



ESCAPE

THE GLOBAL GUIDE FOR THE ADVENTUROUS TRAVELER

**Biking to Boomtown in
Ho Chi Minh City**

**Journey to the
Center of Tibet**

**Bargaining for More
Vacation Time**

**Bolivia's Withering
Heights**

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WITH THE TRADE EMBARGO OVER, HO CHI MINH CITY IS ON THE MOVE. SO IS WINK DULLES, ESCAPE'S WINDED SENIOR EDITOR, TRYING TO KEEP UP ON A ONE-SPEED BIKE. IT'S A COLLISION COURSE OF MOPEDS, CYCLOS, MOTORBIKES AND CARTS SPEEDING TOWARD A CAPITALIST PAYDAY



All Stops Out. VeloAsia's Patrick Morris (left) and Dulles brace themselves for a four-way intersection with no traffic sign or light in sight.



Cardboard factory on wheels gets assist from our man in HCM. Boxman's overloaded cyclo is part of massive incursion of products from Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong.



Cruisers stage mass drive-ins outside Rex in search of non-existent mall shops.

HO CHI MINH CITY WITHOUT A HELMET

STORY BY WINK DULLES
PHOTOS BY LANDIS Y. MCINTIRE

There are about as many communists in Ho Chi Minh City as there are in Boise, Idaho. The immigration officials at Tan Son Nhat airport looked a little threatening in their drab green military uniforms and red epaulets. But I'd seen worse. In places like Dallas and San Francisco. Passport stampers the world over look like communists. Except in Cambodia, where they look like barbers and *cyclo* drivers.

Waiting to get my papers checked, I glanced around at the other travelers who'd made the trip to the former Saigon with me from Bangkok. Besides a couple of frightened-looking, backpack-toting girls from Canada, most of the passengers were Asian. I figured Chinese or rich Thais, but I was quite wrong. These travelers spoke to the customs people in Vietnamese and surrendered their American, Canadian, Australian and German passports. The guy in front of me had an animated argument with a customs clerk in Vietnamese. I could see from his passport that he was Canadian and lived in Vancouver. But his visa

application was written in Vietnamese.

Two young Asian men, hooked in the arms of their girlfriends, approached me. "American?" one of them said in clipped Asian English.

"Yeah. What gave me away, the Nikes?" I replied.

"I think I saw you at a bar in Venice a couple of times," he said, hugging his lady friend, whom I was convinced couldn't discern a word being said. "Yeah, me and my friends, we live in L.A., too. Westminster."

"Little Saigon," I said.

"Yeah, yeah," he agreed excitedly.



There are about as many communists in Ho Chi Minh City as there are in Westminster, California. Outside the airport, hundreds of screaming Vietnamese waited behind fences, like extras in an Oliver Stone film, for their relatives from Westminster, Sydney and Vancouver—coming back to

Vietnam to celebrate the Tet new year. People who fled on leaking boats after NVA tanks smashed into Saigon's Presidential Palace are riding planes back in, dressed in silk and gold and Michael Jordan basketball shoes, bearing gifts of Johnnie Walker scotch and Marlboros. In 1989, a mere 60,000 tourists visited Vietnam, 15,000 of them expat Vietnamese living abroad. A year later, nearly 190,000 tourists came to the country. Overseas Vietnamese accounted for 40,000 of this number. And the numbers are multiplying at astonishing rates. For the first six months of 1993, 350,000 foreign arrivals were racked up. The number of Vietnamese returning to visit each year will soon reach half a million.

It was night, the Southeast Asian kind, where the muted orange light of burning wood—rather than the towering white halogen light of prosperity—flickered and struggled to reach the low canopy of blackness. The streets were filled with pedestrians, cyclos, bicycles, mopeds, motorbikes and a smattering of old automobiles. The orchestra of traffic was dissonant, chaotic. Few of the motorbikes employed their running lights. The chirping of horns was incessant, the drivers, like birds, warning each other of predators.

