

## Reflections on Vietnam

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*Louise Strait, far right, in South Vietnam in June 1974 as part of American youth leaders' tour*

Saigon, if located anywhere else but in a war zone, would have been on any tour book's "must-see" list. Sometimes called the "pearl of the Orient," its broad tree-shaded avenues clogged with cyclists could as well have been in Paris or Nice. Behind the high stucco walls and wrought-iron gates were continental-style houses, often surrounded by terraces and courtyards.

The heat, so damp and close as to have a musty beach house aroma, was fended off by pastel walls, terrazzo roofs, and shutters covering the length of the arched windows. French was often heard when the diplomats and International Commission for Control and Supervision members gathered for cocktails under the large, slowly turning fans of the veranda of the Continental Palace Hotel.

But Western dress was seldom seen on the streets. Suits were in practical and too hot -- preferred instead were loosely fitting white cotton shirts or a bush-type jacket and matching pants. Besides, most young men were in military uniform. The women, often thought to be among the most beautiful in the world, wore their long black hair straight and flowing. City wear was always the traditional ao dai -- a long silk dress slit up the sides and worn over black or white pants.

Another advantage to the might-have-been tourist trade was the fact that America, almost as much as France, was Vietnam's second culture. English was spoken, coke was served, and Americans were welcomed and understood. All this from a culture untouched by industrialization -- as different as possible from Detroit, Newark, or even Des Moines.

Saigon was also four million people -- many of them refugees with less than a tin roof for shelter, but

many more involved in creating the newly emerging society. Whereas most of the country is still relatively underdeveloped, it was in Saigon that we met a Vietnam displaying the potential of a level of achievement of at least Korea or Taiwan, maybe even of Japan: Universities with thousands of students; the modern Saigon medical school -- with at least as many female as male students--each one committed to serve for several years as a volunteer in the front lines to repay their education. Our delegation met with people from a wide cross-section of Saigon's population. Nguyen van Chin, youth leader of the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor (CVT), had met with Freedom Leadership Foundation President Neil Salonen in 1971 and met again with our delegation. He's usually out in the provinces organizing from the grass roots. (The CVT is a vital, progressive yet anti-Communist labor union with both a youth division and sister student organization.) Tich Tam Chau, once a militant foe of the Diem regime, was heading a unification movement of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism in Asia. We also met Hoi Chan, recent defectors from the Communist side.

One, an ex-political commissar, felt quite at home engaging in dialogue about the U.S. anti-war movement or foreign policy. Another, a defector of only two days, could not speak but just stared at us -- the friendly enemy whom he had been told to hate. Most of all I remember the students. The pattern was similar, both in Saigon and elsewhere. Usually we would formally meet administrative and student body officials, receiving an orientation, a tour, and refreshments. Then at least one student would seek each one of us out. First they would try to make us comfortable -- did we like Vietnam? How was the food? How was our flight over? And then they would ask about us: Did we have brothers and sisters? What did we study? When confident that all requirements of politeness had been met they would ask: "What do Americans think about us now?"

Do they still care? Why does Congress object to military aid? Don't Americans know what the Communists are like?" And then they would tell their stories--of their former homes in North Vietnam, of brothers and sisters killed by the Vietcong, of hiding out from the shellfire during the North's 1972 invasion.

They were seldom accusing, mostly curious. Some understood the problems caused by distance and cultural differences. "It is true that many students are against the present regime," the president of the Saigon University student body told me. "So I can see why Americans might think that it doesn't make any difference to us if the Communists take over. But this is not true. None of us wants to live under the Communists."

Some Americans who went to Vietnam did not come back; others returned embittered by the dislocation accompanying war. But many others stayed there or went back to Vietnam, drawn by a special magic known to those who have been touched by the heart of that country: The AID doctor who returned year after year despite his relatives' objections. The POW of seven years whose Vietnamese friends disguised themselves as peasants and combed Vietcong territory looking for him. The veterans in the U.S. who, after the fall of Danang, begged to return, saying: "I would give my life, if it would do any good." The daughter of American missionaries who, after finishing college in the States, returned to her father's mission in Hue. (Before going to the States, she had survived a Communist attack. Villagers seeking safety fled to her family's mission which was according to a captured enemy soldier, surrounded by a light so bright that they were afraid to advance upon it.) "I could not find the depth and the values of the Vietnamese in America," she said. "There is no place in the world like Vietnam." Indeed, there has been no place since Korea that has been so battered by an alien, unwanted force invading from the north.

It was a long way by helicopter and jeep from Hue to Quang Tri. From the air the whole panorama of Vietnamese countryside unfolded: lush green mountains, jungle, rice-paddies, farmlands with houses marked by the yellow and red-striped South Vietnamese flag painted on the roofs, long sandy beaches and finally the ocean. Further north the ground was pockmarked by bombing scars and covered with

gravesites.

From the jeep we saw the simple shacks of families resettled within the last months on land overrun in 1972. Already they had-under tin roofs and between three wans-created mini-barber shops, tailor shops, cafes, and even a pool "hall." The road, frequently bordered by abandoned Soviet tanks, was nicknamed the "highway of terror," where thousands of refugees were killed during the 1972 invasion. In the noontday stillness I tried hard to imagine what that must have been like.



My imagination was helped out a lot at Quang Tri. We passed through gates, around barbed wire fences, past signs saying "Danger, Keep Out," and even went beyond a bright red skull and crossbones. We were driving over what was once a city street, now reclaimed by the jungle. Quang Tri, once the home of over 80,000 people, was levelled by shellfire in 1972. Some of the large stone villas remained but everything else was gone. Atop the crumbling ruins of a gate flew a tattered flag. Beyond was the frontier, where we sat and sipped cokes in the shade of a bamboo gazebo. What a place for a snack-looking over to the Communist soldiers staring at us barely a stone's throw across the Dong Ha River. That day the propaganda speakers were blaring out raspy music.

Over lunch the American and French-educated rector of Hue University-the country's most prestigious-was merciless in pursuing his point. "So you saw Quang Tri today. Were you not shocked?" "Yes" was not enough to satisfy him. I said, "We must never allow it to happen again." "I hope you will never be the same again after seeing Quang Tri," he replied. "Now you know what" e are fighting. Now please tell me what is wrong with Americans that they have forgotten?"

I cried on the way home. Most of all, as I said, I will never forget the students. I just received a letter from one young man at Van Hanh University, a Buddhist school in Saigon: "You and I had met at this university. You know that my country the war happened and overwhelm. My native village no longer. Now my family is living under the control of Communists.

I am living as anti-Communist refugee in Saigon. I am only one: no parents, no cousins. Can you please help me?" My letter was returned, stamped: "Service to Vietnam suspended."