

Good Morning Saigon

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Dear Peter,

Someday, a Vietnamese kid will watch the video of his second anniversary and see me in the middle of it. I am the tall Westerner with the drawn jet lagged face and the wrinkled tee shirt. I sing "Happy Birthday to you" at the top of my lungs. The parents are delighted. They want the video crew to film the foreigner giving a flower to the kid. I oblige. Why not? It is all so unreal.

Dang Tien Trung, nicknamed Tu-Tu, is wearing a white miniature three-piece suit with a red bow tie. His mother shines in a Cinderella-like white satin dress, her feet encased in delicate high-heel shoes. The restaurant is full, with two other birthday parties going on at the same time. Close to 50 guests are there to celebrate Tu-Tu's birthday. The women are very elegant, their wrists heavy with gold bracelets. I stick out like a sore thumb with my loose cotton pants and my beaten loafers. "Only \$500 US for this party", says Le Thi Thuoy, 30, the proud mother of Tu-Tu. "Not expensive at all".

I bite in the cake they have offered me and wonder if my plane landed in the wrong country. Is this really Vietnam, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, a place where teachers earn \$5 a month<sup>(1)</sup> and people must bring their own medicine to the hospital? This is my first evening out. I am not in an expensive downtown hotel. I am 20 minutes from the center. This is supposed to be a "family restaurant". And these people are spending \$500 to celebrate their son's second birthday.

(1). A textile factory worker earns about \$50 a month, working eight hours a day, six days a week. (Le Monde, March 23, 1992)

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Welcome to Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, a city of 4,5 millions people, the commercial hub of Vietnam: 6,1% of the country's population, 50% of its exports, 33% of its growth industrial output; a place where cyclo-drivers earn more money than government engineers and real estate prices are on a par with Hong Kong's. (A few weeks ago, Koreans offered to pay \$10,000 a month for a newly renovated house located ten minutes from downtown. The owner refused. He wanted \$12,000. That is according to the neighbour, a European woman working for a pharmaceutical company.)

I knew it would be crazy. I was told it would be crazy. But I guess, I didn't believe it would be that crazy.

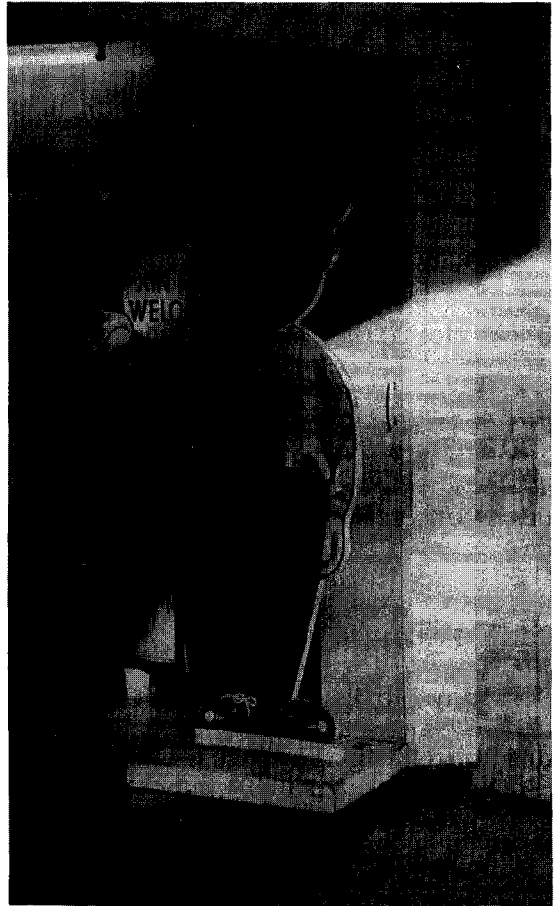
Our plane landed here only three days ago and I am already overloaded with conflicting thoughts about the place.