My fever had dropped, the effect of the codeine I'd gobbled aboard the 737. (One of the benefits of Asia is legally being able to figure out what the hell your problem is and then being in a position to do something about it without having to pay a doctor a few hundred dollars for something you already knew—and knew how to treat.) It was my birthday and I had an appointment with Landis McIntire—ESCAPE's strapping and occasionally annoying photo editor—at the rooftop bar of the Rex Hotel. The Rex was a popular watering hole with U.S. military officers during the "Conflict." Now it's an expensive, bawdy joint where the staff dresses like Omar Sharif on Halloween and the drinks cost the equivalent of a week's wage for most Vietnamese.

McIntire and I were to have met at sunset to talk about the next day's adventures in HCM City, as the locals call it. It was now well after 10 p.m.—and knowing he's the type of guy who views appointments as legal contracts, I figured he must have been waylaid by a squad of passport stampers. I ducked out of the pretentious Rex and went over to a little outdoor bar on the banks of the Saigon River, just down Ton Duc Thang Street from the Floating Hotel. The night was balmy and pleasant as I took my seat at the bar. The bartender/owner, a woman named Von, was 47. She looked in her early thirties. She poured me a Dewars and we had an impromptu birthday celebration. Her voice was raspy, whiskey-laced, but animated and multitonal. She sounded like a wet guitar. She showed me pictures of her three sisters living in America—in Westminster. One stood beside a BMW. Another was dressed in silk beneath a \$150 haircut. Like Von, they're all very beautiful. And all very American.

A Saigon cop approached the bar. He was short, fat, his skin brown and coarse—a jolly face. His pale green uniform fit him like a half-peeled lime. Ho's best. He looked like a doorman at a cheap hotel.

"American?" he asked.

"What tipped you off?" I said. "See me in a bar in Venice?" He pointed at my sneakers. Marvelous.

"You play for Metallica?" he said.

"No."

"You like Metallica?" he said.

I laughed. The cop got up and sped away on his Honda motorbike. Five minutes later, he was back with a cassette tape. Von plugged it in and the Sanyo tweeters began pumping out American speed metal. It was the sound of victory. The war for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese was won not by Tonkin resolutions, B-52 strategies, Marxism or capitalism, but by American pop culture. What Bill Haley and Motown started


couldn't be stopped by anything. However devoid of content pop culture seems to be today, the rock 'n' roll lifestyle continues to be an intoxicating symbol of freedom and rebellion for young people worldwide, and particularly for a new generation of Vietnamese kids trying to escape state control and traditional Confucian paternalism.

Soon, I was surrounded by children and young schoolgirls. Here, girls flirt at an early age, and are far less inhibited than their counterparts in Hanoi, Bangkok, Chicago or Boston. Young women in HCM, although extremely gracious and shy, are very eager to meet Western men, particularly Americans. They toil in hotels and local restaurants by day and learn English and advanced economics at local universities by night, trying to get the tools to move ahead in the new order. They work extremely hard, but Vietnam remains one of the poorest countries in Asia. The average Vietnamese makes about \$200 a year. Westerners, particularly Americans, are tickets out for some of these girls.

I met a waitress at the Vietnam House, an eatery along Dong Khoi Street in the main hotel zone. She was attractive and very pleasant. Her bright black hair tickled her shoulders. Her eyes were like black olives. Her name was Le. We struck up a conversation. She said she was a university student. She wanted to see me again so she could practice English and show me the sights of HCM. Not one to turn down such infrequent offers, I glanced down at my Rolex to note the date and agreed to meet her the following evening. We connected at the huge French colonial-era post office downtown—the main meeting place in HCM City—and took her motorbike to a local cafe for tea and talk. She agreed to drop me off a short five-minute walk to my hotel. Instead, she stopped on a very dark section of Dong Khoi Street.

As I walked along in a traveler's trance, a black silhouette jumped from the darkness to my left. It was a crazed woman in a zebra costume and wild hair. She went for my shoulders, then my crotch. She seemed like a drunken hooker—persistent but not dangerous. I responded the old-fashioned American way—I asked her to stop. She grabbed for my arm, as if trying to get me to go with her. I pulled it away and the woman backed off. Then she was gone. I continued walking, my pulse having shifted into third gear. Then a motorbike sped past from behind me. The driver, a man, chirped his horn. The woman was seated behind him. She turned and waved at me. She was laughing.

