

TRAVELLING WITH A REVOLUTIONARY - Part 1

Catholic churches mushroom, party schools become hotels, government officials buy land. Surprises are many on the roads of South Vietnam, especially when you travel with an old revolutionary.

Peter Bird Martin
ICWA/Crane-Rogers Foundation
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

It rained so much in Hue, Mr Vinh's cigarette began to droop from his lips. Dusk fell on the Ancient Imperial Capital of Vietnam and we took shelter from the monsoon under the balcony of an old colonial French villa. Vinh's white shock of hair and the burning ember of his cigarette pierced the darkness. "In prison, we shared every butt," he says, talking over the muffled sheeting sound of the monsoon. "These days, nobody shares anything."

Vinh is 70-year old. His head barely reaches my shoulder but he towers over me. He holds his head up high, chin erect, hands clasped behind his back. His finely shaped bony face is usually distant, lost in thought, seemingly disdainful. But the man can laugh, oh so well. Often, as we travelled together during the past ten days, his son-in-law cracked an anti-communist joke and the old man's laugh cascaded from his seat, at the back of our rented mini-bus. It was like the joyful flight of white egrets fluttering over a rice field, an explosion of water and light. "We were no communists," says Vinh as we chat under Hue's heavy rain. "None of us knew Marx. We were patriots and Ho Chi Minh was our only hope."

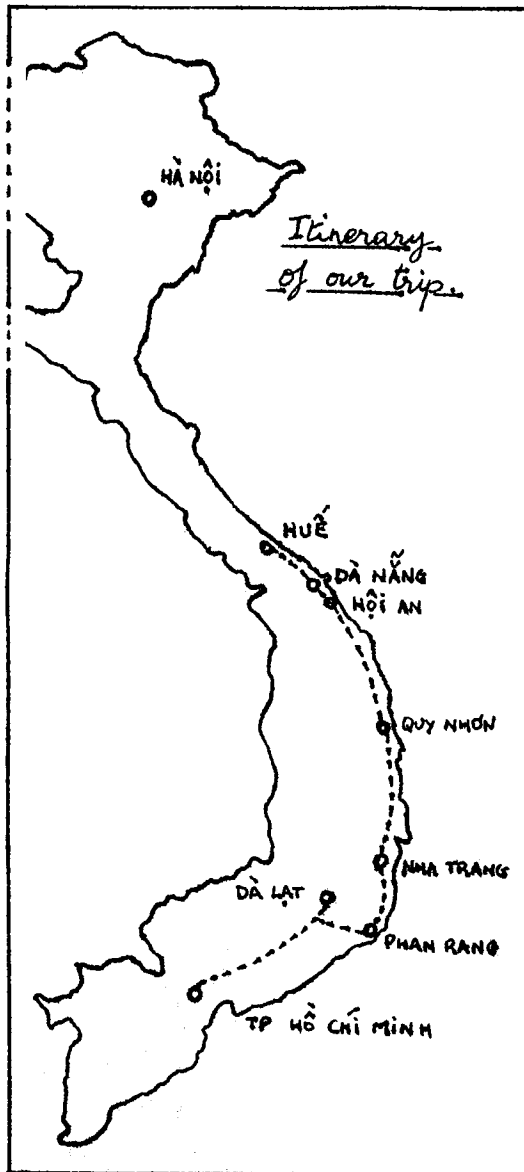
Water creeps up the road and seeps into the courtyard. A few cyclists glide through the flooded streets. Tomorrow, Vinh will go back to his small house in the city he still calls Saigon. Our trip is over.



In Hue, with a
stone mandarin.

Carole Beaulieu is an ICWA fellow writing about the countries of former French Indochina, with a focus on Vietnam.

I had wanted to see the South of Vietnam through the eyes of an old communist militant. The old man had wanted to see Hue, the Imperial Capital, and to return to the memories of his youth.



