

FRANK LIGHT

Three Times a Charm

I. Pearl of the Orient

April 1995. In Vientiane the consul is courteous but never can get Hanoi's approval, he says, for our visas. Each time he quotes a different fee. He wants to know our travel agent's fax number, address, etc. His government's not about to let us traipse around on our own. If we would just go as diplomats, he coaxes. Unh-unh. Not until we normalize relations. Tourist visas on regular passports, I insist in adherence to State Department policy. At the end I think he gets so sick of me that he issues the visas, less than 24 hours before our departure. As though in compensation, the fee is just \$25 per passport, less than every other tourist seems to be paying.

The Lao Aviation flight arrives at Tan Son Nhut ten minutes early, to no advantage—the immigration booths are unmanned. When a few uniforms finally float into view at the far end of the vast reception hall, the thin, wraith-like men animating them hold back. They know what time the plane was supposed to arrive. Not even the Saigon manager for Lao Aviation, who flew in with us, can stir them to action. Finally, when all of us have come to appreciate the essential nature of their work, they glide across the floor to their stations. Wordlessly they stamp our passports. It could have been worse: we're the only flight in at nine o'clock on a Friday morning and half the passengers stayed on the plane, bound for Phnom Penh.

After immigration everything goes like clockwork. The customs official could not be friendlier, and the driver our travel agent was supposed to arrange for stands outside holding a sign with our name on it. He takes us to our guest house in a

residential part of town, nothing fancy, minimal yards, the houses close together behind whitewashed walls. Upstairs of the office run by Christine Hong, our travel agent who lives in the compound with her husband Pham and 20-month-old son, the room is basic—no upper sheet, soap, or toilet paper—but otherwise fine. It is their only room for rent. Christine works for a French company, Pham for an Australian firm. The travel agency is a sideline, but a growing one. In the driveway is a new van with the company's name—Easiway Travel—on the door. Christine and Pham look to be in their early 40s, old by non-Western standards to be starting a family. Relatives help with childcare, housekeeping, and the paying guests.

We change money at a bank—Lao speakers the next line over—and then our driver takes us to the Rex. Eschewing the cold comfort of the air-conditioned restaurant, we lunch on spring rolls and fruit juice in the hot shade of the patio bar. On the fifth floor, it overlooks downtown, which is too far afield for a five-year-old. Julia is drawn instead to the patio fish that thump their heads against the glass when she approaches.

Later we stroll past the Cathedral and into the post office that Eric introduced me to in 1991. It's been altered, I can't tell how. The old mural maps still decorate the walls, and the upstairs arcade remains devoid of shops despite a year having passed since we lifted the trade embargo. The Cuu Long Hotel where I thought I was going to stay that time is undergoing a facelift that will undoubtedly price it beyond government per diem and may possibly lead to the restoration of its previous name—the Majestic. The first hotel to be restored in the post-Saigon era—the Continental—also remains above per diem. In cities that get a lot of U.S. government visitors—Bangkok, for one—hotels soon learn to charge at the top end of the cap. Not that it matters to us. We're doing this on our own nickel, living the life of "affluent poverty" that goes with foreign service. We can say we've been there—for tea. Like other renovated beauties, the Continental looks better from a distance. Its best part is its least renovated—the inner garden, where tea is served.

No expedition ever connects completely. In keeping with new emphases, Reunification Hall is closed for an economic conference. And James Brown cancels a show scheduled for the day we are leaving, either because it would distract from the 20th anniversary of reunification or—depending on the source—because of money. Meanwhile, neither Madame Dai nor the cultural troupe a geologist in Vientiane told us to expect make an appearance at her landmark restaurant La Bibliotheque.

At the table next to ours sits a couple from Kentucky. A Dupont plant manager in Taipei, the husband gets up at 4 a.m every workday for an hour-plus commute, returns home after six. Childless, they're at the end of an itinerary that runs the opposite of ours. They liked Hanoi, Nha Trang, and Saigon, but not Dalat. Nor did Peter the geologist and his friend, who wrote a six-part report on their trip for February's *Gates County Index*, the daily paper in the part of North Carolina where the friend grew up. For those two former Marines, it was their second time around.

And here I am on number three. A year as an Army auditor, five days as a visiting diplomat, and now nine more as a tourist with wife and daughter. So many years have elapsed and so different were the missions that memory is no guide. Besides, I spent only a few days in Saigon as an auditor plus one more in January of 1991. As for the rest of the itinerary, I've never been to Dalat, last saw Nha Trang in 1968, and visited Hanoi just once, on the 1991 trip. One thing I've learned: foreign destinations never turn out as imagined.

