

allowing them a toe hold in the American dream. You integrate the Third World into American cuisine while at the same time segregating it from American society. As an immigrant you have the vicarious pleasure of seeing your food move out of the gastro-ghetto into middle-class respectability in a fancy restaurant where you might be lucky to work as busboy.'

The main dishes came: the menu's 'fresh prawns from Arizona served Southwest bouillabaisse style, flavored with nopalitos and chile pods'; though entirely unrelated to bouillabaisse in any style the prawns were great and the little bits of nopal cactus served as signifiers of the Southwest as surely as an ox skull on a whitewashed wall signifies Georgia O'Keeffe. Signifier of the Southwesternness of the *supreme de volaille* was *jicama*, Mexico's retort to the daikon radish, this year's crisp texture of choice though, in the Saint Estephe's presentation, pointlessly shredded. The saddle of lamb had its signifying *posole*, and the New Mexican *carte d'identite* of the veal chop was established by a *sopaipilla* — a square pouch of puff pastry from which one tears a corner to pour in honey.

We ate and we drank and as we did so parties of sober-looking men in suits and ties came in to eat, straight from the office evidently even though it was now well past nine, Hughes engineers, aerospace executives, traders and guardians of the Pacific rim. As the hefty bill arrived I told Mercator and Augusta of the feeding frenzies of the East Coast: bogus regionalism disguised as the 'new American cuisine'. In New York at Jams, for example, Norwegian salmon with *jicama* and green-pepper *concasse*; sauteed foie-gras salad with *jicama*, sherry vinaigrette, and deep-fried spinach; red-pepper pancake with salmon and Oestra caviar.

Mercator raised his hand. 'Stop, please! It's the same here in Los Angeles, as you well know. Probably worse.' But it was my privilege to give myself the final word. 'The last refuge for an elite frantic to define itself, yet

with nothing creative to say, is conspicuous, relentless consumption of commodities of which the most basic is food. The British elite, at the height of their empire in the late nineteenth century, conspicuously consumed meals which were vast in size and, amid their belches, proclaimed, "We gorge, therefore we exist." Today, the conspicuous consumer in the United States knows that to gorge is to die. He renders his orgies of consumption — hugely expensive to be sure — more theatrical. He nods to the humble New Mexican pueblos with a blue corn tortilla. He winks at the Orient

with a cumin seed, at China with a water chestnut, at Siam with some lemon grass, at Japan with a dried bonito shred. He consumes the world by symbols and the more he eats down the more he pays up. Ideally our conspicuous consumers must ingest all these symbols at the same time, for then truly they can fold their napkins with a contented sigh and say, "We are the world".'

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## Up the Ho Chi Minh Trail

**Twenty years after Tet, how is Vietnam now?  
From the old American embassy to the cellars of Saigon,  
all a leftie tourist would need to know.**

**I stand in the arrival hall at Tan Son Nhat Airport, watching nervously as suitcases and boxes mount in azig-zag pile on the concrete floor. I tell myself to stay calm. On my firstever trip to Viet Nam, I have lost my luggage. The heat is rising and the sweat is running in rivulets down my legs and into my \$34 black rubber-soled sandals. A feel ridiculous. I look out the doorway. The round concrete hangars that once housed US planes stand empty on the edge of the tarmac.**

Twenty years ago Tan Son Nhat was the scene of a major attack by the National Liberation Front forces during the Tet offensive. In 1968 I wore beads, patchouli, jeans, Indian shirts and long cotton skirts. I had a Che Guevara poster in my bedroom and burned incense at parties. I went to demos with friends and a year later

I screamed with 100,000 others outside Sydney Town Hall when Hall Greenland yelled into the microphone "Fuck Gorton, fuck Nixon and fuck the war".

The Air France flight from Bangkok has just landed. I watch fascinated as customs officials in khaki uniforms and peaked caps with red hatbands poke self-consciously through the luggage of the Vietkieu, the local name for Vietnamese who live abroad. An immigration officers meticulously examines the passport of an elderly Vietnamese woman in an expensive grey silk dress.

