

3/15/13 - Day 68–Nha Trang, Vietnam: We arrived at the port of Nha Trang, Vietnam about 8am. Our location is shown in the map on the right. Many Americans, including us, have had an emotional foreboding reaction to the subject of Vietnam because of the terrible war and loss of American lives there in the 1960s. However, after several pleasant visits here in the last 10 years we have come to view this country just like the other vibrant Asian nations.

The view of where the Amsterdam would be docked is shown below. The souvenir vendors and tour buses were already present on the pier. The port area, shown here is a suburb several miles from downtown Nha Trang.



We had signed up for a tour organized by our friend, Karen (Kween Karen). The 10 of us in the group gathered on the ship and tramped down the gangway as

soon as the ship was cleared by the local officials.

Karen found the meeting place at the National Oceanographic Museum that had been arranged by the tour company. We loaded into our van and were on our way by 8:30am.



Our guide's name was Huy (pronounced Whee) and he turned out to be one of the best tour leaders we have had on the cruise (check out www.nhatrangprivatetour.com). We traveled the few miles from the port to the part of Nha Trang that is down by the beach. There we pulled in to the parking lot of an embroidery factory for our first tour. The lady shown in the yellow dress in the picture on the right gave us a tour. She showed us the production line of about 20 ladies and then a display of fine embroidered artwork that the artisans produce.



They had several kinds of embroidered art; the most colorful were scenes of gold fish on transparent gauze like material. Those were hard to photograph but would make a beautiful point of interest in any home. The most dramatic and striking art was an embroidered picture of an elderly Asian man smoking a cigarette, as shown on the left. It was very difficult to detect that this was embroidery and not a fine painting. The selling price of this embroidery was 36.9 million Vietnamese Dong (equivalent to \$1800 USD). Most of the items in the showroom had prices in the \$200 to \$400 USD range.

Leaving the embroidery shop we traveled to the Pagoda Orphanage where Buddhist nuns and volunteers take care of orphans. At the current time there were 120 abandoned and orphaned children in the Pagoda Orphanage. Our guide, Huy, was a local citizen and well known by the ladies in the Pagoda and all the other places we went today. Huy introduced the Buddhist Nun who was in charge of the pagoda and the orphanage organization, as shown on the right. .

At this point we and several other people in our group gave her bags



of school supplies and clothing as donations to the orphanage.



We were ushered into a large schoolroom where the 4 and 5 year old children were having a lesson. We interrupted the lesson but the teacher was very patient with us. The teacher is shown in the photo on the left with a student seated at her side.

The seated student had a special haircut that identifies him as a child who has been committed to the life of a Buddhist monk. Several of the boys had such haircuts and Huy said these were children without any relatives or friends providing support.

The children sang a song of greeting to us that we appreciated but sadly had no ability to respond in their language.



The good work of the Pagoda Orphanage was particularly evident by the presence of a child without arms, as shown in the picture below.



Huy then took us to the kitchen where a hot meal was being prepared for the children, as shown on the right.



Our visit to the Pagoda Orphanage was completed and we drove to a home where traditional Vietnamese mats were made from rushes that grow wild on the stream banks around Nha Trang. The stems of the rushes are dyed various colors before being used to make mats. Two cheerful ladies were in the process of weaving colorful mats and they showed us how they do their work.



Huy explained that Vietnamese people use the mats to sleep on and as functional decoration, as shown below.

The ladies were selling the mats for \$2 USD each. Several people in our group bought them as souvenirs.

We left the mat weaving demonstration and drove to our next destination which was a typical Vietnamese home that was opened for tours by the public. Along the way we snapped pictures of different Nha Trang homes as we passed by. The following are some of the pictures we got.



As with any city there was a range of economic levels represented in the homes we saw. However, we didn't see what we would consider inadequate housing like that we saw in some parts of Indonesia. That observation may have been determined by the route taken by our driving tour today.



