

A visit in the month of Ramadan

A tourist's impression of Vietnam

>Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) -
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If the terms "people's tourism" or "will tourism" were valid, Vietnam would be the champion. Believe me I went there to see people first, before seeing the monuments; to taste the flavour of will before tasting delicious Vietnamese dishes. The Vietnamese people wanted life and destiny has responded favourably without hesitation. Since 1945, this nation has faced death to liberate its country from French colonisation, then American, and God gave it life in 1975. The period between these two dates was dominated by fighting and strife, will, bravery and legendary sacrifices. It was followed by an extraordinary effort for development and progress. All this made the Vietnamese people face the world with a sweet smile on their faces, and overflowing happiness. Anyone arriving in Vietnam will feel safe and secure in this beautiful country which is really a harmonious symphony for tourism.



A rainbow over Ho Chi Minh City

قوس قزح فوق الطريق إلى هوشي منه سيتي



The road to Ho Chi Minh City

I came to Vietnam by air-conditioned coach from the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City, which the local people

still call by its old name, Saigon. The trip lasted six hours and did not cost me more than \$11. I was able to enjoy the villages and green spaces of the two countries, and

the rainbow adorning their rainy sky as well as the Mekong River flowing through the Indochinese countries (China, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and ▶

An Island in Nha Trang Bay

إحدى الجزر في نها ترانغ

Cambodia) which the last three of them have adopted a common policy of promoting their country as an integral part of one tourist destination.

After booking into one of the major hotels in the largest city of the country, I took a walk through its popular and modern streets and markets, passing by beautiful buildings attesting to the elegance of modern city planning, which did not happen in an arbitrary way but through a ten-year plan to erase the impact of the war. This was achieved with great success in 1986. It was followed by a plan of development and renaissance based on a policy of reconciliation with the colonizer and openness to the world in all areas.

I remembered what I was told by Mr. Le Tien Ba, Vietnam's ambassador in Cairo: "Since our main objective is to build our state and develop it, we decided to forgive the past and look for the future We opted for a

policy of reconciliation with past enemies to make them the friends of today. Trade with the USA reached a record estimated in tens of billions of dollars. Furthermore, we passed the stage of self-sufficiency in developing our exports: a few years ago, we imported about half a million tonnes of rice, now we export five million tons."

Ho Chi Minh City Sites

Ho Chi Minh City is a tourist city par excellence. Its eight million inhabitants are visited by 3.6 millions tourists annually. The city is full of hotels at all levels, with accommodation prices from \$10. There are restaurants everywhere offering Vietnamese, Asian and European dishes. The price of meals in popular restaurants is about three dollars. In other restaurants and luxury facilities, the prices range from \$4 to \$10. Vietnamese cuisine means large varieties of soups, with exotic half cooked



Ho Chi Minh City

أحد شوارع هوشي منه سيتي



Nha Trang Bay

خليج نها ترانغ

vegetables together with: chicken, meat, or fish and boiled rice. Bread is served only on request. The most popular dish is "Pho", a kind of macaroni paste associated with meat, chicken or shrimp.

Ho Chi Minh City is a city whose businesses stay open until 10pm. The restaurants remain open beyond midnight. The main shopping areas are Bin Thanh, Cho, Le Lai, Le Loi, Nguyen Hue and Tax with banks and exchange agencies all over the city. The dollar is worth 16 thousand dong (Vietnamese currency). Ho Chi Minh City is divided into ten districts each bearing a number. Free city maps are displayed everywhere in various languages.

The movement of Vietnamese is characterized by a simultaneous combination of speed, liveliness and joy. Everyone is either smiling or laughing and all are helpful, particularly towards foreign tourists. The only drawback is the low use of English, especially by taxi drivers. I learned that there is a plan for teaching foreign languages free of charge, to all

social groups to support the tourist sector, as Vietnam has been ranked among the top ten countries in the world in terms of tourist development.

Ramadan in Vietnam

My visit coincided with the holy month of Ramadan. In Ho Chi Minh City I shared "Iftar" (the breaking of the fast) with local Muslims. Prayers were at the Jamaa mosque, located in District No. 1 (downtown), behind the Sheraton hotel. The Iftar was simple: a plate of bananas, dates, sweets, an apple, a rice soup with small pieces of chicken, green salad and a glass of juice. We took our Iftar seated on floor mats, in two parallel rows, one for men and another for women.

