

Hanoi is overwhelming. Cars, masses of motorbikes and people are everywhere and every vehicle toots constantly. The women are keen to keep their skin pale so go to great lengths to cover up. Many wear a light coat with a hood and sleeves that cover the hands, or else a long sleeve blouse and gloves. They also wear a face mask to keep their face from getting darker as dark skin suggests that you are a farmer from a poor family.



Rose (Hanoi guide) shared a lot about her life including the fact the all women are required to move in with their husbands family when they marry; also that her job is frowned upon because she is not always home to help with female chores. If she wants to have another baby she has to take 2 years off work – she can't work while she is pregnant.

Also in Hanoi we visited the grave of Ho Chi Minh, known to the locals as Uncle Ho. People line up for hours to walk past his body, only to be pushed on by officious guards. The body is only on view for a few hours each day and every year it is sent back to Russia to be treated so it does not disintegrate.

We visited lots of markets where we saw both familiar and other unusual fruit and veg for sale. Snacks include cockroaches, beetles and spiders. Meat is sold in the open, there is no refrigeration although a few have ice on their goods



Many people also sell goods from the side of the road or from overloaded trailers pulled by motor bikes. Families often own a small plot land to grow their own rice; much of the work is still done by hand.



Vietnam has lots of unfinished constructions - some were started before the GFC and were just abandoned when the money ran out (2008). There are huge complexes - multi story buildings and large tourist / holiday unit complexes unfinished. Things are starting to take off again now. Some buildings that are actively being built still look a bit derelict because the sites are such a mess. There are also government projects that have just been stopped because they ran out of money – eg train between Ha Long and Hanoi - along the road there are bits of rail line and bridges, all disconnected.

Ha Long Bay is very picturesque. Unfortunately our time on the bay was cut short by the arrival of a typhoon and



torrential rain. Our guide found us a hotel for the night, but many fishermen did not follow the instructions to leave the bay and did not survive.



Next stop was Hoi An, which is quieter and more traditional. For one of our side trips we chose to cycle around a small island to see locals farming, making and repairing boats, making mats and baskets. With just 3 couples and the guide, it was a lovely way to see the area – even if our cycling skills were a bit rusty.



The French influence in Vietnam is seen in the food, such as baguettes, and occasionally in the language. One young man called Graham “Papa Noel.”

The south of Vietnam is more Westernised and not as rigid as the north.

In Saigon (also known as Ho Chi Minh City) we were taken to a museum showing the tunnels and traps used in the “American war”. One of our group had been in Vietnam with the Australian Army, he said that the Australians were rarely caught in these traps, it was usually the American soldiers.

A short bus ride took us to the Mekong River where we boarded a lovely old vessel *La Marguerite* which was our home for the next few days. We visited villages along the shore; each village specialising in one craft such as silversmith.



In some of the villages we were able to contribute a bit to the local communities. One way we did this was by taking a ride in an ox cart – the locals all turned out to watch the crazy white people.



I found a few aspects of Cambodia confronting, particular the fact that every village has an elaborate temple for the monks while the people live in poor quality houses and education is minimal. It is supposedly compulsory up to age 12 but you can only go to



school if you have a uniform. We visited one school where the children were cramped 3 to a desk in a hot room, with a chalk board and only the wealthy children had pencils. The children were very happy and friendly and were delighted to have an opportunity to practice their English. They know that knowledge of English may get them a job in the growing tourism sector.

Boys from poor families can get secondary and university education in the Buddhist temples but this is not an option for girls. They are expected to get married and have children.

We visited another school that is supported by the company we travelled with, where they teach art and English. We stayed in a hotel, run by a Norwegian company, which trains local staff and also contributes to development of rural villages. There are a lot of countries helping Cambodia to improve the standard of living, particularly in the rural areas.

The disturbing part of this trip was visiting the Killing fields and S21 (Khmer Rouge security prison). It was made more poignant knowing that our daughter in law's family had to endure the Pol Pot regime and many of them died during this time.

Further north, Siem Reap is a thriving community, as it is the gateway to the amazing ancient temples in the area. Angkor Wat is just one of many temples which are hundreds of years old. They have changed from being Buddhist to Hindu temples and back again, several times. Many are being repaired with funding from other countries including Japan and Canada.

We travelled on boats of various sizes, ox cart, bicycles, trishaw, cyclo, tuktuk and bus. It was a very interesting trip.

