 1990's the changes were slow to develop but now those new policies appear to be paying off. In the last five years the investment in tourism has provided more comfortable transportation for visitors. Our bus was air conditioned, the audio system worked and seats were comfortable. The tour director on the Amsterdam, Barbara, said that even the attitude of the government officials dealing with tourism has softened considerably in recent years. She said they still don't smile but they don't give touring managers like her as much trouble. The change in government policy in 1987 was mentioned several times by our guide and that seems to be the watershed decision that has made for a better life for many Vietnamese. He had high praise for the US taking in Vietnamese people fleeing Vietnam after the Vietnam War. After 1987 Vietnamese ex-patriots living in other countries, who tended to be entrepreneurs, were invited to move back to Vietnam to work and start businesses. This was probably a bit of a stretch but the guide said that radio and TV programs were not restricted. Education and medical care are not free. Public schools are better than private but private hospitals are better than public hospitals in current Vietnam. He said public schools have periodic tests and if the kids flunk the tests the only way to continue

education is to go to a private school which is more expensive for the parents. Several times the guide used the phrase "step by step we are making things better".

The first stop we made in Ho Chi Minh City was the Reunification Palace. We got a brief history lesson. Vietnam was formed as a government in the mid fifteenth century. Every hundred years or so there were invasions from China, the Mongols and internal civil wars. Eventually the French took over in the mid 1800s. Construction of this building was started by the French in 1868. We were aware that the French gave up Vietnam in 1954 but were surprised to learn that they had run the Vietnam government for about 100 years prior to that. In 1954 the French turned the government over to Vietnamese officials and the country was temporarily divided into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. According to the pamphlet given to us "The US Administration looked for way to engage in order to carry out their intention to occupy Vietnam." In recognition of Vietnam's independence from the French in 1954, Prime Minister Diem named the building Independence Palace and his family lived in the building. In 1962 there was a coup attempt and two planes bombed the palace. According to our pamphlet the unrest in the country led to "military interference of foreign country causing a tragic war in Vietnam". Finally, "with Ho Chi Minh historic campaign, on 30 Apr, 1975, the tank of Liberation Forces bearing plate 390 has hit off the main gate, tank 843 hit and inclined the auxiliary gate of Independence Palace to move forwards. At 11:30 PM of the same day, first lieutenant Bui Quang Than, Commander of tank 843 lowered the flag of 3 red stripes and raised the flag of the Liberation Front of South Vietnam. This flag has flown vividly on top of the Palace concluding 30 years of hard and heroic war of Vietnamese people, carrying out the wish of President Ho Chi Minh: People of North-South Regions have been reunited." The "30 years of hard and heroic war...", refers to the time interval starting with 1945 when Vietnam was briefly granted independence from France. After WWII, in 1945, the French took over the Vietnamese government again as their prior colony. Ho Chi Minh was a hero who resisted the French take-over and started the 30 year war effort. The French were tossed out in 1954 and then the US got involved in the early 1960s. This war that has traumatized the US was just the last of a long series of conflicts in Vietnam. According to our guide, the Vietnamese just want to put the "Vietnam War" behind them and move on to a better future. They see their future in expanded trade with other nations.

We came away from the tour with mixed emotions. The US involvement in the Vietnam War was justified to the US citizens as necessary to prevent the spread of communism. Communism was viewed as a threat to US national security. Vietnam is now a communist nation and no doubt their personal freedoms are restricted more than ours in the US. However, we no longer have a national policy labeling them as a threat to the US security. From the advertisements on buildings and highways it would appear that capitalism is flourishing in Vietnam. Many of the largest capitalist corporations are represented in the Vietnam business scene. So we ask what has changed in the North Vietnam communism of the 1960s that made it a threat to US security back then. The communist nation of Vietnam today has become a favored trading partner of the US by act of the US Congress. Would the 1987 shift in favor of Vietnam style capitalism under communist rule have taken place if the Vietnam War had not been fought by the US? We remain conflicted by our desire to see our country on the right side of an issue but we conclude that long-view wisdom was lacking in the decision to sacrifice American and Vietnamese lives in the

Vietnam War. This visit to current day Vietnam contributes to our ongoing reservations about the wisdom of US participation in the Iraq War. Thus ends the political comment of the blog.



Here is a view of the Reunification Palace.

We all were crammed into a small room in the basement of Reunification Palace where the South Vietnamese Prime Minister tracked the fighting action during the Vietnam War.



We passed other groups at various stages of touring through the building. Many of the other groups were having the presentation made in a language other than English. Obviously, Vietnam is attracting tourists

from many European and Asian nations.

Our guide went over a status chart posted in the War Room in the basement of the Reunification Palace.

This bougainvillea plant in front of the Reunification Place was too beautiful to pass up without notice.



We drove by the US Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City and got this photo. The US Embassy that was the scene of the helicopter rescue of people from the roof in 1975 was next door to this building. That Embassy building has been taken down and it is now a vacant area inside the US Consulate walled area.