This newsletter will be the story of our trip: eating juicy grilled seafood on the beaches of the South China Sea, visiting renovated catholic churches and their radiant priests, living in hotels that used to be Communist Party Schools, discovering foreign-invested manufactures at a standstill because Vietnamese officials have failed to pay the peasants who supplied the raw materials. "There is much confusion now in my country," says Vinh. This morning on the BBC radio, Vinh heard a commentator quoting a Vietnamese government official. Visiting the West, the official had said: "Do not believe what you read in the State-owned communist press. Look at what we do," Vinh had been doing just that for quite a long time.

LEAVING THE BUSTLE OF HOCHIMINH CITY

We left bustling HoChiMinh City on a hot sunny Monday morning. I had an early interview at the State Bank, with the man in charge of setting up Vietnam's first ever Stock Exchange. Outside the massive building, a grey minibus rented from a local school waited in the shade. Mr Vinh had settled on the back seat. My friend Pierre and I sat behind Nam, the young driver. Between us and Mr Vinh, sat his daughter Phuong and her husband Luu. Excitedly, I began to talk about the plans for the

Stock Exchange. "It will fail," calmly interrupted Mr Vinh. "The people do not trust the authorities. They have no confidence. And without confidence you cannot have a Stock Exchange." The tone was set.

Mr Vinh is so thin one wonders how he sustained the years in the jungle, the "maquis" as he calls it using the word popularized by the French resistance under German occupation. Then there was prison, torture and the stress of working as an underground communist in Saigon during the American war. "Freedom," he says. "Independence. We wanted it so much. It sustained us."

Vinh joined the Communist Party at 23 and remained a card-carrying member until 1978 when he retired. "The Party had no room for an old *resistant* like me," he says, using again the French name used

by French civilians fighting the nazis under the German occupation. "I disagreed too often with the Northern cadres who had come to rule the South. I did not want to beg."

We are driving towards Dalat, the mountainous resort set up by the French in 1912, after the site was discovered in 1897. The road is in good condition. "A gift from the Americans," says Luu. Stalls of all kind clutter the side of the roads. We leave the suburbs of HCM City, and reach the outlying districts. Church spires dot the skyline. The first church is a cozy European-looking one with a pink facade and an elegant jutting tower one would expect to find in a rural French-Canadian village. There are many others, most of them recently restored. I stop counting at 15. "A lot of the catholic refugees who fled the north in the 1950's were resettled here," recalls Vinh. "The Saigon government thought they would be a good buffer against communist infiltration."

Years ago, many of the churches closed, some priests were arrested, others fell silent. Today, the Catholic Church breathes more easily. Some private schools have reopened. Vocations abound. The waiting list for the Saigon Seminary - whose yearly enrollment is limited at one hundred - extends to a few years. Father Joseph, who teaches at the Seminary, expects to have trained enough priests to cover the needs of the country by 1998. Father Joseph is Dalat's Cathedral parish priest and I will see him there.

TEA, COFFEE AND SILK - CORRUPTION ON THE LAM DONG ROAD

For now, we are slowly heading up the mountain, on the road to Bao Loc, the center of Vietnam's silk industry. We are driving through a region the Vietnamese call the Western Highlands. The smell of tea and coffee rush through our open windows in great gulps of air. Coffee beans dry out on the pavement. All around us, on the hills, mulberry trees, tea and coffee plantations expand as far as the eye can see. Temperature here rarely gets over 32 degrees, never under 15, a very favorable climate to raise silkworms. Peasants sell vegetables of all kinds, huge carrots, mountains of cabbages.

Lam Dong authorities are rather daring. They have sold to a Saigon communist official the right to put under culture hundreds of hectares of land although the law says no individual can own the right to use more than three hectares. (The land had been earmarked



Lam Dong markets abound with vegetables of all kinds.

for a new economic zone but left untouched for years) The new "gentleman farmer" from Saigon created hundred of jobs, better paid than the ones at the local state farms. He also became a millionaire in US dollars and was so sure his actions were those of a good communist he explained it all quite openly to the Far Eastern Economic Review, the prestigious Hong Kong-based magazine.

