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AN ADVENTURE IN VIETNAM

By Ellen and Albert Stark

Horrific images of the Vietnam War had been implanted in our minds by television and newspapers. A People-to-People trip to the Soviet Union, inspired by Albert's interview of the Mayor of Moscow on his WHWH Lawline program and Ellen's visits to Cuba with the Princeton Hermanas delegation had revealed that what the media portrayed about both was inaccurate. After the U.S. embargo on North Vietnam was lifted in 1995, we wanted to see what North Vietnam was really like.

When we stepped off a jetliner in December 1998, a dank terminal in disrepair loomed in front of us. After clearing customs, a dented Russian taxi departed the terminal and we bounced along a dusty road on which men, women, and children, wearing conical straw hats, their faces covered with kerchiefs, pedaled balloon-tired bicycles without gears like the ones we rode as teenagers. The taxi passed marshes, rice paddies, barren land, and then shacks made from junkyard tin. Entering Hanoi, beeping cycles, some carrying two or three passengers, PVC pipe, TV's, and plants weaved in and out of traffic, barely avoiding collision.

While we explored Hanoi and nearby villages, we experienced friendliness and warmth instead of the antipathy to Americans we expected. Hardworking people traded and sold goods, sowed and planted rice. Scrumptious food, Oriental and French in cuisine, was served in restaurants and on sidewalks. Christmas and New Years celebrations were colorful and lively. Green and blue earthenware filled baskets on bicycles that had thick wire spokes to bear the loads. Points on straw conical hats popped up and down in rice paddies being harvested. A week in Vietnam was not enough. We wanted to learn more about the Vietnamese people. When we received an announcement of a trip led by Joe Toback of Mountain Travel Sobek that featured three of our favorite outdoor pastimes, trekking, biking, and hiking, Ellen exclaimed, "That's what I want for my sixtieth birthday!" Toback had guided us on odyssey-like kayak trips to Greece and Portugal.

A Different Hanoi?

A clean, modern airport terminal, a spanking new Toyota taxi, and a cement high-speed highway greeted us in Hanoi, a city of four million people, in March, 2003. Bicyclists, without masks, pedaled on paved paths alongside the highway. Old black sans-muffler motorbikes were now shiny, multi-colored Hondas and Suzukis. The tin shacks at the gateway to the city in 1998 had been replaced by a high-rise Sofitel hotel. "There are over a million motorbikes in Hanoi," our taxi driver said. In 1998, there had been only a half-

million.

The Old City, a warren of streets, filled with motor scooters, bicycles, and people trading and eating on the sidewalks, had retained its flavor. The streets were still divided according to craft. Hawkers chased tourists on a street filled with stores selling silk. Children's toys filled the shops on another. Women in conical hats balanced loads of fruit, chickens, hot soup, and bricks. Bicycles carried piles of towels, vegetables, flowers, and glass—every thing imaginable that could be sold.

But now, welders banged on sheet metal being shaped for use as ducts and soldered to make water heaters. Motorcycle seats hung in the shops on another. Western clothes, watches, and shoes were abundant.

In 1998, we had been paralyzed before we learned the trick to crossing safely—moving slowly always forward, trusting that the driver of a motorbike would swerve just enough to miss us. Crossing the street was still a challenge. Now we were confident that we would reach the other side of the street.

To the Mountains

A 1950's vintage train, worn but clean, took us overnight from Hanoi to Lao Cai, located on the border between Vietnam and China. A van hauled our group of twelve up a narrow, rut-filled road for an hour and a half to Sapa, only eight miles away. When the French occupied Vietnam, Sapa was a hill station that the French used as a vacation spot. The French named the region, Tonkin Alps, because of its exquisite mountains and verdant valleys.

We transferred to a four-wheel drive Russian jeep, and life, as we had never seen it, flashed in front of us. Thin young men threw sledgehammers at piles of rocks as they crushed stones into gravel, which was being shoveled onto the red-clay road to make access to their villages easier. Black Hmong women, members of one of the ethnic minority tribes that inhabited the area, carried children in papooses with colorful embroidery as they trudged along, hoes and machetes slung over their shoulders. Beautiful views of a river valley appeared as the jeep small village of thatched roofed bamboo huts. Crossing a suspended bridge that shook nervously, we trekked for five hours, ascending and descending muddy, red clay paths. Women wearing conical straw hats bent over in rice paddies with water up to their knees while they transplanted rice. Smiling children, many of whom were dressed in torn clothes and wore no shoes, smiled and giggled excitedly when they saw us on their path. Two members of our group took Polaroid photos and gave them to the children whose eyes popped as they watched the photo develop. Albatross dictating machine was a big hit with the children who laughed as they heard their voices played back.

Scaling a misty landscape of rice terraces along the mountainous slopes, barefooted tribal people, who had used paths for centuries, passed us, carrying loads of wood and provisions in bamboo baskets on their back. Little girls carried babies. Walking sticks were essential for us!