It all began aboard the Vietnam Airlines plane, a sense that things had changed. Not that the plane was different. It was still the same old Tupolev for which spare parts are hard to come by and which have the bad habit of running out of gas in mid-air. But the inflight service had improved. It was exactly like I had been told in Paris by music professor Tran Van Khê: "I flew with them a few months ago, he recalled. And for the first time, they served us something good to eat".

So we ate some tasty fish as the plane descended over Ho Chi Minh City in the midst of a tropical storm. The view was magnificent. On the dark carpet of the night some brilliant artist had sprinkled millions of uncertain lights. They flickered, faded, were suddenly rekindled in unexpected surges of blue, yellow and white. One looked in vain for the solid, stable light pattern of big cities.

The storm added a new twist to the beauty of the night arrival. Lighting pierced the sky. Thousands of tiny houses appeared then, hugging the sides of the Saigon river. We could see them clearly, as if in full day light. This was a city alright. But its lights were shaky. So very shaky. Our plane descended on Tân Sơn Nhất airport.

I dreaded that airport. Two years ago, in a searing heat, it had taken me more than two hours to extricate myself and my luggage from Tân Sơn Nhất. I could still see the place. The main hall was bare, stuffy, with broken-down fans nagging us from above. Closed-face men and women in kaki uniforms sat behind rickety old wooden table. Signs were all in Vietnamese. The heat wrapped itself around me like a thick cloth. In the hot and humid atmosphere, sweaty young men in tattered clothes were roughly throwing luggage from a cart unto the floor. No



fancy luggage carousel here. Passengers went desperately from desk to desk, trying to figure out which one was passport control, which one was customs. Some were more apprehensive than others, especially the Viet Kieu, those Vietnamese refugees who live overseas and were coming back to Vietnam for the first time. We all carried forms listing every item we were bringing in the country: scooters, jeans, medications, you name it. Everything had to be written down.

Was I ready for another shot at the Tân Sơn Nhất airport? Had the airport gotten its dose of *doi moi*, the Vietnamese perestroika? Would it be easier?

Well, it was. Tân Sơn Nhất is still the same old building. But there are some new white counters for the passport control officials. The fans work in the main hall. There is a small luggage carousel, looking just about like an enlarged version of a kids' car-racing track. The men and women in khaki uniforms are still there, sitting at their dark wooden tables, as stern and unhelpful as usual. But there is also a man acting like a traffic director, taking the hands of disorientated passengers and pushing them to the right table.

The forms have been simplified. We don't have to list all the serial numbers of the electronic equipment we are bringing in the country. (Almost a disappointment because we have spent a lot of time preparing the list. Instead, we fill one short form, declare the money we are bringing in the country and add the type and brand of our electronic equipment.) (2)

That is it. Nothing else. Our young custom lady is a bit annoyed because we used a French form instead of an English one, but on the whole, formalities go smoothly. She goes away to get our form stamped and restamped by some obscure authorities. And we are out of Tân Sơn Nhất.

Outside the main door, behind a railing, people are waiting under the tropical rain, waving small cardboard signs with names on them. Our contacts are there. We shake hands in the rain



New ads downtown HCM City

(2). Even that much won't be necessary from now on, according to the most recent issue of Vietnam News, a daily English-speaking Vietnamese publication. In its Friday Sept. 18th edition, Vietnam News announced that as of September 15th, visitors don't have to declare their money if they are bringing in less than \$3,000.

and off we go towards the lights of HCM City, half-an-hour drive away.

It is dark. So we don't see much. Just traffic and lots of large billboard ads for Sharp, Seiko, Panasonic and other major international companies. Our hosts drop us at a small hotel, about twenty minutes from the center of town and we go to sleep.

The Vietnamese call those "mini-hotels". They have spread like wildflowers in the newly entrepreneurial landscape of Ho Chi Minh City, seriously cutting into the clientele of the larger downtown hotels whose prices have skyrocketed when Vietnam became more popular on the tourist and business circuit.(3) (Who wants to pay \$275 a night at the Saigon Floating hotel?)

