

Letter from Hanoi 11-17

Dear Ishmael,

I write you from the Reunification Express from Saigon to Hanoi. This journey allows me some calm after the sensory assault that is Ho Chi Minh City - the scooters, the heat, the crowds, the pollution. Cemeteries with obelisks and the crosses on Catholic churches scar through the lush verdant rice paddies. Both are the remnants of the legacy of the French and the Americans, the lingering memories of colonialism and war.

As the moon illuminates the rails, I get melancholy. I like my train rides long - the Trans Siberian is one of my favorite journeys - this one is 38 hours. I feel a sense of nostalgia for a childhood trip from Los Angeles to San Diego, the overnight trip from Hong Kong to Beijing I first took solo, a trip I repeated with my boyfriend and then our son Casey, the Coast Starlight. Trains force me to sit, this time for 1700 kilometers: I put down *Wuthering Heights* and watch the moving picture outside my windows. Water buffaloes, farmers wearing *non la*, kids strolling along country paths remind me of the Chinese countryside, landscapes that look unchanged for ages.

We have a comfortable private cabin: it's an amazingly cheap first-class ride. I'm drinking lots of cups of strong coffee from the fellow with the regular pushcart cafe. There's sweets and dragon fruit and meals consist of cooked rice with chicken or pork stew and a side of cabbage served up by the cheery non-English speaking staff. I meet a few locals and I give bracelets to a couple of girls on board, who are immensely delighted.

At Da Nang, Hue, Hoi An, cities notorious to me growing up watching news of the Vietnam war, men go outside to smoke and smoke and smoke; we get off for fresh

air, stretch and photos, as ladies offer us noodles and packages of biscuits and rice with mystery meat.

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I really hate this wherever in the world it happens - when the locals look at me as if I was a flesh and blood walking dollar bill. I've learned is that you can only take Mai Linh or the green Saigon taxis – because of their honest drivers – other companies hire greedy drivers who scam via circuitous rides or simply refuse to use their meters. Let's hear it for the glorious capitalism.

We are staying in the French quarter by tree-lined lake Hoan Kiem; the hotel interior is all glistening Vegas lights shiny. On weekends, the ring road around the lake closes and becomes a charming pedestrian walkway. Families, couples and groups of friends promenade in the festive atmosphere where lion dancers perform for money, kids ride electric cars and ice cream vendors sell popsicles in all sorts of lurid colors.

The staff of the hotel is young, the post-war children who all speak good English and share a slightly cynical nonchalance about Communism. With this group it's about hanging with friends, watching flicks, karaoke, drinking, travel aboard, working out, meeting for grilled pork, hoping for better jobs.

You can get babies here. At the Temple of Literature, a memorial to Confucius and learning, I see European couples wearing Baby Bjorn carriers holding their newly adopted children. The China market has dried up, so the weaker economies are new sources of babies and unlike the rigid Chinese restrictions, you can get boys. Nearby, students giggle, clown and pose in academic gowns for photos as part of a traditional ceremony.

I am not much for war tourism and visiting the mausoleums of man's cruelty and sadism. I skipped the Killing Fields when in Cambodia and am taking a pass on the Hanoi Hilton here.

France isn't far emotionally. At the "Parisian style" Hotel Metropole, guests sit in these date air-conditioned finery nibbling imported chocolates accompanied by demitasses of rich local coffee, far removed from the hoi polloi. This Sofitel legend advertises "colonial grandeur." Ah, the nostalgia, Guess the French haven't quite gotten over Dien Bien Phu.

The Kinh Do is more my pace, an unpretentious joint known for its croissants and creamy homemade yogurt. I speak French with the proprietor, a slim sixtyish lady with bobbed hair. It's always comforting and odd to speak the mother tongue of a former colony, but that's the language of the older generation and the past, now.

At Trang Tien mall, the former *Grand Magasins Reunis*, the spectacular 1920s French department store, designer brands dominate. It's the redundancy of luxury because a Louis Vuitton shop is pretty much the same in anywhere in the world. The cheeriest sight is the smiling middle-aged man, clearly oblivious to the consumer goods, who just relishes the air-con while riding up and down the elevators.

We're eating well and cheaply. Casey seeks out *Pho*, but I'm enjoying *com bin danh*, literally "the peoples' food": fried fish, chicken stew or pork belly, a bowl of bone broth, a scoop of morning glory and *banh xeo*, crepes filled with shrimp and onions, torn and wrapped in lettuce and mint, dipped in fish sauce. I am obsessed with *che*, the sweet dessert soup and puddings. My current favorite is the refreshing *che ba mieu*, a tri-color mess of coconut, agar and red beans.

Communism is ripe for kitsch. At Cong Caphe, vintage black and white photos of joyous peasants and stern soldiers decorate the walls and baristas, clad in khaki shirts and wearing caps adorned with red stars, dispense the frothy coconut café, at near Starbucks' prices to tourists and well-heeled locals in designer gear.

Thanh, the shaggy-haired night clerk and I have a laugh about the teenaged girl who shot down an American flyer during the American War – that's what it is called here. It's certainly a striking photo, a gun-toting young girl guarding a man nearly a foot taller than her. He chuckles as he tells me that image was turned into a postage stamp and that they studied her story in school textbooks. The sleeping man - that's what many locals call Uncle Ho and many admit to never having paid him a visit. Like his fellow Communist brothers Lenin and Mao, he's preserved under glass.

I realize how much I love former Communist countries and the ones I visited so far since rapprochement - China, Cuba, Russia, Czech Republic - have fulfilled some of the curiosity of my Cold War childhood. In this exploration of our forbidden enemy lands, I've seen their sometimes strange propaganda images of us and locals have been eager to meet us, perhaps to dispel the stories they have heard about us. I am still trying to figure what all that ducking under desks was all about.

From Hanoi with love,

Susanne