

Trip to Vietnam: Life

The following dispatch was written by Rami Chhabra, a freelance Indian journalist who visited Vietnam from July 11 to Aug. 3.

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SAIGON, South Vietnam—The fury of the battle is over, though the guns are not yet completely silent. For some the adjustment is painful; for others it has been unbelievably smooth. But for all a different life is dawning in Vietnam.

"I was hysterical when the American planes left and I couldn't get beyond the airport gates," said a young Vietnamese who had worked as a secretary for an American Government agency for seven years. Today she is bitter about her one-time employers and astonished and grateful at recent events.

"You know, my American bosses made me a very special plea to stay on in Saigon till the very end," she said. "I was guaranteed evacuation alongside my grandmother and aunt. But on that fateful 20th, the director was called to the embassy and when he returned the Americans started to leave one by one.

"They told us they were going to the embassy to make arrangements for us and headed to the airport. To be fair to them, the director did call from the airport saying he was sending buses out for the employees. They even came. But the Marine guard escorting us went in at the airport gate and disappeared. And they wouldn't let us in. One bus had an American on board and it got by."

Better Than Expected

"I thought it was the end for people like me," she continued. When some days later the call came for everyone to register, I thought: "This is it." But it took me 15 minutes in all, and so far no one has asked about my work again. In fact, when the soldiers came around to



Former soldiers of the S

our house, it was only to check if we had enough rice."

A former army captain showed similar elation. With a record of work for an organization believed to be affiliated with the Central Intelligence Agency, he was interrogated for four hours.

"At the end of some searching questions they asked: 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?'" he recounted. "I looked them in the face squarely and said No. I realize today it was against the best interests of my country, but then I was doing a job of work and I did it to the best of my ability."

So far he has not had any problems.

For some life has changed, drastically. One is Huyhn Ngoc Ninh, who for 12 years was an interpreter for the United States Army and before that for the British for three. I met him reclaiming the fields alongside the farmers of a village in Quang Nam Province 20 miles from Da Nang.

Volunteer for Hard Work

A thin figure in a back cotton suit and with a pale face under the traditional straw hat he was wearing against the midday sun, he spoke perfect English but hesitantly.

"I volunteered to work in the countryside for three months because I want to do something for my country," he said. "I want to share in the rebuilding."

Some 600,000 people have left Da Nang for the farms, bringing the population of that teeming city down from a million. All around, the overgrown fields are being leveled and houses of bamboo—some with packing cases, corrugated iron, asbestos sheets or billboards from American bases—are mushrooming.

I traveled from the North Vietnamese capital of Hanoi to Saigon by road, the first journalist from a non-Communist country allowed to make the trip.

In Hanoi strict discipline is still the rule. Meat, sugar and milk are scarce luxuries, but bananas, pineapple and beer are plentiful and cheap. Bicycles, a coveted possession, costs 300 dong, or a little over four months' average pay.

The 1,200-mile journey down Route 1 from Hanoi to Saigon took six days. As one leaves Hanoi the landscape is a masterpiece of orderliness. On either side stretch vast, lush tabletops of emerging paddy shoots, or the fields lie submerged in water, big flashing mirrors. Every inch is assiduously cultivated.

Even the bomb craters have been transformed by nature into limpid pools where lotus and hyacinth flower and the buffalo wallow or little boys stand, fishing rods in hand. Often a diesel pump is used to tap this natural reservoir to irrigate the land.

At Vinh, which is being rebuilt with East German help, the scars of war rudely slash the tranquility. It was once a sophisticated city in the French tradition, but all that remains is a bamboo village and the stark skeletons of what were tall buildings.

The famed Hanoi train to Saigon, re-established a few weeks ago, ends here and passengers have to transfer to road transport because the tracks farther south have yet to be replaced.

South of Vinh the devastation is more pronounced. The road becomes excruciating and the fields appear riddled and fissured, though vast tracts have been carefully planted with saplings.

Past Ben Hai the swaths of light cut by the jeep's headlights silhouette huge hulks sprawled on the roadside—over the next four days and 800 miles is what must be the world's longest junkyard of scrap metal—wrecked tanks, trucks, ambulances, jeeps.

Hue Under a Curfew

In Hue there is martial law at night. A request to see something of the town, even to take a walk down the road, is gently but firmly turned down.

At the harbor town and former American base of Da Nang the seagulls circle and dip in an azure sky that merges into a cobalt sea and the fishing boats flare their sails as they set out for a catch. Though this could be the French Riviera, reminders that it was a battlefield are never distant.

The hotel, obviously a former G.I. haunt—"No girls allowed in the room" says a placard on the door—there is air conditioning, but the room looks unswept and the fancy faucets leak. The owner has fled and the hotel is under government management.

Life seems normal in the streets. Coca-Cola sells briskly everywhere; the Da Nang plant, new under government management, is producing from the ingredients in stock, but when they come to an

end, it is expected to switch to a Cuban formula.

The Da Nang air base is a vast pile of litter behind barbed wire. Though visitors are barred, one can see the row upon row of Soviet MIGs where American bombers once stood.

In a textile factory, one of the largest in Da Nang, Soviet cotton replaces American, but the equipment still bears the symbol of US aid.

From Da Nang onward the natural abundance of the South is increasingly evident. There has been a bumper harvest, and the big piles of grain contrast with the heaps of broken vehicle parts and shells along the way. Food seems plentiful.

In Saigon the mood is different. Of the four million people, 2.5 million are unemployed. They throng the streets, sit at wayside cafes that have sprung up everywhere and buy or sell at the thousands of street stalls. The stocks include Japanese tape decks complete with speakers for \$100, Kodak cameras, Westinghouse freezers, Sunbeam waffle irons, Bayer aspirin, and Bob Dylan records. Much of it is looted from American post exchanges. Black-market gasoline is available in beer bottles.

Banks have been closed for over three months. For a few days in July the nationalized banks opened, per-

mitting those with a balance of 100,000 piasters to draw 10 per cent—the equivalent of \$14 at the official rate of exchange or \$4 in the black market—and that only after a district official had certified need.

The notorious prostitutes still continue to ply their trade, though a little less conspicuously, with North Vietnamese soldiers replacing G.I.'s.

Strain shows through at the 10-day "re-education course" to which visitors are taken on an officially organized tour. In a denunciation class, where each of the 280

in the course gets up to read a catalogue of past mistakes and United States misdeeds and to pledge "undying hatred against the U.S. imperialists," several women surreptitiously wipe their eyes.

One of them, a former secretary in a government office, a divorced mother of two, weeps openly. "She is overcome by the memory of what she has done," a Foreign Ministry guide comments.

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