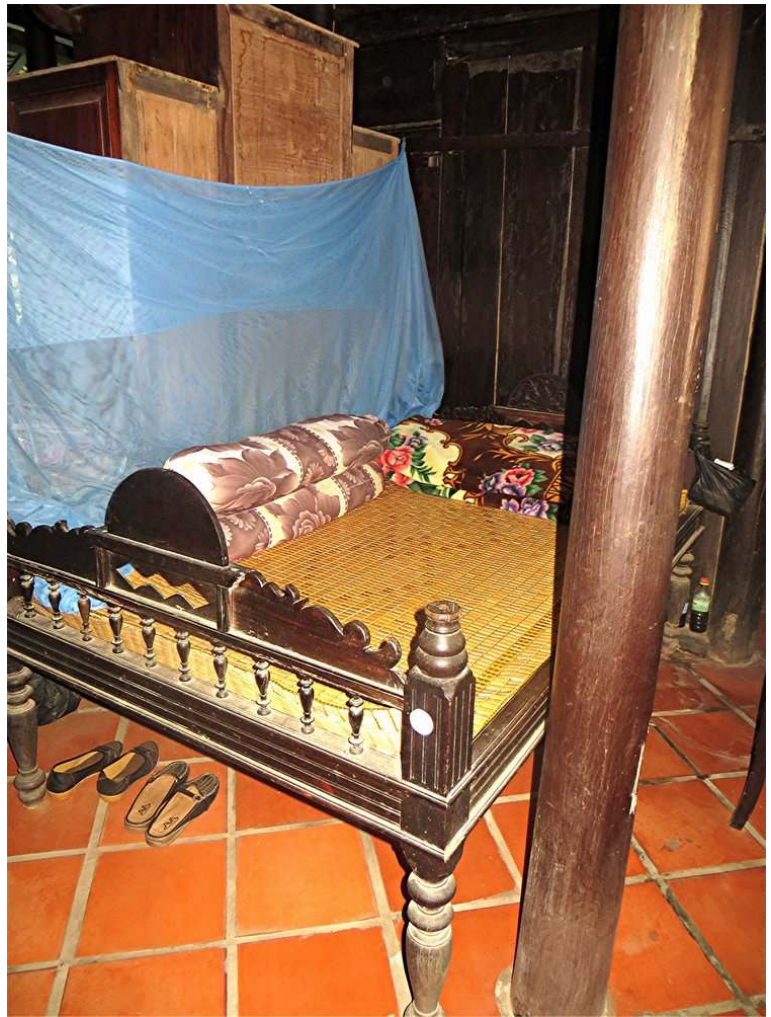
We arrived at the home that was designated a “typical” Vietnamese home. The entrance courtyard, still wet from the periodic rain showers, is shown below. We did a quick survey of homes as we drove around and concluded that this home was in the upper economic bracket rather than “typical”. However, the smaller places probably wouldn't have the range of features that Vietnamese people crave for their homes.



Huy led us through the house where several bus loads of tourists (mainly from the Amsterdam) were also walking around.

He showed us the bedrooms for the husband and wife. The husband's simple bed with a mat rather than a mattress is shown on the right. The bedrooms were not separated from the rest of the house by solid walls but rather screens, drapes, and open spaces that promoted good ventilation during the hot season.

Huy then proceeded to tell us an interesting thing about the culture, regarding the husband-wife relationship. He said that in a traditional home it was considered very unseemly for a husband and wife to share the same bedroom. In the interest of having children the two people would get together for "love" sessions but would not routinely sleep together. This behavior was ascribed to the Buddhist tradition. Fewer people are observing this tradition under the influence of television programs, Internet sources and greater travel experience.



While the bedrooms were very small, barely large enough for a bed and dresser, the kitchen was huge, as shown on the left.

The tour of the home included a very nicely presented snack of fresh fruit slices, served on a table in the covered patio, as shown below.



We finished our tour of the typical Vietnamese home and set out to pay a visit to the large white standing Buddha.

On the way we passed large green fields of rice like the one shown on the right.



Some rice fields had sections that were knocked down, perhaps by this morning's downpour of rain. An example is shown below.