You don't have to have been there to know that Saigon has personality. The name itself invokes an era and an aura. The city can be seductive, moody, and dangerous. It is small enough to get you thinking you have a handle on it and large enough to prove you wrong. In appearance both indolent and dynamic, it has not yet been overrun by cars and overshadowed by high-rises. As opposed to Bangkok with its paved-over canals, Saigon has not reconfigured the avenues it inherited. Trees still shade them. The buildings behind the trees have not grown to unmanageable proportions, perhaps due more to wait-and-see owners and a shortage of capital than aesthetics or town planning. Certainly traffic has intensified in the last four years. Ladies on motorbikes now wear long-sleeve gloves with color-coordinated surgical masks to ward off the pollution they are contributing to. Upscale shops and hotels have proliferated. Construction cranes mark the skyline. Have the authorities learned anything from Bangkok? Probably, but probably the wrong lessons. Ever alert to the dangers of pickpockets and muggers who—recent visitors told us—have sprouted like weeds in the new economic garden, we experience no untoward incidents. Of course a whole city can't be this precious, as we see on our drive out the next morning. The Bien Hoa/Long Binh area north of downtown teems with the muck—construction, machine shops, traffic jams, smoke, noise, dust, odors, and colors no one would ever choose—that sustains the flower in the center.

Before our departure, over a breakfast of just-baked baguettes, creamy papaya, and coffee made the Vietnamese way—a cup at a time—the Hongsgave us three lacquerware plates as going-away gifts. We also take back, on request, an *ao dai* for the Vietnamese-born wife of the International Monetary Fund’s representative in Vientiane. She and her husband left Saigon as students before the Fall and so avoided the boats. With so many Vietnamese in the States, we expected nearly everybody here, as in Laos, to have American relatives. But that was not our experience. The Hongsg didn’t mention it: their past faded into the distance as our questions pushed them back toward 1975. The closest our driver Hiep comes is Canada, the origin of his son-in-law, now a businessman in Saigon. Hiep’s other four daughters are all younger and unmarried. He has no sons. Prior to this, he drove a city bus. Thin and a bit on the dour side, a foot-long hair curling from the bottom of his chin, he is not a talker, although he knows more English than he cares to let on. From 1968 to 1972 he interpreted for an American artillery unit. When the Americans left, he joined the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. *Arvin*, the Americans pronounced it. The Army, like the Republic, disintegrated in April of 1975. He says he spent only four days in re-education because he wasn’t an officer.

2. Hill Station

Dalat still sparkles with the villas and vistas of its days as a hill resort for the French. It was virtually untouched, a sanctuary, during the war. The invasion came later in the form of the internal combustion machine. Probably because Dalat has less dispersal points, the traffic here seems heavier, louder, faster, and dirtier than in Saigon. As is happening more rapidly in Asia than anywhere else in the world, bicycles become motorbikes become cars. And in Vietnam a motor requires a horn. Unlike the Lao, Vietnamese never miss an opportunity to pass. Wheels, not ideology, motivate the man on the street.

Our hotel, the Anh Dao, is early *doi moi*, that heady period when economic policy first broke free from the constraints of Marxist-Leninism. In the lobby a poorly-stuffed brown bear forever nips at the ankles of a plaster Venus playing the harp. Behind them is a mural that looks like Adam & Eve as Tarzan & Jane. A more likely inspiration may have been Conan the Barbarian. The guy on the wall has the pectorals for the part, she the mammaries. Animals surround their jungle clearing. Close by but out of that world is a tiny bar at which a TV blares loudly and loungers puff on cigarettes. All Vietnamese men smoke. It is, one guesses, both connection and separation, a badge of nationhood as well as manhood.

The hotel's small and dimly-lit restaurant, found behind the bar, exceeds our expectations through straightforward service and a Rabelaisian frolic depicted in a plastic frieze along one wall. We go there twice because breakfast is included. The Lights are ever dutiful, like the fare.

What our room lacks in taste it compensates for with space and emblems of post-socialist modernity. There is a fridge, not a minibar, in our own private hallway where Sally and I read after Julia goes to bed. The bathroom has its own phone. Never mind that it doesn't work. Spray from the uncurtained shower may have shorted the circuit. Anyway, there's plenty of hot water, and the toilet paper stays dry in a unique dispenser that shields it from the spray. Thanks to a satellite dish on the roof, BBC comes on the telly. There are red velvet curtains to match the carpet, and a double set of windows mutes the traffic from the square. No need for air conditioning at 4500 feet. The pillows, hard and no-nonsense, cause mother and daughter to negotiate for the soft, fluffy one they packed. At least the beds have two sheets each.

Evoking the earnestness of British travelers at the apogee of Empire, we begin our one full day in Dalat with a walk around the lake that starts from a dam just below the center of town. The setting at the far end—cow pasture, horse manure, and shortcuts that don't pan out—gets downright bucolic. A new golf course along the north shore spares it from further development.

