# Vietnam On Fast Forward

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The waitress set down the cup of coffee and said, "That will be fifty thousand dollars."

I snapped out of my reverie and gasped. "...huh?"

"Fifty thousand, please!." The girl repeated patiently but firmly.

I had the uncomfortable feeling that here was a waitress who was definitely under the influence. Then I remembered. I was in Vietnam, and my friendly waitress was talking in dongs, the local currency not US dollars!

"Can I pay in dollars?" I asked.

"Sure," came the answer. "Three dollars."

I handed over the greenbacks and smiled to myself. In Vietnam, how easy it must be to become a millionaire!

The incomparable George Bernard Shaw once said, "I dislike feeling at home when I am abroad". In Ho Chi Minh City (many locals still call it Saigon) I was in no danger of feeling at home! If forking out millions for a taxi ride wasn't strange enough, there was plenty of exotica to put the most hardened traveller on sensory overload!

Vietnam is a study in contrasts. From the plane I could see the lush green mountains, winding rivers and the geometric shapes of the rice fields. I could imagine the rice farmers in their conical hats bending double to plant the seedlings. After I landed at Tan Son Nhat airport, the picture of idyllic beauty quickly gave way to the sights and sounds of a busy metropolis. Ho Chi Minh City is Vietnam's economic and cultural hub. With its teeming streets, colourful shops, and vibrant nightlife, Ho Chi Minh City gives the impression of a city rushing to make up for lost time. But look beyond the hustle and bustle, and the signs of a rich heritage are there in plain view. Vietnam's charm lies in the fact that it blends the contrasting images nicely. Unlike Dhaka where the modern seems to rise by ruining the traditional, Vietnam's largest city mixes the old and the new into a seductive cocktail.

The organisers of the conference I had come to attend hadn't arranged lodging for us. Left to fend for myself, I had decided to be adventurous. I would stay for two days in strictly budget accommodation in true backpacker style. My final two days would be spent wallowing in sinful 5-star luxury at the Hotel Caravelle. In between, I would dash up north for a date with Hanoi, Vietnam's capital -- the Grand Old Dame of Indochina.

The conference turned out to be a bore. The keynote paper had everyone nodding off. In the post-lunch session, I sneaked out and made a break for the wide open spaces.

One of the very first things that you notice on the streets of Saigon is the huge number of motorcycles a veritable tsunami of two-wheelers. They dart about like criss-crossing shoals of fish, steering and swerving to avoid each other and pedestrians. Many of the riders are female. The motorcycles are to Vietnam what the horse was to the Wild West. I saw people using motorbikes to do all sorts of things, from carrying sacks of rice to transporting the entire family-- dad in front, mom at the back, and toddlers sandwiched in between!



Saigon elegantly combines the modern with the traditional

Crossing the street seems like a death wish in Saigon. But after a few tries, you understand that it's a kind of organised madness! It requires a leap of faith, but the trick is to wade in and walk slowly but steadily. No sudden starts or stops, and the tide of motorbikes will weave merrily around you!

After a couple of close calls, I made it safely to the Ben Thanh market area where my new Vietnamese friend Nguyen was waiting. We had only met the day before at my hotel, but I had exercised my considerable charm, and now