Far Eastern sketches of post-conflict Cambodia and Vietnam

Ironically experience has led me to consider Cambodia and its traditional arch enemy Vietnam as two of my favourite countries. There’s certainly a magic about Cambodia that casts an enduring spell on many who visit this charming yet paradoxical kingdom. On the one hand there is the history, majesty and artistic pre-eminence of the mother of all temples, Angkor Wat and on the other there are the horrors which were self-inflicted by the Khmer Rouge and its killing machine. On the ground it was extremely difficult for me to contrast this gentle and patient but impoverished people with the horrible events of twenty five years ago. Certainly there are several Cambodias. Looking back I identify a friendliness and hospitality in personal relationships and try to reconcile these positive feelings with the corruption that exists at the political level and then to an understanding of what led these same gentle Khmer people to perpetrate the massacres of the recent past.

Cambodia is the successor state of the once powerful Hindu and Buddhist Khmer Empire, which ruled most of the Indochinese Peninsula between the 11th and 14th centuries. With a land area of 69,898 square miles it’s about twice the area of Ireland. The kingdom's capital and largest city is Phnom Penh. The country borders Thailand to its west and northwest, Laos to its northeast and Vietnam to its east and southeast. In the south it faces the Gulf of Thailand. The geography of Cambodia is dominated by the Mekong River (colloquial Khmer: Tonle Thom or "the great river") and the Tonlé Sap ("the fresh water lake"), an important source of fish and earlier the powerbase supporting the Khmer empire.

The Khmer Empire declined as the regional power but yet remained an influential broker in the region until the 15th century. The empire's centre of power was Angkor,
where a series of capitals were constructed during the empire's zenith. It is estimated by experts that Angkor could have supported a population of up to one million people. It was the world's largest pre-industrial civilization. Angkor Wat, the most famous and best-preserved religious temple at the site is a powerful reminder of Cambodia's past as a major regional power.

After a long series of wars with neighbouring kingdoms, Angkor was sacked by the Thais and abandoned in 1432 because of ecological failure and infrastructure breakdown. Afterwards the buildings were swallowed up by jungle creating a myth of a hidden lost civilization. The court moved the capital to Lovek where the kingdom sought to regain its glory through maritime trade. During the next three centuries the Khmer kingdom alternated as a vassal state of the Thai and Vietnamese kings, with short-lived periods of relative independence between. Responding to continuing pressure from his neighbours the Khmer king placed the country under French protection in 1863 and it became part of French Indochina in 1887. Following Japanese occupation in World War II, Cambodia gained full independence from France in 1953.

Between 1969 and 1973 the country was caught up in a series of horrible wars. U.S. forces bombed and briefly invaded Cambodia in an effort to disrupt the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge. Some two million Cambodians were made refugees by the war and fled to Phnom Penh. Estimates of the number of Cambodians killed during the bombing campaigns vary widely, as do views of the effects of the bombing. The US
Seventh Air Force ruthlessly argued that the bombing prevented the fall of Phnom Penh in 1973 by killing 16,000 of 25,500 Khmer Rouge fighters besieging the city. As the war ended, a draft USAID report observed that the country faced famine in 1975, with 75% of its draft animals destroyed and that rice planting for the next harvest would have to be done "by the hard labour of seriously malnourished people".

Then terrible calamity struck. The Khmer Rouge reached Phnom Penh and took power in 1975. The regime, led by Pol Pot, changed the official name of the country to Democratic Kampuchea. It was backed by China and heavily influenced by the Cultural Revolution there. The Khmer Rouge immediately evacuated the cities and sent the entire population on forced marches to rural work projects. They attempted to rebuild the country's agriculture on the model of the 11th century; discarded Western medicine and destroyed temples, libraries and anything considered Western.

Thus and like the radical exponents of the Cultural Revolution during the 1960s they regarded traditional education with unalloyed hostility. After the fall of Phnom Penh they executed thousands of teachers. Those who had been educators only managed to survive by hiding their identities. A local consultant on our first mission was lucky to have escaped because he wasn’t immediately returned to his local village and because of the skills with oxen he could demonstrate to his guards. For a regime at war with most of Cambodia's traditional values this meant that it was necessary to create a gap between the values of the young and the values of the non-revolutionary old. Having lost parents, siblings, and friends in the war and lacking the Buddhist values of their elders, the Khmer Rouge youth were said to have lacked any inhibitions that might have dampened their zeal for revolutionary terror.
Estimates as to how many people were killed by the Khmer Rouge regime range from approximately one to three million. This era gave rise to the term Killing Fields, and the prison Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh became notorious for its history of mass killing. The Cham Muslims suffered serious purges with as much as half of their population exterminated. The professions, such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers, were targeted. Eyeglasses were deadly as they were seen as a sign of intellectualism.

A December 1978 Vietnamese invasion drove the Khmer Rouge into the countryside. It began a 10-year Vietnamese occupation and touched off almost 13 years of civil war. The 1991 Paris Peace Accords mandated democratic elections and a ceasefire, which was not fully respected by the Khmer Rouge. The remaining elements of the Khmer Rouge surrendered in early 1999.

UNICEF has designated Cambodia the third most land mined country in the world, attributing over 60,000 civilian deaths and thousands more maimed or injured since 1970 to the unexploded land mines left behind in rural areas. The majority of the victims are children herding animals or playing in the fields. Adults that survive landmines often require amputation of one or more limbs and have to resort to begging for survival. In 2006, the number of landmine casualties in Cambodia took a sharp decrease of more than 50% compared to 2005, with the number of landmine victims down from 800 in 2005 to less than 400 in 2006.

While a number of the members of the Royal family were executed during the Pol Pot regime, King Sihanouk, who died only recently continued to play a major role politically throughout this momentous period. From all accounts he was a shrewd and often devious and unscrupulous manipulator: playing one side against the other in the interests of the monarchy. He certainly was held in high esteem by the Chinese. He visited Beijing regularly for medical treatment, and probably mixed it with some politics. In October 2004, he abdicated the throne and his son, Prince Norodom Sihamoni, was selected by a special nine-member throne council, part of a selection process that was quickly put in place after the surprise abdication a week before. Sihamoni's selection was endorsed by Prime Minister Hun Sen and National Assembly Speaker Prince Norodom Ranariddh (another somewhat dubious character who is the king’s half-brother and current chief advisor and earlier had instigated a national coup), both members of the throne council. He was crowned in Phnom Penh on October 29, 2004.

I was in Phnom Penh at the time, and the word was that his son had been selected by the government on the basis of his homosexuality and predilection for what were seen to be effete interests such as ballet and dance. It was supposed that without an heir there would be little embarrassment for the government should they choose to depose him.

Since the Vietnam War and especially the Khmer Rouge terror events there are several experienced observers of Cambodia who have tried to pinpoint how these awful things could have happened. There appears to be a degree of consensus as to the historical antipathy between the dominant elite resident in Phnom Penh the capital who imposed their will on the humble farming community with a degree of cruelty and insensitivity. I read an account of where the agent of one of these noble families had captured several protesting farmers. He chained them up. Then, he is said to have
washed his hands and ate a hearty breakfast before he executed each of them in turn. So I suppose in the havoc wreaked by the Khmer Rouge on Phnom Penh there was some degree of exacting a kind of retribution for these earlier atrocities. Personally, I experienced several aspects of Cambodia – some but not all good. I certainly had no stomach for visiting sites such as the Killing Fields or the torture prison in Phnom Penh.

Flying in to Phnom Penh airport during the rainy season is to look down on huge tracts of land under water spreading from one horizon to the other. The country is very much at the mercy of the great Mekong River and its numerous tributaries. This flooding presents significant challenges not only for the farmers, but for all persons living in the countryside. In areas adjacent to the rivers they can be inundated to a level of up to three or four metres. On the rivers, people live in floating barges. Fishermen and their families live together, incredibly cramped in small boats.

For farmers living close to the rivers such as those in the house photographed below you will notice that the house is built on stilts. This is to ensure that when the floods come, all belongings and livestock are transferred to safety above the waters. I wondered how small children survive living above the dangerous flood waters.

Education background
Cambodia is one of very few countries where the education system because of ideological motives, had been systematically destroyed. After the Pol Pot years there were only 300 out of 11 million Cambodians with a higher education left. UNICEF expects that of 1,000 Cambodians born today, 290 will never go to school, 390 will repeat the first grade, and 500 will not complete the primary education that they begin. Only 27 out of 1,000 Cambodians who enter primary school will graduate from high school.
Civil war and its aftermath have had a marked effect on the Cambodian population. The median age is 20.6 years, with more than 50% of the population younger than 25. At 0.95 male/female ratio, Cambodia has the most female-biased sex ratio in the Greater Mekong sub-region. In the Cambodian population over 65, the female to male ratio is 1.6:1. Mr. Henry Kamm, in his Pulitzer Prize winning analysis of recent Cambodian history, has indicated the unique ground zero situation educationally speaking to which the country had descended. Under the Pol Pot regime schools had been abolished and the teacher cadre eliminated. Currently half of the 47,000 primary school teachers have been recruited without even having completed their primary education of five or six years. The older population often lacks education, particularly in the countryside, which suffers from a lack of basic infrastructure. Fear of renewed political instability and corruption within the government discourages foreign investment and delays foreign aid, although there has been significant assistance from bilateral and multilateral donors.

Parents in common with all societies are not indifferent to the education of their children. Great hope lies in the fact that in one of the world’s poorest countries families are prepared to assume two thirds of the cost payable for maintaining a public school system; possibly the highest rate of such contributions in Asia. Teachers’ salaries are about twenty dollars a month. Such low salaries mean that all teachers hold second and third jobs. A widely used and tolerated practice especially in urban areas is for teachers to keep their classes beyond the regular hours. They call the extra time “private lessons” for which parents must pay. In rural areas, systems based on “gifts in kind” paid by parents can be found to operate. The sacrifice that this represents for the average family can be measured by the fact that the government teachers’ salaries represent the national average for regularly employed Cambodians. It’s very low. However poor they might be the parents pay for school repairs and building projects and offer gifts in kind to teachers.