On to Bao Dai's villa, where an American with scraggly beard has his parents photograph him holding former President Thieu's phone to his ear. About thirty, he looks like a man accustomed to having his antics recorded. Some local visitors imitate the tableau. Others try out the furniture. The building is classic art deco but with more light, loft, and air than one usually associates with that form. Perhaps it's an illusion created by the ridgetop perch. Indeed, its genius was to let the outside in. The inside creates the further illusion of function over form. As preserved, the prince and princess's room have far less to offer than the chamber of any present-day middle-class kid in the States. Or anywhere. The princess, we read off a sign on the wall, is now a bank clerk in France.

The old train station is much grander than one might expect for a town at the end of a spur not used since the Sixties, when the Viet Cong severed the cogwheel link to the main line. Nobody in the vicinity knows if the five-kilometer run for tourists will operate today.

So we seek out the painting monk, the highlight of Peter and friend's diversion to Dalat. We are about to call off the search when we discover his haunt behind

a vacant monastery on the back side of a hill. He escorts us through his gallery, pausing to snip out paragraphs about himself from the *Gatesville Item*. The rogue is such a shameless self-promoter, in brown robe and hood, that I hate to contribute to the campaign. I will say you can't beat his prices. For a dollar we buy Julia a sketch of an umbrella whose handle evokes the letter J. Splashed with zen slogans, his ouvre looks like it ought to be on the walls of a San Francisco rooming house. He has been invited, he says, to exhibit his works in California and Delaware later this year. Delaware might as well be Africa. But already he senses the warm embrace awaiting him in the Golden State. Having emerged from the wilderness—1975-1985 was a lost decade for just about everybody we meet here—this wanderer has found his path. He shows Sally twenty volumes of visitors' comments. "Overwhelmed," she writes in the latest one.

We return to the train station to encounter either luck or the reward Vietnamese withhold until the seeker proves due diligence. As America learned the hard way, this is not a land for dilettantes. The ten-dollar per person fare seems expensive until we realize there are no other passengers and no charge for Julia. They put this on just for us. The rear portion of the Soviet-built locomotive (how and when did it get here?) had been the old first-class compartment for the trip to the coast. Further warping the time frame, a minifridge sits at the front of the compartment. It is, of course, not working. Inside is a head of cabbage, the principle crop this time of year. We stand in the back door and watch the patches go by. In the cab the engineers let Julia blow both whistles, one deep and the other shrill.

By the time we return, a crowd has come to occupy folding chairs set up in the lobby. They sit facing a television hefted onto a podium. This seems to be a Party function. Dalat and the highland towns we drove through on the way in were all festooned with the Vietnamese Communist flag—yellow star on a red field. Today marks the 20th anniversary of local "liberation," when the North Vietnamese Army just rolled down, unopposed, from the hills.

There were no other tourists at the train station, and almost none at the Valley of Love, where Julia joyfully rides a horse led by an ersatz Vietnamese cowboy. Our guidebook and our friends from La Bibliotech led us to believe the resort would be overrun with vacationing locals in pursuit of tacky pleasures. We meet only a Vietnamese-American family originally from Nha Trang. It is their first time back. They are pleasantly surprised by the new outlook but know they should be careful in what they say to strangers like us.

The market in the heart of town displays vegetables rarely seen in these parts—bold, bright beets, artichokes, avocados, peas, and more. But the only restaurant

known to serve them is deemed not up to family standards. And one of the two restaurants Christine recommended seems to specialize in the flesh of strange animals and non-traditional parts of common ones. Thank goodness the other—the Thanh Thanh—has the air, if not the kitchen, of a chic cafe in rural France. Our second night there the largest table is taken by a group led by the Australian pro and manager for the golf course overlooking the lake. His family includes girls ages six and four. After two days of parental consort, Julia is anxious for their company. They are of the same inclination, holding up as icebreakers dolls like the one she got for Christmas and still, as marker of her own identity, hasn't named. But her shyness holds her back.

When the girls' mother is asked if she likes it in Dalat, she says, "Let me be polite: no." They have done eight months on a two-year contract. The nine other expatriate children in town are either too young or too old for her daughters, and together they are not enough to form a school. So the two daughters study at home. The mother invites Julia to play tomorrow. Alas, we're leaving first thing in the morning.

Neither the monk nor the Thanh Thanh are in our guidebook, the September 1993 edition of the Lonely Planet series, which everyone says is the best there is for Vietnam. Nor is there anything about the large new hotel in Bao Loc we passed en route nor the waterfall popular enough to attract an ambitious new restaurant by the parking lot and shills in Minnie Mouse and bear costumes, whom Julia of course ran up to and hugged. In fact, none of the restaurants Christine recommended in Dalat and Nha Trang are mentioned in the book, which we relied on to choose our hotels in those two towns. The old villas are metamorphosing into guest houses. There may well be better places to stay, but how is a stranger making advance reservations to know? Besides being outdated, the book's descriptions of places to eat and sleep seem derived from a whirlwind tour, with little feel for the towns in which they are set.

