

Post



Scott Farnsworth

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Sampling a Vietnam vet's moonshine - March 31, 2023

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SUMMARY

Two excursions today. The first is to Long Khanh Island for a visit with a former Viet Cong medic and his wife followed by a stop at a small weaving business for a demo and (of course) an opportunity to shop! In the afternoon we're taken to My An Hung for a walk about, coconut water drink, tropical fruit tasting*, musical performance and martial art display. It was a fun day but I'm sorry to say the music is just not to my taste and *durian is foul. We've heard multiple people say "it smells like hell but tastes like heaven" but they are just wrong! An evening of karaoke rounded out the day and we really killed it! By which I mean the ear

drums of anyone with a modicum of singing talent! So much fun, though! - Karen

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DETAIL

Until now, when we've wanted to go ashore, we walked some gang-plank and we were there. Not so here in Vietnam. We'll be using Sampans. The traditional ones aren't that big, but they apparently come in all sizes. The name just alludes to the shape and construction technique of the originals. Sam-pan comes from Three (Sam) and Wood panels (Pan). Our boat looks traditional but can carry thirty some-odd people.

As always is the case there are half-a-dozen or more people to ensure we successfully transition off the boat, and today is no exception. Each seat has a handsome bright orange life vest, which we're told we can ignore (unless the boat's headed for Davie Jones' locker). It's a short ride across the open water to the narrow tributary that will take us to the 'town' we'll be visiting today.

Here, I guess like everywhere on the planet, there are two high, and two low tides a day (thank you moon). Between those, the water is either rushing out, or rushing in. At the extremes, like now, the water's neither flowing in or out so it's easier for us to get to shore. While gliding in, Khanh points out a boat that looks fairly normal but one of it's 30 cm (1') planks of wood, for most of the length of the boat, and on both sides, has been replaced by screen. It doesn't seem like good boat-building practice, but we're assured it's OK. With a boat like this they can transport live fish!

Ashore we start walking through town. Khanh points out, over the loud din, where they're weaving with machines. At another house they have skeins and skeins of thread drying in the sun. Using it as they make it, we're told, would be too weak and it'd break. So they soak it in rice starch and then let it dry in the sun (what we're seeing here). That makes it stronger.

At the next house we see two marble coffins or sarcophagi. They have the names of the inhabitants, written in Vietnamese (I guess) outside. Apparently they used to bury their dead in the rice paddies. This worked but cut down on much of the usable land, so the government put an end to that practice (while not providing replacement space for the burials). So families (sufficiently wealthy ones) started adding burial areas in their front yards. It's actually convenient, as there's a lot of honoring of one's dead ancestors done in these parts.

We pass interesting trees and plants, and lots of barking dogs. It's explained to us how pretty much all of the villages have roughly the same number of people. Like, 20,000. If a village grows larger, it's split in two, so you'll see a Ton Chau A and a Ton Chau B. Each village has certain government provided facilities, like for health. When the government is trying to decide what they need to do for each village, it's much easier. They're all (roughly) the same size (and the police knows everyone).

At one house we meet a Vietnamese war veteran. He's like 78 years old and a good bit shorter than Karen. He's feisty and tells us of being a medic in the war and how he treated the soldiers of both sides of the conflict. He put on his army uniform with all his medals and then gently manhandled each of us for a smiling picture with him. Later he'd want to show us something else, so he's grab you by the arm and charge through the house to the next thing to see. One of those things was strong home-brewed rice wine hooch, flavored with ginger. We all obediently have a taste. His wife sits Karen down and wraps her arms around her and they get their smiling picture taken. It was wonderful.

Further along on our walk we pass a few grocery stores on wheels. Enterprising people have added to their motor bikes to be able to bring vegetables or meat or fish, or household items to sell. Why go to the store when the store will come to you!

At one house we wind our way to the back yard where there's obviously weaving going on. They temporarily shut down the weaving machines and we're told about the history of weaving in this area. We see the traditional patterns and colors, and hear how this family has been able to get their products for sale further and further afield. We hear how the enterprise involves different families in the village, one making the thread, one dyeing it, one strengthening it with rice starch, and so on, until you get to this family. We see the motorized looms, but also an old fashioned, hand operated one on which only dad knows how to weave.

We complete our loop and wind up back at the boat and soon back on the ship for lunch. While we eat the ship motors to our next stop. We also hear about the history of Vietnam from Khanh, who lived through it. Such an ordeal, so hard. Glad to have heard it and interested to learn more (about a time in history well within my lifetime).

In the afternoon we boat to and walk through another village and learn all about making planters, and different fruits. We stop at a coconut plantation (78 trees) and sit in their shade, sipping coconut milk from just picked nuts. They then split the nuts and we scoop out and devour the flesh within. On the hike back to our starting point we cross an inlet on a bridge made of a single big bamboo pole to walk on and two more for handrails. We weren't sure we'd make it, but no one was lost. '

On the far shore we head indoors to be serenaded by a local trio of some notoriety. They're good and sing for us songs of their own writing expounding the wondrous nature of their delicious local fruit. Their instruments are local, too, and are very wild. Afterwards (or maybe it was before) we eat some snake head fish spring rolls and fruit, including durian. Check that bad-boy off our todo list! (It wasn't — didn't taste — that bad).

And if that wasn't enough excitement, we then got a full-blown martial arts demo by the local squad of a dozen or so Vietnamese ninjas! It was one girl and all the rest young men. Karen, Grith and Ann seemed to be pulling for the lone female. It was fun and they were very serious and good. I wouldn't want to run into any of them on a dark sampan.

After dinner we are reminded that we asked for a Karaoke set up. All the liquor before, and during dinner, leads us to a quick “heck, yes!”. It’s mostly us two and Niclas and Ann, with some help from Margret and Jörg (for the German version of the Beatles’ “I want to hold your hand”) and some fun Abba song, led by Grith and Jakob. Our whole Karaoke session lasted much too late and involved way too much singing and wine, but we loved it.

Photos



A local throwing a 5 to 7 kg weighted net to try to catch fish. With more people and more efficient techniques (like electroshock) there's fewer and fewer fish, which is a problem.



One of the many cute local kids. This was one of the four legged variety.



A boat with one plank replaced with metal screen. The part of the boat above that is water tight so they can transport live fish.

Brilliant!



Our still-feisty Viet Cong medic, in uniform.

He'd think of something else to show us,
grab one of us by the hand, and hurry off.

This is Diego.



But he made sure to take a picture with
each of us, complete with a squeeze. He

likes this role.



Mama got in on the action, corralling Karen for a photo op.



Then it was time to try their home-brewed moonshine (rice wine flavored with ginger).



At a later stop we cleanse our pallet with fresh-off-the-tree coconut milk.



Scott and Jack (fruit)



Shudder... we finally got to try some Durian. As they say, it smells like shit but tastes like heaven. (Once is enough for us)



Jakob attracted this youngster who pestered him for a long while.



Fascinating local music. The scarves are the traditional style, likely woven at the 'factory' we toured.



Same said weaving factory and a couple of their powered looms.



Papa showing us how it's done on an old-school manual loom



FARNSNIENTE 

Seeing us off. Everyone here is so sweet.



A bridge  crossed. It worked, but if it looks  safety, that's because it is.



Karen glad to be almost all the way across



The only girl in a large contingent of local teenage ninja martial artists.



Posing with the tourists



Finally back to the boat on our trusty sampan



On the way back we take a spin around the big ship for a photo-op

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