

Day 25 (Tuesday 10/14/08) Da Nang & Hue, Vietnam

It was about 7am when we started our approach to Da Nang Harbor. This map shows where Da Nang is located on the globe and also the location of the coastal city of Hue (pronounced "way") where we went on a tour later in the day.

The name Da Nang has a special significance for many Americans, particularly older types, because it was in Da Nang that the first US military bases were established in 1964 at the start of the Vietnam War. As visitors and Americans we felt a little uneasiness because of the US participation in the war against North Vietnam which was eventually successful in unifying the country under one flag. However, we didn't detect any evidence that the Vietnamese we met cared that we were Americans.



Da Nang harbor has a long beach area on the southern and western shore while the industrial part where we docked is in the eastern area of the harbor. The map below shows the location of the Amsterdam in the harbor.



Part of the fun of cruising is that the ship is often docked in areas that you would never see in the normal tourist paths that we follow through airports and downtown hotels. Today we lucked out because the berth the Amsterdam had in Da Nang was near an area where real industrial work was going on.

We were docked at a pier across from a ship that was being loaded with a dark brown dirt-like material taken from a large pile. The dock facility didn't have a long enough conveyor belt to reach from the pile of material to the forward hold of the ship so they had cleverly put many small conveyor belt machines to work in moving the material down the pier and up into the ship as shown in this picture.



We had scheduled a 9 hour tour to "The Imperial City of Hue" so we had



to get moving soon after docking. We went down to the Queen's Lounge and got our orange sticky label assigning us to bus #1. The gangway to shore was soon set up and we left the ship. The first thing we had to do was have the Vietnamese immigration official look at our "Passenger's Landing Card" that had been issued to us the night before. He made a hand written notation in a log book showing the number printed on our landing card. We were then free to board the tour bus after passing by the vendors'

stalls that were already set up for business. There was a pile of large logs piled behind the vendors' stalls. We were later told the logs came from the Vietnam highlands and Laos. The logs will be used in Vietnam to make plywood.

Our tour guide's name was Khoa and he got us started on the trip right on time. The city of Hue is on the coast about 60 miles north of Da Nang. As Khoa explained it takes about 3 hours to drive to the city of Hue over the two lane mountainous roads. The ride over the mountains had been described to us as scenic and the ancient Imperial City made a worthwhile sightseeing goal so we had decided to go for it even though the 3 hour trip in each direction was daunting. As usual the first thing we noticed was that Vietnam uses the right hand traffic system like in the US. Khoa said that gasoline costs the equivalent of about \$4 US per gallon. That doesn't sound too bad in view of recent US prices unless you get hung-up on the price quoted in Vietnamese currency. The Vietnamese currency, denominated in the "dong", has been suffering from a bad case of inflation. Currently a gallon of gas will cost about 64,000 dongs. We saw several

service station signs indicating gasoline at a price on the order of 16,000 dongs per liter and it was enough to get our attention.

The road to Hue took us out of Da Nang and quickly up into the mountains to the north. As we had been told, the views of the surrounding countryside and coastline were beautiful from the mountain highway. We soon felt like we were back home in Tennessee when we saw groves of what looked like loblolly pine trees being attacked by kudzu vines, as shown in the picture below.



The two lane asphalt roads were in good condition so we had a smooth ride. However, there were plenty of zig-zags and hairpin turns as we passed over the mountains.



After about an hour and a half we stopped for a rest stop in a tourist shop where the tour company obviously has some kind of commercial arrangement. The accommodations were not in line with five star hotels but there were adequate western toilet facilities in the women's room and the men's room was just fine. Guides in Japan, China and also here in Vietnam seems to get great pleasure out of calling the toilets "happy rooms". We guess they have suffered through many desperate tourists seeking a toilet and they like the colorful translation of "happy room". Here is a view of the shop on the right.

They had an ancient but apparently operational hand pump in the back yard



They were doing a fair amount of business selling drinks, trinkets and maps of Vietnam

to the tourists in our group. Entrepreneurism may to be doing okay in this communist country since the residence, shown on the right, looked much more comfortable than the typical farmer's or fisherman's house that we saw.

Barbara was approached by a boy, possible 12 years old, who had a scrapbook he was putting together with paper money and coins from around the world. He showed Barbara his book display of low denomination paper money. He said he was particularly interested in the US State Quarter Series.



A short way down the road we came upon a photo opportunity at the village of Lang Co. This is a resort area with fine looking beaches and all the houses and hotels were in great shape. Here is the view from a hill just out of town.



Some workers were making road repairs a short distance from where our bus had stopped. Barbara couldn't resist getting a photo of these guys at work. There were several road construction sites along the route to Hue and they appeared to be observing appropriate safety concerns for the passing traffic.



We finally got out of the mountainous terrain and were traveling along flat land that was usually flooded. Our guide said it was not rice planting season and the plants we saw growing up in the flooded fields were just weeds. Suddenly we happened on a scene that made the day for Barbara, who is a water buffalo nut. Although the bus didn't really stop, it slowed down and she was able to get these photos.



From time to time as we drove along we could see burial grounds and in some cases individual family monuments. This one shown below, although blurred by the bus motion, was one of our favorites.

The Vietnamese have a reverence for ancestors that is similar to that found in most Asian countries.



We were very happy when it appeared that we had at last entered the city of Hue. Hue has the same crowded streets as other large cities and it took about 30 minutes to work our way across Hue to the citadel which houses the Imperial Enclosure. The citadel was the main goal of our

day's tour. The original fortress was built in the 1300s during a period when Vietnam was an independent country and had ruling emperors. The perimeter of the citadel is a thick wall more than six miles around and it is crowned by a raised portion on the south wall that flies the Vietnamese flag. Inside the citadel is a zig-zag moat that surrounds the Imperial Enclosure.



