

My First Day in Hanoi

After an uneventful flight in a completely full huge Airbus, I arrived in misty, overcast Hanoi and then got [Vietnam visa on arrival](#) at Noi Bai airport.

A bumpy, hour-long drive took me past miles of dilapidated roadside markets, corrugated metal shacks, motorbike repair shops, smoky industrial buildings, and noisy traffic. Finally, I arrived at the incredibly luxurious Hotel Metropole which I have booked a room online at [hotels in Hanoi](#). The Metropole was built in 1901. Situated between the Old Quarter, the French Quarter, the Opera House and Hoan Kiem Lake, the grand hotel has hosted Charlie Chaplin, Graham Greene, Jane Fonda, and more recently Thomas Friedman. It's mind-boggling—white-gloved doormen, velvet-dressed ladies-in-waiting, and a butler in a waistcoat with a cold drink as we arrive. Quite the contrast to the depressing drive in. And while the rest of the city isn't quite so plush, neither is it the gray, stern, unforgiving citadel of brainwashing we Americans have always pictured. Instead, the people have been welcoming, the city charming, the many crafts beguiling, and the food inviting, healthy, and satisfying.

The day's highlight was a performance of the world-famous water puppets. In a theater with 300 seats, imagine off to one side of the stage an 8-piece orchestra with traditional Asian instruments and several singers. The rest of the stage is actually a large pool of water about 3 feet deep, with scenery at the back and around the perimeter.

Invisible behind the scenery, a troupe of 8 people standing in the water operates large puppets in the pool using long rods under the water. The colorful puppets reenact classic stories of love, war, and nature in the most enchanting way imaginable. The subtleties of movement the puppeteers accomplish is quite extraordinary.

This day I also met my hosts at the Institute of Social Development Studies. We discussed various issues regarding sexuality, gender, and marriage. While I was full of questions for them, they were full of questions for me, so we had quite the lively conversation. More on this tomorrow after my first day of teaching.

Some observations and thoughts as I walk the streets of Hanoi:

- I learned from the newspaper that adultery is against the law, although the penalty is under \$100 and not usually enforced. I speculate that this echoed the policy during the "Vietnam War" (they say American War), when adultery by men or women left on the home front was considered treason, often punished severely.
- As in Saigon, most women under 40 here are dressed quite stylishly, in form-fitting outfits and very high heels. In trying to reconcile this with Vietnam's conservative sexual norms, I realize that this dress is a statement of both personal independence and of modern fashion far more than one of sexual availability. In the West, by contrast, we tend to equate these for women: independence + interest in fashion = sexual interest.
- While it is common to walk in public with a boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse, there is very little affection shown in public. Hand-holding is done almost chastely, and there is absolutely no kissing or erotic embracing in sight.

On Vietnamese TV

Last night I was interviewed for an hour on O2, Vietnam's independent lifestyle TV channel. The set was pretty familiar, as was the three-camera setup, spike-haired makeup guy, and sound guy who threaded the mike cord under my shirt with a nonchalant air of entitlement. Eventually it was 3-2-1 and we were rolling tape. The interviewer had clearly been to my

website, knew my books (a happy contrast to American TV!), and asked very intelligent questions. We discussed differences between U.S. and Vietnamese ideas of gender, love, and marriage; I talked about how technology affects sexual culture, and will presumably continue to do so in Vietnam; and I talked about how increasing Vietnamese women's economic independence will presumably increase the country's divorce rate.

I also compared the sex-related policies of our respective governments. In Vietnam, adultery is illegal; in America, the government has spent a billion dollars trying to discourage teens from having sex. Both countries regulate abortion and contraception. Both countries have inadequate sex education and premarital counseling. The hour show flew by, and my host was quite pleased. She gave me a lovely silk scarf as a gift, and soon I was back out on the street. After a quick bowl of steaming pho (noodle soup with beef or chicken, which can be eaten for breakfast, lunch, or dinner), I headed back to my hotel. I can't wait to see what I look like dubbed into Vietnamese.

Leaving the Cities Behind—For the Water

After 3 days in Saigon and 5 days in Hanoi, it was time to leave the major cities behind and explore the countryside. An absolutely interminable 4-plus hour drive past factory after factory (and sagging roadside market after roadside market) east of Hanoi eventually ended at Halong Bay, a gorgeous little body of water 100 miles from southern China. Dozens of small boats bobbed on the smooth bay in all directions—some carrying tourists from around the globe, others for working stiffs who were fishing, carrying goods, going to or from their jobs, or visiting neighbors. My “deluxe junk” (a perfectly accurate description which sounds hilarious in English) sailed out of the harbor, and I was soon surrounded by ghostly limestone formations as much as 200 feet high. It was a great luxury to see the land recede behind me. I had had enough motorbikes to last me a lifetime, enough people shouting into mobile phones (Vietnamese is a tonal language, so 15% of their everyday vocabulary must be shouted to be spoken properly), enough air that was hard to breathe. I was going to eat and sleep and drift on the little craft in splendid comfort for an entire 24 hours.

After a few hours of putt-putt-putting through the calm water we stopped and I was loaded into a rowboat. We rowed (well, not exactly “we”!) further out into the bay, eventually through a low-hanging natural tunnel in the rock. Ten minutes after we emerged—the silence broken only by the repetitive dipping of the oars and the periodic intrusion of Japanese, American, or French voices from other tourist boats—we came to a little floating village, several dozen little houses, shops, and places to store normal household stuff. Accessible only by boat, the houses and shops had electricity, bottled water, rudimentary cooking facilities, and easy-to-clean front porches. We sidled up to a few, I waved at the inhabitants, the exchanged friendly words with my oarswoman, and off we went, back to my deluxe junk.

The rest of the day passed peacefully. Except for the inevitable early-morning awakening, it was a little slice of heaven. And in heaven, I suppose, I'll wake up early each day and not mind one bit. The next day was the exact opposite—another grueling 4½-hour drive back to the Hanoi airport, to board a flight for the ancient riverside Imperial City of Hue, 35 miles south of the 17th parallel and the DMZ.