Khmer culture, as developed and spread by the Khmer empire, has distinctive styles of dance, architecture and sculpture, which throughout history have been exchanged with neighbouring Laos and Thailand. Angkor Wat (Angkor means "city" and Wat "temple") is the best preserved example of Khmer architecture from the Angkorian era and hundreds of other temples have been discovered in and around the region. Traditionally, the Khmer people have a unique method of recording information on Tra leaf. Tra leaf books record information on legends of the Khmer people, the Ramayana, the origin of Buddhism and other prayer book series. They are greatly taken care of and wrapped in cloth to protect them from moisture and the jungle climate.

Later while in neighbouring Vietnam on an Identification Mission I travelled through some of the South West Vietnamese provinces adjacent to the Cambodian border. I noted so often how much the villages and schools resembled those I had seen earlier in Cambodia. I even remarked on it to my Vietnamese companions. I noticed they were not at all happy. Then it occurred to me that the Vietnamese not so long ago had wrested these Khmer speaking areas from Cambodia.

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I have had three separate involvements with the country over the last eight or nine years prior to about 2006. The first was in 1999, when I was appointed team leader to make an evaluation of the first post-civil war education support initiative by the European Commission. The project, which commenced in September 1994, had as its overall objective the strengthening of the primary education sector in Cambodia through reorganisation and re-qualification of Cambodian civil servants responsible for the functioning of schools in every province. With strong elements of an emergency project it was national in scale, ambitious and not always realistic in its objectives. It was managed on behalf of the EC by two former French paratroopers whom I esteemed highly. Both men worked in parallel; one was involved in reorganising the Ministry of Education and Sport from within. The other ran the project in the field. Things went well until perhaps inevitably after several years there was a falling out between the two.

Despite design weaknesses in project preparation the project had been successful and had made substantial impact. This impact has to be seen against the insecure political and social situation which affected the early stages of the project. The project had made a substantive contribution towards developing and institutionalising professionalism and a range of good practices within the Ministry system. This in no small way has to be attributed to the creative and flexible management style displayed by the two French project managers and to the positive response provided by the Ministry. The reforms operated nation-wide and introduced a valuable degree of uniformity in the systems and training it delivered.

My mission team concluded that although the approaches adopted by the EC management experts were somewhat unorthodox it was their radical response to a very difficult post-conflict situation. From the government perspective we learned it had been considered a significant success. Management of the project had been successful in promoting the reforms nationally, instead of restricting them to individual regions or districts. I personally was taken aback when the Secretary of State characterised the situation following the cut-off of any further EC aid without
notice as a situation where the EC had made the Ministry of Education pregnant with policies, targets and the means to achieve them. Having made the Ministry thus pregnant with good ideas the EC was now abandoning the government and the poor people of Cambodia to their own very limited devices.

As an evaluation team we shared this outrage and frustration at the decision, which had been taken in Brussels and which we considered to be wrong, autocratic as well as without any consultation with the host government. I still think it to have been very, very poor practice. At the same time, I was intrigued at the opportunity given to me to use this very telling description namely that the EC having put the Ministry of Education ‘up the pole’ was now abandoning the baby! I am sure there are not many reports commissioned by the European Commission, which carry that sort of message. I understand there were reverberations back in headquarters in Brussels. Subsequently, when we advised the Secretary of State that we had quoted him directly in our evaluation report he went out of his way to express his appreciation and approval. It helped to build up good relationships during my subsequent postings.

My second involvement was somewhat longer and commenced early in 2003 and lasted for six months when I was based in the Ministry in Phnom Penh. My job was to streamline a second package of EC targeted budget support of about €20 million focused on a limited number of the Ministry’s priority action programmes. Given the criticism with which we had earlier lambasted the EC for arbitrarily terminating its aid without notice to the government I had no idea that the EC would be prepared to appoint me as their liaison person inside the Ministry. That was what happened and between formulating a proposal and following up and monitoring the progress achieved I was involved altogether in eight to ten missions involving multi-donor teams for the next four to five years.

For the duration of the six-month posting I was to provide policy support and advice on targeted budget support to the Ministry. In practice, this meant that I reported directly to the Minister of Education, who was the Deputy Prime Minister and who represented the Cambodian monarchical party, while at the same time I reported to the Secretary of State mentioned above, who represented the majority populist party of Han Sen, the Prime Minister. The Deputy Prime Minister was a Cham, one of a minority Cambodian Moslem sect which had suffered heavily under the Khmer Rouge. Both he and the Secretary of State in private audience with me shared some of the horrors they had experienced in being imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge. On one occasion, one of them was designated to execute a prisoner he knew well. He knew full well that were he not to do it - he himself would be executed. He has had to live with the memory ever since. I should hate to find myself in such a position.

Both men would sit with me and another counterpart from the Asian Development Bank. Together with these men we spent many hours in policy, strategy and financial discussion. I learned to admire them and to respect them as committed parliamentarians and as excellent persons in their own right. I recognised that there was a shared admiration between them. But they were not in a position because of party allegiances to publicly express this admiration and support.

So, sitting with the Deputy Prime Minister the Asian Bank representative and I would discuss issues for hours and hours. The two of them would chain smoke like trains as
we came up with alternative solutions to many issues of governance and finance. On one occasion the World Bank had submitted a letter to the Deputy Prime Minister, which was exceptionally patronising and which complained of the lack of adequate transparency and capacity within the Ministry. It was written by an Irish-Australian. I still see him in my mind’s eye declaiming like a parish priest to a submissive flock and exuding a heavy confidence and a clerical zeal. I was designated to prepare a first draft of a reply. I went away and did my best and came back and tabled a balanced version, which I thought was to the point. I recall the Deputy Prime Minister’s comment: “Not strong enough Liam – go away and make it stronger”. I did as I was told and pulled no punches the second time. He made some small changes and signed the letter.

There was huge upset and resentment expressed by the World Bank at the sentiments contained in the letter. It was a direct criticism of World Bank management coming from the top of the recipient government. I would like to think that World Bank would have mended its ways after that experience. Sadly, my knowledge of the track record of the World Bank in such circumstances is not positive; not even over the medium term. But in this instance, it did draw back. At the same time, it attempted to carry out a witch hunt to find out who had drafted the letter. The Bank and the other donors were well aware that it has to be one of the expatriates providing support to the Ministry. No one disclosed the author—although I was fingered on several occasions. About two years later at some social function long after I had departed from the Ministry and when the furore and heat was long over a lady from the Bank suggested I was the miscreant responsible. I smiled. I didn’t deny it.

As part of my terms of reference from the EC I was to provide support and be a bridge between the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Finance. This was not at all as straightforward as it might appear and perhaps a short explanation would be useful.

Most countries, whether Western - or of whatever other stripe - distinguish very clearly between the roles of the Finance Ministry, which collects the taxes, duties and other government income and the spending ministries such as an Education Ministry. My friends, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for education, saw the EC and the other major donors as natural allies for putting pressure on the Ministry of Finance to deliver funds in a timely and effective manner. This was so they could provide finance for the commitments they had given from the education budget for any given year. This is normally the perspective of an education Ministry. However, it is rarely shared by the Finance Ministry. It certainly wasn’t in Cambodia and the Minister and his senior officials were tough people to deal with. I found out early that not alone was there a determined objection by the Finance Ministry to have any close dialogue or even contacts - above the absolute minimal - with the Education Ministry but at the top level in each Ministry there was a personal antipathy between the individual Ministers and Secretaries of State.
I quickly discovered that my major task was to improve relationships at the top. I think as a consultant you develop certain insights and approaches to situations like this that you don’t necessarily learn at College. From the start the EC was quite supportive and offered to host a meeting between the respective Ministers and Secretaries of State in the Delegation. It was my task to try to reach agreement on a time and date between the key officials and senior advisers. I made every effort to establish my credibility with the Ministry of Finance. It was hard going at times as they extracted their pound of flesh. Finance is always the senior Ministry with the best calibre of people at the top. I personally undertook to draft specific official letters confirming in a delicate manner the Finance Ministry’s reluctance to such a meeting and indicating a quid pro quo from the EC to provide some funds for the Finance Ministry were it to take place. I drafted as a sop to the Finance Ministry several very dignified letters full of financial jargon which were intended to put pressure and succeeded to a substantial degree in gaining concessions in several other funding areas. Strangely, the EC really believed the Finance Ministry had drafted these notes. I think I still have copies of them adorned with the Finance Ministry’s official notepaper.

I recall vividly the arrival of the two Ministers and their senior advisers in the EC Delegation. There was a short and brittle exchange of courtesies. From that time on there was no eye contact between them. They both focused their attention directly on me and my EC official counterpart. It would have been laughable if it was not so serious. On the EC side we were extremely concerned that this breakdown in communications was having major adverse effects on girls and boys gaining access to education in the public schools.

After interminable discussions and ventilations as well as justifications and accusations with a break for morning coffee followed by a lunch we managed to make
some headway in establishing, with the EC as observers, the creation of a Joint Education Funding Committee or some similar sounding title, which it was agreed would meet on a three monthly basis to sort out major difficulties identified by either Ministry. I am advised that this Committee continues to be in existence some several years after I finished in Cambodia. It was a very important learning experience for me and subsequently when I was on a mission in other countries I recalled it as a necessary first step towards for setting up good relations between the respective ministries. Nearly all the countries had similar confrontational issues. As I noted earlier and much later in Egypt the then Minister of Finance, Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali angrily referring to his colleague, the Education Minister as lacking some basic male equipment. Experience is a great school. It taught me that organisations with a reputation for inflexibility – even such as the EC - will tolerate such a role for consultants and once they (the EC) are not officially informed of the details.

In between these involvements I was appointed by ILO/IPEC sometime in 2003 to evaluate progress being achieved in combating the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Egypt, Sri Lanka and Cambodia. I’ve covered that experience in another section but suffice to say that Cambodia came out of that evaluation somewhat poorly. In 2006, Transparency International's rating of corrupt countries rated Cambodia as 151st of 163 countries of their Corruption Perceptions Index. The 2007 edition of the same list placed Cambodia at 162nd out of 179 countries. According to this same list, Cambodia is the 3rd most corrupt nation in the South-East Asia area, behind Laos, at 168th, and Myanmar, at joint 179th.

Corruption has added to the wide income disparity within the population. Foreign donors have urged the government to clamp down on pervasive corruption. In 2005, oil and natural gas deposits were found beneath Cambodia's territorial waters, and once commercial extraction begins in 2011, the oil revenues could profoundly affect Cambodia's economy. Observers fear much of the revenue could end up in the hands of the political elites.

Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh is a colourful cultural and historic city. It's not large in comparison with a western city, nor has it huge amounts of traffic. It is built around two old Hindu/Buddhist Wats. There is a long Riverfront which straddles the Tonle Sap River, and which is lined with shops and restaurants. Many of them constructed during the French period of occupation. Around the Royal Palace there are a number of buildings including the library and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all built in the traditional Khmer architectural style.

Initially, I was surprised to discover that instead of being a hardship post Phnom Penh was a much sought after location by many international consultants. Part of this had to do with the beauty of the city and its surroundings. It was very cheap for Westerners to live in somewhat luxurious lifestyles at very little cost. A number of long-term consultants have married into Cambodian families. Other consultants had rented classical French residences and with almost no traffic chaos and with good connections to Bangkok and beyond for international missions and for medical care they found that Phnom Penh was the place to be. I was surprised on the whole how much a well-kept secret it was. For the Westerner there was the French influence,
which pervaded many parts of the city and many of its restaurants. More, there was the fluency in the French language exercised by the local elite - even after the Khmer Rouge experience.

These long-term expatriates rented their stately homes with formal gardens, palm trees and balconies - all ideal for socialising and parties. In my experience, I found there was a number of high-quality Cambodian, Thai and French restaurants run by long established and often intermarried partnerships between foreigners and locals.

From a social point of view after a time I became aware of subtle distinctions between the long-term officials of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the IMF and senior permanent officials of other donor organisations such as the EC. These generally consorted together and kept their distance from the shorter-term local international consultants, such as myself, who were hired for the various projects. Between the longer-term international residents of whatever nationality one could detect tensions for whatever reasons; whether related to social sense, illicit relationships or even competition for preference by one or other of the international organisations, wasn't clear. But there were these differences.

Certainly, there was a small group of British consultants who were a little coarse and loud and complained that they found themselves ostracised from the relatively small social circles that existed. Cambodia wasn't my first port of call, and I suppose over time, I had picked up a degree of sensitivity regarding such relationships. Perhaps I was more acceptable because of my daily access to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretaries of State. Sometimes I sought to build up social contacts but looking back as often as not I was happy enough to be on my own and to set myself down to observe the city life over a few beers and the delicious menus available almost everywhere.
I always loved to observe the colour and the antics of the street scene in the evening. Sometimes after a stroll along the length of the promenade and along Sisiwat beside the Tonle Sapp river I’d drop in for a beer or a chat at the impressively named ‘Foreign Correspondents Club’. This was a somewhat upmarket drinking establishment at first floor level overlooking the promenade and the river below where I imagined the foreign correspondents had languished in their leather chairs as they wrote their dispatches on the latest ghastly tragedies – well insulated from the activities - frenzied or otherwise on the streets below.

There are spaces which are designated for public celebrations, and there is one imposing building where normally, I think it is in October and November when the river changes direction, the king inaugurates a traditional race of war canoes representative of the various towns and villages along the Mekong and for which preparations and training has been going on for months beforehand. The canoes are traditional and I think could have been some 30 m long and about a metre and a half wide. They would accommodate anything up to 30 oarsmen in each.

By about mid-June, the flow of Mekong and the Bassak River fed by monsoon rains increases to a point where its outlets through the delta near Ho Chi Minh city in Vietnam cannot handle the enormous volumes of water, flooding extensive adjacent floodplains for 4-7 months. At this point, instead of overflowing its banks, its floodwaters reverse the flow of the Tonle Sap River (about 120 km in length), which then has the maximum inflow rate and enters the Great Lake, the largest natural lake in Southeast Asia, increasing the size of the lake from about 2,600 km2 to 10,000 km2 and exceptionally to 13,000 km2 and raising the water level by and average 7m at the height of the flooding. This characteristic of the Tonle Sap makes it the only "river with return” in the world.

After the Mekong’s waters crest and when its downstream channels can again handle the volume of water, the flow reverses and water flows out of the engorged lake. The
Great Lake then acts as a natural flood retention basin. When the floods subside, water starts flowing out of the Great Lake, reaching a maximum outflow and over the dry season increases the mainstream flows by about 16 percent, thus helping to reduce salinity intrusion in the lower Mekong Delta in Viet Nam. By the time the lake water level drops to its minimum surface size, a band 20-30 km wide of inundated forest is left dry with deposits of a new layer of sediment. This forest, which is of great significance for fish, has in recent years been greatly reduced in size through deforestation.

Bonn Om Teuk (Festival of Boat Racing), the annual boat rowing contest, is the most densely attended Cambodian national festival. It is held at the end of the rainy season when the Mekong River begins to sink back to its normal levels allowing the Tonle Sap River to reverse flow. Then approximately 10% of Cambodia's population comes to this event each year to play games, give thanks to the moon, watch fireworks and attend the boat race in a carnival-type atmosphere.

Boats race past the Royal Palace during the annual water festival

I had rented an apartment near the river and close to the Old Fish Market. There were about seven apartments in the apartment block and most of them at one time or another were rented to expatriates working as consultants, usually in the Ministry of Education. The apartment with a roof garden on top was rented by a young English statistician. Under him there was a seventy year old plus Australian project planner with two Nigerian ladies; one his partner and the other her sister. They were both considerably younger than he was and I felt that much of his free time was spent in attempting to amuse and entertain them. Below them, for most of the time I was there lived a gay Australian curriculum developer, who was based in Laos, and who had many interesting stories to tell about his life in Vientiane. Then there was me, and occasionally very occasionally such as when family or office colleagues come to visit – I had visitors.
There were always other consultants or government officials to-ing and fro-ing through the apartments. We had many parties on the roof. One either participated in these late night parties, or one was generally woken up late at night, with several roisterers pounding on the door, demanding that you come and join them. I suppose part of this could be attributed to the fact that we were alone and away from our families and wanted company. Certainly, I found that I rarely eat alone in the evenings.

The apartment block was directly adjacent to the Last Home boarding house, where backpackers touring Cambodia, would inevitably stay. On other occasions, I would encounter young people coming back from their year’s working period in Australia or New Zealand and using Phnom Penh as the first stepping stone to cover the countries of Southeast Asia. It meant that there was a varied clientele to be expected when we either went for our breakfast or later when we went down for dinner consisting of delicious squid or freshly caught fish, washed down with a few beers or a bottle of wine. We were always welcomed by the owners and their grown-up children, who managed the place. They were delighted with the additional patronage as well as with the opportunity for them to improve their English.

Phnom Penh has so much going for: it is a beautiful residential city with its river, promenade, restaurants and public buildings in the Cambodian traditional style. But
yet I cannot pass over a description of the city without describing one of the prime centres of interest for foreigners located there - as well as for visitors and locals alike.

Dhaka has made some attempt to replicate the phenomenon but nothing comes close to the variety or range of goods to be obtained at basement prices in the Russian Market of Phnom Penh. The area covers several hectares and consists of a maze of passageways providing access to garments of all descriptions, souvenirs, DVDs and everything that has ever been manufactured under the sun as well as butcheries and vegetable shops. Originally established by the Russians, when their troops were assigned to the city, the area has moved up to reflect every new development of foreign investment in the Cambodian economy. There are millions of DVDs and CDs. They were always kept up-to-date. It was easy to see the linkages with the garment industry. But then again, the bargains there were huge. Shirts and jeans were for nothing. My lady acquaintances went there ritually each weekend. Most bought hundreds of up-to-date fashion labelled clothes. It was and I suppose still is a magnet.

Through visiting a place like the Russian Market one can learn a lot about the fortunes and profits that are made from having garments produced by the branded multinationals in these impoverished low-cost countries.

Later, in preparing proposals for detailed EC funding and in negotiating with Brussels I worked with a Frenchwoman who was married into one of the upper class Cambodian families. She has three children, and while she didn't need to work, she enjoyed it as an outlet to take her away from the monotony she associated with being an upper-class socialite. We got on very well and through invitations to her house I learned something about how the top-tier Cambodian families lived and about the swimming pool parties laid on for the rich.

Her husband drove fast racing cars. He had been educated in Canada and had missed the Pol Pot years. His stepfather was the Minister of Health. Once they and their friends celebrated his victory in Formula I car racing; somewhere in Mexico. They saw this as the first time a Cambodian had achieved anything in the inter-national sports arena. I remained friendly with this lady and saw her occasionally during my subsequent mission visits to Phnom Penh. At a later stage she and some friends started an upper-class restaurant overlooking the Tonle Sap. I was always made welcome and received a discount whenever I turned up.

Another restaurant I frequented was owned by a Basque Frenchman. Again it looked out on the Tonle Sap. He had lived most of his life in Cambodia after finishing service with the French Foreign Legion. I try to improve my French by speaking to him as often as I could. He oversaw the management of the restaurant, strutting along with a monkey perched on his shoulder. I thought I was making good progress with French until my two colleagues from Utrecht, called by on their way back from Manila. Somehow I had mentioned to the French man that I've would be bringing two lady colleagues to his restaurant. He understood me to say that I wanted him to put the three of us up in one of his bedrooms. If such was his understanding then I'm sure I went up high in his estimation. I am sure his estimation of me peaked when I duly arrived with the ladies. Both were fluent in French and early on they smelt a rat when my man suggested we three go up and inspect the bedroom he had prepared for us.
When all was explained and all the ruffled feathers had been smoothed down he forgave me. I think we all saw the sunny side of the misunderstanding.

The apogee of French influence, built during the French occupation was the Officers’ Club. It is a huge building with such an imposing facade and surrounded by two or three enormous swimming pools. After the French departure it had been transformed under various guises. Finally it became part of an exclusive South East Asia hotel chain. When I went out to celebrate someone’s birthday we were advised we could order wine costing over US$ 1,000 a bottle!

Fishing at 6am on the Mekong River – before the sun came up. That’s me waiting to fall off the steep narrow ladder.

Another pastime for early Saturday mornings was to go fishing with a Sri Lankan friend, who came from a privileged banking background. We hired the boat and he brought his servant along to hook on the bait for us while the man himself or I would cast it. I immediately saw it as reflecting the relationship between the nineteenth century Irish gentleman fisherman and his gillie. I’m not sure whether we ever caught anything but a bottle or two of beer before the sun came up was most refreshing. It also gave us the opportunity to come ashore on the other east bank of the Mekong River which although close to Phnom Penh as the crow flies was very remote by land. We’d organise a grilled chicken breakfast and eat it with the last of the beer. I found the local villagers on the other side to be most hospitable and friendly towards us strangers.

