

# Travel & Leisure

## Finding Peace In Vietnam

As Saigon fell in April 1975, Tran Ngoc Ann made the excruciating decision to put her sons Tony and Tim, ages 7 and 6, on an evacuation flight out of the country. She could have boarded the plane, too — her boss at the American Embassy had reserved seats for his secretary and the children. But she just couldn't bring herself to abandon her parents.

Thinking she would catch the next flight out, she ran home to get her mother and

father, but — if you've seen *Miss Saigon* — you know what happened. When she returned to the Embassy, it was awash in desperate people, and she was unable to make her way through the crowd.

Tony and Tim ended up at MCRD in San Diego and eventually found a home with distant relatives in San Luis Obispo. Back in Vietnam, Ann eked out a meager existence by selling ice on the streets of Saigon — now Ho Chi Minh City. »



Truc Lam Zen Monastery

« The '80s were painful. An embargo against Vietnam made finding her sons impossible. It wasn't until 1989 that Americans began visiting, and Ann seized the opportunity by opening a travel agency and telling her story to every client. Her prayers were answered in 1991, when a Vietnamese-American businessman returned home to California and found the boys listed in the phone book. For the first time in 16 years, Ann spoke with her children.

Of course, I didn't know any of this when I called Ann Tours last fall and asked to book their "Two-Day Mekong Delta Excursion." I just was just acting on the recommendation I'd read in a guidebook.

It wasn't until a month later, as we floated down the Mekong River, that I heard Tony's story. Our guide from Ann Tours explained to my husband, Richard, and me that Tony and his brother grew up in California and graduated from San Jose State. After their mother found them, "Tony came home," stated the guide. "His brother prefers to live in California, but visits."

Because of his bi-cultural experience, Tony has gathered together top-notch guides who relate comfortably with Americans and are a font of information on Vietnam. These people showed us the sights, but, more importantly, they helped us to understand the impact of history, the reality of the political situation, and the philosophy that guides the country.

Our first lessons came from Nguyen Van Quoc, our guide in the Mekong Delta, who explained, "Half the people in Vietnam have the last name Nguyen; just call me Quoc."

By the time he picked us up at the Park Hyatt Saigon, we had been in town for two days and I was bursting with questions — questions I couldn't ask the staff at our five-star hotel.



Evason Hideaway



Vinh Trang Pagoda



Sofitel Dalat Palace

"Everyone we've met has been so kind," I ventured after a reasonable period of getting-acquainted conversation. "Why don't they resent Americans?"

"First of all," Quoc replied, "more than half the population is like me — born after the war, so with no memories of it. And besides, as a nation, we've moved on. We're not stuck in the past like some Americans seem to be."

This explanation seemed more plausible after we'd toured the peaceful Vinh Trang Pagoda at My Tho. Forgiveness and acceptance are a big part of the Buddhist faith followed by more than half of all Vietnamese. And frankly, from what we saw, these people are just too

busy to dwell on the past. With a rapidly growing Capitalist economy, men and women work in the fields and at ubiquitous construction projects as if they're making up for lost time.

I sensed the same focused energy from the groups of girls we saw bicycling home from high school. Wearing the traditional white long-sleeved dresses over long flowing trousers, they reminded me of flocks of doves. Beneath each conical hat was a sweet face ready to return a smile.

The Mekong Delta is covered in lush green vegetation. At Cai Be we boarded a sampan that took us through miles of narrow canals, past houses on stilts and



Ana Mandara Resort



Lang Ga near Dalat

tropical fruit orchards. We stayed at the beautiful Victoria Can Tho Hotel, perched on the river's edge.

While we couldn't discuss the "American War" with Quoc, our next guide from Ann Tours knew that period well. Thach was in the South Vietnamese Army and had worked as an interpreter for a U.S. Army general. His experience helped me understand why I felt so connected to this country. We have a shared history. I have friends in San Diego who are from Vietnam. Likewise, many Vietnamese I met told me about relatives in the States.

Thach drove us from Saigon to Dalat — a town in the Central Highlands, popular with honeymooners and anyone seeking

relief from the heat. Richard and I stayed at the Dalat Palace Hotel, which looked so French that I was surprised when the receptionist spoke Vietnamese.

Thach also drove us to Nha Trang, known for its beautiful beaches, and we said good-bye in front of the Ana Mandara Resort. This deluxe hotel and Evason Hideaway, its very special offshore sister, provided us with luxurious surroundings, great service, and a chance to catch our breaths.

When we were ready to continue touring, we headed to Hanoi and the historic Metropole Hotel. Our guide, Hein, reminded me a little of the Martin Short character in *Father of the Bride*.

Sometimes this made me want to giggle, but mostly I listened with rapt attention. I already knew about Ho Chi Minh and his struggle to end the French occupation and, of course, the "American War," but it wasn't until we toured the Army Museum, that I realized Japan, the Khmer Rouge, and China had also invaded at different times.

"No wonder the Vietnamese people are so amiable," I thought to myself. "They're experiencing peace and prosperity for the first time in history."

Hein knew I was interested in ceramics and suggested we look in Bat Trang Village outside of Hanoi. On the way, I mentioned the Ho Chi Minh Trail Museum, where he'd taken us the day before. It seemed a strange choice — we three had been the only visitors — and I had a feeling it was special to him.

"My parents were Viet Cong and worked undercover in Saigon. They helped plan the Tet Offensive. Afterwards, my mother realized she was pregnant and they walked north along the Trail. After I was born, they left me with a family in Hanoi and went to Moscow."

We were speechless. The Tet Offensive, a surprise attack on the Americans, was the beginning of the end of the war. Hein's words echoed in my head as I browsed through aisles piled high with teapots and vases.

And what about him? Up until now, Tony was the only person I knew whom strangers had raised. Had Hein forgiven his parents for abandoning him? The answer came in the form of a beautiful green bowl. Hein stared at it longingly. "This is really expensive, but my father would love it and his birthday is next week. Do you think I should get it?"

As we made our way back into Hanoi, Hein unwrapped the dish and showed it to me again. It really was very beautiful.

— Elizabeth Hansen, photography by Adams/Hansen Photography