Customs regulations allow each passenger to bring in tax-free 1,000 cigarettes, 50 cigars, or 250 grams of tobacco; one litre of liqueur; and one litre of "eau de vie". Forbidden are opium, arms, explosives and cultural articles incompatible with the social regime of Viet Nam.

The Saigon tourist brochure announces (in French) that the airport is seven kilometres from the centre of town. The town is Ho Chi Minh-ville, as it has been renamed since the liberation of Saigon in 1975. Today, the twin cities of Saigon and Cholon comprise the greater city of Ho Chi Minh.

Uncle Ho died in 1969, seven years before the reunification of his beloved Viet Nam. From where I sit on the rooftop garden of the Rex Hotel, if I close my eyes and take a sip of gin and tonic, I can see the Quai de Nha Rong, or Port de Saigon, whence President Ho Chi Minh set off in 1911 as a young patriot in search of his country's salvation.

A nightclub belts out pop music across the rooftops of the commercial centre of old Saigon. The garden rooftop of the Rex Hotel was once a favourite haunt of US officers. Now the Ben Thanh, its open air terrace is gently Vietnamese with intricate bonsai trees, a battalion of large ceramic elephants, cane chairs and a barman who has been mixing cocktails around the bars of Saigon for twenty-five years.

A tinkling piano, stiff white tablecloths, black and white starch-suited waiters with formal manners, and fresh flowers on the tables every morning in the dining room. Breakfast is yellow or white noodles, served with a porcelain spoon and chopsticks. Fresh fruit and Laotian coffee that tastes of chocolate is definitely mind-blowing. The French should go back to Viet Nam to find out how to make fresh crunchy bread rolls like they used to when Saigon was the river port capital of French Cochinchina.

If Ho Chi Minh took a walk around some parts of the city today he might be a touch puzzled. Shops stocked with Sanyo, Sony and Olympus cassette players, radios and cameras attract crowds of onlookers, while youths in blue jeans ride brand new motor bikes. He might think for a moment that America had won the war. And, in a way, it did.

On the street, a gentleman brushes up beside me. One thousand dong, he says. I ignore him. He runs

after me. Fifteen hundred, he whispers. I hurry into a souvenir shop. Black and red shiny lacquered boxes, carved ivory jewellery and tiny antique watches and statues are too good to pass up. How much that one? For two US dollars I walk out with a carved ivory necklace and an exquisite lacquer jewellery box. That was about 800 dong to the dollar. At the hotel the rate was 450. The American greenback is the real currency of Viet Nam.

I am waiting in the lobby of the hotel. Earnest-looking businessmen with leather briefcases confer with their agents and interpreters under gilded ceilings and chandeliers. The panelled walls, inlaid ivory screens and Chinese-style carpets are straight out of a black and white movie.

My interpreter has arrived. She is probably in her late twenties but she looks younger. Her black, shiny hair falls to a straight bouncy bang just above her collar. She has large round eyes and thick glasses, and glorious French-accented English for which I am truly grateful. Breathlessly she explains that my luggage has been found in Bangkok and will arrive in two days.

At the Saigon tourist office, the deputy director serves strong tea in tiny cups and black coffee with biscuits. I learn that it is customary to take both. The walls of the office are newly painted and there are none of the usual glossy travel posters in sight. Tran Duong is pleasantly efficient in a beige linen suit. The government is well aware of the currency problems, she says. They have, in fact, four different official prices — one for western tourists and businessmen, one for Vietkieu, one for tourists from socialist countries and a much lower one for local Vietnamese. It's a kind of apolitical means test.

Madame Tran Duong doesn't make any political distinctions. She is quite proud of the small but growing number of sentimental Viet Nam veterans from the US and Australia who are returning to visit the battlefields of their youth. The Saigon tourist office is organizing trips to the 17th parallel which marks the beginnings of the Ho Chi Minh

Trail, the network of tortuous paths, jungle trails and underground tunnels that provided cover for guerrillas from bombing attacks by day and allowed the movement of troops and supplies by night.

The gates of the former Independence Palace, smashed by tank 843 in 1975, have been rebuilt. Now Unification Hall, the old palace is surrounded by parkland, which is not open to the public. It retains intact the room where President Thieu used to say his prayers. The white lattice-fronted American Embassy, which saw the dramatic last hours of the US withdrawal from Saigon, has become a government office.