More and more I’m aware I’m not exactly alone in my predilection for the country. The tourism industry is the country’s second-greatest source of hard currency after the textile industry. Most visitors arrive through Siem Reap with the remainder through Phnom Penh and other destinations. Another tourist destination I loved to visit for both its simplicity as well as its superb views over the islands and the ocean was Sihanoukville in the south east which has several beaches and which could be visited over a long weekend from Phnom Penh.
The Greater Angkor area

To recap Angkor is a name conventionally applied to the region of Cambodia serving as the seat of the Khmer empire that flourished from approximately the ninth century to the fourteenth century A.D. More precisely I’m informed the Angkorian period may be defined as the period from 802 A.D., when the Khmer Hindu monarch declared himself the "universal monarch" and "god-king" of Cambodia, until 1431 A.D., when invaders sacked the Khmer capital causing its population to migrate south to the area of Phnom Penh.

The ruins of Angkor are located amid forests and farmland to the north of the Great Lake (Tonle Sap) and south of the Kulen Hills, near modern day Siem Reap, and are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The temples of the Angkor area number over one thousand, ranging in scale from nondescript piles of brick rubble scattered through rice fields to the magnificent Angkor Wat, said to be the world's largest single religious monument. Many of the temples at Angkor have been restored, and together they comprise the most significant site of Khmer architecture.

In 2007 an international team of researchers using satellite photographs and other modern techniques concluded that Angkor had been the largest pre-industrial city in the world with an urban sprawl of 3000 square kilometres. The closest rival to Angkor, the Mayan city of Tikal in Guatemala, was between 100 and 150 square kilometres in total size. The Angkor temple complex stretches over a vast area with tens if not hundreds of temples, monasteries and convents. Siem Reap which
translated means victory over the Thais - here the people have long memories - is the administrative town and airport for visitors.

I found the overall temple complex to be most impressive. So in my spare time I followed up my interest with selective reading. The following is the result. I quote from my guidebook to the effect that the world renowned Angkor Wat is a temple built for the king Suryavarman II in the early 12th century as his state temple and capital city. As the best-preserved temple at the site, it is the only one to have remained a significant religious centre since its foundation: first Hindu, dedicated to Vishnu – and then Buddhist. The temple is the epitome of the high classical style of Khmer architecture.

Angkor Wat combines two basic plans of Khmer temple architecture: the temple mountain and the later galleried temple, based on early South Indian Hindu architecture, with key features such as the Jagati. It is designed to represent Mount Meru, home of the devas in Hindu mythology: within a moat and an outer wall 3.6 kilometres (2.2 mi) long are three rectangular galleries, each raised above the next. The temple is admired for the grandeur and harmony of the architecture, its extensive bas-reliefs and for the numerous devatas (guardian spirits) adorning its walls.

![Anghor Wat Temple, Cambodia.](image)

In 1177, Angkor was sacked by the Chams, the traditional enemies of the Khmer. In the late 13th century the King who was Hindu was deposed by his son in law, who had spent the previous 10 years in Sri Lanka becoming ordained as a Buddhist monk. Hence, the new King decided to convert the official religion of the empire from Hindu to Buddhist. Given the constant political corruption not to speak of the violence of the time, I’d surmise that the citizens were quick to follow a faith founded on tranquillity without the need for material gain and power. This apparently made the conversion
relatively easy. Hence, Angkor Wat was converted from Hindu to Theravada Buddhist use, which continues to the present day. It is unusual among the Angkor temples in that although it was somewhat neglected after the 16th century as noted earlier it was never completely abandoned. Its preservation being due in part to the fact that its moat provided some protection from encroachment by the jungle.

One of the first Western visitors to the temple was Antonio da Magdalena, a Portuguese monk who visited in 1586 and said that it "is of such extraordinary construction that it is not possible to describe it with a pen, particularly since it is like no other building in the world. It has towers and decoration and all the refinements which the human genius can conceive of". However, the temple was popularised in the West only in the mid-19th century on the publication of Henri Mouhot's travel notes. The French explorer wrote of it:

"One of these temples: a rival to that of Solomon and erected by some ancient Michelangelo might take an honourable place beside our most beautiful buildings. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome, and presents a sad contrast to the state of barbarism in which the nation is now plunged."

Angkor Wat required considerable restoration in the 20th century, mainly the removal of accumulated earth and vegetation. Work was interrupted by the civil war and Khmer Rouge control of the country during the 1970s and 1980s, but relatively small damage was done during this period. In January 2003 I was told that riots erupted in Phnom Penh when a false rumour circulated that a Thai soap-opera actress had claimed that Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand. Personally, I came to the personal opinion that the classic Anghor Wat while truly amazing was one of the least attractive of the sites in the area we visited. I found particularly there were serious practical problems with flights of stone stairs so steep as to be downright dangerous.
One week after I went to work in the EC Delegation I was told that I should carry out a survey of educational and vocational training buildings in the Siem Reap area. I was delighted at the prospect because I knew that this offered me an opportunity to spend a weekend poking around the greater Angkor Wat complex. Anyone who has lived in or visited Cambodia, quickly learnt about the complex and the often surreal atmosphere of some of the monasteries; especially in the less well-known monasteries and converts. There was one special convent, which is famous for the trees sprouting out from crevices in the stonework. It is truly a fantastic sight. The picture above is only indicative. You really have to be there to take in the strange sight of tall trees growing up and out from domestic or institutional architecture.

Anyway, I flew to Siem Reap, hired a four wheeled drive vehicle, and went around looking at the various schools. I was genuinely impressed to see how much some committed school principals could do – even with very little. They allocated considerable time to staff development and to helping with local social problems. There were very few learning materials available in the schools and those that were there had been supplied at some sacrifice by the local parents. Comically, when I was in a classroom talking to the children I remember a cow grazing outside put her head through the open space used for a window and gave a friendly belch.

A number of the country roads were impassable, with bridges washed away, and we always had to do our best under the circumstances. The picture above was taken by my German colleague after a bridge had been washed away and an enterprising local girl on her motorbike offered me a lift to see a school. Travelling in the countryside outside Phnom Penh was always an opportunity to meet and to try to communicate with these lovely, friendly and hospitable people.
I was somewhat disappointed to visit vocational technical school, built by the International Labour Office, the organisation I had worked for in Pakistan. The building was fine, but no equipment or materials had been supplied much to the frustration of the local district officials to say nothing of the parents and pupils. This wasn't unique. I wondered whether the institution would ever provide the training it was supposed to.

On the other hand, a French expatriate working with local people had established as a tourist venue a silk farm, but also to provide employment for the locals. Silk production had been a traditional occupation in the area but like so many things had been utterly destroyed during the Khmer Rouge wars. I was amazed to see the various steps that have to be gone through from planting mulberries to sourcing silk insects, in rearing them, then easing the insects from their cocoons, and taking and preparing the threads on spools, colouring them and eventually producing raw silk. It was a contrast to the more institutional ILO investment which was so lacking and I marvelled at the commitment and energy required to source the silk larvae and bring them – perhaps illegally - from China to this rather backward location. Then there were the challenges to provide the training in horticulture and the downstream marketing activities required. Travelling through the countryside was always an opportunity to be amazed and to learn new things.

![A Cambodian girl draws water from a roadside well near Battambang. Notice the bright red colour of the recently excavated roadworks.](image)

Over my time in Cambodia I traversed a fairly representative area from the Thai border to the north and then down to Sihanoukville on the Gulf of Thailand. I was constantly aware of the attempts by Thailand and Vietnam to nibble away and to absorb areas traditionally disputed or belonging to areas previously absorbed. This
led to instability along the country’s borders. Internally there is much illegal logging. There is the eviction of tenants by the indigenous army generals and the other elites because of the absence of written title to the lands worked by so many of the farming population.

While it was my personal experience in dealing with the government that people at the top were not all corrupted it was clear to me that the country has a long way to go if it is to provide satisfactory democratic rights to the vast majority of its citizens. Even at the rural level girls and young women are particularly at risk. I have referred elsewhere to the abuse of working children and the trafficking that goes on with the police often standing by.
I grew up during the Vietnam War. Like many other young Europeans as a student I marched and demonstrated against that war. Now some 30 years later the excesses and abuses by American in Vietnam are becoming recognised - even in the US. In retrospect I shudder to think of the manpower and material committed to destroying Vietnam in the name of democracy. Through my visits I have learned to respect and admire these proud sophisticated people. So I ask myself - why did they have to suffer so much? How simple it appears to have been for those few men like Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson at the top of US administrations to come to terrible decisions to impose their will on a much poorer country with enormous and horrible consequences for the targeted population.

Thus it came as a huge surprise to me to find myself standing outside the Presidential Palace in Ho Chi Minh City - then Saigon - and to see the point through which that iconic picture of a Vietcong tank as it broke its way into the Presidential Compound signifying effectively the end of the war, was taken. In Hanoi, I regularly passed the classical facade of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. I suppose this man was portrayed to many in the West almost as the Anti-Christ. And yet there in Hanoi he is revered as father of the nation.
My history book informs me that the people of Vietnam broke away from China in AD 938 after their victory at the battle of Bạch Đằng River. Successive dynasties flourished along with geographic and political expansion deeper into Southeast Asia, until it was colonized by the French in the mid-19th century. Efforts to resist the French eventually led to their expulsion from the country in the mid-20th century, leaving a nation divided politically into two countries. Fighting between the two sides continued during the Vietnam War, ending with a North Vietnamese victory over South Vietnam and its U.S. allies in 1975.

Emerging from this prolonged military engagement, the war-ravaged nation was politically isolated. The government’s centrally planned economic decisions taken by the victorious North Vietnamese are now admitted by it to have hindered post-war reconstruction and their treatment of the losing side is said to have engendered more resentment than reconciliation. In 1986, it instituted economic and political reforms and began a path towards international reintegration. By 2000, it had established diplomatic relations with most nations. Its economic growth over the past decade has been among the highest in the world.

