

Slumming in Vietnam

By Lenhardt Stevens



Photograph by the author

In Hanoi, the summer time is very hot. Frequently, the humidity allows for temperatures to rise well into the hundreds. When my skin made prolonged contact with direct sun light, I would first burn, then watch my skin as it peeled off my body in weblike formations. On the taxi ride over from the airport, my taxi driver stroked my beard twice before I told him, “That’s enough.” He was saddened, but seemed to understand. I picked up a motorcycle from the rental company, something that would not start until you gave it a little gas, and joined the gnat like mass of motorized vehicles that make up Hanoi traffic. Within inches on either side of you, in front and behind, there is another vehicle (usually a moped). It resembles schools of fish in the ocean, intersecting with other schools with everyone making it out alright by the end of the interchange. I had a friend who once closed his eyes and walked across a street in Hanoi in order to see if the self-correcting nature of Vietnamese traffic would exist without his active participation. He is still alive and uninjured.

Vietnam became unified and fully under the Northern government in 1976, with the renaming of Saigon as Ho-Chi-Minh acting as a decisive redubbing of an American

ruled southern Vietnam. Vietnam still carries living members of what was, although not in essence, a civil war between its countrymen and women. The not-so-elderly have relatives who were fighting against their neighbors during the war. While reunification has been met with successes, this historical fact in conjunction with veterans from the war in Vietnam from America puts this country in a continually troubled relationship with United States imperial practices. If the language here appears too radical, allow me to do some nimble footwork surrounding our involvement. If the Vietnamese people were electing to become a political ideology that was decided upon democratically, with platforms that did not include genocidal intent, then our intervention is not justified. Disagreeing with this statement comes at a political cost that I bear as much as detractors.

Westerners trade tips at the hostels, usually after a round of “free beers,” which incites the young people to frenzy. They are wearing flamboyantly colored tank tops, jean booty shorts, and the boys are wearing neon sunglasses while the girls show us how tan their legs are. At one bar, laughing gas was being served in balloons for \$2. These bars are frequented, with near exclusivity, by Westerners, i.e. Australians, Brits, Americas, Portuguese, French, German, Canadians. On the street, I watched as the Vietnamese would pass the bar to have a look inside, to watch the drinking and hollering Americans and Europeans have their fill before they proceeded to the next location.

A friend of mine was walking down the street when her buttocks was grabbed by a man who whispered something lascivious towards her before running away. The night was so humid I could not discern where the moisture started and my hot flesh began. It is true that the exoticism that reduces the other to a consumable experience goes both ways. To many of the Vietnamese I engaged with, I appeared to be nothing more than my wallet, with most of our encounters being a simplified English raised-voice contest about purchases or the value of the goods they were selling. The ideology undergirding this economic relationship is locatable when cynicism as market analysis is applied. The Vietnamese want us to spend money so that they will get money, and the tourists only want to spend money on things that they think are of a particular value. What things are of value is a separate question.

The exchange rate in Vietnam is such that beer can be purchased at some purveyors for a nickel and lavish multi-course meals for a couple of bucks. People can head to Vietnam with a checking account of any whole number plus three zeros and find themselves able to subsist on consistently well made pho and the watchful eye of your parking lot attendant, usually a boy under the age of twenty, whose hours go through the night to ensure you do not have your Honda Win stolen. These motorcycles are light, tend to need a push in order to get up a hill of a slight incline, and are traded between Western hands with greater frequency than the prostitutes underneath the red lights. While one may believe that there is a certain amount of daring in their adventure to

Southeast Asia, I assure you that the process of procuring a motorcycle, riding it around the country, and visiting the sights is so streamlined it is veering on visiting the Lincoln memorial.

Let us not forget that at My Le it was Americans who raped and killed the the Vietnamese, not the other way around. We saw thousands of men whose lives were cut down by Vietnamese soldiers, but only Southeast Asia saw Agent Orange unleashed onto their civilian populations, or their women subjected to a mass prostitution industry of which the customers are near exclusively foreign¹, or a globalization effort that has poor working conditions and poverty sustaining wages for its workforce. Our tourist activities in the country we once brutally near-destroyed reflects the worst example of imperio-tourism the world can see today. This is not a cross-culturally exchange where Vietnamese youth get to meet their American counterparts and discuss forward aiming practices for two our two nations to adopt. Rather, the stark contrast between the cash-strapped Vietnamese and the passing-through American tourists creates as a dynamic of something exploitative, distancing, and self-perpetuating.

There was a phrase in one of the hostels that read, “Do not be a tourist; be a traveler,” written on the wall of the building. The intent of these injunctions, I would imagine, is to democratize the world by eliminating the notion of being a foreigner abroad. If we have no tourists, a unity of *travelers*, a people without borders, opens up as a possibility. These sentiments are important, and provide a noble ideal to keep in the back of one’s mind as they move about the globe individually. It would seem at the moment, however, that they are obscuring a much more vital confrontation that is worth having, in addition to creating an impression of possibility where there is none. The Westerner who comes to Vietnam to live an ostensibly dingy couple of months is, in actuality, in a luxury that the Vietnamese they will be encountering do not know. Those Vietnamese are not allowed to leave their country and do a couple of months in Dallas, or Rome, or Tokyo. In our globalized world, liberal arts grads want to be able to travel under their terms, while at the same time not having to acknowledge the privilege that they are bringing with them while they are in a third world country.

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¹ http://www.who.int/hiv/topics/vct/sw_toolkit/sex_work_asia.pdf, “Structure of the Market” p. 6