

Haircuts and horror in Hoi An

A therapeutic trip to a barber's shack allows Dominic Ryan to reflect on the beauty to be found in a land tainted by war

MISTER Tan's hot toc is a shack of plywood and hammered iron in a street far enough from Hoi An's riverfront that the market's hubbub is lost to the slow snip-snip of his scissors and slower snoring of the man next to me. In fact, all noise in this city on the south central coast of Vietnam seems to recede. I settle deeper into the cushions, comfortable yet intensely curious. Many visitors to Vietnam must feel the same: warmly welcomed yet wide-eyed in a country that is often alien and raw to western sensibilities and, even now, is still coming to terms with a turbulent past.

Snip, snip, clip, clip. Methodical and deliberate, Mr Tan is in no rush. He knows the job is going to get done. The same industriousness, after all, built the Cu Chi tunnels, now the primary tourist attraction for new arrivals to his country.

About 22 miles northwest of Ho Chi Minh City, wistfully referred to by many as Saigon, the district of Cu Chi is famous for these excavations, more than 124 miles of burrowing that stretch unseen to the Cambodian border. During the Second Indochina War, this was home to tens of thousands of National Liberation Front (NLF) soldiers.

A guide in NLF uniform had led our bemused band down into a stiflingly hot passageway, where hair and bare arms brushed smooth, enclosing earth and

clumsy footsteps disturbed a fluttering bat.

This is where the guerrillas lived, huddled in the clay, as cluster bombs and napalm spiked and boiled the world above. When the writer Carsten Jensen climbed from these same tunnels he questioned whether their inhabitants could ever again lead a sane life or build a normal society, writing: "Perhaps that was the tragic truth about the tunnels of Cu Chi. Having once lived in them, you never left them."

The answer to Jensen's question can be found in the frenetic streets of Saigon. Here there is the tangible air of life lived earnestly: hollering and waving amid the pungent smells of fish and vegetables on the market banks of Song Saigon; businesslike among the jostling trawlers; joyful and laughing in the open doorways of impossibly narrow townhouses where families gather around a flickering TV screen; hot and panting in alleyways where, at night, lights draw insurgent moths to the flames of warm flesh and cold beer.

And, like a strangling, unremitting forcefield, noise abounds.

Now, here in Hoi An, on the estuary of the Thu Bon river, in Quang Nam province and 30km from Danang City, there is only the snip, snip of scissors and the burble of pop music from a radio – suddenly interrupted by a fanfare of brass. Six o'clock. In Vietnam it is hard to escape martial influence. With such resonances from its war-torn past,



even tragedy is celebrated with a strong, militant conviction. There can be few places where the horrors of warfare have become so linked to tourism.

The My Lai massacre is an example. Situated in Tu Chong Hamlet, a memorial now commemorates March 16, 1968, when US troops killed 504 unarmed villagers. Visitors are met by enormous statues of the victims, a wailing man, a woman with a child in her arms. Bare footprints showing the villagers' vain flight from the guns of Charlie

company are cemented into paths circling the coconut trees.

It is a disconcerting juxtaposition, this daily mixture of horror and peace, brought uncomfortably home when Mr Tan produces a long, open razor. There is a hypnotic swish of the blade across my face, down my throat and across my Adam's apple, even across my upper back. Meticulous preening and pampering is, of course, an intrinsic part of his culture.

Earlier, when I had passed through Dalat, the pampering of visitors was paramount. High in the Langbiang Plateau, in the southern parts of the Central Highlands, surrounded by waterfalls and fragrant pine trees, the emphasis in this spa town is ever on rejuvenation.

A mist rises on the morning I jog down the steep incline from my hotel, on to a wooden arc that carries me into a park of manicured lawns. Here, under a pergola, wrapped in a Kitty blanket, are two children, their shoes by a one-time fire, now ash in the cold morning. Orphans, I'm told later. Here you must fend for yourself from an early age.

Such troubling affairs, it seems, do not enter the world of Mr Tan, or his other customer, who is suddenly awake and worried only that he has the correct shade of hair dye. Mr Tan's granddaughter's shy eyes peer at me over the top of her book. Grandpa is still intent on his surgery. Out comes a silver lance which is plunged into my ear.

There is the deafening sound of what I hope are follicles being cut. Squirming, I try to calm myself. I concentrate on the highlights of my trip: the cathedral, that was certainly distracting. Than That Cao Dai, the

Holy See, near Tay Ninh city, is a gargantuan monoblock festooned with all-seeing eyes and Cao Dai saints, whose vaulted ceilings are supported by dragon-entwined pillars.

For their noon prayers, the prone worshippers began a wonderfully melodic chant, while priests clanged symbols and wafted white smoke. Incredibly relaxing. As is Mr Tan's massage. He kneads my shoulders and neck. An aroma of warm ginger and tofu being fried at a nearby stall wafts into the shack, mixing with the lavender hair oils. I'm growing sleepy.

So Mr Tan decides to prop open my eyelids with a giant cotton bud. I think he's trying to invert my eyelids and I resist until he gives up and squirts my rolling orbs with cooling water drops.

As I leave, he whispers in his granddaughter's ear and, giggling, she fishes a bracelet from her tray of souvenirs. It is made of wooden beads, each depicting an image of the Virgin Mary.

At nightfall, I walk across the Japanese Covered Bridge to the waterfront. The junks sit obediently in the water. In the black river, embankment lanterns wink. There is the unmistakable scent of jasmine.

In the 1994 novel Sorrows Of War, the Vietnamese author Bao Ninh wrote: "Our lives may not be very happy, and they might well be sinful. But now we are living the most beautiful lives we could ever have hoped for, because it is a life in peace." He was speaking of his life in this new Vietnam, after the horrors of conflict. But it's a sentiment the visitor might warmly share.



Here, there is the tangible air of life lived earnestly: hollering and waving amid the pungent smells



Travel notes

Dominic Ryan travelled with Imaginative Traveller on the Highlights Of Vietnam tour. Prices start from £1195 per person for 17 days, including 16 nights B&B accommodation (14 nights hotel, one overnight train, one night boat), land

transport and the services of a tour leader and local guide. Flights are available from Glasgow or Edinburgh to Ho Chi Minh City (via Paris) from £657 per person. Tel: 08450 778803 or book on line at www.imaginative-traveller.com





The frenetic streets of Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, are full of the sounds and smells of life being lived

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