My first involvement in Vietnam took place with two linked missions in mid and late 2003. In August 2003, the Government of Vietnam had unveiled its Action Plan for the Education for All, which envisaged support being provided by the donor community supporting education on a sector-wide basis. The objective of the first, the Identification Mission, as established in the project Terms of Reference (TORs), was to assess the priorities put forward by the Vietnam education reform process and to match EC aid priorities for the education sector with the Government Education Strategy 2001-2010. The targeted budget support proposed for the Plan constituted a transition between a traditional investment project approach, which has been the main avenue for donor support to Vietnam up to that date and an untied budget support operation in the framework of a medium-term expenditure framework. The missions culminated in the preparation of recommendations for a proposed new EC funded project. The provinces we visited were Hai Phong City and Quang Ninh and Lai Chau Provinces in the north and Quang Nam Province and Da Nang City in the centre and Tay Ninh Province and Ho Chi Minh City in the south.

Later during October and November 2004, we prepared an independent Final Evaluation of the Support to the Ministry of Education and Training Project (SMOET) provided by the EC over the previous five years. This had been quite a successful project and notwithstanding the defensiveness and often downright hostility we encountered in interviewing the European management team. Then in October and November 2009 I was team leader for the evaluation of a big World Bank, EC and other donor budget support project for education. In late 2010, along with our local counterpart expert Viet, we evaluated another EC project providing management and technological assistance again to education. Incidentally, that was the last mission of my career.

Education in Vietnam

Education enjoys a high social prestige in the Vietnamese society. Again like Cambodia parents and the communities are prepared to make considerable financial and social contribution to it. This high social value priority and the government’s
policy to invest in human resource development of the country is reflected in the significant increases in recent years in levels of public spending on education at the central and provincial level. This increased spending has been supported by a robust development of the economy with average annual growth rates of over 7%.

During the last 10 years, education across Vietnam has accomplished tremendous progress. The primary net enrolment rate has increased from 86% in 1990 to 94% in 2000, the drop-out rate has declined from 12% to less than 3%, the repetition rate from 9% to less than 5% and the completion rate has increased from 47% to more than 75%.

I’m thronged by excited school children in a visit to a school in Quang Nam province – much to the amusement of my local counterpart and the teachers.

The general literacy rate in Vietnam with 93 % (age 15+, in 2000) is much higher in comparison to the average literacy rate of the East Asia and Pacific Region with 86 %.49 The vast majority of citizens have enjoyed some form of schooling and almost all children have access to primary education.

The Ministry of Education and Training has the mandate and the leading role in cooperation with other concerned ministries for the implementation of the Education Development Strategic Plan (EDSP) for 2001-2010 and to develop and implement five-year and annual educational plans in accordance with the EDSP and socio-economic development plan. Furthermore, this mandate requires it “to guide, to control, to monitor, to collect the information on the implementation and to prepare

49 Source: WB, Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children Project, April 2003, p. 74. That does not exclude the much higher illiteracy rates among ethnic minorities and particularly amongst women.
periodical reports\textsuperscript{50}. The Plan has identified that while “after 15 years of renovation, Vietnam education has gained important achievements but (it) is still facing weaknesses and shortages.”

The Plan certainly doesn’t pull its punches. It identified education management as the central weakness of the system. “… the level of education management does not catch up with the practice or needs of development when the economy is experiencing the change-over from a centrally planned to a market economy with socialist orientation\textsuperscript{51}. It does not coordinate well and use effectively the state and social resources for education. The change in the thinking as well as the mode of management is characterised by a slow decision-making in term of strategic orientations and policy at macro level.”

Da Nang: I was impressed by the work being done for children with disabilities and would wish to have seen more of it.

Another shortcoming highlighted was that generally and contrary to numbers and progression the quality of education remains quite poor due to the presence of under-qualified teachers, inefficient teaching methods, low remuneration of teachers and limited “time-in-school”. On the whole, in Vietnam education is very much a part-time occupation for pupils and for teachers alike. I was much impressed by this incisive analysis and still find it well worth quoting.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks and as I came to be more familiar with Vietnam and made some acquaintance with ordinary Vietnamese citizens I learned to admire them for their positive approach to living and their pride in their achievements. All over Vietnam I noticed there is the sense of the people having a considerable degree of national pride. My friend and counterpart dismissed the American War as almost a sideshow to the subsequent and more recent war with the Chinese. It was his impression that the country had got over the sense of extensive injustice and feelings of hostility to the Americans. He pointed out the all-pervasive presence of Pepsi-Cola and Coke as examples of practical reconciliation!

\textsuperscript{50} See Education Development Strategic Plan for 2001-2010

\textsuperscript{51} This is just another signal from a developing country of its intentions to shed its communist past.
Vietnam presents a powerful contrast to the only other country in that part of south-east Asia I know fairly well: Cambodia. It is a far more populous state. It has absorbed many minority peoples into its population. Once I asked my friend why the Vietnamese saw it as necessary to invite the donors such as the European Commission to support areas of development such as education? I gave it is my opinion that with the children's enrolment rates and the general support provided by the government for education being as high as they were there wasn't a huge case for calling upon Western European countries to contribute. He saw things in a different light. In earlier times Vietnam was a vassal of China. For hundreds of years there has been a deep mistrust amongst the Vietnamese in relation to the designs they believe neighbouring China has upon their country. At the same time they are aware of the immense and growing power that China has. This intimidates them. Following the American War, as it is called in Vietnam, there remains some antipathy towards the Americans. Against this, Europe with its projection of soft power through the medium of aid and development partnerships is seen as having much to offer.

The Vietnamese admire many aspects of the European way of life. Under the French occupation they experienced both positive and negative sides of French culture at first hand. A number of their most important revolutionaries spent some time in France either as students or as labourers. They see closer relations to Europe as leading to improved industrialisation of the country. Education is seen as a particular strength of European society at large. He emphasised they didn’t want European tanks any more than they wanted Chinese or American. But the European Union is seen as neutral and even as benevolent towards Vietnam.

Only after I had been to visit Vietnam have I realised how cosmopolitan it is in relation to the main world religions. While there are the majority aspects of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, I was surprised at the relatively high profile given to Christianity. I suppose the Americans during the Vietnam War decided that
recognition of this relatively high Christian profile might reduce support for the War. I was advised that - apart from the Philippines - given all of the other south-east Asian Nations that Vietnam has the highest proportion of Christians in its population. I remember I was informed with some pride by my Buddhist friend and colleague that Ho Chi Minh worked on the basis that “irrespective of religion or conviction - we were all Vietnamese first”.

Hanoi is beautiful city. I much prefer it to Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon, which I consider to be a somewhat brash melting pot and with a modern chic as opposed to the more conservative tree-lined boulevards of the capital. The city is built around several lakes. Pedestrians have direct access to the lake shores. Along the shores there are attractive restaurants and while these are a little more expensive than the norm - their location and the traditional culture and atmosphere one finds in many cases - makes them well worth any additional small cost.

The central part of Hanoi is located around the Roman Catholic Cathedral built by the French. One day, it was a Sunday morning; I visited the cathedral to find it full of worshippers. Out from the centre there radiate tree-lined avenues with coffee shops, restaurants and high-quality leather, silk and souvenir shops all very busy. It was my delight for an evening out: first to stroll and observe the way the local Vietnamese live their lives; to watch the streams of motor cyclists in their hundreds and sometimes thousands manoeuvre across junctions and roundabouts; then occasionally to stop to examine, to touch and maybe to buy some small things for taking home. Finally, with my colleagues and sometimes accompanied by local Vietnamese friends we’d select a restaurant and spend an evening over a delicious meal of Vietnamese food and Australian wine discussing many things including the project, the political situation and trying to learn more about issues of significance to the Vietnamese.
It was during these conversations especially with my friend and counterpart, who unusually has two PhDs granted from Russian universities and who was director of an advisory institute to the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training “we advise - but they don't listen” that I learned something of the background and sacrifices made by the ordinary Vietnamese people during the American War. He could well recollect while at school the occasions when he and his classmates were strongly affected by the sacrifices made by individual fellow-classmates who had enrolled in the Vietcong. It was customary for these students - prior to their departure as volunteers - to simply stand up, to bow and to announce to their schoolmates that they wished to be excused from school as they were enrolling to fight for the independence of Vietnam and were prepared to sacrifice their lives, if necessary. Even as he explained this to me in English over a few glasses, I could sense he was profoundly moved and almost in tears.

Earlier, he had been informed by the North Vietnamese authorities that as one of the best students of his year he had been selected to participate in a scholarship programme to Russian academies and universities. It would be his duty when the war was over and victory had been achieved to serve the country by bringing to it the benefit of the skills and knowledge he had accumulated abroad. He was not invited - he was given his orders. In Russia, he found it very difficult to reconcile his new life as a student socialising with student parties, Russian girlfriends as well as his studies and the opportunities they gave him - with the sacrifices being made all around him by his Vietcong schoolmates many of whom he would never expect to see again.

During my second mission I learned that a Dutch diplomat, whom I had known very well in Pakistan, had been transferred to Hanoi. Subsequently we were to meet again in the Yemen. She very kindly invited the mission team to her residence, which was a magnificent traditional Vietnamese house built directly overlooking one of the lakes. We spent a wonderful evening inspecting her collection of antique furniture and
tapestries gathered from countries she had lived in and spending the evening sitting; looking out on the lake and sipping wine.

On mission on my own with my local Vietnamese who accompanied me as a friend as well as an interpreter, we visited the city of Da Nang. During the Vietnam War I think it was an important American air base. It was always the centre of one conflict or another. There we stayed in a hotel complex owned by the Vietnamese military.

Another evening we sat around a typical kitchen table which had been taken out on to the beach directly overlooking the South China Sea. We had an amazing meal as the evening turned to twilight and the ships lights, as they passed up and down, glowed and became ever more striking. We started with crustaceans. We followed that with fish and then finally we had lobster and all washed down with a very dry white Australian wine. We talked and we chatted very animatedly and wittily on a range of subjects. Then I was surprised when a bottle of whiskey was produced and someone began to grind powder from a cow’s or deer’s horn into a cup and then poured it into the whiskey. I was a little taken aback and asked what they were polluting the whiskey with? He explained that they had developed a high regard for my companionship. They wished to celebrate this by presenting me with an aphrodisiac. We laughed and I mocked them saying that while I very much appreciated the gesture I couldn't see it would be too much use to us. But I appreciated the oriental gesture of friendship combined with the sense of humour.

