

A journey to Vietnam

When I think of Vietnam, it is less a place and more a mosaic—each tile a flicker of color, sound, and smell that together form a kaleidoscope of humanity. We began in Hanoi, a city that wears its history like an old coat—patched and frayed, yet still proud. The customs clearance was a peculiar theater of human frailty and resourcefulness. Ali's visa, faulty in its dates, was miraculously reissued as we stood under the indifferent fluorescence of JFK, and with it, the journey began.

Doha, with its sprawling airport of glass and commerce, was a sterile prelude to the cacophony of Hanoi. Upon landing, a travel agent's ingenuity—snapping a photo to pass along to a customs contact—had us whisked through the otherwise impenetrable bureaucracy. Such pragmatism might shame any Western notion of efficiency. And then, the Metropole. Colonial grandeur perched awkwardly amid the bustle of a third-world city, yet somehow at home. The walls whispered of faded opulence and untold secrets. That evening, the Miss Vietnam contest transformed the hotel into a realm of surreal glamour—paparazzi flashing, contestants gliding through marble halls, and Marjie capturing moments like a seasoned photojournalist.

Hanoi engulfed us in its embrace, the air thick with a smoky haze that seemed to carry stories of centuries past. By the lake at night, young women from our group swayed with locals to an ancient rhythm, while French cuisine offered a taste of colonial heritage reimaged through Vietnamese ingenuity. The next morning, descending into the Metropole's bomb shelter felt like stepping into a time capsule of survival, followed by the sobering walls of Hoa Lo prison, where tales of captivity and courage still echo.

The old quarter revealed itself from the back of scooters—a labyrinth where every turn brought discoveries. Spring rolls that shattered like glass, bánh mì bursting with herbs, and bowls of pho that seemed to hold the essence of the city itself. Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum, the parliament, McCain's memorial—each site a chapter in Vietnam's complex narrative.

A Russian jeep carried us through Train Street, where locomotives thundered past with heart-stopping proximity, forcing us against café walls in a dance of daily life and danger. Through cramped commune apartments built by Russians and North Koreans, where five families shared a bathroom, we witnessed how resourcefulness transforms scarcity into community. The B-52 Museum stood as a testament to December 1972's aerial drama, a study in propaganda, reminding us again that history is never neutral.

Trading the Metropole's refined breakfast spreads for Ninh Binh's wild beauty felt like stepping into a watercolor painting. Women rowed with their feet through lily-padded waters, mountains shrouded in mist beckoned us up 200 steps, then cycled through villages that seemed untouched by time. Even the disappointing Chinese dinner at the modern Lotte Hotel served as a reminder that authenticity often hides in humble corners.

Ha Long Bay's limestone sentinels rose from emerald waters like nature's skyscrapers. Here, amid stunning vistas and mundane cruise fare, news of Amoo Mohammad's passing in Iran reached us—a poignant reminder that life's circle turns even in paradise.

Hoi An arrived after a turbulent Vietjet flight, the Anantara's colonial elegance a balm for weary travelers. New Year's Eve by the lantern-lit river became magical when "Iran Iran" filled the air, transforming strangers into dancing companions under a sky bright with fireworks.

The next morning, we visited Marble Mountain in Da Nang, a spiritual enclave rising from the flatlands. Climbing through dimly lit caves, we discovered ancient statues of Buddha carved into the rock, their serene faces illuminated by flickering candles. Sunlight pierced through openings in the caves, creating an ethereal atmosphere that felt both sacred and timeless.

Saigon pulsed with modern energy, its spirit embodied in a 14-year-old boy masterfully running Pho Ha restaurant. The streets erupted in horn-blaring celebration as Vietnam vanquished Thailand in soccer, the city's joy infectious. We wound through districts designed like Paris but distinctly Vietnamese—past the imperial palace's war memories, through Saigon Square's labyrinth of counterfeit luxuries, into neighborhoods where street food reigned supreme. Papaya salad on sidewalks, seafood fresh from shells, coconut ice cream in the shadows of a self-immolated monk's memorial—each bite a story, each story a feast.

The Saigon River, though polluted, carried us toward Cu Chi's tunnels, where even small gestures like the precise cutting of tangerines spoke to Vietnamese attention to detail. A one-armed veteran's tales of underground warfare resonated against the shooting range's sharp reports, history's echoes refusing to fade.

Departing through the chaos of Saigon's airport, I realized Vietnam doesn't allow passive observation. It demands immersion—in its fragrant air, complex flavors, and unvarnished truths. To visit Vietnam is to be transformed by it, each memory a tile in the mosaic of understanding.