Fourteen thousand tourists passed through Ho Chi Minh City last year. For the first time since the reunification of Viet Nam, two thousand tourists came from the West. The southern Vietnamese capital is a departure point for the ancient cities of Hue, Hanoi and Danang. There are two flights a week by Air France from Bangkok and one a week from Manila. An Australian tourist agency runs charter flights to the Kampuchean capital of Phnom Penh and the ancient temple of Angkor Wat.

A tourist-led recovery seems unlikely. But who knows? The hotels are still there. New ones are to be built under joint ventures with foreign governments and private companies. The Continental, the scene of Graham Green's novel *The Quiet American*, is under renovation. I wonder if he has been back since.

Tonight I have dinner at the Ben Hui or Friendship Hotel. The terrace is smaller but, from fifteen storeys up, there is a cool breeze and a view across the Saigon River. I order sole, cooked French style and served in mayonnaise, washed down with Russian wine from Georgia. I decide that warm Vietnamese beer served with large chunks of ice is an acquired taste.

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Photo: Carlotta McIntosh

## SAIGONTOURIST

The government tourist office is located just across the square from the Benh Thanh Hotel. If you want to get out of town, Saigontourist has a wide choice of tours to the provinces. Vung Tao, the favourite resort of US servicemen, is a few hours' drive from Ho Chi Minh City. It boasts beaches and Buddhist pagodas. These days, the hotels of Vung Tao are patronised by Russians and East Europeans, who travel mostly in groups organised by their unions or as delegates to conferences.

## CURRENCY

As in all socialist countries, currency cannot be taken out of Viet Nam. The Vietnamese dong is not exchangeable outside the country. You need US dollars not Australian dollars. Take more than you think you will need, but include at least fifty in small denominations. Rates vary from 450

dong to the US dollar at the hotel desk to 1,500 in the street.

## HOTELS

Foreigners are expected to stay in hotels. The bill is always in US dollars. The most expensive hotel in Ho Chi Minh City costs no more than \$US30 per person. Hotels in Hanoi are cheaper.

## TRANSPORT

Saigontourist runs some coach tours to the provinces. Long distance travel in the country is mainly by Air Viet Nam. Return fare from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi is \$US300. If you want to go to both cities the best way is to schedule your ticket to arrive in Hanoi and depart from Ho Chi Minh, or vice versa; that way you only pay \$US150. Taxis can be hired for 50 cents a kilometre including the driver. In the city there's a choice between taxis which are hard to find, and cyclos which aren't. In fact, tourists are often

besieged by pedicab drivers all wanting to be your exclusive driver. They have means tested prices and western tourists are at the top of the list. It's not uncommon for them to ask for a fare equal to the monthly salary of a government clerk. If you are brave you can buy a bicycle. At local prices you can afford to leave it behind when you go.

## FOOD

Hotels and restaurants serve excellent food. Mostly it's traditional Vietnamese, or in Cholon, Chinese, and there are even a few that serve exclusively French menus. Hotels usually have a choice of Vietnamese or French. Fish is fresh and plentiful. Once you've tried tiny spring rolls wrapped in mint leaves and rice paper and dipped in hot sauce, you'll be hooked on the local fare.

## WINE

The cellars of Saigon are full of surprises. Dusty bottles of ancient Bordeaux, romantic red and white Russian wines from Georgia, and Bulgarian rose are just a few of the ~~to~~ to be found.

## MOVEMENT

There are no explicit instructions limiting free movement. However, without an interpreter it is more difficult. There are few telephones.

## CLOTHES

Everybody wears pants. Black peasant pants like the Viet Cong used to wear are seldom seen in the city now. Women wear jeans, or the traditional Ao Dai. There is a vast range of fabrics at the market and tailors can make up the material of your choice in a day or two at low cost. The slit fitted shirt, slit at the waist, over black or white wide-bottomed pants is worn by young and old for formal occasions. The silk shops sell embroidered shirt lengths in exquisite colours and patterns.

## WEATHER

Hot in the south and cooler in the north. Winter in Hanoi is like Melbourne, wet and cold. Mosquitoes can be a problem. Take the usual precautions against malaria.