While in Ho Chi Minh City I was brought by the Lady Director of Education to one of their best middle schools. One had to be impressed by the wide use of language laboratories and of computer technology. In an aside I was given to understand that this was the school chosen by the government elite to educate their children. It was no ordinary school. In taking leave of the headmistress I congratulated her on the
excellence of the leadership and the facilities provided by the school. I almost brought
the house down when I suggested that rather than have Europe provide assistance to
Vietnam that the authorities might consider seconding her to Ireland to provide
assistance in improving the quality of education back at home.

The lady in red to my left was the school director.

My friend insisted on showing me everything he thought I would be interested in and
epecially locations and events dating from the Vietnam War. One afternoon in Ho
Chi Minh city he brought me to a most luxurious restaurant which had been located in
the immediate vicinity of the then US Embassy. As I gazed around me through the
palms and over the marble and other signs of opulence I wondered what it had been
like during the last days of the war when the friends and allies from the top bracket of
South Vietnamese society sensed they were running out of time and were clamouring
to ensure that they and their families escaped from the oncoming Vietcong forces;
using whatever means they could to call in obligations from the Americans to ensure
they made it out on the last helicopters. In my mind’s eye I had those desperate
pictures of the last helicopters taking off from the roof of the US ambassador’s
residence.

In contrast, there was another occasion when I was invited out by the local Director of
Education to a dinner organised for the teachers of several schools in the district. It
was a very informal location with high spirits in evidence everywhere. They were
singing; there was drinking and there was lots of evidence of goodwill. I don't think in
Ireland you would find a similar situation where school management and the teachers
could sit down together in such a happy way.
The historic capital of Vietnam, Hue, sits astride a truly majestic and beautiful river, the Song Huong (Perfume River). The north-bank is host to its share of hotels and restaurants, but the area is dominated by the old fortified city known as the Citadel, spread across more than 5 square kilometres of ground, crowding out development on that side of the river. The south bank of the river has been developed as park cum promenade, with an eclectic variety of public sculptures on display. Like Halong Bay to the north, the complex of tombs, pagodas and palaces throughout Hue and its surrounds has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. But to the Vietnamese psyche, shaped by centuries of war and struggle, tempered by nearly forty years of communist rule, this imperialist heritage was seen by my friends to be largely irrelevant and completely disconnected from the present.

I was fortunate to go again on mission again during September and October 2009. It was my fourth time and I certainly was amazed at the changes I saw after a gap of five years. One example was the huge industrial development that had taken place. Earlier this was a feature confined to Ho Chi Minh City or Da Nang. But driving from the port town of Haiphong some 60 miles to Hanoi I was taken aback by the huge number of factories which had been built and which carried signs with flags signifying inward investment by Japanese, South Korean, American or European multi-nationals. While many of these factories had come to Vietnam due to low wage levels even in comparison with neighbouring China it was quite clear that the government viewed this merely as a first phase.

The aim was to achieve high added-value through the rapid development of skills and abilities for Vietnam’s entry into the knowledge economy. To achieve this there has been enormous pressure and responsibility placed on the education and labour ministries to create a labour force with the skills and knowledge required. I was informed that they have achieved Education for All at the primary level in 2004/05. They are about to achieve universal access to lower secondary education and to follow this by 2011 with universal access to upper secondary education. Already the economy is being geared towards mirroring Western achievements. I’m advised that in recent times a number of Western countries including Ireland have entered into
negotiations for agreements with the government to create long-term relationships through the establishment of technical institutes at the university level.

Ironically in 2009 at sixty six years of age I was the youngest of my team of three. The mission was to carry out a final evaluation of US $ 150 million of targeted budget support for education in all 65 provinces of the country. It was something of a revelation to be working with somewhat mature men; one of them aged seventy two!

There was quite a lot of pressure but we did manage reasonably well. One of the officials of the EC Delegation let it be known that she felt that she was being treated at times by three elderly gentlemen who seemed to think she was a girl just out of college. I suppose we would have to admit some guilt on this charge. One of my colleagues received a critical e-mail from her and forwarded it to his wife in England with some critical remarks of his own. Unfortunately, his wife somehow pressed the wrong button and the e-mail with the attached critical comments was sent back to the EC official. While all three of us might have agreed with the sentiments I found myself as the team leader to be in a somewhat awkward situation. The colleague who sent the e-mail, a U.K. professor, refused to meet the official or to recant in any way and I suppose it did cast a shadow over the latter part of our mission. I’m well aware at my age that older doesn’t necessarily equate with being wiser!
Our mission was concentrated in Hanoi and the Northern provinces close to it. While in the city there was development there were some things which had not changed. During peak hours the streets were still full of light motorcycles – thousands of them. They come through from all directions. As someone remarked “it’s bad enough now to risk being run over by a motorcycle - but what will happen when with development they transfer from riding motorbikes to bringing cars into the old town. There will be mayhem!”

While there has been huge development Hanoi has managed to maintain much of its 19th-century beauty. I suppose being built around some twelve lakes helps to inject a sense of calm which is missing from other cities. We in the team particularly enjoyed walking to the lake located in a main tourist area. One restaurant there we christened ‘Jim’s Place’ as he was the first to have discovered it. Then the area around the classical Opera House remains as beautiful as ever. With a population of some 85 million and with more than four million living in Hanoi the place was buzzing.

Part of our mission was planned to cover the Central Highlands area. We had our air tickets bought and all preparations in place when one of my colleagues noticed in the newspaper that a typhoon was forecast to hit the area. Vietnam with its long north-south coast is visited by the order of twenty typhoons a year. They do enormous damage. The one that came ashore near Da Nang involved substantial loss of life. We abandoned any prospect of visiting the adjacent Highland areas which were caught in the eye of the storm.

Instead we spent more time visiting six mountainous and remote provinces in the northeast and northwest of the country. In one of them Long Soc, I visited schools which were not more than 5 km distant from the Chinese border. These were areas where a substantial amount of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities are living. Some thirty years ago in the late 1970s and following the American War and the subsequent invasion of Cambodia and expulsion of Pol Pot this part of Vietnam was invaded by China with great loss of life. The Chinese only withdrew following threats by the
Russians to mount a nuclear attack on a Chinese city. To my recollection there was no mention of this in the Western news media at the time.

In the Peoples’ Committee Meeting Chamber in Qa Ninh – the Cold War may be over but many of the symbols have remained!

I asked one of the locals as to the porosity of the border. He replied that there were severe restrictions but they managed to avoid many of them and there were holes through which commerce could pass. There was marriage across the border – fairly frequently. More immediately visible in the main town of the Province were the supermarkets filled with Chinese hardware, software and children’s toys. I bought an iPod – which would sell normally in Ireland for about €150 for less than €10. I could access what seemed to be hundreds of Chinese songs and music on it.

In the provinces we interviewed officials of the People’s Committees and of the devolved Ministries of Education and Finance. The picture above was taken in one of these ministries. The official who took the photograph has managed to position me in front of the revered Ho Chi Minh. Even in present day liberalising Vietnam not to have done so could be considered a serious omission. Neither Lenin nor Karl Marx look to be very amused.

The country has been investing hugely. This has paid enormous economic dividends and it is projected that by 2012 Vietnam will no longer be classified internationally as a developing country. It will have achieved the status of a middle-income country. Already it has school attendance rates for primary education levels of 98% which is comparable with countries in the West. I was impressed by the quality and standard of construction of primary and secondary schools. They certainly were of superior design and construction to what we normally encounter across Europe. On one occasion we were taken to see a dormitory school complex setup for different minority children. It was superb. On the other hand I had some forebodings regarding the institutionalised behaviours imposed on six to nine-year-old children.
A corollary already noted is that while substantial funding is made available for education parents still pay substantially to have their children in schools. As a team we again missed a focus on quality education standards. Their assessment of quality is made through using fundamental school level standards as a proxy. This means the quality relates directly to inputs such as teacher education, provision of toilets or of school textbooks rather than by measurement of actual learning achievement. We noticed from records of the annual reviews of education progress carried out by the government and the donors that the maximum attention was paid to financial management and audit and it was only comparatively recently that the government has begun to concentrate on education quality and learning achievement as important key indicators of success.

I noticed that there was huge investment in ensuring speed limits were observed and that all motorcyclists wore helmets. On one occasion the car I was travelling in was flagged down for speeding. It had been picked up on a traffic radar system. Things looked as if they were going to be embarrassing and that the car would be impounded. This was avoided by a quick thinking lady official’s decision to telephone the Chairman of the People’s Committee, the most senior local politician. He gave an instruction and we were released immediately.

Provincial and district council representatives often took us out to a few schools and to see for ourselves the situation on the ground. Some of this was fairly mixed and was readily admitted to be the case by the officials accompanying us. Usually there was very friendly discussion and good social intercourse. On several occasions I was taken by surprise to be invited for a meal and then to be presented with small glasses of rice wine which had quite a kick. The picture below shows the lady, who is the Director of Education at the district level, hosting a meal for me and leading in
proposing a toast to the European Union and to me. Another Council Director presented us with a case of rice wine bottles.

A happy occasion in one of the Long Soc districts.

There is no substitute for face-to-face discussion and it was very gratifying to learn that our interviewees appreciated the interest and the range of technical enquiries that we made. Personally I found the officials to be proud of their achievements but at the same time could be very open and self-critical. In other ways they were quite like their counterparts would be in similar departments and schools across Ireland. I certainly never had any sensation or impression that I was being watched or controlled in any way.

Vietnamese food is simple and for me was dominated by fish, shrimp and squid. Given its long and narrow geography fishing plays a very important role in the economy. Food preparation and presentation is most impressive. I was very taken by Vietnamese food and hope that I will be able to find a Vietnamese restaurant somewhere locally in Dublin.

A short circuit around the centre of Hanoi

Hanoi next year will be celebrating its 1,000 anniversary but its history goes back much further than that. There are the excavated remains of peoples living in the area some 4,000 years ago. In the busy time I spent there I didn’t get out and see so many places but I think there are three very much worth mentioning. In describing them I am going back over earlier paragraphs but perhaps in travelling alongside my wife Daphne on one occasion I learned a little bit more and certainly we had a very exciting and adventurous holiday. The first of the three places is Hoan Kiem Lake
with its lakeside restaurant and bar, the Ngoc Song Temple and parts of the old city with each street originally devoted to a particular guild or trade and which caters preponderantly for the modern tourist industry.

