

Heartbeats

**Servants of the
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Adventure to Vietnam, Hanoi

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I began my adventure of going to Vietnam, Hanoi, to be exact, on Easter Monday, April 21st. As I reflect back on using the word “adventure”, I have to share with you that I really am not an adventurous person. So I did have a lot of butterflies as I waited at O’Hare Airport in Chicago.

Then if you would picture this. Being wheeled in a wheelchair up to the plane door and this lovely Korean woman waiting there to take my small bag and help me out of the wheelchair and into the plane.



She took me to this lovely little cubicle and showed me how to put my feet up and, if I wished, how to move the seat so that I could lie down. She also showed

me how to turn on my own TV and how to get to the movie section in English, of course.

After offering me something to drink (on a small tray she had choices of wine, water, apple juice or orange juice) she handed the menu and asked if I would make my meal choices for the flight to Seoul, South Korea.

After that beginning (and I hadn’t even left the ground yet” my butterflies were pretty well gone.

I need to begin by giving you a little history of Vietnam. In the late 1800’s Vietnam was ruled by kings. Then came the colonization period of Vietnam by Germany. At the end of the First World War, the Versailles Treaty took all of Germany’s possessions and gave them to other countries. So France took over the colonization of Vietnam. The French presence had been in Vietnam in previous centuries.



Communism began in 1917 in Russia and did spread to Vietnam. In the 20’s and 30’s there was underground formation of Communist leadership. This was the advent of the leader, Ho Chi Minh. In 1954 the French were driven out of the northern section of Vietnam and the Communist, under Ho Chi Minh, took over. However, the southern section of Vietnam was not Communist and a Civil War began. The United States entered into this Civil War by aiding the southern section. Finally in 1975, the United States withdrew and in the treaty between Vietnam and America the unification of Vietnam as a Communist country was in place. Ho chi

Minh died in 1969 but other Communist leaders took his place.



Knowing most of this history at the time I went to Hanoi, I was so confused when I began to travel around Hanoi, either going to 5:30 Mass at the Cathedral or shopping for plants with my niece. The confusion was because of what I was seeing. Construction was everywhere: high rises going up, the best of construction equipment was evident, we travelled on 3 lane highways, and crossed one of the most beautiful bridges I've seen.



I was finally able to talk to one of Don's guests at the First Communion. He was so knowledgeable about Vietnam

history. He said that Lenin would turn over in his grave because of the way Communism is lived there. There is a huge statue of Lenin in the historic district, so they are communist. It is Communist in its leadership, but they ignore the economic principles of Lenin's philosophy. In that way they are different than Cuba. Vietnam is a thriving country. The building and industry going on is rapidly building a middle class that they've never had before. It will be fascinating to see what emerges out of all of this—to see what kind of country Vietnam will end up like. Don said that there is a 7% growth rate per year.



That was why for me, Hanoi was a city of contrasts: there was the construction which is so 21st Century. And then there are food stands that look 19th Century. They are like our flea markets stands. Going to the Cathedral is a good example of what I was feeling; women sit on

the right and men sit on the left (19th Century) and in the front there are TV's with the music on it (20th Century)



When we travelled out of Hanoi and went to the Bay of Halong to see the 8th wonder of the world, the Karst's, we went on a super highway with toll booths, service areas at different exits. Everything was 21st Century living. Then we came to the waiting area to get a boat to take us to an island where we were going to stay. The waiting area was outdoor with only Squat Bathrooms. Again, the contrast.



The people, however, were so friendly and immediately wanted to know where we were from. I was surprised to find that saying Chicago had no effect on them, not even saying the United States. I had to say America. And then they would understand. But they know the war as the American War. They were happy to share their food with us and their fruit and vegetables. I really never had a sense that they were suffering under an oppressive government. They don't have a mail system, or radio or newspapers. I think they have a TV station with one station on it. They don't have a very developed educational system yet. My nephew's children are being home schooled but will go to the International School in 6th grade up. They have a good beginning of a medical system with hospitals and smaller clinics.