I noticed the gold Rolex missing from my wrist. It had been a professional hit, and I suspected Le had been in on it. Damn well-rehearsed, and executed with the tactics of a SEAL team. I lamented my ignorance—but then laughed aloud and wondered how far they would get before they realized the "Rolex" was bought for about 20 bucks on a street in Bangkok and was worth about as much as the gas the bike needed to make its getaway.



NOW ENTERING:

Vietnam

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Population: 71 Million
Size: 128,066 square miles
People: 90% Vietnamese;
 others include Chinese,
 Mong, Khmer
Government: Socialist republic
 rule by Vietnamese
 Communist Party
Religion: Mostly Buddhist,
 Confucian or Taoist
Language: Vietnamese
Currency: Dong



Above: City worker drives fuel-efficient vehicle.



Below: Dulles and bystanders look for clues to his whereabouts.



Above: For their next act, this family of five will stuff themselves onto a single skateboard!



Birdman of Ho Chi Minh flocks to market with reluctant passengers.



Vendor works captive audience at Cholon bus station.

Ho Chi Minh City wears its best face at sunrise. The stained, granular buildings are porous sponges for the tangerine shafts of new sunlight; the horizontal beams turn the ashen statues of the city's roundabouts into dark teal. Shadows are long and everything seems very low to the ground. The streets are packed with motorbikes, which easily outnumber bicycles and even the trademark *cyclos*, the human-powered bicycle carriages that operate as taxis throughout Vietnam. Japanese motorbike manufacturers like Suzuki and Honda must be licking their chops at the potential offered by a market of 71 million motorcycle-crazed Vietnamese. On the way up the modern convenience totem pole, cars are not a factor here—yet. Instead, families of five are sandwiched onto a single moped, kids swallowed up in a tangle of big brothers' and mothers' legs and bags.

Traffic this particular morning was roaring like the sound of the next Pacific Rim "Tiger," the din of Taiwan and Hong Kong in the air. Secretaries in bright, new silk pant suits and dresses shuttled off to jobs in the new office buildings and banks that have been thrust up in recent years by European and East Asian companies, poised to cash in on Vietnam's impending boom. Others motored or pedaled off to street markets to pick over the day's best chickens, pigs, coriander and durian. McIntire and I decided to join the crowd. We rented some ancient one-speed bikes for \$1 a day, and blundered into the crazy current of laneless traffic. A couple of problems emerged right away: 1) stop signs and lights—there weren't any, even at four-way intersections—and 2) brakes, missing in action. As we tried to weave through the cross-currents of spokes and riders, we got some pointers from Patrick Morris, who runs bike tours in Vietnam for VeloAsia. Watch out for the mopeds, he warned us. They're the guppies, darting in and around the tide. They come up so fast, you can't look too long before turning. At the other end of the hazard scale are the slow-moving *cyclos* that drift in front of you

like Chris Crafts. Then there are all the pedal-driven freight operators, who vie for the Guinness Record for most stuff stacked on top of a couple wheels.

I pulled up alongside one of them, a *cyclo* loaded beyond the limits of gravity with boxes of Taiwanese goods. The boxes were bursting out the sides of the pile and threatening to cause a spill of epic proportions if the big Americans went down in a pile of mopeds, *cyclos* and Taiwanese electronics. I popped a couple of the boxes back in and held one side from collapse. The driver laughed at the ridiculous load, which he probably lost two or three times on the way to his destination. *Cyclos* and stereos, Vietnam and the modern world, lurching forward.

We passed a variety of vehicles from another Vietnam, one that has survived a century of new eras from the French to the Americans to the new economic boom. Charcoal men, sooty and callused, pushed and pulled their enormous loads of black wood to street stalls and markets. Other vendors hauled crates full of dead fowl, hundreds of birds on a single rickshaw, their bright orange bills dangling over the brims of the crates, bobbing along the rutted roads like marionettes.