Perhaps during my previous missions to the city I had built up a rosy a picture of a city with narrow tree-lined streets and beautiful small restaurants. This time although I recognised the famous coffee shop where we as a team earlier had our coffee my impression was that things looked a little less quaint and beautiful. It may have been that we were there during a hotter period and indeed temperatures were sometimes between 33 and 36C. Nonetheless, I consider a Hanoi to be one of the most beautiful cities of its size that I know. I always see in my mind’s eye groups of local people sitting on small stools on the open pavement and enjoying their cups of coffee and their conversations and oblivious of the tourists passing by.

It’s a warm friendly city and on many occasions I’ve asked myself how could the US have unleashed such a terrible war on these people? Given that I’m a Westerner and that most of their experience would be with Americans I was impressed that I didn’t encounter unpleasantness of any kind during the whole period of my stay. Yes, I was aware of the bureaucratic sensitivities and of the need to comply with procedure in relation to meetings or addressing people. But people, whether officials or waiters, or guides or schoolteachers were always pleasant and open and instinctively courteous and well mannered.
In taking a circular and leisurely stroll around the lake you transfer from the Opera House area with its luxury hotels of the French colonial era and going clockwise pass a lovely lakeside open-air restaurant. Behind the buildings fronting on to the lake you have the fashionable shops and tree-lined streets around St Joseph’s Cathedral. Further on you pass the ANZ (Australian/New Zealand) Bank where I used to extract literally millions of Vietnamese Dong; using my visa card and constantly looking back over my shoulder as I stuffed the notes in whatever pockets or spaces I had32.

Then you arrive at major traffic junctions with hundreds - and at peak hours you will encounter more than hundreds and sometimes thousands of motorcycles - and occasional cars converging together. Making crossovers at this point is certainly not for the weak hearted. A little further on there is the Buddhist Ngoc Song Temple which is still in use with its beautiful bridge and centuries old statues and icons. It is in this location the legend describes the sword being cast by the dying Emperor into the lake and being snatched and taken away into the depths by the faithful tortoise.

Still further on and on your left you will see the palatial offices of the People’s Committee for Hanoi. This is where the political power base that manages Hanoi resides. But it was explained to me that for more than 400 years there has been decentralisation across Vietnam. I was interested to notice when I visited the Temple of Literature that academic and administrative candidates for recognition and ennoblement as a result of their studies were first proposed at the district and then subsequently at the provincial level for submission to the King. For the tertiary level viva voce the king participated personally. So this bottom-up system is not any recent phenomenon introduced by the Communist Party. Rather it has a very strong and enduring tradition.

32 The Vietnamese Dong had an exchange rate of 26,000 to the Euro.
Earlier I was reading my assessment of the 2005 mission where I anticipated there would be difficulties in providing EU funding to the State Treasury - given this degree of autonomy at the local level and of which I utterly approved. The structural problem that arises out of all this is that money from the donors earmarked and agreed with the central government for particular purposes can legally be diverted by the 65 provinces to meet other priorities. There’s no question of corruption. It’s simply that the money isn’t always spent for the purposes for which it was provided such as natural disasters. I suppose I found it a bit ironic that the reference to this in my earlier report was never picked up either by the European Commission or the other donors. I think that in preparing our draft final report we did our best and glossed over this situation as best we could and in a diplomatic way. This anomaly which I think is unique to Vietnam has had major implications for the expenditure of the US$ 150 million provided by the donors for education.

Walking a little further on and overlooking a broad platform on which the children are accustomed to skate there is more than life-size statue of a heroic figure from Vietnamese history. I suppose I should have gone over and looked at it but I think the inscription stated that he lived for maybe 40 or 50 years during the 10th century or possibly the 12th century? If it was the latter he must be the highly revered Vietnamese general who rallied his people against the Mongolian invasion which came ashore from their boats in the Halong Bay area.

There the guide referred to him with a great deal of reverence. Apparently the Mongolians were poor sailors. So the Vietnamese general took advantage of the tide...

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53 This is a legend similar to the Arthurian one where one of the early emperors on his death threw his sword into the lake to be taken into the care of the faithful, wise and long-lived tortoise.
and at the entrances between the many islands he placed vertical stakes below high tide level. Skirmishes were planned to take place at high tide level and the Vietnamese ships rapidly withdrew closely pursued by the larger Mongolian vessels. Many of them were pierced and sank as the tide dropped with great loss of life. The general had had his archers climb to the top of the steep mountainous islands and conceal themselves. As the Mongolian ships drew close these archers rained arrows and other weapons down on their exposed decks. I heard this account several times. When I asked one well-educated guide as to who were the greatest figures he considered in Vietnamese history - he replied without hesitation that one was this general who conquered the Mongols. The other was General Giap who defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu. The Vietnamese have long memories.

Further on again and you pass by the white marble monument to the martyrs of the American War. Close by this is a stone hillock. This is the place where on Saturday afternoons you will see newly-wed couples posing for pictures. I was lucky enough to be passing with my camera and to take a quick snap of a beautiful young bride. From the little experience I have in relation to weddings I would imagine that her wedding dress would sell at a premium in any Dublin wedding boutique.

Further on again and a left turn away from the lake and after 10 minutes’ walk we are back directly opposite the Opera House. Earlier, from my guidebook I was recommended to visit a three-storey market some distance from the lake. I went to see it expecting it to be like the Russian Market in Phnom Penh and was most disappointed.
It was hot as I strolled back towards the lake. I was delighted to discover the joys of the Metropole Hotel. This is a beautiful hotel dating from the French colonial period. It is very, very expensive. However, a glass of mango juice and a beer beside the swimming pool made me feel I was superior person and mixing at the top with my peers.

The Metropole Hotel with all its style and elegance and expensive items for sale reminded me so much of the French Officers Club in Phnom Penh in Cambodia. There as I think I mentioned earlier you could order bottles of wine for as much as $1,000. I suppose both buildings reflected the apogee of French colonial influence and catered for very much the same levels of French administrators and officers. They certainly must have looked after themselves well. The French are long gone but the Metropole continues to thrive!

The second place of interest for me is the Temple of Literature. This landmark was founded in 1070 as a Confucian temple. It is extremely rich in intellectual tradition. It functioned as Vietnam's first university or Imperial Academy and was established within the temple site as a centre to educate Vietnam's bureaucrats, nobles, royalty and other members of the elite. The university functioned for more than 700 years, from 1076 to 1779. Earlier I've mentioned the rigorous studies and examination of candidates to display their entitlement to high office - all in accordance with the Confucian philosophy and morality which required high success in examination and example to be demonstrated by the top administration mandarins.

The Temple of Literature is a unique campus although not quite a modern university as it provided instruction in Confucian theory of administration and social organisation. I was particularly impressed by the stone steles which were about 2 m tall and on which were inscribed the qualifications of the successful candidates.
suppose these were an earlier and more enduring precedent for the conventional present day degree parchment!

Given the extreme difficulty of the doctor laureate tests, few students passed final examinations. The list of names engraved on the stone stele every year during this period is very small. The stele records a total of 2,313 students graduating as doctor laureates. An emperor established the tradition, dating back to 1484, of carving the names of the laureates of the university on stone steles that were placed on top of stone tortoises.

Interestingly, my Vietnamese friends in conversation concerning the awards made to the successful candidates always appeared to imply that it was at PhD level but I think during its heyday between the 11th and 14th century the study and examination process was intended as recognition of a balance between morality and administrative genius. The awarding of PhDs probably came somewhat later.

Nevertheless the award of a PhD parchment when contrasted with the carved stone steles awarded to the successful candidate – just pales. The steles recorded for all posterity the accomplishments of the successful candidate. To put the situation regarding the Temple of Literature into an historical context I suppose it precedes the creation of the earliest European universities in Italy and Paris by somewhere of the order of a hundred years or more. The campus and its lakes have been preserved. Altogether it’s a delightful environment to relax in. The buildings represent a classical
Vietnamese architecture and combine robustness and simplicity in a way which truly is impressive.

Another view of the Temple of Literature.

The third place of interest in the general Hanoi area and to me the most memorable is the Perfume Pagoda.

Approaching the Perfumed Pagoda we travelled on flat bottomed dinghies similar to these through strange shaped limestone mountain scenery.
My Dutch diplomat friend took the team on one weekend to the Purple Pagoda monastery site some 45 km to the south west of the city. It was fascinating because for us to access the monastery we had to embark on flat bottomed boats which were paddled for about three or 4 km between the nearest access point and the monastery site. We climbed up to the monastery pagodas which are of great significance for Confucian and other Eastern scholars with its Ying and Yang; opposites and attractions and in the overall symmetry. These were displayed in ornate goldfish ponds and in the very buildings themselves. Several monks came and indicated that they would like to hear us read their English school texts to them. We did this to both our and their mutual enjoyment and satisfaction.

I suppose the only discordant note was the realisation that the live dogs displayed and complaining in metal cages were for eating and not perhaps for admiration. My friend had assured me that the practice of eating dog was very much looked down upon by the majority of the Vietnamese. But it continues to be a predilection for a small minority. There is a part of Hanoi which specialises in dog meat restaurants – and which we avoided like the plague.

The Perfume Pagoda derives its name from the scents provided by the many plants growing in the mountains around it. Again, these mountains are very special and look like an inland version of the Halong Bay islands. They are limestone, and they almost rear up out of the flat plains. Again, in order to get there we had to travel for an hour and a half by sampan from the nearest road access point; paddled along by the successor to the first experience we had some five years ago. It is most impressive, even if it does leave you - temporarily at least - with a stiff back. At the pagoda site a cable car has been installed by an Austrian company. This allowed us to reach the most venerable area, which is a grotto situated about 500 feet above the plain level.
The centre of the Chua Huong complex, the Huong Tich Cave, houses the Inner Temple. The mouth of the cave has the appearance of an open dragon’s mouth with Chinese characters carved in a wall. The characters are translated as “first grade cave of the South World”. The words are attributed by some to the Chinese emperor of that time. Inside the cave there are many statues. There is a large statue of Lord Buddha, as well as one of the lady revered by Buddhists, Quan Am: both made of a green stone. Among the naturally occurring features are numerous stalactites and stalagmites, some of which are worn smooth from years of rubbing by visitors to the cave.

