



## VIETNAM:



« Day Thirteen – Zen and the art of motorbike riding Vietnam

Day Fifteen – Hoi An, 'the' place to shop »

## Day Fourteen - Hoi An, ancient international port town

June 26th, 2007 by ben

Hoi An has been a major centre of commerce since time immemorial. An economic and political centre for the Cham Dynasty from the 2nd to 10th Centuries, it also served as the kingdom's main seaport – a port of call for ships from as far away as Persia. From the 15th century onwards Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Filipino, Thai, Indian, Spanish, French, American and British ships would all make their way up the Thu Bon River to Hoi An to participate in its bustling trade of high-grade silk, fabrics, sugar, pepper, agricultural produce and any other significant old world product you can think of.



Let Hoa was sitting next to me, speaking in soft tones and gesturing for me to have a cup of a tea. We were sitting in Tan Ky House, Hoi An, a Chinese Merchant house built in the 18th Century. The house was used as a storage facility and living quarters for the family, which traded mainly in agricultural produce. It's a beautiful old building with dark wooden pillars and walls, exposed beams and mahogany furniture, most of which is covered with ornate carvings of flora, fauna and, strangely, bats – symbolising happiness, the word for which in Chinese sounds very similar to the word for the particular nocturnal beast in question.

Let Hoa, a middle aged, seemingly very kind, woman, is the 6th Generation of the Tan Ky family to have lived in the house. Continuing my tour she described the buildings architecture, a combination of Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese traditional designs, directed my attention to the families poetry written in Chinese characters in mother of pearl down the interior pillars and spoke of the annual rains that flood the house, sometimes rising as high as a metre – at which time everything is transported on pulleys upstairs. The family has gone to great lengths to preserve the premises however and, taking it all in: the Chinese landscape paintings, Chinese lanterns, beautiful open air central courtyard and aforementioned attributes, it's like your living and breathing in 18th Century Hoi An.

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This morning...

Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda we were not, but I still felt pretty groovy baby. Motorbike riding, slalom style, down the China Beach road to Hoi An with the wind, blistering heat, blue sky, ocean, beach and palm trees I felt the coolest I've felt in a long time. After meeting John's friends, Bruce and Sue, a writer and artist couple from New Zealand, two of the most interesting people I've met in a long time, John hired a motorbike from his hotel and we set off on our motorbike adventure to this old port town.



After about 30 minutes of riding, which was broken up by lunch at a bamboo beach side restaurant, where basket boats lined the shore, we turned inland. An elevated road cut a straight line through rice fields where farmers worked the soil, but then, hitting the outskirts of Hoi An, I was disappointed. The depressing dilapidated concrete and corrugated iron shantytowns that scar the landscape of so many developing countries presented the sad reality of modern life for many Vietnamese. Hitting the town's centre, or old quarter, however we were transported into an ancient world where centuries of wealth, privilege, art and sophistication from every corner of the planet have blended with an oozing oriental charm.

Call me conservative but I like a bit of uniformity. The 18th and 19th Century buildings of central Hoi An all pleasingly share the same exotic mottled yellow walls



or dark carved wooden veneers. Wooden shutters, balconies, Chinese lanterns and thick web-like vines, creeping along walls and hanging from the eaves (some of them covered with bright red, yellow or white flowers) only add to the appeal. Merchants from all over the world once settled here, living and trading from these exotic structures - further contributing to the general aesthetics with the erection of traditional, ornate, red Chinese temples, pagodas and assembly halls that have been snuggled in between. Combine all this with Vietnam's general chaos and the ever present cyclos, motorbikes, don gahn vendors and steaming street stalls run by stone faced machete wielding noodle soup nazi's and you've got my kind of town.



Better still, almost every one of Hoi An's buildings opens up into some of the most mesmerising displays of textiles, arts and crafts I've ever seen. Yes, Hoi An is a touristy, it is in fact tourism central, but it's as if having such deep historical roots in the trade of quality goods the garish excesses of modern commercialism just cannot affect it.

Truly an amazing town...

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