

VIETNAM:



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Day Twenty-Three - Silkworms and Easy Riders

July 6th, 2007 by ben

Silkworms are boiled to death in their cocoons. Poor little buggers.

At the beginning of the silk chain, in the silk farms of Vietnam's central highlands, light systems keep silkworm eggs warm for incubation. After 10 days the eggs hatch and, placed in shallow baskets, a four-day mulberry leaf feed, four-day sleep cycle commences, lasting for 28 days. The healthy silk worms are then put on a bamboo frame where over the following three days they make cocoons from their saliva. The cocoons are then plucked from the frames and sent to the factories down the way, where... the silkworms are boiled to death in their cocoons. Poor little buggers.

While being boiled to death silk worms also experience a sensation equivalent, I imagine, to that of rolling down a very steep mountainside in a barrel. The silk that makes up silkworm cocoons is one continuous thread. At first placed in a tray, filled with boiling water, a young, no doubt underpaid female factory worker, extracts the end of the cocoons thread, attaching it to the complex system of spinning dials in the machinery above. Once attached, the thread unravels and that cocoon spins and spins and spins in the water - like a barrel rolling down a mountainside.



And if you thought: yeah, well, it's hard being a silkworm in the silk industry, but what about the free ones or the captive breeders... the ones that go through the redemptive process of metamorphosis and turn into those fluttering creatures of the air, those ones, they must have it good... well if you thought that then think again.

For the breeding process male and female cocoons are separated. Lights then heat their cocoons further for a transformative ten days, after which those slimy worms emerge as silky white moths. Singular male and female moths are placed together in a jar. After 3 hours they're at it. But get this... when it's over the male moth dies of exhaustion. The female, still alive, then makes eggs, a lot of 'em (around 1000) then she dies. And this happens in and outside of captivity. So whether it be 'cause of nature or human nature silkworms get a pretty raw deal.

But silk's nice, yeah... no pain, no gain I suppose

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I witnessed the sequence of silk production described above as part of my motorbike tour from Dalat to Lak Lake, near Buon Ma Thuot, today. My tour was with Easy Rider, Mr Phuc. Easy Riders are a group of motorbike riders that provide tours around the country on their big arse Russian Minks motorcycles. They come highly recommended and are supposed to be really cool. But... I didn't really like Mr Phuc. Mr Phuc (read the following internally with a Dennis Hopper voice please) definitely wasn't cool, man. His dress sense was terrible and he had this annoying tendency of telling me, tactlessly, about how my travel plans were stupid and I should do everything he said – generally that which would earn him more cash. While our stops on his tour were interesting and well communicated, he was more of an educational CD, stopping and starting and playing from beginning to end. After 12 years as an Easy Rider his Mr Phuc's English, outside of established Easy Rider tour information, was terrible. Questions were not understood and left unanswered. I'm sorry to be negative but it's the truth.

That said we went to some great places:

The silk thing, as described above was really interesting and informative.

We visited some beautiful flower farms outside Dalat (the honeymoon city – readily available flowers being one of its honeymoon draws)...



Next up was the Elephant Falls, and they are truly elephantine falls: big arching falls of earthy brown water - the river beneath fast flowing and brown. There are gnarled lush trees and vines surrounded by black igneous (often moss covered) rock in jagged formations - the rocks scaly surfaces like the exoskeletons of prehistoric beasts (or like the surfaces of those rocks that host Monkey Gods; rocks upon which elemental forces focus; rocks called 'truth'; rocks like the rock from which Monkey Magic emerged... irrepressible!). I also happily managed to get myself soaked after squeezing through a tight crevasse into a vertically spinning water works tornado behind the fall.





There was a Coffee Plantation (Vietnam is the 2nd biggest exporter of coffee in the world).



And a Chill (pronounced Ching) village where I watched as a woman worked her nimble hands to weave a rattan basket.



Now, I'm here, Lak Lake, near Buon Ma Thuot and... well, I'm a little tired to tell you the truth.



This entry was posted on Friday, July 6th, 2007 at 10:22 am and is filed under Day twenty-three. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

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