

Before Leaving for the Mekong Delta

Tomorrow begins the last leg of the trip - a 40-minute drive north to Danang (yes, the old Danang Air Force Base you may have heard of 40 years ago), a 1-hour flight south to Saigon, and then a 3-hour drive southwest to the Mekong Delta. I'll spend 3 days there, exploring fishing villages on stilts, rice fields, floating markets, and a few large cities on the river.

A few words about the Central Coast before I leave:

- 70% of the people here are Buddhist. In practical terms, this means they go to one or another pagoda to worship Buddha, and one or more temples to worship their ancestors. And they really mean it: the little decorative shrines that look so kitsch in the U.S. are in daily use here. People burn a huge amount of incense, and leave offerings of food, all over.

In fact, when we were at a tailor shop getting some shirts made, I asked them to shut the TV - no problem; asked them to use the bathroom in their home behind the shop - no problem; asked them to stop suddenly lighting incense, which was making it hard to breathe in the little shop, and they didn't even answer - just turned on an overhead fan.

Even Vietnamese who move to the West continue worshipping their ancestors. When they visit Vietnam, they go to a temple, buy a spiral of incense 24 inches across, attach a list of their ancestors to it, and have it hung and burned. It burns continuously for 21 days (for about a buck a day, honoring a dozen people, that seems a pretty good deal).

- The beaches here are world-class. Unfortunately, many are fouled with a depressing array of just-begun luxury residences and [world class hotels in Da Nang](#). Come to central Vietnam now, folks, because in 3 years it will be nothing but Hyatts, Sofitels, and assorted Korean and Japanese resorts. I understand that Vietnam wants cash this second—ostensibly for building its modern infrastructure and providing jobs, though I remain skeptical about where the money will end up. But as in every other country with a coastline, the Hanoi government is making short-sighted, selfish, dare-I-say bourgeois choices with dramatic long-term consequences. A small part of the planet's seashore patrimony has been entrusted to Vietnam, and they are pissing on it. As a result, we're all a bit poorer.
- Here in Hoi An, a port city hundred and hundreds of years old, the original (and continuing) Chinese presence is palpable. When the Ming dynasty was conquered by the Tangs over 400 years ago, waves of political refugees came here from various part of China—each area resettling in its own separate enclave (Fukian, Hunan, etc.). To this day one can visit the assembly halls and temples each group built, its political history clearly visible in the old original murals and poems (in Old Chinese) on the walls. Walking the narrow little streets of Hoi An, amidst the smells of street food, the unending sales pitches from the open storefronts, and the pointed elbows of little old people rushing to unknown destinations, it was easy to imagine the cacophony of Chinese dialects and the smells of late medieval life here. In fact, with modern China's steady, unyielding pressure to buy up Vietnam's resources and real estate, I wonder if they will one day use the old presence

of these Chinese groups and their linguistic artifacts to justify a territorial claim to Vietnam the way they've done with Tibet, Macao, Hong Kong, and other places.

- The Vietnamese are great tailors, and their colorful silks, delicate brocades, and baby-soft cashmere wool are exquisite. They turn out dresses and jackets, slacks and suits, overnight. The good news is, they make the clothes to your measurements. The bad news (for me at least) is that they have to take your measurements. My tailor gently commented on my “nice Buddha belly.” That may be a compliment here, but not where I come from. When I frowned good-naturedly, she responded with, “and you have a charming smile.”

Source: [Đặt khách sạn](#)