3. Beach Resort

At Prenn, a quick diversion on the way out of town, we get to walk behind a waterfall. Sally's correct. A waterfall is just a waterfall, and Dalat is surrounded by them. But, like memories, their pull overcomes logic. So too with vistas. The outlook from Ngoan Muc Pass (the French called it Bellevue) is spectacular. It is hard to imagine that trains used to climb the gradient in the foreground, stopped not by gravity but by insurgents. Beyond that lies the whole coastal plain, spotted with hills, clouds, and heat haze that keeps our vision short of the South China Sea.

We catch our first glimpse of it from the Thap Cham towers, Sally's must-do for the day. Centuries old, they are better preserved than the climate would lead one to expect. There's even a decent bathroom and a snackbar at the base. The only jarring note springs from a garrulous denizen who says he is controlled by a radio the Americans planted in his brain. Amazing how it still works.

Driving past Cam Ranh we sniff the salt air but see no sign of the massive base from the American and then the Soviet era. The Russians still cling to it, a keepsake from their glory days. Hiep points out the old camp at Dong Ba Thin, where Pratt, Winogron, and I, three college-graduate draftee auditors, separately underwent parachute training. The villages along the road north of there look prosperous. They were beginning to look that way when auditor Herthel and I drove it. Can't remember why. Back then, those who could almost always went by air. Speed, views, comfort, a cool breeze, and no ambushes, not even a potshot, once you got up a few thousand feet.

Nha Trang is much more of a resort than I remember. The beach is well-preserved, and small hotels have sprung up where before there were none. Once toes touch sand, the family settles on a division of leisure. They will dedicate themselves to the beach while I explore the town.

Thus commissioned, I seek out the economic foundation for the city's 200,000 inhabitants. Factories are few. The ocean port is small and on the outskirts of town, an anchorage for just two coastal freighters while we are there. The fishing harbor on the other end of town is larger but still limited. Tourism provides employment for a growing number. But most folks seem to make or import things to sell to each other, or repair the things after they break. The woman doctor who gives this lone visitor a personal tour of Dr. Yersin's museum thought there were more French than Vietnamese the five decades he lived in Nha Trang until his death in 1943.

In part because of failing memory and in part because I never made the effort when stationed here, I recall little of the town. To get a feel for it I go by foot, declining persistent offers from cyclo men. Old plaques on shop walls confirm that the main street—Thong Nhat (reunification)—used to be Doc Lap (independence). In the Sixties it percolated with spillover from the war. Its central location secures its commercial strength, but the buzz is gone. A few mostly empty tour vans pass, and truncated buses painted bright colors cruise the town in a desultory fashion. There are no taxis. To save time I catch a cyclo from Thong Nhat to Nha Trang's own Cham towers, which to this untrained eye look like the ones at Thap Cham. But the solitude there has here become a Boschian hell peopled by postcard hawkers, beggars, amputees, and cripples who flaunt their deformities in sightseers' faces. I

am further accosted by the young cyclo driver who followed me the better part of an hour this morning, bantering all the while. He is chagrined to learn I am leaving there in the cyclo I had taken from Thong Nhat, pedaled by a stranger who had invested no time in me at all.

We go to Hon Chong point, a respite from the towers. The seaside cafes there are empty, the only other tourists a few local Vietnamese and a French couple on vacation from their residence in Germany. They are friendly and easy-going, could pass for a yuppie couple sampling the Vietnamese food in northern Virginia. Technology has narrowed the differences.

A man at the rocky point sells us sodas. I buy one for myself and one for the driver. The vendor has an umbrella and cooler. When there are no customers, which is most of the time, he applies pitch to a basket boat. Like most Vietnamese males his age, he is a veteran, a former ARVN Air Force mechanic. In the south we've yet to meet an ex-NVA or VC who will own up to it. The victors must have held on to the high ground, leaving the losers to deal with their erstwhile allies and the other barbarians who come after.

The cyclo driver takes me back to Thong Nhat. From there I stroll past the old Nha Trang Hotel, still operating under the same name and waiting its own *doi moi*. It used to have a rooftop restaurant. The lobby is but a passageway to the elevator, and there is nobody behind the reception desk. Moving on, I order a mango shake and noodles with vegetables at an ice cream shop that caught my eye on the way to the bank. Leaving the facade for the facilities in the rear takes this customer progressively deeper into darkness and disorder. Back there is where the family lives. The women are all working. The one man is napping.