Life is full of paradoxes these days in Lam Dong. For many, the unorthodox communist landowner-turned-millionaire is more "patriotic" and does more good for the people than the director of very orthodox Viseri, the Union of Vietnamese Silk Enterprise, the state-owned largest silk enterprise in the country.

Lam Dong province is Viseri's largest producer of silk cocoons. A few years ago, as part of the new economic times, farmers in the area were encouraged to grow mulberry trees to feed the silk worms with promises of good returns. Attracted by the prospects of a flourishing silk industry, many foreign companies formed joint-ventures with Viseri. Italians, among others, were strong supporters. The Italian government authorized a 1.5% low interest loan to Viseri to set up five automatic spinning factories in the town of Bao Loc.

New silk weaving factories were also built. The white buildings now line the road between the town of Bao Loc and the Dambri Falls. But there are few vehicles in the parking lot of the factories. Many workers have deserted the place, their work place at a standstill. "Viseri did not pay the peasants who raised the silk worms, so the peasants stopped growing mulberries," explains Vinh. "Now some factories do not have enough raw material to operate."

Viseri stopped paying the peasants but kept on developing the new tourist spot we are heading for: the Dambri Falls. The road to get there is new. Viseri paid for it. At the site, there are horses for hire, and small paddle-boats on a lake. The falls are impressive. But there are few tourists, only a few Taiwanese trying out the paddle-boats. While so many roads fall apart in Vietnam, this brand new one leads nowhere but to the falls, the big new restaurant, and the soon-to-be-built hotel, all financed by Viseri. "Tourism means fast money", moans Vinh. "They get a fast return just on the building. The bigger the better, even if it is useless."

Later in the day, as we drive towards Dalat, Luu buys the latest edition of *Tuoi Tre*, the muck-racking Vietnamese Youth newspaper. On the front page, Viseri is the subject of a new scandalous headline. According to *Tuoi Tre*, the newly-built grandiose headquarters of the company includes a large new opulent flat for the director. Vinh moans again on reading that the director did not lose his job when authorities found out. He was simply "reprimanded" and told to mend his ways.(1) "This is what saddens

(1). The director of Viseri accompanied Premier Vo Van Kiet on a recent visit to Japan and South Korea, securing many new contracts. Viseri's relations with foreign companies have broadened with the help of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The company says it provides jobs to 11,000 households in Bao Loc alone.

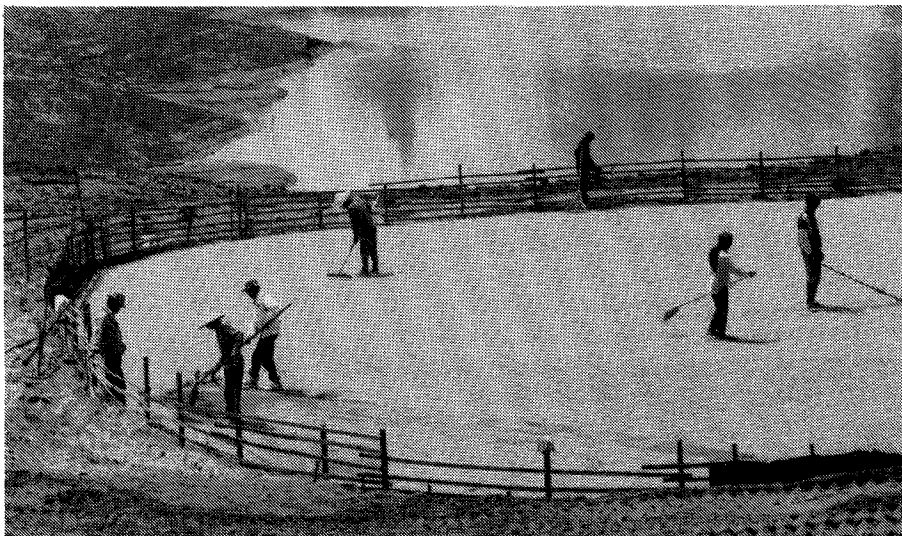
me the most," says Vinh. "Our country badly needs capital and those people are misusing public money for their own benefit. And they do not even get punished."