We'd already seen a couple of accidents, and knew this was fertile terrain for Allstate, so it shouldn't have been a surprise when we got into the middle of one. McIntire and a *cyclo* driver had a monumental collision in the middle of an intersection, much to the initial delight of an enormous crowd of Vietnamese, who laughed uproariously. McIntire was down, but not out. The driver, though, cut his shin on the edge of his hurtling cart. It was a minor gash, but suddenly every Vietnamese this side of Da Nang—from elderly food stall cooks to one-legged beggars—had become certified paramedics. There was bickering and shouting as to what the cart driver should do about the wound. Old men scuffled over differing diagnoses. The women pushed the men back. The children stood in bewilderment, biting their nails.

Morris half-carried the driver into a pharmacy across the street. The two-wheeled traffic on the congested boulevard bottlenecked. Then there was another accident—a *cyclo* hit a bicyclist—as a passerby gawked at the ruckus. It was getting tense. It was taking way too long to put that Band-Aid on the guy's cut. Too big of a crowd. The cops were sure to arrive, and I pictured the changes in the masthead of ESCAPE I was convinced were imminent. I squirmed my way through the crowd and went into the pharmacy. The driver was sprawled on the floor, his legs banded, the pharmacist huddled over him with a tray of multicolored barbiturates, like a pool-side waiter with hors d'oeuvres.

"We're gonna leave him here," Morris said. "They're gonna sedate him."

"I'd say," I said. "The pharmacist looks like Jack Kevorkian."

There must be a hundred thousand of them," yelled McIntire. "It's Woodstock on wheels." We gazed upon the scene before us, the equivalent of the inhabitants of a good-sized American city, say Reno, all on motorbikes on the same street at the same time. Curb-to-curb, handlebar-to-handlebar, they flooded down the street in front of the Rex. It was a cross between Hollywood Boulevard and the Winter National drag races. Thousands of families and teenagers congealed in a mass of humanity and alloy. It was the Saigon equivalent of "cruising." The night air was thick with exhaust as riders swarmed on the square, retreated, and swarmed again, forming mobile queues that stretched for blocks. Grandmothers negotiated Hondas like Harleys, and teenagers, four to a bike, turned mopeds into vans.

The crowd was bigger than usual because of Tet. And so was the noise. There were salvos of firecrackers going off every night as part of the Tet festivities. Apparently, years of gun and rocketfire had made people impervious to random ear blastings.

It was too early for most of the celebrants to know that the American embargo on trade to Vietnam had been lifted, which we had just found out about in a fax from ESCAPE central. However, one excitable fellow had gotten the word. A motorbike driver came up to us on the street, shouting, "Yankee! Yankee! What is the news today? My friends are American. I worked for the embassy during the war. What is the news? Vietnam, America friends again? This is good news!"

He then hastily wrote on a card his business services. Even though neither Connie Chung nor Geraldo were there to capture it live, we declared it historic enough for our purposes, marking it the first direct entrepreneurial contact between a Vietnamese and an American since the lifting of the embargo. McIntire thought it was a pretty auspicious occasion. E-Day—and his birthday—all rolled into one. He'd turned 40 as the New Era arrived. "I like the symmetry," he said. "I'm going global, too."

Most of this city of 3.5 million, though, was too busy driving their Japanese motorcycles to

be concerned about the embargo. Le Cong Hau, a local computer shop owner, probably summed up the local reaction best when he said, "The Vietnamese people don't care about the embargo. The Americans care about the embargo. The only Vietnamese who care are the big businessmen."

But the evidence of the embargo's lifting became apparent later at another computer shop, CMT, which only the day before curiously sported three covered Roman letters in its marquee that appeared to read "IBM." They now brilliantly displayed the huge American company's logo throughout the premises. The big logo in block letters on the facade of the building was proudly painted in the company's PMS blue.

"This is a great day for us," said Bich Hang, a saleswoman at the shop. "We are the only authorized IBM dealer in the city. Business here will be very, very good."

