

Travelogue: Discovering the new, modern Vietnam



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Over the next few weeks, Citizen freelance writer Kira Wronska Dorward will be reporting from Vietnam, as she discovers its new vitality and beauty.

After 26 hours in transit, we finally make it out of the airport in Ho Chi Minh City. There is a horde of people outside the entire length of the building, kept back by barriers and police to keep some semblance of order and a clear walkway. I instantly melt into a puddle in the tropical heat and it takes us all of three minutes to sink into a mercifully air-conditioned taxi. I'm already flustered by the sheer amount of people that started at baggage claim, and the lobbying on all sides for SIM cards and money changers, before I can process which foot to put in front of the other to get out the front door.

However, once in the taxi driving through the city, I start to relax and enjoy the exotic view like the window pane is actually a television screen. The first thing that strikes me is the number of brightly clothed people on motorcycles. Although there are technically two lanes in the street, we drive over the centre line, which seems to be more of a suggestion in any case. There are people coming and going from all sides and life is just teeming everywhere.

The Lonely Planet describes HCMC as 'Vietnam at its most dizzying,' and 'a high-octane city of commerce and culture that has driven the country forward with pulsating energy.' I feel like I'm in a huge hive where everyone zips around (on motorcycles) intent on their business, and I'm swept up in the flow.

We see what I assume are propaganda signs everywhere, with the Red Star and the Hammer and Cycle. I am somewhat taken aback, because I was under the impression that, even though Vietnam is a one-party Communist state, they were seeking to align themselves commercially more with South Korea and Japan, and shying away from the ideology-driven policies of China and North Korea.

I guess, as everywhere else, Communism and Capitalism are not mutually exclusive, as I will see later. I must say, surprisingly enough, that people here are very good drivers, as I white knuckle it from cab ride to cab ride. I keep expecting to be hit from every side by a motorcycle with an entire family on it.

Formerly called Saigon, and originally part of Cambodia until the seventeenth century when it was absorbed back into Vietnam, French colonialists set up shop in 1859 and ruled what was then called French Indo-China until after the end of the Second World War.

From 1956 until 1975, it was the capitol of the Republic of Vietnam until it fell to North Vietnamese forces and was renamed in honour of the North Vietnamese ideological leader Ho Chi Minh who, by that time was too old to do much fighting and was little more than a figurehead.

To be honest, my background is European and, even though I have two degrees in history from U of T, my knowledge of this part of the world is largely based on how it relates to the West. So I come here with a blank slate, ready to learn.

My first challenge: the hotel bathtub. No shower, just a bathtub made for Vietnamese people. Not compatible with mine or my

parents' Viking frames. Epic struggle ensues. My first full day begins very early in the morning, rising at six a.m. to Vietnamese pop music floating in from the hotel's hallway.

Today I'm going to the market, the History Museum, and lunch at Le Bourgeois Restaurant in the Continental Hotel, the first hotel in Vietnam and the fabled haunt of prolific novelist Graham Greene.

Greene was working as a war correspondent for The Times (as well as being an MI6 agent) in the period before the French withdrawal and the American incursion into the peninsula. He later penned *The Quiet American*, a reflection on the effects of European colonialism and American foreign policy in French Indo-China. I have read the book numerous times since high school, and it remains my favourite Greene novel. It was really the first impression I ever had of Vietnam and its historical significance. I reread the novel on the plane, wanting again to immerse myself in 'a book of depth and complexity that recognized the communist role in 'humanity's' cause and represented American anti-Communist effort in Asia as not only naïve but murderous.'

The Hotel was built in 1880 and faces the Opera, both relics of La Belle Époque architecture. These are the last remnants of European colonialism in all their glory. As I sit and eat my Bisque d'Hômarde, evidence of new European influence faces me directly in the form of Dior and Louis Vuitton in the plaza across the street.

I feel at home with my recently obtained, authentic knock off Louis Vuitton bag and purse, purchased at great personal risk at HCMC's downtown market. I personally gave four vendors good luck for being their 'first customers' of the day which, they insist, had them lowering their prices for me. I'm always uncomfortable with haggling, and even more uncomfortable in the heat, so I was more than happy to go home, shower, put on a nice dress, and take a taxi to the Continental with my new purchases.

The hotel is rife with history. It was essentially headquarters for a multitude of journalists (News Week and Time magazine had their offices here), diplomats and politicians and, in the last days of the war, the Continental was considered to be one of three of the safest locations in Saigon, aside from the French Embassy and Grall Hospital. I can imagine the ghosts of Graham Greene, Rabindranath Tagore, Harry Berman and Pham Xuan An (General of Intelligence) sitting at a table in Le Bourgeois, smoking and discussing politics and the news of the day.

Next we head to Da Nang, a large port city an hour's plane ride away, for two weeks. Da Nang is famous for its China Beach, and will certainly be a change of pace from the hectic, overcrowded streets of Ho Chi Minh City. I'm looking forward to some sand and spas.