Money does not only grow on trees in Lam Dong province. It is also buried underground. Vietnamese geologists say the province's mineral resources are the largest in the country. Among them: gold, quartz, precious gems, granite and various construction stones. But few mines are being developed; domestic entrepreneurs lacking the capital and foreigners waiting for new mining laws to be adopted. (The country's mining law is still on the draft board with the help of a group of United Nations lawyers, but progress is slow and many key questions are still unresolved)

TO DALAT: IS IT CAPITALIST TO PLAY GOLF?

Further up the mountain, in the town of Dalat, tourism is still the major foreign currency earner even though the town has long lost its reputation for being the Little Paris of Asia. The resort town has been disfigured by neglect, population pressure and the chaotic growth of the new market economy. Colonial houses have been fitted with oddly-built annexes flouting any housing regulations or architectural style, trees have been chopped down, makeshift shops of all kinds constrict the already-narrow streets of the old town. A nearby lake has been emptied to plant vegetables. A golf course - Vietnam's fourth - is being built on the main hill overlooking the lake. Hundreds of laborers are working on the Taiwanese-financed project, building sand bunkers, sowing grass. "It is the fence I am worried about," mutters Luu ironically. "I wonder how they will manage to build a fence high enough to keep the people out without disfiguring the site."

Years ago, in the days when he was a young Vietnamese student coming out of the delta to study in the "big town" of Saigon, Luu saw his first golf course. "I regarded it as a huge injustice against my people, the proof of their oppression by imperialism," he recalls now. "It comforted me that I was right to be a communist. It is so funny when I think of it now."



Dalat's golf course: building a green.

Of Vietnam's four golf courses, 50-year old Luu has little to say now, except for his worry that they sometimes destroy valuable park land. "But they create jobs and they bring tourists," he adds. "If foreigners are willing to pay US\$25,000 to join those clubs, why not? As long as some of the money goes back into the community." (One golf course in the suburb of Saigon destroyed a park where trees had been planted by residents during the past 15 years.)

In Dalat, there are no "cyclo-pousse" (bicycle rickshaws), few conical hats and even fewer shoulder poles. In this hilly town, the cyclos have given way to motorcycles and ponies. The short horses pull covered carts used as taxis, and the clatter of horse shoes hitting the pavement clashes with the roar of the motorcycles. "Moto-ông" (moto-man) drive passengers around, wearing bomber leather jackets, jeans, baseball hats and muddy boots. They shove their hands deep down in their pockets, smoke cigarettes endlessly, briskly shake their long shiny black hair. The smell in the air, the pine needles and the cool wind, remind me of Northern Quebec. There is even chocolate cake.



Dalat's pony pulling a cart full of cabbages.

SLEEPING IN AN OLD JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMP

Our hotel is in the center of town, overlooking the lake. The main part of the hotel is a low-lying building resembling a motel. Vinh used to come here often in his twenties. In those days, our motel-looking guest-house was a Japanese internment camp. "I worked for the International Red Cross then," recalls Vinh. "But I also served the Viet-Minh, passing information to and from the prisoners."

For that and other activities, Vinh was later classified by the French colonial authorities an *élément dangereux* (dangerous element). He was 39 when he was arrested, sentenced and sent to Poulo Condore, the infamous island jail, on the southern coast of Vietnam. He spent three years there. "Five of them came to arrest me," he recalls laughing. "Five."