Our mini-hotel is called Villa Tulip. For \$20 US we get an air-conditioned room, a receptionist who speaks English, a neighbourhood devoid of beggars but peppered with small cheap restaurants. Sure, our mini-hotel has no bar, pool, fax service or tennis courts. And the owner doesn't know the magic formula to save his hotel from power and water cuts. (Most major hotels are spared the cuts but they won't say how they achieve such feat.) So today, at Villa Tulip, there is no water in the tap. Instead, each room gets two big buckets of water and profound apologies. Light is also a problem. The neons only come on after 10 pm. Better bring a flashlight or a candle. All this we are told because of the Tri An dam, the Soviet built dam from which the city gets over 50% of its electricity. It was so badly needed a few years ago, that engineers overlooked the fact that during the drier months of the year, there would not be enough water in the reservoirs to push the turbines, forcing industries to a halt, sometimes for days.

But this is not meant to be a report on the state of Ho Chi Minh City. It is, at best, a first impression, a quick look at a city from which I will be writing for the next few months. Walking around town, the changes are obvious. Some are well-known. They have often been presented in the news since 1986 and the beginning of Vietnam's transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented one: stores overflowing with goods (even American ones despite the embargo), five-stars hotels, English-speaking music blaring from every shop, kids hawking Western newspapers on the street, fast scooters and brand new cars, Asian and European businessmen elbowing each other in hotel lobbies. All that was there two years ago, albeit in a less intensive form.

But there is even more now: cellular phones, traffic lights, video parlors showing Madonna's latest hit, Japanese restaurants, a Tiger beer tavern (the famous Singapore brand), currency exchanges, elegant clothing stores, escalators, even a locally-made car, the Mekong car.

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(3). From 15,000 visitors in 1986 to 250,000 visitors in 1991 according to Vietnam Tourism.

The post office sells "phone cards" for the new yellow cabins disseminated in the city. (Overseas Telecommunications Corporation International, the international arm of Australia's Telecom monopoly has almost single handedly connected Vietnam to the Western world by installing international telecommunications link.)(4)

All over town, shop owners are busy playing with "game-boys". The small portable electronic games arrived in Ho Chi Minh City three months ago. They are "*lam ben Trung Quoc*" (made in China) and they sell for about 170,000 dong (about \$16 at today's rate of 10,800 dong for a dollar). The games are a big hit.

Money is the big talk of the town. The value of the local currency, the dong, against the US green-back is reported daily in the media. "Money is now the only thing on people's mind", says Phuong, a young classical musician who now studies Commerce at the University after finding out he couldn't earn a living with his music. There are talks of soon opening a stock-exchange.



Street vendor playing "game-boy"

Among that frantic activity, orange-clad bonzes slowly walk the streets of Ho Chi Minh City to collect their daily alms of rice. Two years ago they weren't there. They just weren't there.

Other things have changed not for the best: power cuts are more frequent as industrial activity increases and strains the already weak power supply system, water cuts become routine as the city's population feels the pressure of the countryside dwellers looking for a better life under Saigon's lights. "The population increase in the city is a major concern," says Ton Si Kinh, vice-director of the Economics Research Institute, a city-controlled body mandated to research the impact of the economic reforms. "There is a cost to this transition. People now have more diversity in their lives but the poor are growing poorer and the richer are growing richer. It is a necessary phase before achieving more democracy."

People like Dien (pronounced Zee-en), a 30 year old office worker, don't mind the risk. They just want a chance at a better life. "I quit my teaching job because the pay wasn't enough to feed me, she says. I had to work evenings at private tutoring. In my new job, I get to practice my English". A University graduate who lived overseas when she

was a child, Dien now does secretarial works for a private consulting firm. She won't say how much she earns. But she is happy with the change.