As the late afternoon sun fell behind the mountain peaks, we reached our home stay in Sin Chai, a Dao village of thatched houses with outbuildings for pigs and chickens. Our boots were encrusted with mud and our rain jackets soaked from a late afternoon cloudburst. We met our family, members of the Red Dao tribe. Red turbans with flowing

tassels on the back covered the heads of a mother, her daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. The father, who was the shaman of the village, short and wiry, sat on his haunches on a stool three inches above a dirt floor in front of a burning fire.

After spreading our sleeping bags on a bamboo floor and washing off the sweat from our journey with water carried by intricate bamboo aqueducts, a dinner of tasty noodle soup with shreds of meat and greens was served around a wooden table was completed a warm welcome.

After dinner, the shaman invited us to join him around a smoky fireplace dug into the dirt floor. The shaman smoked a four-foot long bamboo water pipe, poking small pieces of tobacco. Cradling his pipe between his knees, he leaned forward every once and a while to slide small pieces of bamboo into the fire. We learned, with the help of a Vietnamese translator that he was called the shaman because he was the spiritual leader of the village, that the Red Dao had come from China centuries ago, and practiced a religion that was based on Daoism.

Our Vietnamese guide began a conversation with the daughter-in-law. She asked us questions about our lives. How did we live? What kind of food did we grow? What did we do?

After we told her that we bought our food and clothes, worked as a doctor, a nurse, lawyer, and banker, she said that we must be rich. She described walking long distances to collect wood for cooking and how she took her children with her while she planted and harvested rice. No daycare or nannies here! She told us that she had given birth to her children by herself and that only when there was a problem would a mother or neighbor be enlisted to help with a birth.

Children, with runny noses and coughs, darted in and out, glancing at us curiously. Men carrying muskets, powder horns, and water pipes meandered in and offered some rice wine, one of their sources of happiness. Imitating them downing a cup in a single gulp, the alcohol went right to our heads. Soon thereafter, thanks to our miner's lights, we managed to find our bamboo mats and sleeping bags.

As we walked via slippery paths to several other villages, we visited two and three-room schools. Some children had scabs on their faces and arms. We gathered medicines we carried for our own use to help these children. At a health clinic, a nurse confirmed that local customs oftentimes prevented the administration of modern medicine and that the child mortality rate was rate very high. The doctor in our group worked with the nurse and our Vietnamese guide to contact the children's families and instruct them on how to use the medicines.

Living with primitive people had been an eye opener. Time was not a factor in their lives. Everyday was a hand-to-mouth existence. Life was difficult. People were poor. Yet they were happy and trusting. Their kindness, beauty, artistic accomplishments, and respect for each other had impressed all of us.

There were no locks on doors and no worry about street crime.

Buying a Water Buffalo

Trekking and bicycling to Bac Ha, we passed through breathtaking agricultural villages. Chickens, pigs, and water buffalo dotted the path. People leaned over fences and offered

us tea or rice, motioning to us to come see their "house."

On Sunday morning we rose early to see Flower Hmong women, known for their colorful outfits and plaid head dresses walking, bicycling, motor scootering to Bac Ha's Sunday market. Some in the stream of villagers that had begun many miles away had come to buy vegetables, meat, clothes, live chickens, pigs, and buffaloes. Others brought things to sell. Men, laden with wooden, bamboo, and animals.

Joe suggested we buy a water buffalo for a needy family to whom he had delivered chickens and a pig the past November. He informed us that the gifts had made a big difference in their lives. A water buffalo would make it easier for the family to work the rice paddies and till soil.

Thrilled with the idea of helping someone, each member of the group chipped in fifteen dollars. After a spirited negotiation, the buffalo was loaded into a truck that had backed up to a hill that provided a makeshift ramp. The family welcomed us as if we were delivering manna from heaven. The woman of the house, with her four daughters, poured us tea, repeating over and over that it was one of the happiest days of her life.

Kayaking Halong Bay

Another clinkity-clink overnight train and a three and a half hour van ride took us to Halong Bay, where on a boat, we would be able to experience the tranquility of the sea and recapture all that we had seen, smelled, and touched.

Halong Bay, one of the wonders of the world, is a prosperous tourist destination. For three days, we paddled kayaks through unmapped caves, into lagoons encircled by towering limestone outcrops, and to floating fishing villages where people lived in houses built on rafts made from oilcans and planks. True boat people, they spent their lives in the narrow confines of their small vessels, still practicing an ancient cult of worshipping creatures of the sea.

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The kayaking adventure ended with a surprise birthday party for Ellen. The cooks on our boat prepared a spectacular dinner, consisting of fresh shrimp, squid, clams, which was served in a cave lit with sixty red candles. To our dismay, a birthday cake and red roses had been brought to the cave by boat from Halong Bay's harbor!

Now we are in Princeton and memories and thoughts percolate. Images appear out of the blue- a fisherman offering us a bowl of rice, smiles of children, a party in a cave, the tears of joy in a woman who now had a water buffalo. The images of horror implanted in our minds are still there. The kindness of the Vietnamese people and the dynamism of Hanoi are not easy to forget. We would love to return.