Legend claims that the cave was discovered over 2000 years ago by a monk meditating in the area, who named the site after a Tibetan mountain where Lord Buddha practiced asceticism. A stele at the current temple dates the building of a terrace, stone steps and Kim Dung shrine to 1686. The many Pagodas that make up the complex are spread out among the limestone hills and tropical forests in the area of Huong Mountain. Over the years some of the structures were damaged and replaced. More recently, damage was done during both the French and the American wars.

There are many practices associated with Chua Huong and its various temples. Some of these are specifically Buddhist, while others are animist or part of popular religion in Vietnam. At Huong Tich there are statues of deities but pilgrims come to get blessings from the stalactites and stalagmites, many of which are named and have special purposes. Many childless pilgrims seek fertility from Nui Co (the girl) and Nui Cau (the boy), while others visit stalactites and stalagmites thought to give prosperity. Pilgrims often gather under one particular stalactite, which resembles a breast, to catch drops of water in hopes of being blessed with health from the ‘milk’ of the ‘breast’. Other names of stalactites and stalagmites include the Heap of Coins (Dun
Tien), the Gold Tree, the Silver Tree, the Basket of Silkworms (Buong Tam), the Cocoon (Nong Ken) and the Rice Stack (Dun Gao).

It was emphasised to us by our guide that we were lucky that we had missed the main pilgrimage dates when thousands come to pay homage and to seek good luck and happiness in their lives through making donations to the Buddha, but especially to the lady Buddha who is especially venerated at the lower Pagoda built on this site. While this site was originally established by Chinese Buddhists I was given to understand that over hundreds of years it has come to reflect Vietnamese religion and culture. Ironically and in contrast the religion practised in the South of Vietnam is much closer to Chinese Buddhism. To me between its isolation and its beauty there was more than a touch of Glendalough about it.

The main pilgrimage season at Chua Huong is during the Huong Pagoda festival, when hundreds of thousands of pilgrims make their way to Huong Tich cave and the other temples. The longest lasting festival in Vietnam, it officially begins on February 15th on the lunar calendar, but the peak in visitors lasts from the middle of January to the middle of March. The Festival we were advised is seen by some as a good opportunity for young people to find romance and begin courtships.

Then we followed the pilgrimage trail back down to the main Pagoda complex. It was exciting to smell the perfume as we passed down through the jungle. Occasionally, we encountered pilgrims climbing slowly on their way up to the grotto.

In contrast to the revered grotto and its frolics the monks’ enclosure at the entrance was a wonderful insight into the way that Buddhism is lived. It was interesting to listen to the guide explain the significance of ancestor worship, which is part of the Buddhist philosophy. It is very important that on death the appropriate rituals are followed. The food and money are placed inside the coffin. The money is not real money, but false money and we passed a pagoda on one occasion where we saw huge flames coming from where a vast amount of this false paper money was being burned. The corpse is buried and is believed for a three-year period to live with the family. Every family has an altar in the house dedicated to the ancestors. After three years, the body is dug up, and the bones are taken and cremated. Then they are placed in an ossuary. They are regularly venerated by the family.

Following cremation of the bones the spirit of the dead person is considered to have made a full assumption up to heaven or to the Buddhist equivalent, Nirvana. The family pray to the ancestors for happiness and good luck in their own lives. This is a very important part of the religion as practiced right across Vietnam and indeed across the border in China.

We in the West have always considered that in countries such as Vietnam and China where Communism has been established there has been the death or annihilation of religion and the age-old traditions associated with it. This assumption, based on the pilgrims we came across, seems to be very far from the reality. Although it was not the pilgrimage season our guide pointed out to us on a number of occasions pilgrims arriving as a family and bringing with them donations of food, and this paper money for presentation to the monks. The vast majority were Vietnamese, but he pointed out
Chinese amongst them. It reminded me of the Irish pilgrims visiting Knock or what I suppose I might expect to see at Fatima.

The Perfume Pagoda: the impressive entrance to the 14th century monks’ enclosure.

Vietnam: Perfumed Pagoda approximately 60km outside Hanoi.
The Perfume Pagoda: the inner courtyard and temple with Buddha venerated by the monks.

The Perfume Pagoda: another detail of the monks’ dwellings and the water gardens.
Sailing on a Chinese Junk on Halong Bay

Anyone who has an interest in Vietnam knows of Halong Bay and its two or three thousand islands. It’s situated in the North-East of Vietnam and is a bay in the Gulf of Tonkin. Ha Long Bay, which literally means ‘Descending Dragon Bay’ is a UNESCO World Heritage site located in Quảng Ninh province, Vietnam. The bay contains thousands of limestone karsts and isles in various sizes and shapes. Ha Long Bay is a centre of a larger zone which includes Bái Tử Long bay to the northeast, and Cát Bà islands to the southwest. These larger zones share similar geological, geographical, geo-morphological, climate and cultural characters.

The core of the bay has an area of 334 km² with a high density of 775 islets. The limestone in this bay I read somewhere has gone through 500 million years of formation in different conditions and environments. The evolution of the karst has taken 20 million years under the impact of the tropical wet climate. The diversity of the environment, climate, geology, geography, and geomorphology in the area has created biodiversity, including a tropical evergreen bio-system as well as an oceanic and sea shore bio-system. Ha Long Bay is home to 14 endemic floral species and 60 endemic faunal species. Historical research surveys apparently have shown the presence of prehistoric human beings in this area tens of thousands years ago.

Travelling through the islands by Chinese Junk was a new experience of boat design. I liked it very much and wondered whether I could introduce them into Dun Laoghaire Harbour.

The Bay was the setting for local naval battles against Vietnam's coastal neighbours. On three occasions in the labyrinth of channels in Bach Dang River near the islands the Vietnamese army stopped the Chinese from landing. In 1288 General Tran Hung Dao stopped Mongol ships from invading Vietnam. Much more recently during the
Vietnam War, many of the channels between the islands were heavily mined by the US Navy, some of which are said to still pose a threat to shipping.

We joined a junk equipped with six passenger cabins and with total accommodation for twelve tourists. We boarded it from a jetty in the Halang Port and were the last to arrive after a long and demanding drive from Hanoi. The junk cast off as we went below to the cabins to stow away our gear.

The junk was about twenty metres long and with a beam of about eight metres. There were two decks; one where the cabins were. The upper deck comprised the kitchens, the dining area and the observation deck forward. The steering area was just forward of the dining area so we could see the crew at the wheel. There was no hint of GPS or depth gauges to be seen but there was an impressive brass binnacle and magnetic compass. There were two masts but I wouldn’t think she ever carried sail. We travelled at about a stately five knots through the channels and between the vertical cliffs of the islands. Halang Bay is protected from the Pacific by the large Chinese island of Hainan to the east and by the multitude of islands which combine to shelter the bay. It’s rarely rough although on occasion and like the rest of Vietnam they can have typhoons coming in off the Pacific.

Our fellow passengers were an interesting group. With us we had a retired French Army officer of seventy six and his younger Algerian doctor colleague. Over several glasses of wine he described his arrival by train from Lhasa in Tibet and via several of the Chinese coastal cities. He had revisited China after a period of fifteen years and was both startled and amazed at the progress he had seen. The highlight for him was the number of electric cars and tuck-tucks he had seen on the streets of Shanghai.

There were two Australian couples. One couple was very concerned at the way the Roman Catholic Church was going downhill so rapidly in Australia. Apparently paedophile priests are not just confined to Ireland. The other couple had come from Laos and complained loudly at how the drug-fuelled lifestyles and sexual antics of the backpackers were eroding local Laotian culture. I confess it was wonderful to sit out with a glass or two of wine after eating a delicious seafood meal and to discuss the world and our differing but colourful impressions with a group of total but agreeable strangers. They were all happy and satisfied retirees and I was hesitant to mention that I had actually been to Vietnam on a working mission.

Several of the islands are hollow, with enormous caves. French tourists visited in the late 19th century, and named one of them Grotte des Merveilles. Its three large chambers contain large numbers of stalactites and stalagmites (as well as 19th century French graffiti). Some of the islands support floating villages of fishermen who ply the shallow waters for 200 species of fish and 450 different kinds of molluscs. Many of the islands have acquired their names as a result of interpretation of their unusual shapes: such names include Voi Islet (elephant), Ga Choi Islet (fighting cock), and Mai Nha Islet (roof). My guidebook advises that 989 of the islands have been given names. Birds and animals including bantams, antelopes, monkeys, and lizards live on some of them.
I took this picture of Chinese junks like ours tied up to allow the tourists to climb up to the huge grottos inside one of the islands of Halong Bay.

We stopped and anchored off the various fabulous tourist sites and then were taken ashore by launch. After such visits we had the alternative of either going kayaking or swimming off the beaches. One beach, a delightful place, had been named after Marshall Tito of Yugoslavia by his host, President Ho Chi Minh. That must have been an interesting conversation between the two of them. Writing these lines I’m brought back to the magical environment we passed through; travelling at a gentle pace in an easy swell and endlessly speculating on how these remarkably shaped mountains had been created – and over how long. Ha Long Bay was first listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994, in recognition of its outstanding aesthetic value. In 2000 the World Heritage Committee additionally recognised Ha Long Bay for its outstanding geological and geo-morphological value.

We spent a further time on Cat Ba Island which is, at 87 square miles, the largest island in the bay. Approximately half of the island's area is covered by a national park - a UN Biosphere Reserve--which is home to the highly endangered Cat Ba langur, a beautiful long-tailed golden haired lemur. This golden-headed langur is rarely seen, as fewer than 100 specimens are thought to survive in the wild, although it was constantly impressed on us that it is the subject of a well-organized conservation programme. They had been hunted down by the islanders both for food and for the Chinese medicinal properties they are supposed to have. I remember that other mammals in the park included civet cats and oriental giant squirrels. The park faces the constant challenge of protecting its biodiversity while encouraging tourism.

Cat Ba Island was pleasant but a little bland after our experiences in Halong Bay. The highlight again was to be taken out for a picnic on a smaller junk as the only guests and with our guide to glide slowly through a maze of smaller islands.
What a good way to spend the end of the day at peace in your coracle waiting for the fish to bite and with the family behind on the floating village waiting to cook the evening meal!

Then the ship’s cook presented us with another marvellous fish and shrimp lunch and beer while the owner of the boat who spoke excellent English entertained us with his views on Vietnamese life and his earlier time spent as an economic migrant traversing the world from Hong Kong to London. He certainly gave us to understand that he was a happy man to be back home with his boat and earning his living on these beautiful waters.