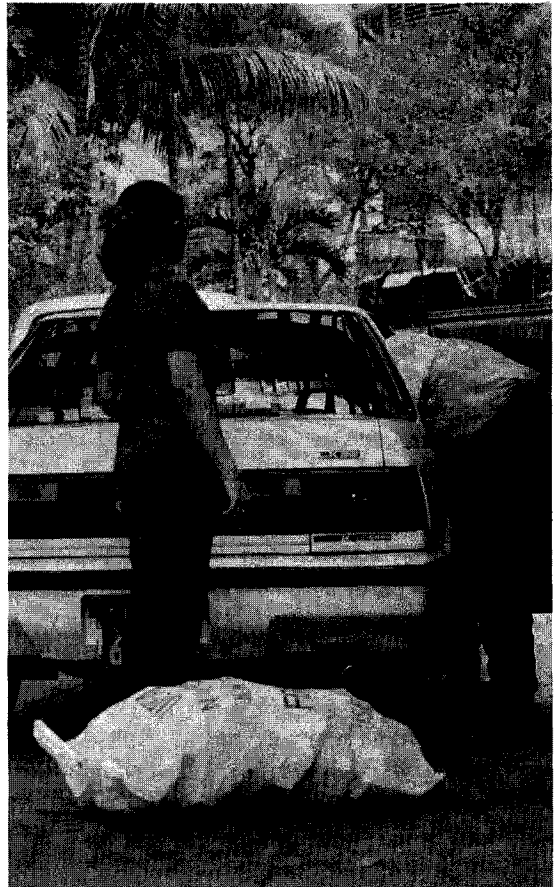
"It is a common trend, says Kinh. Many government employees are leaving for the private sector, mainly in the South. Who could blame them?"

Kinh talks for over two hours. A Southerner, he went to the North during the war with the United States. His family worked for the old regime. He believed in Ho Chi Minh's revolution. But the Soviet Union collapsed. And Vietnam, he says, had to adjust.

Kinh says the foreigners don't look deep enough into Vietnam's reforms. They only see the surface, only look at the problems, not the successes: the increasing rice exports, the banking reforms, the open door policy toward foreign investments, the inflation under control. Kinh goes on and on, proud of the fact that compared to the chaos of the Soviet Union's collapse, Vietnam is proceeding in an orderly fashion with its transition to a market economy. But I don't want to be guilty of the sin Kinh blames the foreigners for. So I won't write more on the reforms for now. Their impact is quite a controversial issue in town.

"Sure, there are many goods in the stores," says Loc, a 50 year-old professional who spent time in a reeducation camp after the Communists came to power in the South. "But our money is worth less and less."

Dealing in dongs is certainly no fun these days. The bigger note is a 5,000 dong note, which is worth just about 50 cents. Most people would rather do business in gold rather than carry around bags full of money. At EXIMBANK, one of the few Vietnamese banks doing business with the outside world, people actually sit on the floor of the lobby surrounded by piles of money one or two feet high. They shove them into large white bags. One bag filled with 200 dong notes could pay a \$40 meal at the Floating Hotel. Another one, filled with 5000 dong notes would buy a brand-new scooter. But inflation is now under control. After falling in 1991 to more than double their level of the preceding year, the dong has stabilized in 1992, exchanging at the rate of 10,000 to 11,000 dongs for a dollar.(5)



Taking money  
out of the bank

(5). Nguyen Xuan Oanh and Phillip Donald Grub, Vietnam: the New Investment Frontier in Southeast Asia, The Publishing House of HoChiMinh City, March 1992.

Loc has other quarrels with the actual state of the economy. He says so many products are imported clandestinely that they are pushing the locally made products of the market. Factories close down and there are even fewer jobs for the young people. "The economy is very sick, he says. The officials can't manage a free market economy."

Even Dao Cong Tien, rector of Ho Chi Minh City's University of Economics, admits that most government cadres are totally ignorant of market economy. "They have been isolated for so long, says Tien. They are not aware of the changes the world has undergone during the past ten years. They lack autonomy, they are afraid of taking initiatives."

The University has been given the mandate to "recycle" those 100,000 cadres in the new ways of the economy. But Tien admits that he doesn't really know how to do that. Few professors on his staff speak French or English so they can't read material "to update their marxist-leninist economic training". Many speak Russian or Chinese. Very few have had been exposed to free-market managing techniques. "We have not decided yet if we should send people to be trained in foreign countries or organize seminars here", says Tien. The task is daunting. The government wants the University to do it NOW, without much additional resources. And the University also has 12,000 students to worry about. Those students already don't have classes every day because professors of economics are few and they are often needed elsewhere. But Tien is optimistic. "What Vietnam can not do alone, it can imitate, he says. There is no shame in imitating. The Japanese do it. Even the United States do it."