As shown on the right, the large standing Buddha statue was visible well before we arrived at the base of it.



The Buddha statue was really huge and the base included a Pagoda. The best photo we could get, up close, is shown on the right.



Behind the Buddha statue was an extensive cemetery, as shown in the picture below.



Optional forms of burial were also seen throughout the day. We saw above ground tombs in the yards of homes and out in the fields, as shown below.



From the White Buddha statue we drove to a factory where a food product called “rice paper” was made.



The photo on the left shows a thin film of yellow rice paper lying on the woven bamboo racks used to dry the “paper”.

The factory was in a semi-shut down mode because of the recent rain that stopped the process of putting the rice paper outside to dry. Huy knew the workers and the process well so he proceeded to give us a brief lesson on how to make rice paper. He said you start with a mixture of rice powder in water. The mixture is held in the containers shown on the right.



Huy showed how the mixture is scooped out and spread on a hot stove top, much like making pancakes. After a short time the semi-dry film is peeled off the stove top and placed on the bamboo racks to go through a second drying step on a large stove where the entire bamboo rack is processed over the hot zone, as shown below.



After this quick-dry the rice paper on the bamboo racks is placed in the sun to dry more completely. Today the drying stanchions in the yard were empty, as shown below, because of the rain.





The final dried product looks like the films sticking to the bamboo racks shown in the photo on the left.

The dried product is removed from the racks and shredded to form rice noodles, as shown below. The noodles are packaged and sold in that form to be used as food.



As shown below, Huy spent some time showing us that instead of shredding into noodles the rice paper could be cut into large pieces and, like a tortilla, used as a wrap filled with vegetables and meat.



The difference in color between the yellow and white rice paper remains a bit of a mystery to us. Apparently the yellow color results from a natural or artificial color addition that some customers prefer.

We finished the tour of the rice paper factory and drove to a home where two women had a business of making traditional conical Chinese hats.

Huy said that, unlike old times, motorcycle riders now have to wear helmets so the market for conical hats is not very good. However, some women still wear the hats to shade their faces from the sun. Some also wear face masks to keep their skin color as light as possible.



Huy is shown demonstrating the hat making technique in the photo on the left. He is holding a light weight wood and reed hat frame and showing how plant leaves are sewn onto the frame. To finish his demonstration he put one of the hats on Orlin who had made the mistake of standing nearby. In an endearing gesture Huy patted Orlin's protruding "Buddha" tummy.



After everyone had taken their pictures, Huy announced that only women wear this kind of hat in Vietnam. A pretty little girl, shown on the left, came by to see what was so funny.

Several people in our tour group bought hats for \$2 USD each.

It was time for lunch so we drove to the Ven Song Restaurant where tables had been set up for our tour group and one other, also from the Amsterdam.

The tables were set up on a delightful deck over the river that flows through Nha Trang.

We had a delicious lunch consisting of a bowl of soup, spring rolls and a plate of noodles and vegetables.



The deck held the two tour groups very comfortably.



The meal was included as part of the tour cost but the drinks were extra at \$1 USD each. That was a bargain and we had a couple cold Saigon beers that hit the spot on this humid but not too hot day.

Next to the restaurant there was a narrow wooden bridge across the river, as shown below. It got a lot of use, particularly by people on motorcycles. Huy explained that the bridge was paid for by the residents of a suburb of Nha Trang on the other side of river from the restaurant. He said that nearly every rainy season the bridge is damaged but the people just fix it up and keep on using it.



As part of the tour Karen had arranged for a boat ride back into the heart of Nha Trang. After we had finished eating lunch, Huy, made a phone call and soon a boat pulled up.



We all piled in to the boat and were on our way down the river.



We were all looking forward to looking at Nha Trang from the river and maybe getting a little different view. Here are some pictures we took along the way.





It appeared that the range of economic levels represented by the houses on the river was about the same as what we saw earlier in the homes around town.

We arrived at the boat harbor for Nha Trang and saw all the fishing boats, as shown below. Huy had said that tourism was the biggest economic driver in Nha Trang and fishing was the second. The boats were all painted blue which is a “lucky” color for Vietnamese.