There was torture on Poulo Condore and Vinh was not spared. "They turned the handle of a machine, the one we called the phonograph, and it sent electricity through my body," he recalls. "After, I could not stand. Other prisoners held me under the arms, and walked me in the cell. We were like a family, like brothers. We only ate dried fish and unbleached rice, but we had each other."

Friends of Vinh's family appealed for his release and managed to get six months cut from his sentence. "I had many friends in powerful places," recalls the old man. "We had all been to school

together at the same French *lycée*. When they went off overseas to study law or medicine, I joined the resistance. I had just begun to study architecture in Saigon when the war broke out [with the French]. I felt it was my duty to join president HoChiMinh."

And he did. There was no "test" at the time, no required political training. Vinh was never asked if he believed in socialism, only why he wanted to join the Communist Party. During a short ceremony, he swore, in front of three communist cadres, to fight for his country's freedom and independence. He was assigned to work in Saigon to "mobilize the intellectuals" in favor of the cause.

The party did not support its members financially so Vinh had to find a job. He taught English and French, translated for the Red Cross, worked for the BBC and for the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Twice, he was offered jobs overseas. Once in London. Once in Geneva. He turned both of them down. "It was my duty to stay and fight."

Vinh never killed anyone. At least, not with a gun. He spent all his resistance years organizing intellectuals in Saigon, gathering information from his government-installed friends or teaching in the countryside. Some people probably died because of the information he gathered. But he never fired a gun. "At night, on television, when I see the fighting in Bosnia, I am horrified," he says as we drink coffee on a Dalat terrace. "I spent most of my life at war. But I never got used to it."

- "Could it happen in Vietnam?" I query.

- "No," he says. "All Vietnamese are nationalists and we have had enough of war."

After his release from Poulo Condore, Vinh was interrogated for another six months, this time by his communist superiors. "They were almost tougher than the French", he says laughing. "They had to make sure I had not been broken."

REFUSING TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF THE IMPERIALISTS

Vinh was a stubborn idealist, a well-educated one in an impoverished underdeveloped country. His father was the secretary of a French Resident General, under the French Protectorate. "As a child I sometimes sat on the knees of the French Resident General", he recalls. "Who could I have guessed the future then?"

It's a clear cool day in Dalat. We are standing on a hill overlooking the town. The sun shines through the tall pine trees surrounding what used to be the summer house of the Resident General. Little Vinh knows the house well. But only the ground floor is opened today. Foreign tourists are sleeping in the rooms on the second floor. They paid good money for it and the staff of the residence-turned-museum are in no mood to let us disturb them. My friend Luu argues we have paid the 10,000 dong (US\$1) entrance fee to see more than the ground floor. His request is met by a snarl. If he wants to see, all he has to do is pay US\$45. "Money is everything now," comments Vinh, shaking his head.

For years, patriotic Vinh refused to allow his two daughters to learn English or French, "languages of the imperialists", he used to say then. The daughters learned English anyway, although much later in their lives and they do not speak it with their father's ease. One daughter moonlights for an American company working clandestinely in HoChiMinh City while the other is a consultant for a Western government. "My children did well," says Vinh. "It is the only good thing that came out of it all".

