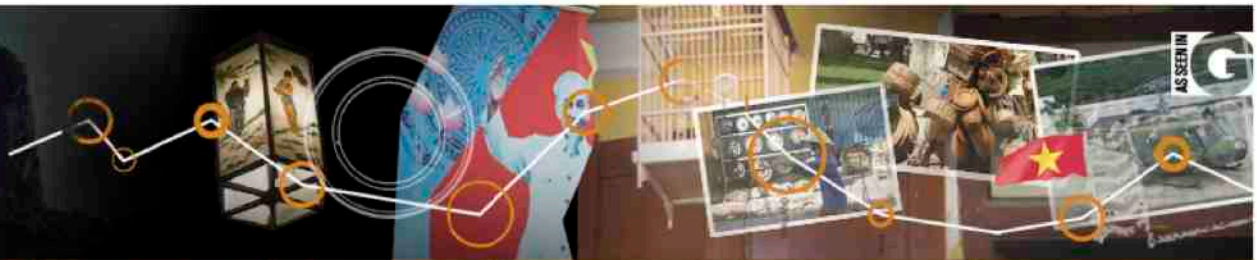


ASIA ADVENTURES UNCUT



VIETNAM:



« Day One - Time of arrival: 4pm

Day Three – Halong Bay Dreaming »

Day Two - Hanoi, The Old Quarter

June 6th, 2007 by ben

At 6am this morning the people of Hanoi were up and active, gathered under arched exotic trees on the cement and cobbled shores of Hoan Kiem Lake, the old quarter. Facing the water, in shorts and singlet tops, or shirtless, they were seriously engaged in a gamut of truly zany exercises. Groups of old women executed synchronised Tai Chi moves (with swords, red paper fans or otherwise unadorned); bizarre forms of stretching and self-flagellation (people standing there slapping themselves from head to toe) were happening everywhere; there were endless hip swivelling jingle jangle moves - a cross between jogging and dancing; cheery games of badminton played by the aged and a kicking and very acrobatic style of the game (no hands), played by the young and the agile - precision high jump scissor kicks, chest blocks and the like (quite the spectator sport).



A female voice blaring from old world speakers attached to gnarled willow trees, and others I couldn't identify, regulated the Tai Chi sessions. An old man meditated, sun sparkled off the water, motorbikes and cars zoomed around the lake beeping at each other: it was morning, like morning, morning kind of morning and I had truly arrived in Vietnam!

In Vietnam, life takes place on the streets. On average every 10 meters, beneath the canopy of tree lined streets, there are people – families, friends - sitting on steps or stools, drinking all manner of concoctions, eating bowls of soup noodles (pho) or simply chatting - all of them wedged between the hundreds upon hundreds of motorcycles parked along the footpaths. Many shops seem to exist as shop façades and little else, the main clientele spilling out on to the street. Spring rolls are deep-fried and chicken skewers are barbecued on small roadside cooking stands – their smoky aromas filling the street. Vendors, usually donning the conical straw hats, move about, stop, then move about again, selling their wares from rusty old bicycles loaded up, front, back and sides, or from wonderful, ye oldie worldie don gahn – bamboo poles with baskets (deep or shallow) slung from each end (at their aesthetic best when loaded with mountains of furry, red and yellow lychees). Motorbikes, bicycles and cyclos weave through the crowds. Horns are honked. Life unfolds. It's chaos. I love it...

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The old quarter once formed the Artisans district within the Emperor's citadel. Each street was named after the particular craft practised there. There were 36 guilds in total. Leather, silk, silk dyes, china bowls, wooden bowls, sandals, jars, hats, bamboo lattices and screens, string instruments, rattan furniture, baskets and much more were all produced here.



While times have changed and the streets have diversified, many maintain their original trade, and the area is teeming with crafty produce: a lot of which now caters to the tourist dollar. Beyond that, the old quarter is full of cheap high (and poor) quality clothing. In short, it's a great place to shop. Aware of this before I came I packed light. I returned to my hotel for breakfast then headed out and bought up big. Within the space of one hour and a half I had purchased two pairs of cut off cargo pants, two belts, a pair of board shorts, a swimming costume, sandals, sunglasses and a cap. All good quality and all for less than 1,200,000 Dong, roughly £40!

Wondering the streets relatively aimlessly for a few hours, truly suffering from jet lag, sleep deprivation (I didn't sleep at all last night) and the intense heat – it must have been at least 40C - I stepped into a craft shop or two (the air-conditioned being my favourite) and was regularly amazed by the richness of the colours and quality of the detail. The silk and embroidery especially was truly phenomenal.