The unrequited cyclo driver shows up again. Replenished, I tell him I'm walking, repeat, walking to the Buddha. I need the exercise. Somewhere at home I have a washed-out snapshot of Pratt and Winogrand in a jeep by the Buddha. And somewhere not too far from here Winogrand took a round through the midsection the first morning of the Year of the Monkey, 1968. Yellow swastikas still stud the hillsides. Dragons guard the last flight of stairs, the ascent of which provides a token of penance in this heat. At the base of the statue, new portraits commemorate monks who immolated themselves to protest Diem's autocratic rule. He was Catholic, and we got rid of him, all the good it did. A girl leaves her group on the patio to come over and practice English. She says she's fourteen but looks younger. When I bid farewell, she asks so sweetly one wonders where it came from, "You give me money?" I decline and move down the steps past elderly female

beggars. At the bottom I give a little something to a man who insists I look inside the pagoda he watches over. Despite his entreaties, I take no pictures.

On to the train station. The waiting rooms are closed, and the train on the tracks is occupied only by cleaning ladies. The whiteboard schedule above the ticket window shows the destination as “Saigon.” After ducking into a dive for a bottle of water and a bathroom break, I engage a cyclo for a trip to a place called Cau Be via the old perimeter road past where the Operations Base used to lie. The OB. Headquarters, a less self-conscious unit would have called it. Actually it was both. Ignoring my directions, the driver obdurately pedals toward the beach road. It is not until I make a move to jump out that he turns around and goes my way. We don’t talk, which is fine by me although I know I should be more understanding. His caution, aggrieved manner, profession, and white hair speak of a man who’s been re-educated, and for probably a lot longer than four days.

Not much to see of the old base. The hooches in which we slept had wood-slat walls and roofs supported by wooden beams, nothing vertical that would last. Only the latrines had concrete walls. And (this is all coming back) our office—Civilian Irregular Defense Group Finance. That’s where the money was. Anyway, new housing camouflages what may be left of the old. At one point we pass a military camp situated about right for the main entrance to the base, but it sure is decrepit. And at Cau Be, which protrudes into an inlet that makes the south end of Nha Trang a peninsula, there is no sign of the team site from which Americans used to leave on plastic “assault” boats for an observation post on a knoll about five kilometers out. I spotted that knoll from the Buddha and the perimeter road, but we get no closer today than this new shrimp-packing plant. The most prominent building out here had been a white dome under which GIs could call home through ham radio operators in the States. My parents had a hard time remembering to say “over” when done talking, like on military radios. It too is gone. The ridgeline to the south bristled with Hawk anti-aircraft missiles, never used of course. The highlands seem to have returned to their natural state. Amidst glares from young men on extended siesta, the driver insists there is nothing for this wayfarer here.

So we go to the base of the bluff holding the Bao Dai villas, where I settle accounts with the driver. Cyclos have their limitations. So do the villas. They are under reconstruction, meaning there is nothing to see except the setting. The restaurant is also in the “open soon” stage. A young Westerner tells the receptionist he cannot enter his room. The reception explains the room “broke.” When asked how that could be, the receptionist replies, “Don’t worry. We have another room. Cheap.”

I leave for the aquarium, which is third rate. We saw better at the Rex. The souvenir shops that line the one street here are too hard-edged for the average tourist. Peter and friend complained of syringes on the beach below the villas. This is where the coastal freighters moor. At water's edge I stop for a soda with lemon. The bottle comes in a bait bucket of water with a chunk of ice to cool it down.

I take a cyclo as far as the airfield. The terminal looks like it will retain its dinky charm despite the restoration in progress. The rest of the airport is virtually untouched. Bunkers still surround the field. Nobody mans them anymore. The only time I spot a plane is two days later when we catch a propeller flight to Hanoi. The runway is still too short for jets, the absence of which keeps the number of tourists down.

I walk from there. By a monument to the victors' war dead, the unrequited cyclo driver pedals up. By then I'm beginning to wonder who he's really working for. Unless repartee is his sole objective, he's following the wrong man. Our badinage is cut short by a crash across the street. Two motorbikes. A muscular young man with a punk hairdo appears to have been driving on the wrong side of the street. Ignoring his two-year-old passenger now on the pavement bawling, he takes a swing at the other driver, also young but leaner. The latter wears a necktie and lets his lady friend restrain him. The punch-thrower jerks the two-year-old to her feet. A crowd forms, but the action is over and my cyclo man has disappeared, it turns out for good.

That evening we take a cyclo to the Thanh Lich, a restaurant recommended by Christine and then pre-inspected during my morning stroll. Not much more than a hole in the wall, it is cooled by fans and open to the unpaved street. The menu is mercifully limited and in English. The food shows finesse—except for the pineapple flambe, which burns for a very long time. The owner is a former officer in the ARVN who invested in this three years ago. Like others, he is not inclined to talk about the decade that wasn't. I hope he makes a go of it. Only one other table has customers. Outside, our cyclo driver waits, as he said he would. So do five others, one for each of the potential riders inside.

