

The Silk Bomb (II): Good morning Vietnam!

The Pursuit of Happiness (A Worldtrotter's Log)

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(amidst the cliffs, silk, sickles and hammers in Hanoi and Ha Long Bay)

Hanoi threw me off-base. I feel like I can't keep the pace with the city, with the weather, with the sound of the Vietnamese language. No trace of relaxation. How is it that Laos is so close by? Hanoi is nothing like anything I had encountered until that thrilling moment. From a bird's view, it probably looked like a swarm. From the inside, it was like a maze in which the engines and people live alongside each other, together with the smell of food and winter. At first, the stress of crossing a street froze me with fear. It was like all of a sudden all of my senses would enter a latent, inactive state. It seemed that walking without looking to your left or right was pure madness. Be that as it may, it was the only way. Moreover, after the heat of Thailand and Laos, the cold from Vietnam seemed merciless. Therefore, the next morning, I decided that I would wisely invest in a sweater and a pair of stockings. So I went along the streets filled with engine smoke, women with conical hats carrying fruit, motorbikes overloaded with objects that surpassed my wildest imagination, clothing stalls and minuscule tables and chairs for dwarfs filled with people with an appetite, merchants who always have something to sell. Moreover, the red flags with the yellow star packed the streets of Old Quarter, in contrast with the lacing of French architecture from the colonial period. It was the election period. Just like the intertwining cables braided on the electricity poles, the streets are terribly similar and disoriented me beyond recognition. Hanoi boils with commerce and life. You have no chance of avoiding the style. You either join the rhythm of the street, or you catch the first flight to more welcoming lands. With all these thoughts in mind, I realize that I got lost while trying to reach the heat. I try to find some visual marker. This stall sells fruit, the other sold electronics. Damn, they all look alike. I get lost and night falls in. I realize I'm moving in circles. I make one last effort. I remember the route from last night when I went to dinner with Jeje and a twenty-year-old German

traveler picked up from the Laos-Vietnam border, which he crossed in a minibus. Then markers and signs started to take shape, which help me find the Hanoi Silver Hotel. I take a deep breath and I get in line for chocolate muffins. Along with me are tens of women and men forced by the stoplight to take a break and enjoy something sweet. The only thing that reminded me of home was the cold. The cold and the return to the communist times, with “Serbian trade” infusions form the consumerist mix that took over the sidewalks in danger of extinction. I felt like I was playing a balance game, in which the one who won was the one was able to stand in an impossible position the longest, in an even more impossibly small space. I felt like if I had brought a friend, I would have brought the town on the brink of collapse by overpopulation. And in a way, this just may be the trap in which humanity is slowly sinking in an imminent and irreversible way. We are in constant search of unpopulated beaches, untouched mountains, things that in a few years’ time will only be a story from the past. Hanoi gives me this impression of city on the limit. Intense, cultural, political, social, keen on finding its way towards the Chinese success. With its 600 pagodas and temples, Vietnamese classical music concerts, arts and history museums, along with the bizarre mausoleum of the venerated Ho Chi Minh, the miniscule tables on which you can have soup in the street, the bazaars filled with Buddhist ornaments, red flags with the hammer and sickle, French villas and karaoke discos, Hanoi is to me a capsule thrown somewhere on the border between the surreal and a reality in reverse. First of all, in Hanoi you have to activate and develop your technique of crossing the street full of motorbikes, without panicking and without disturbing the traffic, which, as chaotic as it may seem, flows by itself with a continuous mobility that appears to have existed since the beginning of time. The second most important thing is to not to allow yourself to feel that people are rude and cold especially when you come from a country like Laos, where people seem to be made out of milk and honey. The Vietnamese in Hanoi are people who have been through a lot, who know how to handle things, who work from dawn till dusk in a swarm that has drenched me of every bit of energy. Without realizing it, the ten days in Hanoi and Ha Long Bay pushed me to the limit. There were so many things you could do in a city the size of Hanoi and so many things to learn from a transcendental space like Ha Long Bay. The enthusiasm of being in Vietnam strongly activated me. Moreover, for the first time in a year, four Romanian friends had found each other in the same corner of the world in spite of the fact that the famous and indispensable Facebook was banned in Vietnam. This resulted in the arsenal of tricks through which you can fool the system in order for meetings at far end of the world to take place. This is what happened to Raluca and Ramon. We found each other thanks to some conspiracies of Facebook and without Facebook. But I’ll tell you all about it in a future episode.



Through the tangled wires, old buildings like precious stones hidden behind a magic curtain, minuscule restaurants where they served *fresh spring rolls*, thick pullovers and humid cold, I spent the first day in Hanoi by touring the most important sites of the capital of the grand Vietnam. Because of the general chaos that, after having seen Laos, seemed impossible to maneuver, I chose the easiest path towards knowledge. It's useless to point out that the danger of staying in the room increased as the temperature decreased. So at seven o'clock in the morning I was on my way to literature temples, pagodas, mausoleums, history museums and everything that was supposed to give us an idea of what it's like to be in the capital of a mythical place, filled with a historical ping-pong hard to digest. It's just that, after having seen Buddhist architecture and pagodas on the river banks, standing in a strict line to see the mummy of the mystic Ho Chi Minh means that you should again change your perception related to what's right and what's wrong in this world. A feeling of army and party calling hit me, although I have no idea what it's really like. Standing in a single line, without being allowed to talk to each other, driven by a curiosity to see a dead body guarded by soldiers in fancy suits with loaded guns, I felt like saying no. Along with the eeriness of the idea, I had found out that the man's last wish was to be incinerated. In the cold morning, the cubist building of Ba Dinh Square seemed to be a symbol of the human absurd placed in a corner of the human species' need to glorify leaders, especially in desperate situations, when