Our guide took us through the gate in the wall of the citadel, as shown on the left. There was a lot of car and motorcycle traffic going through the narrow gate at

the same time as us tourists. It got exciting for a while. We can only conclude that the Vietnamese drivers are extremely good at cutting their clearance to an absolute minimum without making contact with human tissue.

Once through the main wall there was a moat and then another wall to pass through on the way to the Imperial Enclosure.



We were taken inside a room that contained the Emperor's throne. We were not allowed to take pictures.

Next we passed into an expansive courtyard, that is in a state of renovation to repair damage from the multiple wars and typhoons that have swept through the area. Most of the damage was done during the Vietnam War in 1968 when the TET Offensive launched by North Vietnam singled out Hue and Saigon as the primary cities for the fighting. Fighting raged for 5 days in

the citadel. According to Dr. Wolff, our on-board history expert, the US commanders at first did not use bombs and heavy artillery against the North Vietnamese in the citadel. They wanted to preserve the historic artifacts. However, when it appeared that the North Vietnamese were not showing any special concern for damage to the ancient relic, the US opened up with everything we had. Eventually the North Vietnamese left the citadel and US forces moved in. The tile floor and pillars of the courtyard are still not repaired. For example, these four gold decorated columns in the picture on the right stood out as attractive and we were marveling at how nice they looked. Then we stepped closer and found the columns to be made of fiberglass. Presumably they will be replaced someday by a replica of the original.

Vietnam is not a wealthy country and apparently it will take some time before the money is found to restore "The Imperial City" to its former glory. We doubt that we will see it.

On the way back to the bus we broke out our shopping list and indulged in a little bargaining with the merchants along the way. We managed to get these coolie hats which appeared to be authentic and actually worn by Vietnamese.



After touring The Imperial City we drove to the Century Hotel for lunch. There were three bus loads of Amsterdam tourists which total about 120 people. The Century Hotel and the staff went out of their way to make our lunch a memorable occasion, especially for those folks who like oriental food.



Here is a view of Esther, Bob and Joan enjoying their oriental cuisine.

Doug grabbed a table for us out on the patio. We had hopes that it might be cooler than inside. Alas, we were subjected to

the same warm humid conditions as everyone else. We didn't let the sticky conditions spoil the fine dining experience arranged by the Hotel staff. Here we are with Jeff on our left and Molly on our right. Our friend Doug took the picture.



Before we left the hotel Barbara tried her hand at the oriental drums. This will be a story for our percussionist grandson, Andrew, back in Oak Ridge.



After the luncheon we were driven over to the tomb of the Emperor Tu Duc. This mausoleum is in very poor repair. Our guide blamed typhoons for the damage rather than the wars that have come and gone in the region. The floor tiles were covered with moss-slime and some were very slippery. One lady fell down, without serious injury, shortly after getting out of the bus. On the Amsterdam we have noticed that people in our age group are susceptible to injuries while on these active tours. The tour staff tries to warn people about the hazards but there is a natural tendency for us tourists to take a chance because we may never have another opportunity.



Here are some photos we took of the tomb and the grounds.

The grounds of the Tu Duc Tomb contained a moat like water canal with a small lake house built out over the water.



This missing brick step is what you call a real "Tourist Trap".



We were not impressed with what we saw at the Tu Duc Tomb. To cap off the tour our guide told us that because of grave robbers it was the practice of the ancient kings to have a tomb but their actual remains would be buried elsewhere. In other words, the Emperor Tu Duc isn't really buried here. Anyway, here is a picture of his tomb that we got to take away with us.



The Tu Duc Tomb finished our agenda on the tour and our bus headed for Da Nang. After five hours of riding the bus and walking around the ancient sites of Hue we were all eager to get back to the ship. Fortunately, the Vietnamese have dug a 6.2km (3.8 mile) long tunnel through the mountain that, in the interest of sight seeing, we had climbed over on our way to Hue. Our bus driver paid the toll and we made the trip to the outskirts of Da Nang in about 15 minutes rather than the hour it took to negotiate the tortuous road over the mountain.

Once in Da Nang, just as in Hue, we were surrounded by a few cars and hoards of motor bikes. Our guide had told us about the fact that the bicycle is being replaced by the small motorcycles or mopeds in Vietnam. Until a few years ago the typical motor bike cost more than \$3000 US. The average Vietnamese makes only \$100 US per month so a motor bike was not a feasible option. He said the real breakthrough came when a North Vietnamese company teamed up with Honda. Now there is a motor bike made in Vietnam that sells for about \$300 US and many of the Vietnamese have purchased this new motorbike. As we were negotiating the streets on the way to the ship about 5pm we were able to capture this photo of a fleet of motorbikes coming off one of the new bridges in Da Nang. The ratio of motorbikes to cars looks like about 25 in this photo.



Finally the bus arrived at the Amsterdam and dropped us off. Before checking in we had to pass by the vendors on the pier even though they were starting to pack up in preparation for the Amsterdam getting underway. We didn't find anything of interest.

However, we did get this rare photo of a table completely covered with Rolex and Omega watches. In this low rent district venue they sell for \$2 to \$5 US each.



We had to go by the Vietnamese officials and let them record the number of our "Passenger's Landing Card" so that they would know we had left Da Nang.

We made it back to our room and even had time to clean up and be ready for early seating in the dining room at 5:30pm. The ship got underway about 6pm headed for Phu My, Vietnam.