Our first night in town we went to the hotel's poolside restaurant for a dance performance, which Julia especially enjoyed. Another night we go there for classical music marred but slightly by stage smoke swirling around the artists' feet and the electrification of their acoustic guitar. The food's not bad considering the show's the draw. The large indoor dining room at our hotel—the Vieng Dong—stays closed even though the tables in it are always, poignantly, set. Like the cavernous

restaurant at the hotel next to ours, it was built with an imperfect knowledge of what beach tourists want. But the Vieng Dong seems to have gotten more things right than any other place in town.

Our suite has a separate sitting room and two TVs connected to satellite. The air conditioners are controlled by remotes, one of which works. Sure, the chairs look better than they sit, and the bathroom is not exactly Western suburban, but you can see they tried. We sleep just fine despite the noise of the street one floor below.

For a municipal beach, the one in Nha Trang has done a pretty fair job of maintaining appearances. And of course the cove curves as languorously as ever, the water turning from turquoise to cobalt as it deepens, a few fishing boats out there, and then the islands, on one of which Senator Kerrey earned the Medal of Honor. In the sparkle of the sun it is easy to commingle the permanent with the transitory and to picture luaus along this strand—colleagues sky-diving over the bay with colored smoke streaming behind them, an LST in the water to collect them, pigs in pits, beer in trailers, horseshoes, volleyball, football. Nha Trang was a place where you didn't have to blend in. The clubs and formations fostered the illusion of numbers. Caught up in the activities, you could forget your status as an interloper here and a spinoff from home. Further along the beach, about where we are now, guys from unpublicized units would be surfing in solitary. They were the thinkers, I supposed at the time.

These days the foreigners are outnumbered by peddlers flogging tee shirts, postcards, fruit, etc. The older salespeople are strictly business. But the kids cannot repress their sense of play. In matching wits with the Westerners, they find that humor is good for business. The souvenirs they push are a bit old-fashioned, not of the Nineties like the paraphernalia in Saigon and Hanoi. But they are cheap—30 cents gets a packet of ten postcards, maybe two of which are suitable for mailing. The others depict unrecognizable rocks and random scenes that wouldn't even make it into a home album. I get three Nha Trang shirts for five dollars, one for myself and one each for Winogrand and Pratt, the only two guys from here for whom I still have addresses.

After Julia goes to bed I try to set up a boat ride the following day to the old observation post, for a different perspective. The guides want to take me on the standard cruise up the river north of town, but I am not interested. They say the authorities are not the problem. It's just no tourist has ever wanted to go that way. They don't know how to do it. Finally we arrive at a provisional agreement.

As first order of business in the morning, the family visits the bank to get cash through a credit card. It's the only bank in town so equipped. In Dalat there were none, and throughout the country few places take credit cards for purchases. I went here a couple of days ago after checking into the hotel. I didn't know the transaction required a passport until I reached the front of the line. On registration a few minutes earlier the hotel had insisted on holding it, whether for their or the authorities' security was unclear.

My second time up the entire staff gathered to gawk at my card and a device the cashier inserted it into. After a long pause she told me the card had been "refused." She could not explain why.

So today we're trying Sally's. Only when we get there do we realize, oops, no passport. It takes a hot moment for me to remember where they are—with the hotel, of course. After another round trip, we score. Sally's credit card, same bank as mine, does the trick. We would not have found ourselves in these impecunious straits had I been able to cadge more dollars out of the Embassy cashier. Can't blame him. He was following orders.

My guide takes me on a motorbike out past the shrimp packers on to the dock at Cau Be, where he talks a reluctant boatman into making the trip. The fare, included in my \$25 excursion fee, overcomes his incomprehension of my quest. First we have to buy gas for the boat, a wooden skiff with an inboard motor and black flags attached to fishing floats inside. We put-put past V-shaped fish traps made, like a rural fence, of rough-cut wooden stakes. That hasn't changed. But the tin-roofed huts built all through the previously uninhabited tidal flats are new. Their residents tend shrimp farms, the guide tells me. Mangrove lines the banks, and the water remains brackish all the way to the hill. At one point we have to backtrack out of the widest channel when it becomes too shallow. After a few deadends we find an alternative route that takes us to the hill some 40 minutes after departure.

Two small buildings—Chinese pagodas, the guide says—have been erected at the base. Nearby is a rude hut with thatched roof. We stop for directions. A man about my age with a load of history in his neck, arms, posture, and face says we cannot get to the top. There is no path and too many briars.

We can deal with briars, I say, but what about mines? Twenty-seven years ago only claymores were employed, but who knows what was planted since? Certainly this little outpost could have used a little more security. To become a casualty this many years after the war would be mortifying. What is tragic for peasants forced by circumstance onto dangerous terrain would be seen as mere karma for a war tourist indulging old memories.