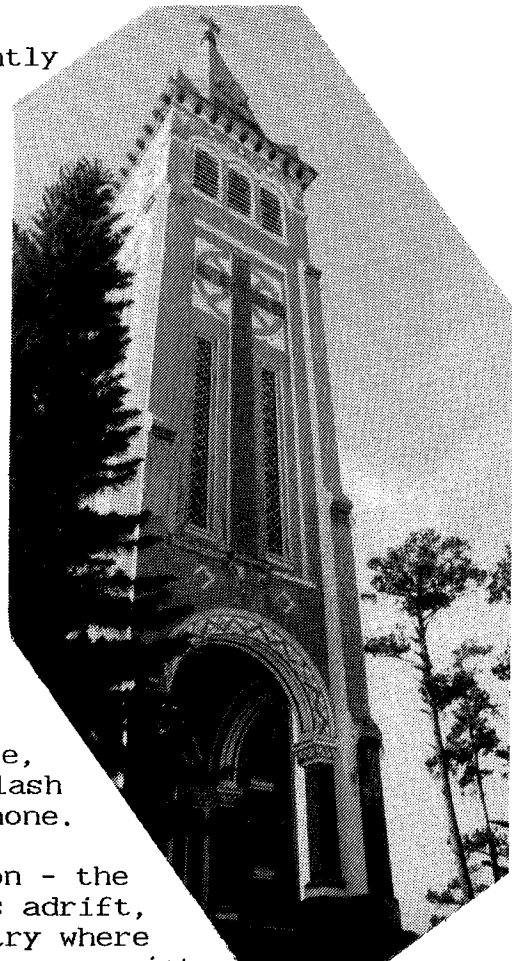
WHEN A COMMUNIST'S DAUGHTER ASKS ME TO SHOW HER HOW TO PRAY

Daughter Phuong - who is travelling with us - shares her father's patriotism and devotion to Vietnam. But their resemblance stops there. Years of living under an idealist but impoverished father have taught her the power of money. She knows a good bargain when she sees one, walks into every gold shop she sees, bargains hard for a gold ring bearing a tiny jade frog. "Frogs bring luck", she says happily. Phuong is superstitious. She vehemently refuses to be photographed if she is the third person in the photo ("bad luck," she says). Phuong burns incense at the pagoda, prays to various tutelary gods and reveres her ancestors at the house altar. "Even hard-line communists believe in geomancers," she says when I tease her on the subject. Phuong is lovely, with a round golden face, and long thick black hair. As we move around Dalat's cathedral, she nudges close to me. "I do not know how to pray in a church," she says. "Please show me."

The high-vaulted building is pleasantly cool. Brightly-colored stained-glass windows reach up high, shining in the morning light. They were donated early in the century by rich Saigonese families and have survived the tremors of war. "Dalat was not a strategic position," explains Vinh. "We never fought here."

Each Sunday, hundreds of people attend Father Joseph's morning mass. The number of his parishioners has doubled since 1975. The two daily masses - one in the morning and one in the afternoon - are often full. Mostly of young people! "Blood of the martyrs, seeds of Christians", (my translation) quotes Father Joseph in latin while Vinh quietly walks around the Church. Father Joseph is Vietnamese but he speaks French in a soft carefully way. He was trained in Switzerland, in France, and in Rome. I worry of a possible clash between him and Vinh. But there is none.

Even Vinh admits the young generation - the one born after the American war - is adrift, looking for higher values in a country where "getting rich" and building a consumer society



seems to be the authorities' main message. So if religion has them thinking about the well-being of others than themselves...

Father Joseph says there are no immediate plans to reopen Dalat's Couvent des Oiseaux, the famous French-language school where many young women from the Vietnamese elite were educated before 1975. "But more and more people now send their children to private school, even government officials," he says. (Mr Vinh knows. The young son of the man who used to be his superior in the Saigon resistance now studies at a private catholic school.)

The loss of a generation - education-wise - is the only regret Vinh will admit too as we chat over dinner that night. "We were so busy with war, we had no time to teach our children. After the Liberation many professionals fled the South. Many ignorant people replaced them in the universities and in government. Some who had never even seen a bicycle, came to manage whole cities. It took us ten years to realize our mistake. We lost so much."

At 70, with his sport-jacket and leather shoes, his sharp tongue and the oh-so Parisian way he holds his cigarette between his fingers, Vinh looks more European than I do in my plastic sandals and my Vietnamese plastic rain coat. The first time young communist Vinh had to make a speech in Vietnamese, when he joined the *maquis*, he was speechless. His French was much better than his Vietnamese. He could speak English too, quite well. But Vietnamese? "I worked hard at it and quickly I was not ashamed to speak in front of my comrades."