Western tourists in Ho Chi Minh City stick pretty much to District 1, the central part of Saigon and home to the amenities foreigners are accustomed to, but that are virtually nonexistent outside the city. The Rex, the Continental—these are the security blankets, and most Westerners don't stray too far from them. In the area, you can dine in luxury beside an American Army tank and a downed Huey helicopter. There's the somber-looking Reunification Hall, formerly the Presidential Palace on Nguyen

Street, and the former U.S. embassy on Dai Su Quan My Tu, now home to nothing more than a petroleum company.

As you move west from the deodorized Section 1 to Section 5, life becomes more ethnic, both Chinese and Vietnamese neighborhoods—more raw. Instead of hawking boomboxes, street vendors offer their wares of pig entrails and chickens strung together in pairs like ice skates. There are more people in a bigger hurry than in the other more Western-influenced areas of the city. The Chinese, once despised, are a blur of capitalist activity at the Binh Tay market. Vietnam's version of China's get-rich-quick-but-stay-nominally-socialist, called *doi moi*, is a hit in these parts. Humanity and animal carcasses were packed in so tightly that it was nearly impenetrable. I kept my hands glued to my wallet. After the demise of South Vietnam in 1974, the Chinese fled en masse, and many died as boat people or languished in refugee centers. As many as 80,000 left Vietnam during the late 1970s and early 80s. Now with hopes for prosperity, the flow out has been slowed to a trickle.

We took a short ride over to the Cholon bus station, where the action was even more frenzied. A produce and livestock free-for-all, it was a scene exaggerated enough for Fellini. Whole barnyards were crammed in and on top of buses. Hog-tied pigs were tossed onto the roofs, and crates of geese, flapping and honking in vain, were loaded onto carts for the market. The eco-green buses were stuffed like turkeys

DOING IT

OUTFITTERS

USA: Bolder Adventures, Boulder, CO (800) 642-ASIA; Cycle Vietnam, Portland, OR (800) 661-1458; Myths and Mountains, Haverford, PA (215) 896-7780; Overseas Adventure Travel, Cambridge, MA (800) 221-0814; VeloAsia Cycling Adventures, Berkeley, CA (800) 884-ASIA

TRANSPORT

Malaysia Airlines (800) 421-8641; Thai Airways (800) 426-5204; China Air (800) 227-5118

CLIMATE

Tropical climate with a wet, hot summer and a drier, somewhat cooler winter

FURTHER READING

Modern: *Vietnam: A History*, Stanley Karnow; *Two Cities: Hanoi and Saigon*, Neil Sheehan; *When Heaven And Earth Changed Places*, Ly Li Harslip
Classics: *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene; *The Best and the Brightest*, David Halberstam

ready to burst with riders making their way to the hinterlands.

Pedaling west again, we threaded through traffic without incident and dropped down to the Saigon River, one of the tributaries of the Mekong Delta. Boat taxis and larger ferryboats vie to take riders down the river, which meanders its way through the city and out into the countryside miles from the New Vietnam. Our plan was to go down the river a bit and take in some of the life along the river's edge. When we got to the docks, though, a nasty battle broke out over who would be our skipper. Several of the dozen competitors came to physical blows, bashing each other with sticks. "I'm not getting into another riot," I told McIntire, who was still bruised from the last melee. We found a woman with a boat off by herself away from the fighting. While the boys duked it out, the woman took us across to an island in the middle of the river. We stopped at a village perched on stilts above the water under a huge Panasonic billboard. It was a touch of the country in the center of the city. The people were very poor and a few light years from economic boom times. But they were very friendly, happy to see visitors to their island in the storm.

A few days later, I found myself standing in the middle of Tet festival traffic in 94-degree heat with a dead moped and a man the size of a papaya. Jimmy Dean's Honda had broken down. It was supposed to take Jimmy, my guide, and I on a sidetrip outside HCM to the Mekong Delta. The Mekong didn't look too good all of a sudden. But Jimmy Dean took off around the corner and came back with three men, two motorcycles and clear evidence of his improvisational skills. Two of the guys carted off his dead Honda. The third drove us, three astride his tiny Vespa, to the bus station.

"Friends," Jimmy said. I'd know later that he had a lot of them.