Yes, the man says, there are mines. He looks at me a long time and then asks why this hill. It is in the middle of nowhere, uninhabited, and unbeautiful. I explain. Turns out he is a former sergeant in the ARVN, he elaborates in an English I don't pick up on. Oddly, when he repeats his former rank in Vietnamese—*trung-si*—I, who knew so little of the language, understand. He had been up north, in I Corps. He invites us in for tea. First the hill, I say. Okay, he says, pointing straight up, this is the way. I promise to stop by on the return.

It's my nickel, so I lead, the guide close on my heels. Part way up, in the midst of a young eucalyptus grove, we pass a tomb with a Chinese tablet, which may explain the pagodas. At the top the trench lines, including grenade sumps and mortar pit, are still evident despite grass and scrub that obscure the contours. The outpost is smaller than I remember, from the pitcher's mound to the plate in length, to first base in width. There's a small concrete platform on the Nha Trang end that must have been added after my time. I uncover a few scraps of sandbag, an old jungle-boot sole with a bit of canvas attached, and a few pieces of military metal and plastic. Scavengers must have cleared out the rest. The place seems as ancient as a site from the American civil war. But unlike the monuments from that era and a few the victors may choose to preserve from this one, the abandonment here is total, the oblivion complete. It may well be that no one else will ever notice it enough to ponder why or wonder who. In its anonymity it exemplifies a more common experience than the battles memorialized in parks, books, and film.

Dannie Johnson, from Michigan, died here. If memory serves, so did one other American and some irregulars from the A-team one night in late December. The rifle and grenade flashes were seen from the OB and probably from the team site. But it happened so fast that nobody here got to the radio, as I recall. Because nobody answered, the officer in charge held off the reaction force until first light. No use compounding losses by sending good after bad. I recall they found another guy from the team, wounded but alive, outside the perimeter.

The question that never occurred to me then—oddly, since it was 1967 going on 1968—was what for? It did not occur until four years ago when I was chatting up an old gutshot guerrilla with Howdy-Doody ears and an alligator smile, now an ambassador. How perverse to be clinking wineglasses with folks who collectively were trying to kill you and vice versa. It points out the integral nature of the fourth dimension. Some of us travel it better than others.

A couple of weeks after the overrun they reopened the post for night duty. Its location—the hill closest to the wetlands from which the Viet Cong would occasionally launch attacks (usually a few hastily fired mortar rounds directed

toward the base and the airfield next door)—was too good to relinquish. I went with one other American, a guy from the team, neither of us for the first time. Someone else was supposed to come but he got sick. We took dexedrine although we didn't need it. We were definitely awake. So were the irregulars, for a change. Ions charged the air, like after a storm. We were so ready it was both a relief and a disappointment that nothing happened. Relief was real time. Disappointment came with the dawn.

Experiences are immutable. It is only our perceptions of them that change. The knoll still offers a great view of the estuary and the hills and Nha Trang, which now looks so much further away than the base ever did.

On the way back I search out the old *trung-si*. Two cohorts have joined him in the hut. No sign of women or children. He proposes a drink but my guide, born 1971, is uncomfortable—who knows what epithets these aging renegades might spit out after belting down a few? I slip the ex-sergeant a few thousand dong for showing us the way. It's not much. A down payment. A token. Solatium.

Our last evening in Nha Trang the family dines at one of the outdoor cafes that straddle the grassy sward between the boulevard and the beach. A strong breeze and stars make up for any shortcomings in the food. The ambience seems so settled, the customers so regular, that this scene must have been going on well before the Americans came. I don't know if I remember these cafes or not. Had the Yersin museum—a curious man, a wonderful testament—been open during the war? It's been 27 years. Nha Trang looks the same, and it doesn't. I realize now I hardly knew the place. I saw more of it in one day touring than I did in a year as an auditor. My only excuse is that then I had other things on my mind. And half the time I was out auditing the teams. Only the hardest of memories keep to the conscious mind. Imagination seeps into the blank spaces and eats away at the rest. Looking back like this previews the loss of control that awaits those of us lucky to live so long. I don't know how I feel. The illusion of clarity came and went four years ago, with that old guerrilla in Hanoi. An overload of signals remains.

4. Forbidden City

Four years ago the airport building in Hanoi was cramped, staked out by passengers in long lines watched over by unsmiling, uniformed officials. The renovated facilities are now air-conditioned, relaxed, and efficient, at least until one begins the transition to the outside world. The swarm of drivers in waiting shows how far the government has distanced itself from the economy. No fixed prices

here. The driver we engage says he has to go out the back way and then disappears. Just as we are about to give in to a competitor's pitch, our guy pulls up in a new van that undoubtedly was imported for some official purpose other than this. The invisible hand outmaneuvers planning every time.

Four years ago the road to town consisted of two lanes and thousands of potholes. Now a divided toll road, it has become a training ground for high-speed wannabees. Four years ago the traffic in town was almost entirely bicycles. Now at least half of it is motorized. Few intersections have stoplights or policemen who do anything other than watch the passing parade. The vehicles weave so effortlessly through them that the interchange must derive from some fundamental characteristic of the culture not apparent to the casual observer.

