

Mom's Asian adventure

BY LIISA ATVA, POSTMEDIA NEWS FEBRUARY 13, 2012 escapes.ca



Halong Bay, Hanoi, Vietnam

Photograph by: istock, Getty Images/iStockphoto

"Please feed our fish your dead skin" read the sign over a large fish tank in the night market of Siem Reap, Cambodia. The perfect solution for sore feet after a day exploring the nearby Angkor ruins – foot spas where fish nibble away your calluses, leaving your feet silky smooth. Sitting around the tank soaking their feet, happily chatting, beers in hand, were three twenty-something young women, all with sun-bleached hair in beaded or dreadlocked strands. Cheery Australian accents intermingled with a Swedish "yah, yah." Backpackers, we presumed. We were two ladies, old enough to leave backpacking to our kids, adventurous enough to pass on a group tour, but not carefree enough to try the foot spa.

Using travel guide books, and sample itineraries from the tours we didn't book, we planned a 17-day trip through Vietnam and Cambodia. My travel companion's daughter, Julianne Austman, joined us in Hanoi for a few days at the end of her three-month back-packing trip through Australia and Southeast Asia.

We booked a hotel for the first two nights before we left Canada; the rest we sorted out along the way. As we left one hotel, we booked the next, using Expedia online, paying \$120 to \$130 per night until we learned that four-star hotels could be had for less than \$50 dollars. Julianne began her search for a hotel upon arrival at her destination, paying no more than \$12 dollars per night for hotels that had no amenities, but were clean and fairly new. Having a look at the room before taking it, Julianne ruled out those that she said had, among other things, "sheets that looked like they were from your grandmother's basement."

Hanoi offered a sidewalk smorgasbord: cinnamon-flavoured Vietnamese coffee at lakeside cafés, fresh French baguettes, and steaming pots of soups and noodles. Many street vendors provide sidewalk seating on child-sized plastic chairs and tables. As Vietnamese are typically small in stature, the tiny furniture suffices. We squeezed ourselves onto the tiny chairs after Julianne passed on backpacker lore; "the shorter the stool, the cheaper the beer."

From Hanoi we took a day tour to the Perfume Pagoda, a destination a guide book referred to as an important pilgrimage site visited by hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese annually. After several hours on a bumpy road in a rickety minivan, we reached a river and boarded a sampan. Engrossed with the

dead rats floating beside us, we failed to notice until we were in the middle of the river, that there were no life jackets, and that the water was inches from swamping the sampan. Thankfully, the boat ride was short. After a hike, and a gondola ride, we reached the limestone cave wherein lay a small, unimpressive shrine, reminding us that a pilgrimage is about the journey not the destination. The tour included lunch at one of the riverside restaurants that advertise their menu by hanging dead animals out front, including at one, a freshly caught deer still dripping blood.

In Halong Bay, three hours east of Hanoi, we set sail on an overnight cruise. With hundreds of boats plying the same waters, Halong Bay is not a pristine wilderness, but the bay, dotted with islands of limestone hills and caves with stalagmites and stalactites, is beautiful. The twelve-cabin "Calypso Cruiser" built in 2009 resembled an old-fashioned Chinese junk, and was one of the nicest boats on the bay. A few months earlier, one of the boats sank, drowning all twelve tourists aboard. Since our boat was a newer one, we didn't let that deter us and the cruise was a trip highlight.

With a population of 90 million in an area one-third the size of British Columbia, Vietnam is crowded, and the streets choked with traffic. With ten rows of motorbikes approaching from both directions and few traffic lights, trying to cross a street can seem futile. The Vietnamese simply saunter slowly across, letting the traffic swerve around them. In Hue, my travel companion plucked up her courage and crossed the street Vietnamese style. When I was unable to do the same, a local man, chuckling at my predicament, marched over, took my arm, and led me across.

The main attraction in Hue is the Imperial City, built in 1805 and modelled after the Forbidden Palace in Beijing.