A rebel with less of a cause these days, Jimmy Dean was attached to the U.S. embassy during the war and remembers fearfully when the Viet Cong attacked the U.S. embassy in Saigon during the 1968 Tet offensive. "They gave me an American captain's uniform and a .25-caliber handgun, and I said, 'I don't know what the hell to do with this,'" said the 46-year-old Vietnamese guide as we sped toward Can Tho in the heart of the Mekong Delta on an old, jam-packed Desoto bus with the leg

room of a Tonka toy. "People were running around shouting orders. It was chaos. There was screaming."

Jimmy Dean is short, maybe five feet, tops. He walks with a pronounced limp, the result of polio as a child. He wears Ray-Bans, western business suit trousers and a T-shirt every day. And each morning he polishes, to a rich luster, his pair of black leather policeman's shoes, even while out in the remote, muddy pancake of the delta. He doesn't look capable of much, but beneath his fragile exterior is a viscera of kiln-fired clay. After the fall of Saigon, he spent years in a re-education camp. He likes "Jimmy Dean," the name the Americans gave him during the war.

But the two best things about him are that he knows everyone in Vietnam and his English is better than Dan Quayle's. As we bumped along the 100 or so miles down National Highway 1 to Can Tho, I aimed my camera at the lush, fertile countryside, bursting with citrus, coconut, papaya, mango and jackfruit trees. Cotton, pepper and tobacco were growing everywhere rice wasn't. I'd never before seen such an array and abundance of nature's potency and goodness, and wondered how on earth Vietnam could be so poor amidst such bounty. We crossed over the wide mouths of the delta as a flotilla of longtail motorboats passed under bridges built by the French during the Indochinese War of the 1950s.

Along the road, teenagers played pool under palm-thatched roofs, oxen grazed on sawgrass and TV antennas towered 50 feet or more above flimsy hootches. Old women carried baskets of bread and spring rolls wrapped in coconut palm leaves. Men unselfconsciously urinated beside the road. Broken-down buses stood listing on jacks while their drivers changed tires. Others had been stopped by the police. Revolutionary slogans loomed from giant red banners and signs strung up on the facade of the party community centers.

Jimmy told me the names of the towns and pointed out the structures the Americans had built during the war. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had built the National Highway 1, known as the High 4, during the war. We passed lumbering,

Billboards touting new era gaze out on the old as locals make their way along the Saigon River.



repainted American and French military trucks, the spoils of victory in two different conflicts, now in use as freight trucks. I told him of my amazement at the friendliness the Vietnamese displayed toward Americans and asked him his opinion of Americans during the war.

"Sixty percent of them I didn't like, and 40 percent I did," he said, smoking the filter of a cheap Asian cigarette. "The educated ones I liked. But most of the enlisted people were trash. They were big and abusive. They treated me like shit." Then someone caught his attention. Although it was unlikely anyone aboard the Desoto spoke English, the diminutive guide lowered his voice. "VC," he said. He pointed, "That guy over there, he's VC."

Can Tho is the laid-back, friendly unofficial capital of the Mekong Delta with a population of around 200,000. The fog-shrouded Bassac River lazily winds its way past dock-side cafes and food stalls and beside a mammoth statue of Ho Chi Minh. I soon found myself followed by an entourage of locals. They don't see a lot of Westerners around here and the big reason is that the primary attraction of the city is not the city itself, but the villages out in the provinces, which are accessible only to that handful of tourists with a good guide. Without a good guide, a really good guide, forget it.

Jimmy Dean's a really good guide. The next morning we hailed a *cyclo* and made our way about 10 miles outside of town. Jimmy not only knew everyone, he was also related to everyone—which helps if you're a guide. On the back of his cousin's stepfather's motorbike we left the paved road and went deep into the delta, where the true identity of Vietnam lies. I was met everywhere with expressions nothing short of astonishment. The cratered, rock-strewn path slithered alongside the thin finger of the Mekong. Men bathed themselves in the muddy waters while women washed clothes.

Soon we were too deep in the delta to continue by motorbike. A small longtail boat churned its way against the ebbing tide and Jimmy Dean waved it down. Its helmsman was Tap, Jimmy's second wife's second cousin. The two embraced and we continued on.