Four years ago the government guest house was the best place to stay. Its unreconstructed stolidity and imperfect luxury symbolized an era just then beginning to fade. This time we go for the Dan Chu, which embodies the new *laissez-faire* reach in the rate it charges for carefully restored rooms built in the previous century. They're nestled away in the back. The front remains unrepentantly, if a bit disingenuously, socialist. The gift shop is clever, the lobby small and dark. The dining hall is both seedy and grand. Call it Bulgarian-modern. Attempts at style lack feel, subtlety, and taste. Same for the food. The head waitress knows it but keeps a stiff upper lip that presses to the verge of, but never gives in to, a smile.

Four years ago the sidewalks of downtown Hanoi were virtually devoid of vendors and beggars. Now a foreigner cannot go more than a few steps without encountering postcard saleskids, certified orphans, moneychangers, and the ubiquitous cyclo drivers. The one constant is the weather. No sun four Januaries ago, none now. For visitors who need a refuge, the Metropole has been restored. It is world class, with prices to match.

The Pear Tree restaurant is cheaper and has a menu best described as Central-Valley Californian—thick shakes, eggplant sandwiches, and devil's food cake for dessert. Pam and Charles treat us to lunch there. In the late Eighties Charles, Sally, and I toiled together in the Africa Bureau. British born, he acquired U.S. citizenship through marriage to a Foreign Service Officer. The marriage didn't last. The citizenship did. Pam, his new wife, is trying to decide whether to quit her job with the Immigration and Naturalization Service or keep paying her way here for visits from Bangkok, where she's stationed. She's been with the Service 17 years, and they won't give her leave-without-pay to live with her husband. Charles, the sole American consular officer, can't easily get away because he's doing the work of three. So is Scot, head of the liaison office we opened a couple months ago. He

handled Laos when I had the Vietnam desk. The tables have turned. He's putting in major hours. In Washington or abroad, the Department seems incapable of placing people where the work is. No need to manage officer labor, the marginal cost of which is zero. No overtime, no whining—old school rules.

He and his wife take us to L'Indochine, another tony place. Earlier we had visited him at the office, an unattractive midrise still under construction. Too bad the U.S. didn't get in on the ground floor, in the district of seasoned French villas where thick ambience, unalloyed air, and diplomats for neighbors might prepare us better for the inevitable disappointments of normalization.

We Lights pass through that district on the way to Uncle Ho's mausoleum, as sterile inside as out. A touch of North Korea for those, like us, fortunate enough never to have been there. How fitting that it was built against the resident's wishes. Before Sally and I realize what's happening a guard lifts Julia, too short to see into the bier, so she can witness—close up—the face and hands of the master. His pretensions are preserved in the tasteful cottage overlooking a pond out back where he supposedly lived. There are no tourists. Sally has to talk a guide into letting us see it.

With time on our hands we take a cyclo to the McCain monument, the Temple of Literature, and the Hanoi Hilton, currently under deconstruction. Whatever catches our eye gets photographed. Like cigarettes for the natives, it's our badge of identity, our attempt to connect. Later we run into Julia's preschool teacher of last year at the Metropole Bar. A five-piece ensemble plays "Lara's Theme" and classical music without electricity or smoke. Hanoi is Vietnam's intellectual capital. Everywhere there are book stores, art galleries, berets, goatees, painters shoulder to shoulder on the shores of the Lake of the Restored Sword, and nary a thought of James Brown. We go on to the water puppets, where the music is every bit as lively as the show.

Years ago another we used to joke about jumping here, into the belly of the beast. Like ghost stories at camp, that jest actually gained some currency one night around Christmas when they mustered us in our jump boots for a flight to an unknown destination. Turned out we were props for President Johnson in Cam Ranh Bay, a major disappointment for those who, once they saw where we were landing, aircraft coming in from all over country, thought it might be Bob Hope and his bevy. Determined to make the most of it, knowing he was unlikely to have such an opportunity again, Pratt rushed forward to shake the man's hand. Winogrand and I held back, irritated that our leader's hair was months longer than we could grow our own. Hanoi was out of the question, of course. They certainly had the

numbers, and China was just up the road. So the only Americans who visited were Jane Fonda and friends. They don't come this way anymore. Vietnam isn't what it used to be. Just about everybody seems glad for the change.



Glad for the Change

FRANK LIGHT is writing his way through retirement. This essay comes from an unpublished collection of travel stories. Excerpts from an unpublished memoir titled *Adjust to Dust: On the Backroads of Southern Afghanistan* have recently appeared in *Even the Smallest Crab Has Teeth*, a Peace Corps anthology, and *MAKE*, a literary magazine.