

but these weapons could not shoot down the B-52s that were wreaking havoc around Hanoi with high altitude carpet bombings. Vietnamese scientists applied indigenous technology to the missiles and shot down B-52s from the skies prompting Russian scientists to run to Sai Gon to figure out how they did it. Over a drink Duyen explained that many countries had tried to conquer the Vietnamese and despite years of oppression, occupation and global sanctions; Vietnam continues to grow into an Asian Giant with no looking back!

WE headed to "Vietnam House", the most happening restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City. This is where the elite dined, the stars and the rich and famous mingled. The place is just as I had envisioned it to be - high ceilings with colonial-style fans, French windows and beautiful Vietnamese art décor all set in a cool and retro ambience. You get the feeling of the Indo-China era

and I did spot the odd European wearing his panatela and crumpled white linen suit. The stars had all left by then as we sat down to a refreshing crab and asparagus soup, mild with a seafood flavour, the distinctive edge of freshly ground pepper quite prominent. We took several starters, Goi cuon, the famous fresh spring rolls that every newcomer to the cuisine will definitely try and Chao Tom, barbecued shrimp paste fried on sugar cane served with lots of lettuce, basil and mint. Duyen suggested the 5-coloured beef stir fry, which really dazzled the table with red peppers, yellow flat midget squash, scallions, tomatoes, eggplant, green capsicum and strips of beef on a light soy gravy. Lamb is a specialty in Vietnam and Duyen took the liberty of ordering a delightful lamb stew with hearty root vegetables, very popular in Northern Vietnam where the weather can get chilly up in the hills.

The next day Idris graced us with his presence at breakfast, being a person who is generally used to late room service orders. The three of us had a long day ahead. We were going off to see the Cu Chi tunnels which start about 60 Km from Saigon. Once on the highway, you get to see the actual beauty of this land, very similar to our terrain here. The serenity of cool green paddies of rice attended to by rural farmers wearing conical hats gave it a distinctive look. We were passing through orchard country and trees adorned the road. The driver told us that another 15 minutes of straight road would take us to the Cambodian border and its Phnom Penh ahead as the crow flies...



The tunnel system of Cu Chi and Ben Dinh is a network of 250km of tunnels dug deep into the ground from where the Vietnamese fought an arduous and protracted freedom struggle. The tunnels were actually used earlier during the resistance fight against the French, but the use of the cobweb of underground passages came into the limelight during the Vietnam War and it is a model for modern guerrilla warfare. These tunnels - barely wide enough for a body to pass through - are connected to an extensive maze of passages with underground rooms for lodgings, dining rooms, war meeting rooms, factories where local indigenous weapons were made, and hospitals where many Vietnamese children were born during the war. The complexity of the tunnels gives you an insight as to the undaunted will, the intelligence and the pride of the people of Cu Chi who fought one of the hardest wars for freedom.

ON the way back from Cu Chi we took an off-road to a wayside restaurant set right next to a river; this little highway resort called Ben Nay was picture perfect. A beautiful building with no walls, just railings and a pond with a pretty little bridge. The waiter turned on the taps and water trickled from the roof, turning the breeze outside into a cool wave of air. In 10 minutes our table was cool. Duyen took charge of the ordering and I must say he did a wonderful job. We wanted to know what his wife cooks for him on a typical day back home in Ha Noi. He started off with a tall glass of Lotus tea (Lotus plant is big in Vietnam and it is used in cooking, brewing and decorating homes too!) with lots of ice to beat the heat and a clear mustard green soup with shrimp wafers. This clear soup

was moderately hot with strands of greens, which can also be substituted with morning glory (*kolmi shak*). The flavour was authentic and refreshing to say the least. Steamed dumplings with shrimps followed with dipping sauce and plates of morning glory stir fried in garlic. Duyen ordered Ca Hap, a large river fish steamed on a hot plate with shavings of pumpkin and other green shoots I was not familiar with, but the heat sort of softened up these stalks into tender morsels. Ca Kho To, a special river fish dish very popular in the Cu Chi region came in an earthen pot. Cut into round pieces it was simmering in thick brown gravy made out of caramel/molasses, soy and sautéed onions, giving it a rich mouth watering flavour. This particular fish dish served with sticky rice was the last seduction for me; I fell in love with Vietnamese cooking at