

The Pearl in Vietnam's Crown

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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. This is her third log.

It is with excitement that I said goodbye to Da Nang and Central Vietnam and flew North to Hanoi.

Unfortunately, our schedule would prevent me from exploring the city, but driving to and from the Hotel Pearl I get the same overwhelming feeling I had in Saigon. The city has a jungle-like feel, with the narrowly built but many-storied Vietnamese houses crammed so closely together, and that sense of an unruly rhythm to the way traffic and pedestrians coexist.

My senses are a little disoriented, and I nearly knocked a motorcycle rider off his vehicle when I opened a taxi door too quickly. Our hotel's street is closed to traffic, and all night I hear the sounds of drums, a man on a megaphone, and celebration.

Although I won't get to explore Vietnam's capital, I can appreciate viewing it from the roof restaurant of our hotel.

Gia Long, the first Emperor of the Nguyen dynasty, founded the city as a regional capital in 1802 while rule of Indochina was maintained from the ancient imperial city of Hue in what is today Central Vietnam. In 1831 it was named Hanoi from the words ?Ha? (river) and ?Noi? (interior), which referred to its position alongside the Red River. In 1902 it became the capital of French Indochina, and later Ho Chi Minh claimed the city for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam during the August Revolution of 1945. The French and Viet Minh fought for control of the capital until 1954 when the Geneva Accords afforded the Vietnamese official control of the city.

During the Vietnamese War (which in Vietnam is referred to as ?the American War?), Hanoi sustained heavy bombing by US combatants. The strategically important Long Bien Bridge was bombed several times to cripple the Viet Minh, but each time the Vietnamese cleverly improvised replacement spans. Bombings stopped entirely when US POWs were put to work repairing the bridge.

Today the bridge is a symbol of the tenacity and strength of the people of Hanoi. The volume of motorbikes and scooters is a recent development in the city, starting in the 1990s. It is a metaphor for the city's rapid development in the post-Soviet era, when the population was booming and pollution levels were rising. The idea is to ?get in quick? before the authentic and historical Hanoi is gone.

We set out early the next morning on a tour bus headed for Ha Long Bay in the Gulf of Tonkin, 165 kilometres from Hanoi to the coast. A UNESCO World Heritage Site twice over (named in 1994 for its natural scenic beauty and again in 2000 for its biological treasures), it shares its border with China. The bay of over 3,000 limestone islands is actually a national park and North Vietnam's top tourist spot. We board a luxury junk-style yacht to spend the next three days cruising the Bay. We begin with lunch as we pass breathtaking limestone formations on all sides. They all seem to jut dramatically out of the sea in odd shapes. There are countless grottos and idyllic sandy beaches, and the sea is an otherworldly greenish-blue.

Both ?Man with the Golden Gun? and ?Indochine? films were set here, and the scenery literally is the stuff of legends.

Ha Long means ?Descending Dragon,? a name that comes from the myth that a dragon once flung herself into the sea, her tail digging deep valleys and crevices in the mainland. As she descended further underwater, these filled up with the sea, creating the bay. Another legend has it that the Emperor ordered a dragon to stop a Chinese invasion. The dragon spewed out jade and jewels which, upon hitting the sea, turned into wondrous islands and karst formations, creating a natural fortress against enemy ships. The local fisherman still say that a dragon-like shape can be seen in the waters.

Despite its beauty, Ha Long Bay is an incredibly useful defense against foreign invasion, as it has proven in time. In 983 the Chinese were defeated by a clever plan of embedding hundreds of iron-tipped stakes in the river, then luring the Chinese fleet upstream at high tide. When the tide turned, General Ngo Quyen attacked and drove the invaders downstream to be impaled on the spikes.

Three centuries later, the same tactic was used to defeat Kublai Khan in 1288.

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, the Bay sat at the bottom of what the Vietnamese call the ?South Sea.? It was a giant limestone sea bed that eroded until only pinnacles remained behind, forming the rock formations that are seen today. Locals name the islands for items they resemble such as ?teapot,? ?toad? and ?elephant's foot.? As centuries passed, the rocks were eroded by rain to form hundreds of grottos.

After our initial lunch, we are invited to kayak around an island near our ship. Having worked with a physical trainer for six months, I feel up to the task of commanding a vessel built for two. I slowly kayak around the island as the sun sets, forever fixing the moment in my memory, but three-quarters of the way the core muscles that have been balancing and propelling the craft without rest begin to tell me they can go no further. Making sure I signal the boat crew, I slip off the kayak with great relief and allow them to

haul me back to the boat as I hold onto the back of the kayak. The water is extremely salty, but a very comfortable temperature. I'm proud to have made it as far as I did, but I know my muscles will be reminding me of this little endeavour for days to come.

The next day we are treated to a beach barbeque and do a little swimming. Being so salty, the water is buoyant and refreshing on such a hot day. Grilled seafood is of course on the menu, along with a mango-coconut drink that is so delicious that we send the boys back to the boat to make us some more. I am so tired from the exertions of the day before, combined with today's overwhelming heat, that I go back to the boat early and spend the rest of the day sleeping.

The third and last day of the trip is the highlight of highlights. We are taken in small groups on boats rowed by single practised Vietnamese rowers in the back, and pass by tiny floating houses inhabited by the local fisherman. They provide the fish consumed by both the tour boats and the mainlanders. I try to imagine what it must be like to wake up and live every day in this natural wonder of the world, where life is simple and untouched by the modern day, and one's only tasks are to fish and live.

We are taken to a floating pearl farm, where the process of cultivating these jewels of the ocean is demonstrated. Essentially, a pearl is created when there is an irritant within a mollusk that causes a reaction. The mollusk secretes thousands of very thin concentric layers of nacre, a calcium carbonate that makes up 90% of the pearl's content. Creating a single pearl can take up to 10 years of cultivation, and only 30% of those harvested are of useable quality, and only 10% of perfect quality. Because they are created within a living creature, pearls bring health, vitality, luck and marital bliss to the owner, which consoles me as I hand over the credit card for a pendant and earrings.

After we return to Hanoi, we fly for Cambodia and Siem Riep. From there the ancient ruins of Angor Wat (featured in ?Tomb Raider?) await us.