"Hoa ky," Jimmy said to Tap, and then to me, "American. I told him you're an American. Hoa Ky are the Vietnamese letters 'U' and 'S.'" Tap was grinning broadly as he stuck out his hand.

The delta is an endless series of small enclaves of people who remember, people who took sides during the bitter years of the lethal Ping-Pong of American and Viet Cong control of the Mekong Delta area. The region was "Yankee by day and VC by night." After the fall of the south in 1975, Hanoi reappropriated the property of

those who farmed in the delta, which is one of the most densely populated areas of Vietnam, and sole provider of staples for all of the southern and central part of the country, and some of the north. The farmers got their land back only a few years ago.

Jimmy Dean and I stopped for tea at the house of one of his

wife's uncles, Thup, a man with the good fortune of having sons and daughters living in the U.S. He lives well. Joining us was one of Thup's best friends, who told me how happy he was about the embargo being lifted. It was curious that people knew more about the embargo's end in the rice fields than they did in HCM City's newspaper-laden cafes. Jimmy Dean cracked a joke about the VC. Thup said that his friend had once been a Viet Cong captain. Jimmy's jaw dropped. Thup's friend seemed not to notice. He was too busy telling me how happy he was to see me.

"The Vietnamese people don't hate Americans," he said. "We hate the American government." Thup, despite his previous role as an ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) infantryman, agreed with his friend. Two men who fought on different sides were now buddies, and eager to meet new ones. Jimmy Dean was still worried about the ramifications of the VC joke. "You know," he whispered to me in English. "I think this man really was VC."

It didn't seem to matter.

Two chickens and a sow were killed in my honor that day. Wherever we went, families offered us their food and drink. Where we accepted, I'd hear the wailing of swine or see the blood of the rooster. We drank rice whiskey and talked of our new friendship and hopes. How so many people who had suffered so badly for so long could be this excited to see an offspring of its roots—entire villages

emptied to follow me—I couldn't understand.

But I left the Mekong Delta with the peculiar but very distinct—albeit self-inflated—impression that what I had most in common with the delta's people was that I was an American.

And that nobody wants war.

It's the chickens and pigs that've got to be worried.

If there's any talk still left in and around HCM City about Americans as imperialist running dogs, it seems pretty much isolated to the American War Crimes Museum and the He Co Chi tunnels. The vast network of more than 120 miles of tunnels that reach across a decent chunk of southeast Vietnam, at one time, stretched from the Cambodian border nearly to

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The road to prosperity isn't always a straight line. Lanes make a personal appearance outside Tan Son Nhat airport.

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things had gone remarkably well. To reach Humla before the full moon, however, the *dhamis* would have to travel quickly. The following morning, they got a ride in a truck headed for Purang. As they drove off across the plains toward the Nepalese border, the sound of their singing rose clearly above the noise of the truck's engine. The gods had been with them. And still were.

Only Agu Lama stayed behind with us at Darchen. It was likely to be his last visit to Kailas and he wanted to complete the *namkor* in the mountain's inner sanctum. Tom and I accompanied him up the ridges behind the small town of Darchen, past the nomads' barking mastiffs and into a broad, silent valley leading to Kailas' vertical, southern face.

As we approached Kailas, it suddenly dawned on us that we were at the axis of the planet. For hundreds of millions of people in the Buddhist and Hindu worlds, we were standing on the very threshold of the universe. This was clearly a moment Agu had been waiting for. An accomplished yogi who had spent years in solitary meditation, Agu eagerly climbed the scree slopes below Kailas' massive walls of rock and ice as if he was on the verge of uncovering a very long sought-after mystery. After Tom and I completed one turn around the mountain, we decided to turn back at the entrance to the inner *kora*, preferring to respect the local traditions. We could see Agu striding briskly over the ridge, where he disappeared gratefully into the center of the earth. ☉

Tom Kelly, originally from Santa Fe, has lived in Nepal since 1978. His photos have appeared in *The Hidden Himalayas* and *Kathmandu: City on the Edge of the World*. Ian Baker lives in Kathmandu. A student of Tibetan Buddhism and the Tantric tradition, he is author of *Tibet: Reflections from the Wheel of Life*.