survival hangs on a thread. Either way, what is certain is that I would have not liked to be in the shoes of the boys hired to guard the transparent coffin which contained the human remains of a man who was no longer among the living and whose memory literally hung to a people who, ironically, believed in the law of Buddhist impermanence. The thing is, the world seems to be governed by other rules than those of the Zen logic. But because Hanoi has been here for quite a while, I know that not everyone relies upon and respects the regime. Hanoi, a former French colony and the capital of Indochina, was the first city that had European-style universities. And you can tell. Hanoi is a terribly cultural city, in which you can find the most unexpected musical and sculptural rarities. We should have spent at least a whole month in order to actually enjoy the essence of a place as intense as Hanoi. In four days, you barely have enough time to learn how to ask for coffee and survive the race between bikes and humans. Fascinating. Forgetting about the relaxed time spent in Laos, where you would pay for coffee and receive even more in change, in Hanoi you had to negotiate everything. But it's worth it, because nothing compares to the silk in Hanoi, which embraced the feminine shape in the most elegant and sensual manner. I think that I saw the climax of elegancy on a bridge in Hanoi, at a young couple's wedding. The white silk was flowing on the slender feminine curves of the beautiful Vietnamese woman with orchids in her hair, standing next to her husband with gentle features. It was the symbol of Vietnamese grace. If I were a designer, I would have been in a constant inspirational delirium. Actually, I did meet such a specimen: a Polish hair stylist, travelling with his cousin from London. His luggage was considerably bigger than ours, although we had been travelling for so long, and he was complaining that he doesn't have any more room, but that he would have bought more. I couldn't agree more with him. If I had spent three days in Hanoi and had gone straight home, I think that I would have brought an extra rucksack.

Hanoi made me fall in love with the Vietnamese culture. Silk, culture, puppet shows in water, classical and contemporary music, traditional costumes, stunning features, strong personalities. To a traveler, Old Quarter seems a mix of strong essences. You stand no chance of not being bewildered by so much cultural stimulation. In a cold evening, on my way to dinner, I stumbled upon a traditional music concert, which is a rarity in the North of Vietnam. It was banned for a while because it was associated with the consumption of opium and with prostitution. It seems that nowadays, the musicians from the University of Hanoi want to revive this musical genre, which is very difficult to accomplish because the 80 year-olds are the only ones left to remember its beginnings. Like in any other culture, globalization has created strong and irrecoverable effects. Styles disappear and limiting and homogeneity seems to be the natural process that is taking place in the world. In a few years' time we will only have one culture. It's a pity. Still,

watching that rare traditional music concert, I realized that the music and improvisation, in all its shapes, even the most bizarre and atonal, has a healing effect. I came out of the temple as if I had witnessed the last chau van music show in the world.

But time passed with fantastic speed. I could not get carried away in Hanoi. We had to get organized and move fast. We were four Romanians and a Spanish on our way to discovering a grand land. Early in the morning, rushing with the cold, we found ourselves in a bus on our way to Ha Long Bay. The sky was grey, it was raining and it did not seem to be any fun to spend the night on the boat to *Descending Dragon Bay*. It was pouring over the dragon's land and over the chalk cliffs that split the cold waters of the Pacific. Geology has worked its magic here, playing the deities' imagination to the limit. I have seen UNESCO World Heritage sites before, but nothing compares to Ha Long Bay. If you are a rock enthusiast, this is the place where you can say that you cannot believe mother nature could create anything like this. From caves where you can hold an electronic music festival, to the most delicate structures, to kayaking between the rocks that seem to have been drawn by Dali himself and floating villages, Ha Long Bay has surpassed my humble imagination. What I don't understand about Vietnam, nor Thailand, is the mess left behind by the locals. Wrappings thrown in the water, on the beaches, through the forests. It's a shame. It seems that these places lack the New-Zeeland paranoia concerning organized camping, eco trash bins and so on. In Ha Long Bay, I had the feeling that the place was used to bring money, not to be protected. Furthermore, it's awfully touristic, even with the late autumn cold. That's why I couldn't understand why the guide was insisting on swimming. In return, I insisted with kayaking and I got my kayak, at seven o'clock in the morning, through wind and waves. I didn't even want to stick my head out the window, not to mention getting equipped and pedaling. But I did it anyway, and it was intense. The coffee on the elegant boat was a gift from God, especially after the sleepless night I spent because of the storm and karaoke. I am really passionate about karaoke. Maybe too passionate. An anonymous traveler once said: the Japanese have a few historic flaws, and karaoke is definitely one of them. But I am not the one to judge, because I myself got carried away with a short Hey Jude, before one of the guides got hot under the collar and sang a nationalist song, from which I only got *Vietnaaaaaam*. But this was the first part. Now, after a two week mental break, lost between the islands and rocks in the south of Thailand, Hanoi is only a phantasm. In two days I will return to Vietnam, but this time in Saigon. Plunging into **Apocalypse Now**: *Saigon... shit; I'm still only in Saigon... Every time I think I'm gonna wake up back in the jungle. When I was here, I wanted to be there...* Towards what exactly leads this travelling puzzle, I sometimes wonder.



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