There are many other days when he is ashamed now. "All they think about is getting money from the foreigners," he says bitterly as we negotiate with the local police the right to visit the nearby village of the Lat tribe, one of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups.

PAYING THE POLICE TO VISIT A LAT VILLAGE

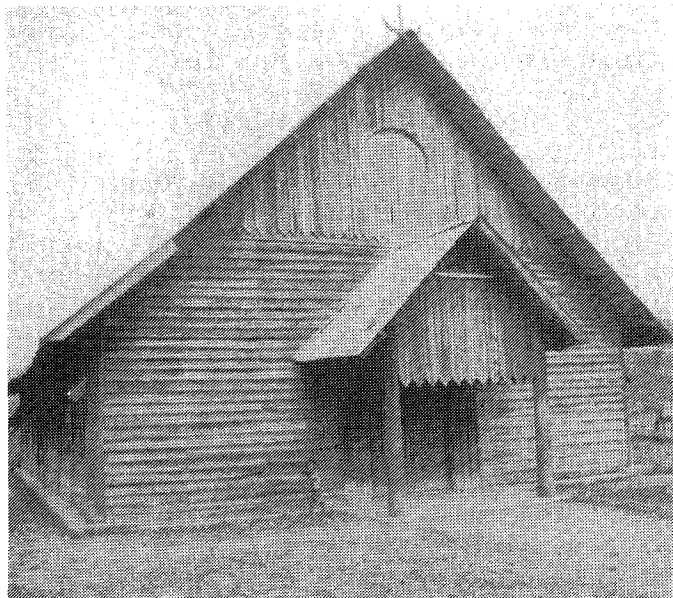
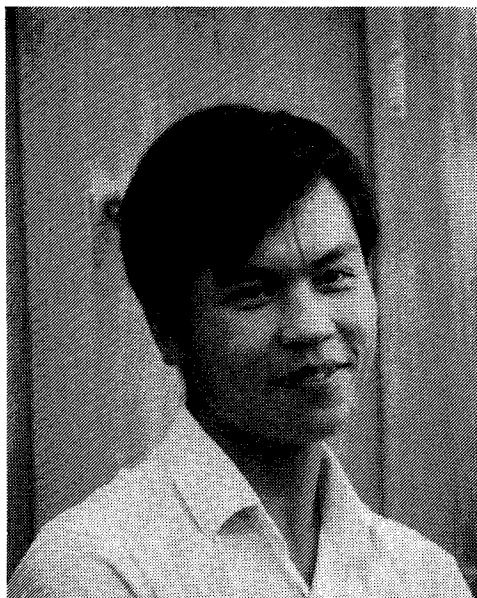
The Lats lived in the Dalat area before the arrival of the French. Nomads, they used to cultivate by slashing and burning the forests. The group was forcibly settled in a village 10 kilometers from the city and the police now make money "authorizing" foreigners to visit it: US\$10 for the permit in a country where Hanoi has forbidden such "travel permits", US\$10 for the guide. And no way to avoid the guide.

The guide is a 20-year old named Ho, which means "tiger" in Vietnamese. He comes from Hanoi and knows little about Dalat and much less about the Lats, whose language he does not speak a word of. He laughs when I ask if he finds the Lat women good looking. No. "They have dark skin," he says, "and no Vietnamese man would even think of marrying one." Ho got the job as a tour guide because his brother is assistant-director of the Dalat police. As we drive to the village, Ho stops at the check-point, at the village entrance, and obviously hands over some of the money.

A colleague of his at the Dalat Tourism Office has tried to tell us that the permit is for "security reasons", mentioning the threat of the FULRO. I smiled then, saying the last FULRO fighters, an anti-communist force bent on freeing the mountainous ethnic minorities

from communism, gave themselves up a year ago, making the front page of the Far Eastern Economic Review. He finally relented. "I know it's wrong to charge the foreigners this way," he said. "You are right to say this has nothing to do with security. It's the police. They need the money."