When out at sea at night in these Asian waters we often see fishing boats with bright lights shining down into the water. The lights attract fish and that improves the amount they catch. This boat on the right shows three large banks of fluorescence lights that are used for that night fishing. It also has the traditional round utility boat tied to the stern. These light weight boats were attached to nearly every fishing boat in the harbor.



On a hill (Mount Cu Lao) overlooking the harbor was a weathered looking Ponagar Temple as shown on the right. The boat was soon pulled into a landing near the temple.



We gingerly departed our boat and proceeded to the entrance of the Ponagar Temple.



Inside the Ponagar Temple grounds were ancient brick buildings erected by the Cham people of Vietnam. Huy said that in celebration of the long history of Nha Trang the Cham people had especially invited to a convention in Nha Trang so there would many of them visiting the temple today. The main temple entrance is shown on the right.



At the entrance of the temple was a sign in several languages, as shown below, giving the rules for those not familiar with tradition.



Elsewhere on the temple grounds there were traditional Chan dancers and a band performing for a crowd of people. Many Asian men and women observing the dancers were wearing yellow baseball type hats, as shown below. They appeared to be from the same organization.



After about 45 minutes we left the Ponagar Temple and drove through the city to the “Dam Market”. Along the way we commented to Huy that we had not been able to photograph any posted gasoline prices in Nha Trang. It appeared that prices were not posted at the stations. Huy covered for us by simply saying that regular gasoline is selling for \$1 USD per liter. That would amount to \$4 USD per gallon and about the same as in the US.

The Dam Market was a major collection of temporary and permanent booths selling food, souvenirs and household items. It is distinctive because it has a central permanent building that is round and the booths are arranged in a circular pattern. Outside the round building are other booths that line the streets leading in to the circular central building. Shown on the left is a display of spices that was typical of booths that could be found at the Dam Market.



After about 45 minutes in the Dam Market we boarded our van and headed for the Amsterdam, about a 20 minute drive away. Part of our route took us past the beach area that is one of the most beautiful parts of Nha Trang. On another visit we had spent some time at the beach but there was no time for that today. We got some pictures of the trees along the beach that were pruned to produce an interesting sculptured effect, as shown below.



There were lots of examples of this kind of topiary that enhances the beach area. Nha Trang is a popular resort area and they have focused on making their beaches as beautiful as possible.

On the way back to the port we gave a round of applause for Karen who had set up this tour for us today. It was a wonderful combination of great sites to visit and a very professional tour leader.

Back at the port of Nha Trang we thanked Huy for his site selection and clearly delivered tour comments. For future reference Hug's email address is: hbluesky_hbluesky at yahoo.com.vn and his website is www.nhatrangprivatetour.com .

As we passed through the entrance to the pier we saw a wonderful sign for the port of Nha Trang. We usually have trouble finding good sites for documenting the visit of Barbara's library card but this one looked perfect. We snapped a quick picture and were on our way.



We then walked down the pier and past the traditional row of souvenir vendors.

Back on the Amsterdam Orlin hustled up to Deck 8 where he could get a good picture of the cable car system that carries people to and from the Vin Pearl, as shown below. The Vin Pearl is an upscale resort across the bay from Nha Trang. We have never been there but the cable car access sure gets your attention. This morning when we arrived the sun was coming up and the lighting for a picture was terrible so now with the setting sun the lighting was just right.



The Amsterdam got underway about 6pm. It was necessary for the ship to pass under the cables carrying the cable cars to Vin Pearl. Apparently the clearance between the Amsterdam superstructure and the cable cars was marginal because we noticed that the cable cars stopped running until the Amsterdam had completely passed under the cables. It was dark as we continued out of the harbor. The towers turned out to have colorful lighting on each one that became quite pretty after dark. Later as we got further out to sea the fishing boats with their bright lights were lined up for several miles.

The Amsterdam continued underway bound for the island nation of Singapore. We are scheduled to arrive on March 17.