In an interview with the first Imam of the mosque, Sheikh Yusuf Mohamed Ali (87), I learned that Islam reached Vietnam in the 10th and 11th centuries, and that the number of Muslims exceeds 200,000, residing mostly in an area known as Cham Ba Ni. They have 82 mosques, each with



هونشي منه سيتي في المساء
Ho Chi Minh City in the evening



Ho Chi Minh City

هونشي منه سيتي



A temple in the green mountains

معبد وسط الجبال الخضراء



Ablution area

مكان الوضوء بالمسجد

an Islamic school. The religious books and copies of the Koran come from Malaysia. The city of Ho Chi Minh has more than 5000 Muslims. The second Imam of the mosque, Sheikh Ahmed Abdul Kadir, recites the Koran in a beautiful voice. I also visited the smaller mosque Al-Rahim in Saigon.

The State of Vietnam

The map of Vietnam is shaped like an S, with a slender centre wide at the ends. Hanoi, the capital, is the largest city in the north. Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), is the main southern city. Vietnam is part of Indochina. It is bordered in the north by China, Laos to the west and Cambodia to the south-west. On the east is the "Eastern Sea", with 3260 km of coastline and an aggregate of 2774 islands with a total area of 1720 sq km, each with an area ranging from 100 sq km to 100 sq km. Vietnamese beaches are famous for their bays, some of which are classified among the 29 most beautiful bays in the world, particularly Ha Long and Nha Trang.

The population of Vietnam is about 84 million, with almost an equal percentage of men and women. A quarter lives inside major cities. There are 54 ethnic groups, with three main classifications: Austronesian, Malay and Sino Tibetan. They all speak Vietnamese, in addition to their local language. Seventy percent of Vietnamese are Buddhists,



The Sheraton behind the mosque

المسجد وخلفه فندق شيراتون



The Mosque

المسجد

10% Christian (Catholics and Protestants), and 2% Muslim. The remainder follow various religions such as Taoism, Confucianism, Cao Daim and Hoa Hao. The country is criss-crossed by the Mekong River, whose delta is a priceless gift for Vietnam, which boasts an average temperature of 25 to 30 degrees, 80% humidity and a rainy climate. These conditions strongly support the rapid growth of plants and crops, hence the abundance of flowers, fruits and greenery throughout the year.

The bay of Nha Trang and the islands

My trip to Vietnam, despite its short duration, was really one of the best trips of my life. The Vietnamese Ministry of Tourism gave me the opportunity to visit the bay of Nha Trang, accompanied by journalists and foreign experts in tourism. We travelled the distance of 448 km, which separates it from Ho Chi Minh City in 10 hours on a bus. After taking a boat to Bamboo Island and booking into the luxurious Vinpearl hotel. We paid a visit to Nha Trang bay which is ▶

filled with dozens of hotels, tourist villages, beaches famous for their huge coconut trees and mud baths. Monkey Island is home to more than 3000 very friendly monkeys especially to those who offer them peanuts and bananas.

We also visited the island of Nha Phu, with Evason Hideaway, one of the most expensive hotels in Vietnam, where the price of a room ranges between \$600 to \$2000 a night. Orchid resort, on another island, is famous for its rich flora and fauna: hundreds of varieties of trees, plants and flowers, as well as elephants and ostriches (which you can ride), and bears. There are also lakes full of goldfish. My trip to Vietnam, despite its short duration, was really one of the unforgettable trips of my life, during which I was able to appreciate everything that can be described as beautiful and amazing. Is it the magnificent natural landscapes, attractive beaches, or beautiful cities? Is it its cuisine, its moderate prices, or the pleasure of shopping? The appropriate response to these questions should perhaps be the valiant people of Vietnam who were quick to overcome the consequences of war. Through their hard work and tenacity, they have built a country which can best be described as a harmonious tourist symphony known as "Vietnam". ■



Ho Chi Minh City

هونشي منه سيتي



The covered market

سوق تشو المغطى



The covered market

سوق تشو



Fruit market in Saigon

سوق الفواكه في سايجون