DOING IT

OUTFITTERS

USA: The following companies are offering trips to Kailas: Himalaya Trekking, Berkeley, CA (800) 777-TREK; InnerAsia Expeditions, San Francisco, CA (800) 777-8183; Karakoram Experience, Aspen, CO (800) 497-9675; Mountain Travel/Sobek, El Cerrito, CA (800) 227-2384.

Nepal: Himalaya Expeditions, P.O. Box 105 Thamel, Kathmandu, Nepal, Tel. 977-1-226622.

TRANSPORT

Airlines: From the U.S. to Kathmandu—Thai Airways, Singapore Airlines and China Air.

FURTHER READING

Modern: *A Stranger In Tibet*, Scott Berry (Recommended! Great portrait of Tibetan history and epic trip of Japanese monk/explorer Kawaguchi Ekai); *Trespassers On The Roof Of The World*, Peter Hopkirk (the race to Lhasa); *Sacred Mountains of the World*, Edwin Bernbaum.

Classics: *My Journey To Lhasa*, Alexandra David-Neel (1927)

VIETNAM continued from page 57

Saigon. Started in 1946 by the Viet Minh to evade French patrols, the tunnels were completed in 1970 to allow insurgents to control vast parcels of South Vietnamese territory despite being outgunned by U.S. and ARVN forces. Besides their strategic value, the tunnels became a symbol of the peasant/communist battle to unify Vietnam.

By the time I got there, however, they seemed more a symbol of the effort to procure hard currency, although the uniformed government guides were intimidating enough (a few of them had killed Americans as well). The tunnels had been enlarged and concreted to allow Westerners to tour them. B-52 strikes in the late '60s and early '70s destroyed many of the tunnels, but those that remain today near Ben Douc, about 40 miles west of HCM City, seem to be a must-see for western tourists. Bomb craters dot the landscape around Cu Chi, the few visible remnants of the U.S. campaign to denude the area entirely of foliage and people. Of course, like so many other campaigns the U.S. undertook, it didn't work.

As it turned out, Le, my waitress friend, was not a co-conspirator in the theft of my watch, and we met again. There was no ring of thieves, just a sole transvestite coincidentally sharing a dark HCM City street with an American mark who is attracted to the Third World because of the warmth it usually displays toward him.

Le and I rendezvoused at the post office, she in an exquisite traditional *ao dai* dress. We had dinner and later ended up at a disco off Dong Khoi Street. It was packed with Vietnamese pulsating to the throbbing rhythms of rave techno beneath a barrage of lasers and strobes. The men were in silk shirts and Armani trousers; the women favored Guess jeans. Le, in her *ao dai*, looked like an anachronism, a beautiful reminder of what Vietnam was leaving behind. And it was not lost on her. She looked like Imelda Marcos at a Dead concert. She was uncomfortable.

"My God," she said.

"Have you ever been here before?" I shouted above the din of a Ministry tape.

"Once, three years ago," she said. "It was very different then."

Ho Chi Minh City will be a different place a year from now, and a very different place five years from now. With the embargo over, 18 years of isolation and almost 30 years of rancor are coming to a close. A lot of people don't think it'll make a difference—that the more than \$5 billion already invested in Vietnam's burgeoning economy by other players, most notably Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, France, Britain and Australia, will leave any U.S. impact far back in the pack.

Don't count on it.

Ho Chi Minh is a city in a communist country where half the *cyclo* drivers don Dodge and Dallas Cowboy caps, where construction workers wear hard hats emblazoned with American flag decals, where Hammer tapes blast from sidewalk boomboxes, and where the majority of residents openly carry memo books filled with addresses in Los Angeles, Fresno, Eden Prairie and Wilkes Barre.

I say this not in support of, nor in indignation at the bounds this Southeast Asian community will be making in the next decade. But in a little bit of awe, that after all the agony and conflict, 20 years later, they seem to like us so much. Like us better than we like ourselves. ☉