I am suddenly reminded of Duiker's preface to his book about the Vietnamese post-revolution period. "It is easier, he wrote, to win a war of insurgency against a corrupt and incompetent government than it is to transform a primitive pre-industrial society into an advance state (...) Vietnam was not, in the classical marxist sense, an advanced capitalist society ripe for a socialist revolution. It was a relatively backward society with a primitive industrial base characterized by small-scale production. Marx had assumed that communism would only have to distribute existing wealth; in Vietnam the Party would have to create it."(6)

The Vietnamese Communist Party now admits a centrally-planned economy failed to create enough wealth to improve people's lives. It believes a free market economy will do it if social order is maintained. Many people seem to agree. "Its too early for more democracy, says Daisy, a 35 years old Saigonese who recently lost her job in a textile manufacture. We must first live better."

Daisy talks to me as I ride at the back of her scooter and I can't hear her very well over the traffic: buses screeching to a halt, cyclo-drivers screaming, scooters honking. It is only 9 o'clock on a Sunday morning but the streets are packed with motorists. Daisy is taking me to her place in Ben Tanh, a northern district of the city. She is about to lend me a bicycle and she is worried about my safety. How will I fare in the traffic? "There are no rules, she says. People do as they wish. They enter one-way street, they will cut you off. Be careful."

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(6). William Duiker, Vietnam since the fall of Saigon, Ohio University Center for International Studies, Athens, Ohio, 1985.

The first few minutes of riding her old green Peugeot are in fact quite wild, a good crash-course in Saigon traffic. Think of it like a weaving pattern. Cars, bicycles, cyclos, buses, all coming at different speed to the same crossings. Some give way. Others speed up. They all mingle, sliding into interstices left by a slower vehicle, never really stopping. You get the hang of it after a few minutes. Not that I will ever have the elegance of the native Saigon drivers. On their bicycles, the women wear long gloves and brightly colored hats tied under their chin. Some wrap a scarf around their mouth to protect their face from the dust and the pollution. Others sit side ways on the luggage rack of their sweetheart's bicycles, their *ao dai* (pronounced ao-zai) lightly flowing in the breeze. The *ao dai* is the traditional dress of the Vietnamese women: white pants, enlarged at the bottom, and a long-sleeves tunic, very tight at the top, slit at the waist. There seems to be less of them these days on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. Many women have exchanged them for shirts and jeans. And the only conical hats in town are those of the women who come from the countryside to sell their produces in town. They walk a curious bouncing step, balancing on their shoulders their traditional long wooden pole loaded with heavy baskets at its extremities. People are sleeping on the pavement, next to the luxurious Floating Hotel. Others are bathing outside, some urinating on the street.

I ride back to my hotel thinking of what Loc said yesterday about the changes in his life. "The women don't stay in the home anymore, he said. They earn more money than men doing the trading. Children are taken care of by strangers who are not paid well to do the job and don't care. The youngs have no morals. They only think about making money. They don't think of sacrificing for something they believe in. The Confucian family is fading."

I think of Tu-Tu's mother and father, both working in the tourism industry. I remember their happy faces, the table full of gifts. I ride and I think about French scholar Paul Mus who wrote in the 50's that the Vietnamese revolution was mainly "a competition to change the values by which the Vietnamese live".(7) I wish he was here. Maybe he could tell us who won.



Carole Beaulieu

PS: Fans of Vietnamese history will have noticed in my previous newsletter an awful typo. It is in the 17th century, not the 19th, that the Vietnamese really populated what is now known as southern Vietnam. My apologies.

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(7). Paul Mus and John T. McAlister Jr, The Vietnamese and their revolution, Harper and Row Publisher, 1970, p.4.