

VIETNAM:



« Day Two - Hanoi, The Old Quarter

Day Four – Back Flips, Kayaks and Limestone Pillar Islands »

## Day Three - Halong Bay Dreaming

June 11th, 2007 by ben

The soundtrack was deep space, the sensation, slippery salt-water buoyancy and moving images bouncing off my retina presented the dimly lit undulating ceiling of a limestone water-tunnel. I was on my back, ears submerged, kicking through one of the 100's of water tunnels that weave their way through the 3000 karst islets that make up the Unesco listed and phenomenally beautiful Halong Bay. No amount of words or pictures can adequately convey the majesty of these limestone pillar islands. They really just have to be experienced.



According to legend Halong Bay was formed when a family of dragons, sent from the gods to protect the Vietnamese people, swooped down, spitting jade and jewels over the bay. Hitting the water the jewels turned into thousands of islets, forming a protective fortress against invaders. As the scientists have it, over 4 million years ago clams and oysters, snails and the like, their shells formed from Calcite, a mineral form of calcium carbonate, broken up by waves and scattered on the sea floor, slowly formed into a large bed of limestone. The pacific plate pushed the limestone up from the sea and from what I can gather, through some specialised form of erosion – water rich in carbon dioxide dissolving the calcium carbonate of the limestone perhaps – the limestone was cut away leaving the denser harder limestone, the karst islands of Halong Bay, behind.



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It was getting dark and I'd swum a little too far from the boat. It was worth it. On the tunnels' opposite side I'd swam into an emerald lagoon, hemmed in on all sides by steep limestone walls covered in thick vegetation. The swim back took a little longer than I'd expected and by the time I reached my destination it was well and truly dark. A cluster of ancient wooden Chinese Junk boats, all sweeping eaves, multiple levels and carved wooden features were lit up like Chinese lanterns. I felt like a 16th Century pirate stealthily approaching enemy ships by night as I swam by, on route to my particular old world Junk. I was tempted to climb up the anchors rope, but thought better of it. Stepping up the ladder and up on deck I found that dinner was being served in the boats luxurious old world dining quarters. Placing a towel on my seat I sat myself down and proceeded to stuff myself with exotic seafood while talking politics with some Aussie girls from Melbourne.



Earlier in the day, having driven 4 hours from Hanoi, boarded the boat and set sail, we had visited Hang Sung Sot cave, a massive cave full of stalactites and stalagmites and all manner of amazing limestone features stunningly illuminated by a series of colour washed lights, then stopped off with a number of other tourist junks, at Titop Beach, one of the few island beaches. It's a little piece of paradise, named after Russian Astronaut, Titop Allen who came here with Ho Chi Minh when on a visit in 1962. We swam, we frolicked, the water was numbingly perfect – I am truly living the dream.



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