Off we go, anyway, to the Lat Village. I fear a tourist trap but find instead the most charming people I have yet to meet in Vietnam. Playful children in rags, noses oozing, run around us laughing. Women wave at us, motion us to come in their dirt courtyard. Ho even leads me to Dinh, the 21-year-old catholic seminarian who has been working in the village for the past two years. Dinh speaks French and we are quickly chatting away, leaving behind us a baffled Ho who did not know I spoke French.



Seminarian Dinh and the Lat's Catholic church.

Over 2000 people live in the village, all of them Lat except for Dinh and the local shop owner, a Kinh (Vietnam's main ethnic group). According to Dinh, shortage of food is not a serious problem in the village although there is malnutrition. Medicine, clothes and schooling are big problems though. "It is cold and many children do not have sufficient clothing," he says. "With the open fires in the houses, many have eye and respiratory infections. I distribute medication in the morning and teach in the afternoon. But there is never enough."

There's a school in the village but many families do not have the money to pay for it. (Most schools, even public ones, now demand entrance fees. The fees vary greatly between provinces and even between communes but even a few tens of thousand dongs can be too much for the Lat. This September, for the first time, all Vietnamese students admitted to universities had to pay US\$150 cash on their first day in class. In some universities hardly a third of admitted students showed up. The days of free education are gone.)

The women here choose their men. In the local language they "capture" him. A famous Lat saying goes like this: "When you live with your sister you are a free man. When you live with your wife, you are a slave." Two or three families share what they call a "long house", a long wooden house, bearing exactly the same name used by North-America's Mohawk tribe, also a matriarchal group.

The Lats are not bound to respect the Vietnamese policy limiting family size to two children. Most families have five or six. Sometimes more. Kids are all over the place.

- "What happens when the children grow up and need land to cultivate," I ask.
- "They go up the mountain and burn more," answers Ho.



Playing with a group of Lat children.

Since 1975, the Central Highlands have lost more than one million hectares of forest, some to logging, some to shifting cultivation. "The Lats are ignorant," says Ho. "If they used fertilizers they would have better crops and would not need to slash and burn. We are trying to show them." (Most mountain groups also refuse some food aid. But more on this in a subsequent newsletter)

Contrary to Ho, Dinh, who was born in Dalat and is as much a Kinh as Ho, speaks the language of the Lat. He lives in a simple wooden house near the long narrow Church that reopened last year. Mass is celebrated in the Lat language and the three Sunday services are always full. So are two daily masses. Officially, only one priest is allowed to work here and Dinh helps him while awaiting a place at the Saigon Seminary. But a new house is being built nearby. "Do not tell anyone," says Dinh, putting a finger to his lip. "We are building a house for the second priest. Officially he works and lives in Dalat."

I leave Dinh with some regret. Vinh is waiting in the mini-bus. He did not walk around the village or speak to anyone. Phuong says they are worried that being associated with the Lat might bring trouble. A friend of the family lost her husband to a Lat ambush in the late 70's and distrust runs high in the family. (The fact that

the dead man was an undercover police-officer trying to draw out potential dissidents among the Lat makes no difference to them.)



A Lat's Long House.

We finally leave Dalat, heading south-east, down the mountains, toward the coast and the town of Nha Trang. On our way lies the town of Pham Rang and the religious Cham sanctuary of Thap Cham. In Pham Rang, descendants of a civilization destroyed by the Vietnamese southern migration, still respond to the call of the muezzin and pray to Hindu deities in a language once spoken by Indonesians. Talk of confusion!

Further up the coast, near Danang, surfers gather for an international surfing contest. They will surf on China Beach, the famous beach where American soldiers came to relax between tours in the jungle. (The beach gave its name to the TV show) Then there is the ancient town of Hoi An and the Imperial City of Hue. All this in CB-16. Stay tuned.

Carole Beaulieu

Carole Beaulieu
October 30, 1993



PS: The names of our three travelling companions have been changed.