

something more Saigonese. Along with the soup I took Xio, pancake-like fried glutinous rice stuffed with onions and dollops of French-Vietnamese steamed Pate called Cha Dum. The combination of fried sticky rice and the pate was, on an empty stomach, absolutely magnificent. A brilliant breakfast treat for a person who skips the first meal of the day.

Our first visit was an official one to the largest tour operator in Vietnam and we went through all the venues that the Bangladeshi traveller, as well as expatriates in Bangladesh, would like to visit. Vietnam is a long stretch of territory snaking up around Cambodia, Laos and China. One side is landlocked with these three countries and the other is entirely coastline. The country has something for everyone, from mountains and lakes and the chilly frost to the sun, sea and coral islands. The Capital Hanoi is in Northern Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in the south and between the two cities is a distance of two hours by air. Vietnam boasts some of the nicest beaches and the difference between Thailand and Vietnam is that the tourists haven't discovered the wonders of this country yet.

In the afternoon we landed at "La Taverne", a wonderful Vietnamese restaurant offering a blend of French-Vietnamese food. The French Colonisation may have been an unbearable period in the history of the country, which values its sovereignty with a passion, but I must say it has made the food one of the most distinctive in the region. This high-end restaurant frequented by Europeans is simple and rustic with alcoves and vases, French windows, etc. But the real magic is in the kitchen, the reason why people queue up to get a table. Since Madame Dai, the hostess, knew of our visit, she had a place neatly tucked away for us. The first order was a plate of deep fried pumpkin flowers stuffed with minced meat and lotus seeds. The appetiser was crispy on the outside with a heavenly mix of mince, garlic and the nutty flavour of lotus seeds. Large mugs of Vietnamese Beer "333" were accompanied by Banh Tom, large prawns and sweet potato cakes which was definitely something different and unique. I had to taste the beef for which Vietnam is famous and opted for the grilled strips of beef wrapped around Gouda cheese. Duyen ordered ca chien sot ca chua, a local fish with stir-fry vegetables in a tomato-based sauce and to top off the meal, a special lotus seed and seafood fried rice. The battle of the chopsticks continued all through lunch, and not even a garnish was left on the plates.



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After a wonderful meal like that I would have opted for a quick siesta, but no, we had work to do and places to see; this was no pleasure trip!! We had rented an air-conditioned car for the entire trip and the driver acted as our guide. Duyen being from Ha Noi was good with the overall visit presentation, but the driver knew the places to take us. During the day you will find the people of Saigon eating lunch as early as 11:30-12:30 and spending the day indoors or in the shade. Women ride bikes with lampshade looking hats and faces covered in scarves with just enough opening for sunglasses. This can't be Vietnamese "purdah" can it? Duyen was quick to tell us that Vietnamese women are extremely cautious about two things. One being the protection of their complexion as fairness is a guarded possession; and secondly their fierce obsession with their waists and figures. This can be seen in the traditional dresses that they wear. The dress is similar to our *shalwar-kameez* except it is so narrow around the waist; it's a wonder how Vietnamese women

breathe at all? The dress does look very elegant and suave indeed, but we couldn't help but notice that tight jeans and short, short skirts are just as popular as the traditional dresses. The men wear boring trousers and shirts just like the rest of us around the world!

We stopped at the City centre, a pretty roundabout with the Notre Dame Cathedral on one side and the General Post Office on the other. This place is a perfect "photo-op" venue. The GPO looked like Grand Central Station with French ornamentation on the building façade. By the side of the Cathedral a young couple were getting married. With the groom dressed in a black tuxedo, his bride in a white gown, the Notre Dame and the green roundabout with flowers; this place looked like Paris. For a moment we forgot we were in Saigon! Our next visit was to the beautifully restored Reunification Palace, the seat of the President of Vietnam during the war ravaged years. The Viet-Cong tanks that smashed through the gates are still there.

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