We took the local train from Hue to Da Nang; it was old, but adequate, and the fare only three dollars. According to a guide book, it was a four hour trip. After two hours, the train made its first unannounced stop. As there were no signs in English, or other English-speaking passengers to ask, we assumed that it wasn't our stop and stayed on board. As the train pulled out of the station, the conductor appeared, glanced at our tickets, threw her arms up and exclaimed, "Ah your stop!" Realizing that the next station was hours in the opposite direction, half-jokingly I asked if she could stop the train. She rushed away but soon returned saying, "Hurry, train stop, not long." The train groaned to a stop, the other passengers helped throw our luggage out, and we jumped into a pile of rubble at the side of the tracks. After we'd cheerily waved goodbye to the laughing passengers, we realized we were miles from the nearest town. We were spared a long hike by a helpful local.

Having admired a dress that Julianne had made in Hoi Ann, a shopping paradise famous for its tailors and seamstresses, we went on our own shopping spree and had 16 items custom-made in two days. Our best buys included cotton sun dresses for \$15 dollars, embroidered silk dress for \$30 dollars, and a cashmere wool winter jacket lined with silk for \$45 dollars. The quality and service ranged from excellent at Mekong Tailor, to poor from seamstresses in the cloth market.

Although custom-made clothing can be made overnight, with an overwhelming choice of fabric, designs and tailors, three full days in Hoi Ann would have given us time for last minute alterations.

In Siem Reap, the town closest to the famed Angkor ruins in Cambodia, we stayed at the Borei Angkor Resort and Spa. The service was, by far, the best I have experienced anywhere in the world. Upon entering the lobby resplendent with mahogany wood, we were greeted by a hostess offering glasses of pandan ice tea. After inviting us to sit, she checked us in as we were serenaded by a lady playing a Khmer xylophone. Our hotel room was a luxurious retreat swathed in raw silk, with a spa-like bathroom complete with a rain shower. All this luxury cost \$60 dollars per night, including airport shuttle, and an extravagant breakfast buffet.

At the Angkor ruins we marvelled at their architectural complexity, elaborate carvings, and vastness. Some sources say that at its peak in the 12th century, Angkor, the former capital of the Khmer empire, was the largest city in the world, with an area of 1,000 square kilometres, and one million people. Two of the more well-known sites, Angkor Wat, and Phnom Bakheng, are part of the tour group circuit, and can be crowded, especially at sunset; the perhaps even more impressive Ta Prohm site was almost

empty.

During late April and early May, the weather in Cambodia was hot and steamy, with temperatures in the high 30s. We stayed cool by hiring a driver with a tuk-tuk, a carriage pulled by a motorbike less expensive and more fun than an air-conditioned car. Julianne opted for a cheaper "moto," a ride on back of a motorbike possible with a backpack, but we didn't try it with suitcases.

However, in Chau Doc, we did bring our luggage on a "cyclo," a pedal bike with a buggy in front.

A locally arranged two-day tour took us from Phnom Penh back to Vietnam through the Mekong Delta on many different modes of transportation. On the first leg, it was only the two of us in a private min-van possibly that of the travel agent's uncle. As the road narrowed and sightings of other tourists became scarce, we wondered what we had got ourselves into. The road became a dirt lane so narrow that an arch strung across it for a wedding had to be dismantled to let us pass. Eventually we reached the Vietnamese border crossing of Ving Xuong, where a sampan and boatman awaited us. The slow, peaceful trip down a tributary of the Mekong River evoked 1930s Vietnam.

Although the two-day tour was a budget one popular with backpackers, we modified it by paying extra to upgrade the hotels. As well, if we weren't thrilled with the looks of the restaurants that the tour guide led us to, we searched out our own.

Did we feel safe? Other than rickety boats and death-defying traffic, we had only one unsettling incident. In Ho Chi Minh City after paying a taxi fare in full, the driver swapped the fifty dong bill we'd given him for a ten from his own pocket, and then insisted that we hadn't paid him enough. When we hopped out of the taxi, he chased us menacingly, but backed off when a policeman approached. On a few occasions in Northern Vietnam we received hostile looks from older people but otherwise, young and old alike smiled, waved, or flashed the peace symbol.

Despite the mishaps, we never once wished that we'd opted for a group tour. Not only did we save money, but we had an exciting adventure with experiences we might otherwise have missed. The 17-day trip, including hotels, meals, entrance to tourist attractions and travel within Vietnam and Cambodia (but excluding airfare to and from) cost \$1,500 dollars each. The \$800 to \$1,200 dollars saved by not taking a group tour was more than enough to finance the shopping sprees.

Special to The Sun

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



Halong Bay, Hanoi, Vietnam

Photograph by: istock, Getty Images/iStockphoto

