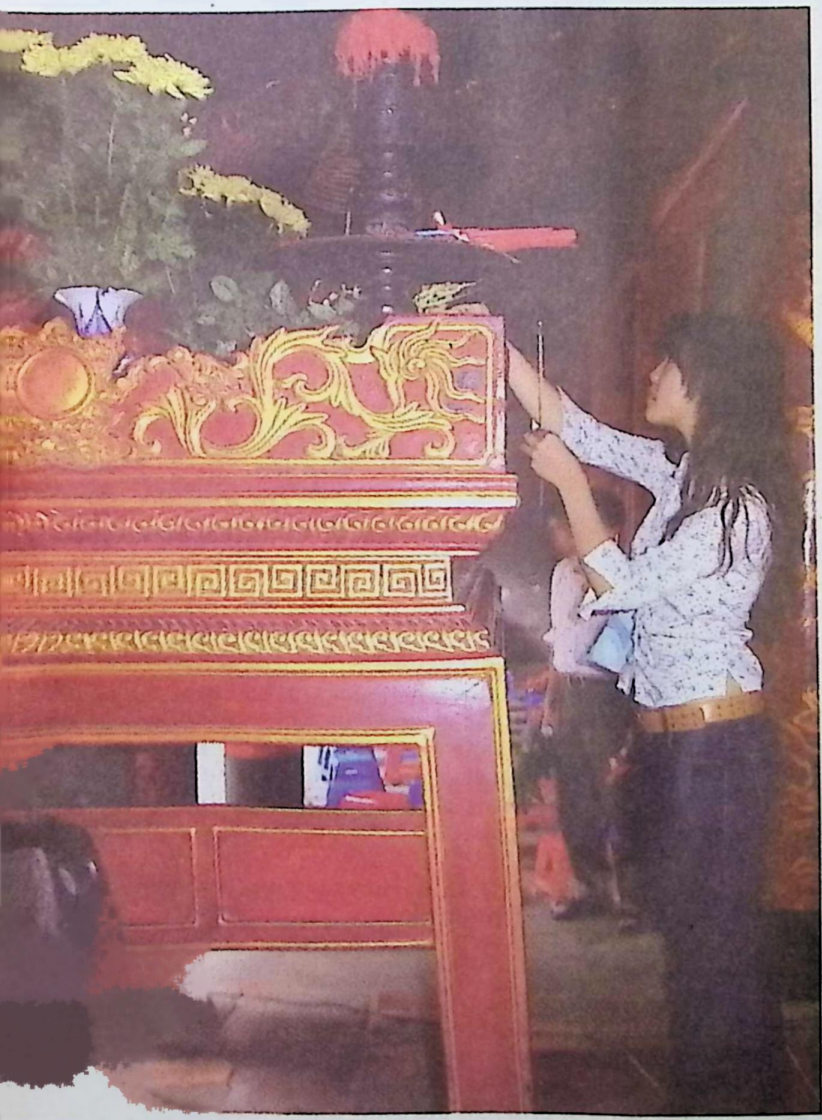
we were fast friends. Nguyen was going to show me around Ho Chi Minh City. There's nothing like local knowledge. We took a taxi, and headed downtown. Nguyen was apologetic about the heavy traffic. Little did he know that after Dhaka this was like a stroll in the park!

To most of us in the outside world, the name Vietnam stands for war. Indeed, relics of war are scattered about the city as a grim reminder of what the Vietnamese people went through. Before the Americans, there were the Chinese and the French. The Vietnamese are a nation who fought off three super powers and I had half expected them to be a dour, resentful and warlike lot. Far from it. The Vietnamese people are remarkably friendly, and they're embracing the future with infectious enthusiasm. "My dad fought the Americans," says Nguyen. "But now we're doing business with the Americans. America is our largest trade partner"



American army issue Zippo lighters

This breathtaking pragmatism is one of the reasons Vietnam has come so far so quickly. Although officially socialist, it has adopted a free market approach with gusto, and for the past decade the country has boasted one of the highest growth rates in the world. Foreign investment is flowing. Many Vietnamese worry that the new boom in commerce might erode their social values and threaten their cultural heritage. But for now, at least, they have got the balancing act just right.



Students offer prayers at the Confucian Temple of Literature.

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First stop Notre Dame Cathedral near Dong Khoi. The red-brick neo-romanesque structure with its twin spires dominates the skyline. It was built in 1877 using bricks from Marseilles and stained glass from Chartres. Across the square from the cathedral is the beautiful Saigon Post Office with its distinct French architecture.

The Giac lam Pagoda in district 10 is the oldest Pagoda in Saigon. Built in 1877, the pagoda is interesting for its elaborate wall tapestry and gilded statues. A monk showed us around, and then asked for a "fee" for special prayers. I was reminded of a *khadim* asking for a donation to his *mazaar*. Same story, different setting.

Tucked away in the centre of busy Saigon is the Mosque Jamea. Built by South Indian traders, it seems an oasis of calm. Exploring the compounds, I found an Indian restaurant and had a meal of the most delicious meat and *parata*!

The Dam Sen theme park failed to impress, but I liked the Reunification Palace. It was the seat of the