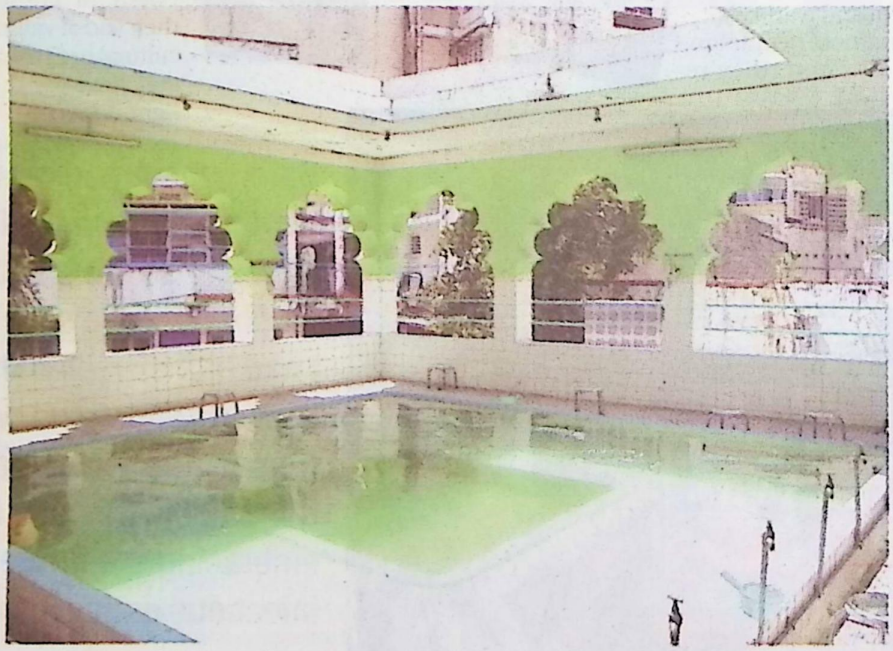
South Vietnamese presidency and the war was officially ended when it was occupied on 30th April 1975 by North Vietnamese troops. It has largely been left untouched and one gets an eerie sense of history imagining the moment on that fateful day when South Vietnamese leaders waited quietly for opposing forces to come and take control. The tank that smashed through the gate to end the war is still there by the way!

The War Remnants Museum (formerly Museum of War Crimes) is a harrowing chronicle of the effects of armed conflict. It displays brutal instruments of war -- tanks, howitzers, fighter-bombers -- and images of the carnage they inflicted. Most gruesome were photos of people affected by Agent Orange, a chemical exfoliant sprayed by US aircraft. I wonder if we will have a museum like this in Baghdad any time soon? Perhaps they will turn Abu Gharib into a memorial?

I am a souvenir hunter. I love to hunt for bric-a-brac that represents a locality, something unusual that your friends back home cannot buy from Aarong. An interesting souvenir available at the War Remnants Museum is the basic but rugged Zippo lighter used by American soldiers during the Vietnam war. It's estimated that 3 million Americans passed through Vietnam during the course of war, and almost everyone had a Zippo. "Hundreds of thousands were left behind," says the man behind the counter of the shop. "We take the brass shell, and install a new lighting mechanism."



The beautiful Mosque Jamea is an oasis tucked away within bustling Ho Chi Minh City.

I asked Nguyen if divisions caused by the war still exit? North versus South, East versus West? Nguyen's answer was typically pragmatic. "It does no good to harbour resentment and stoke anger. We are united as a people. The war is over. We have moved on."

After Reunification, there were no witch hunts and no vendetta. The Vietnamese understand that divisions must be smoothed over for the common good and a common future. This is their greatest strength, and a lesson for the rest of us.

Nguyen took me to dinner, and I was presented with my first Pho opportunity. Pho is Vietnamese noodle soup. You eat it with chop sticks. Having lived in Japan, I thought I could handle chop sticks. But Pho requires special technique. I twirled the noodle around my stick, but just as I was about to pop it into my mouth, the blasted thing would fall into the bowl with a plop! Nguyen almost died laughing.

I said goodbye to Nguyen and headed for my hotel. Next stop: Hanoi.

If Saigon assails the senses, Hanoi caresses them. With its leafy boulevards and Art Deco buildings, Hanoi has a quieter, more old world charm. I put up at the Golden Lotus hotel, and am met by Minh Kanh, Ly and Ngoc, all three are young women in their early twenties and executives for local companies dealing in furniture and handicrafts. Vietnam used to be a matriarchal society and women are doing very well in corporate life.

Minh Kanh is going to take me north of Hanoi to the industrial park. We exit the hotel, and there stands her motorbike. Minh Kanh notices my hesitation and laughs. "Hop on," she says. "In Vietnam we call this Xe Om literally the motorcycle hug."

The industrial parks features huge garments, shoe and electronics factories. Vietnam is one of Bangladesh's most fierce competitors when it comes to RMG. The factories are beautifully laid out and many new ones are springing up. Minh Kanh takes me to see her silk manufacturing unit. Hanoi is famous for its silk and there is a dazzling array of designs.

Back in town and its Ly's turn to take me to a meeting at the handicrafts factory where she works. After an interesting tour, we head out to see the sights. More Xe Om. Ly expertly pilots us to Van Mieu, the 1000 year old Temple of Literature. Dedicated to Confucius, Van Mieu is a temple and university rolled into one. "We always prayed here before our exams," Ngoc tells me. Like Saigon, Hanoi is full of pagodas and cathedrals.

We go to see Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum complex where Ho Chi Minh's embalmed body is kept. "Uncle Ho" would have been proud to see the economic strides the country is making.

Vietnam honours its glorious past, but has sights set firmly on the future. A 15-year war left it scarred. Now the Vietnamese people are making up for lost time. From its busy industrial parks to its bustling street scene, unmistakable signs of progress are everywhere. Vietnam is a nation hurrying towards tomorrow. ■