Vietnam Report

By Richard Kelley

During our recent trip to Southeast Asia, my daughter Anne Marie and I had the opportunity to spend 10 days in Vietnam. We found an exciting, vibrant nation, and our only regret is that we could not stay longer.

While in Vietnam, I experienced a number of deep emotions because my generation was the one which, through its political leaders, sent the enormous power of our military forces into that country. In the United States, that period is called the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, they refer to it as the American War.

It started with just a few “military advisors” in 1955, sent there during the Eisenhower administration in support of the non-Communist government of what was then South Vietnam. Throughout the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, the manpower and firepower increased, taking a terrible toll of life and property on both sides.

After the U.S. withdrew in 1975, the southern half of the country endured two decades of harsh Communist rule. (The north had been under such rule since 1954, when Communist fighters defeated the French, the country’s former colonial rulers.) In the post-war period, business, profits, land ownership, free speech, and the English language were considered evil and forbidden. It was not until the 1990s that the Vietnamese government began to loosen the strict, authoritarian control of its citizens.

Historians and analysts will argue the merits of the Vietnam conflict for centuries. However, the results were destructive to all sides, all participants. I, like many in my generation, lost friends in that war and almost ended up there myself as a military physician. Many members of our ‘ohana did serve there in the military, and it is possible that some fought on opposite sides of the battlefield. Each believed they were serving their country.

The lessons we should all learn are enormous and obvious. The good news is that Vietnam is back. The streets are filled with traffic, shops are busy, and construction cranes dot the horizon in cities large and small. Much of the country is still agricultural, depending primarily on growing rice, but tourism is starting to play a major role in the economy. Outrigger is part of two oceanfront resorts being developed on the country’s beautiful eastern shore (see teal dot on map).

Our first stop in Vietnam was the Metropole Hotel in central Hanoi, the country’s capital. We were warmly greeted in the lobby, and a pleasant bellman showed us our room. We soon discovered that in a country where the average daily wage is around a dollar, a $2 tip can really bring forth an excited smile.

The Metropole is a grand old colonial-style property with a fascinating history. Built by the French in 1901, it has a more than century-long tradition of welcoming ambassadors, writers, heads of state, and celebrities, including Charlie Chaplin. Some say it rivaled properties such

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as Singapore’s famous Raffles Hotel as the best in Asia in the pre-World War II era.

The Metropole has experienced some very rocky times. During World War II, it was used as a barracks for Japanese occupation troops, and, after the war’s end, it returned to French control until 1954 when France left the country after its defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

The Communist government of North Vietnam changed the hotel’s name to Thong Nhat (Reunification Hotel).

According to the travel publication *Things Asian*, the darkest days for the Metropole fell during the “American War.” The nation’s resources were mainly dedicated to the war. The resulting lack of maintenance caused the Metropole to fall into disrepair. There were very few guests except for diplomats, foreign journalists, and peace activists such as Jane Fonda.

Rats were common everywhere. According to award-winning *LA Times* correspondent David Lamb, “One guest awoke to find a rat gnawing into his suitcase! That was far better fare than what the average Hanoian subsisted on (during the darkest days of the war).”

The hotel had to build an air raid shelter for its guests and staff, who spent many nights huddled underground as the bombs fell close enough to shake the entire bunker.

In an ironic twist, Arizona senator John S. McCain stayed at the Metropole during his highly publicized post-war trip to Vietnam. As a U.S. Navy pilot, McCain had flown 23 bombing missions over Vietnam until an antiaircraft missile blew him out of the sky and into a lake on the outskirts of Hanoi in 1967. He spent the next five years as a prisoner of war in that famous facility known as the “Hanoi Hilton,” just a short distance from the Metropole.

When Vietnam began pursuing more liberal economic policies, the long-neglected Metropole got a new lease on life. The French hotel group, Accor, restored the property and, in 1992, the revamped Metropole reopened its doors for business.

Recently a new wing was added, which we inspected, courtesy of Thibault Souchon (Director of Food & Beverage) and Nguyen Viet Ha (Sales Manager). Everything is first class and modern.

Anne Marie and I stayed in a room in the old wing, which still exhibited the colonial décor. The rats have long gone and everything was excellent. However, as we walked across the floors of our room, we could hear the hardwood planks groan, squeak, and almost cry out with the story of the good and tough times of this classic, venerable property.
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The beauty of the country . . .

Anne Marie rides in style

Goldfish Express

Goods delivered the old-fashioned way

Street vendors eek out a living

. . . and the beauty of its people