The transportation system was fascinating. It felt as if I was taking my life in my hands every time I got into a car to go anywhere. Everyone seems to just go! In one of my Grab Cars, he had the back window blocked

off with sunscreens. There seemed to be a million motorcycles on the roads, no matter where you were. When we went to shop, there are no sidewalks so you have to walk as close to the edge of the road as you can because the motorcycles have the right of way. It was so funny to see these beautiful women dressed up with 3 inch heels hop on their motorcycle and take off. Don or Amber would call for a car on their cell phones and give their address and the address of where they wanted to go and a car would come. The license plate number of the car would be on their phone so we would watch for that car with that license. No money would change hands. Don would pay by credit card. They also had Grab Motorcycles and I saw Grab Food signs.



The smog was oppressive. They say it comes from China which is about 100 miles north of Hanoi. In the three weeks, we did not see the sun. On Monkey Island we saw the sunset about 6:30-ish. Vietnam and China are traditional enemies so Vietnam

would blame anything they could on China. But I don't think Hanoi has the amount of industry production that would have caused such smog. And they have much more motorcycles than cars.



Amber and Don tried to continue to cook the way they had before moving to Hanoi. But they soon found that it was much too costly. Everything they needed would be specialty items. They hired a Vietnamese woman to do their cooking and she arrives every morning about 10:30 carrying all of the food she will use for that day's meals (noon and night). Mrs. Neu was very delightful. She lived with her husband on the 31st floor of one of the high-rises. She cooked different meals but they did all seem to be pretty much alike. I thought they were very tasty. But realized how spoiled I was when I thought I'd get tired of the same food. We never used plates. We used bowls. Mrs. Neu would put rice noodles in the bowl first and then a few pieces (like an inch square piece) of beef or chicken and then add broth. Spices are in the form of

the leaves. So if I wanted to add mint, or coriander or basil I would put that leaf in my food. And they like to use sauces made up of fish sauce and vinegar and a little sugar or other spice. You use the sauce on your chopstick portion of whatever was in your bowl.

When we ate out a few times, we sat on stools, around a narrow table. We loved going to the restaurant that President Obama went to and seeing his glassed-in table and dishes. They loved President Obama and Senator John McCain. They would show us where McCain crashed into the Lake and how the people pulled him out of his plane



My trip was wonderful. There were so many graces. Daily Mass was a great Grace for me, even though everything was in Vietnamese. My pew mate was always welcoming and Father always gave me Eucharist by saying Body of Christ in English. That touched me greatly. I felt so amazed at the 100's of people at

Mass at 5:30 in the morning. Meeting so many new people was a Grace. Wojtek, the Ambassador from Poland to Vietnam and his wife, Lena, were a Grace. They were such an example of connecting with people so quickly.



I am trying to find Spiritual Directors for them in Vietnam. I did practice a lot of humility; in some of the primitive areas where we had to get into boats, I needed help getting down steps with no railings. I remember being at one dock and looking down about 10 feet or so and having to walk down the steps and thinking "I really can't do this." But the help was there and I accepted it.

I wanted to do this as a gift to my brother, Don, and I am so grateful that I was able to do so. My nephew Don wanted to do this for his daughter, Kate, as I am Kate's godmother. It did impress on Kate how special her First Communion was that Rosemary, her grandmother, and I would travel all that way to

be with her as she made her First Communion.



*Happy Birthday,
Sister Agnes!*



On Saturday, May 25th, the day before Sr. Agnes' 96th birthday, several of the sisters gathered in the parlor at Merkle-Knipprath to visit and wish her Happy Birthday. Shhh, it was a surprise!



Everything went off without a hitch! She had no idea that anyone would be there on Saturday, let alone be there to celebrate *her!* Sisters Dorothee, Linda, Mary Himens, Loretta, Vicky, Mary Ann, Elsie and Mary Stella and Laurie were all with her prior to lunch and she was able to chat with everyone.



When it came time for lunch, the Sisters made their way down to the dining room where the cake was 'stashed' so she wouldn't see it. The cake, which was large enough to feed the residents and staff, was accompanied with birthday plates and napkins.

Nana's Cakery baked and decorated the cake and it turned out beautiful!



Along with their creative decorating, a photograph of Sister Agnes was transferred to the top of the cake. They really went out of their way to make it special for her.

Prior to lunch all of the sisters, residents and staff sang Happy Birthday to Sister Agnes and later in the day the staff made sure that every resident and employee were offered a piece of Sister Agnes' birthday cake.



One of the residents asked if she could have her picture taken with the Sisters. She was so excited to see everyone.



It turned out to be a delightful day, in spite of the rain!