We toured the History Museum and saw illustrations of major historic events and culture in Vietnam. This exquisite mahogany alter with inlaid mother-of-pearl was a very impressive work of art, typical of what we saw.



A highlight of the History Museum was the gift shop. Barbara was successful in finding some small purses with cute designs. We were amazed when our purchases, which amounted to \$2 USD each, were placed in two hand woven reed bags with woven handles. As a souvenir the woven bags were probably more valuable

than the cloth purses.

We drove by the Rex Hotel which apparently was a place where US soldiers and journalists stayed during the Vietnam War. It has a big sign out front welcoming any



returning GI. Here is a view of the Rex Hotel with palm trees growing on the roof. Also obvious in the photo is the large number of motor bikes in Vietnam. Here are some examples of the motor bike scene as we drove out of Ho Chi Minh City. Gasoline cost about \$3 USD per gallon, cars are expensive so the motor bikes at about \$1000 USD each are a favorite mode of transportation by men and women.



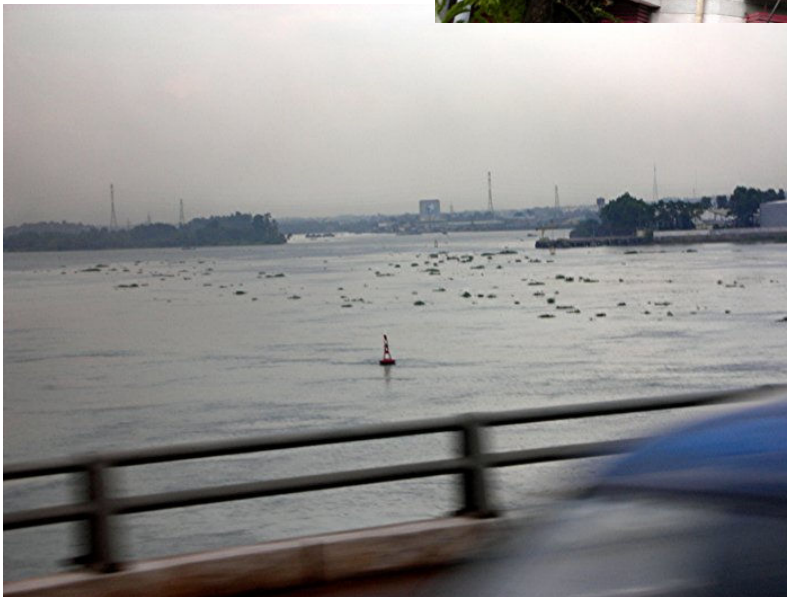
In the scene on the left are two ladies on a motor bike and they are wearing masks. The guide said they do not wear masks to protect from pollution but they wear masks to keep the sun from tanning their skin. They also keep their arms covered. White skin is considered a sign of upper class people. The guide said white skin is good and makes the ladies more attractive to the men. As the guide

uttered these words we wondered about the reaction of an African American couple sitting behind us on the bus. Regarding social customs the guide also said that about 75 percent of the men smoke cigarettes but hardly any women smoke because in their culture that makes a woman very unattractive.



Mixed in with the motor traffic could be found some more simple modes of transport.

We were fascinated by the tangle of wires strung between power poles along the city streets. We were wondering how the telephone and power service is in Ho Chi Minh City. Here is an example of what we were seeing.



Passing over a bridge we spotted water hyacinths growing in the river. The little spots in the water shown on the left are water hyacinths. The guide said the water hyacinths choked the river and were a problem until they found a use for the fiber in the stems. Now the water hyacinths are harvested for the fiber and they are not a problem.

The bus ride from the center of Ho Chi Minh City to the Amsterdam took about 2 hours. The buildings along the highway were a mixture of relatively good construction and some shoddy shack-like buildings.



We had to stop for a toilet break about half way back to the ship. The vendors knew where the buses would stop and they were there to greet us with all sorts of souvenirs from lacquer boxes to silk kimonos. A couple bus passengers bought silk kimonos in bright colors with dragons embroidered on the front and back. They paid \$5 to \$10 USD for these garments and were quite proud. When other people on the bus saw this great buy a feeding frenzy broke out. We had been about ready to leave but then people left the bus so that they could get one of the cheap bright colored



kimonos. Barbara had bought a green kimono for \$5 USD but it didn't have a lining. A lady on the bus showed her a lined, reversible kimono she got for \$10. Barbara thought she had to have this upgraded version and through an open bus window negotiated with a vendor to purchase a reversible, lined kimono for \$10.

The look of a shopping success painted all over her face.

A spontaneous shopping festival of sorts broke out on the bus as people showed off their kimonos and other purchases.

Order was eventually restored and we completed our trip back to the Amsterdam.



Later that evening a calmed down Barbara displayed her shopping trophies.

Here she proudly shows her green kimono, jade pendant, blue decorated purses from the Ho Chi Minh History Museum and free woven fiber bags given to carry the purses in. The purple paper was decorated with hand stamped designs and used to wrap the purses.

The ms Amsterdam got underway for Singapore about 7pm.

