

First Night

Friday, February 18, 2005

It was almost midnight, when we stepped off the plane in Vietnam. The darkened sky dripped with humidity was barely lit by yellow lights piercing through a light maze of pollution. Welcome home! It has been thirty years!

Tan Son Nhat International Airport was unexpectedly modern. The custom agent, a young girl of late thirty, was kind and polite. Professional even and no bribes. After a short while, we were in an old, beaten taxi heading downtown Saigon. The streets were still packed with cars and mopeds after midnight. The aging houses and unimpressive buildings seemed tired, and the town seemed uneasily restless, dense, dirty and tiresome. The drive was uneventful, but Dung was fairly suspicious of the advanced fee of US \$20.

Her suspicion was confirmed by the bellman, as we checked into Bong Sen Hotel on Dong Khoi Street (Tu Do) Downtown Saigon. The hotel was not up to Dung's standard, but I was pleased for its cleanliness and old styled charm. The room was comfortable, air-conditioned and was well worth the US \$60 per night. Exhausted after the 24 hour trip, we fell asleep easily our first night home.



**Saturday
February 19, 2005**

Co Sau

Dung rushed out of the taxi to hug a frail old lady she called Co Sau. All morning Dung was anxious and cannot wait to get started. She gulped down a modest breakfast of Pho at Bong Sen, and made phone calls hurriedly. As she hold onto this petite lady tears streaming down her cheeks, I saw tears trickled down the bony face of Co Sau as well. Seventy something years old, thirty years apart, the old lady was smiling and crying at the same time. Holding bags of goodies that Dung had prepared tediously from the US, I followed them through a tiny residence obviously shared by many families.



Co Sau lived, ate and slept on an old tiny bed called ‘divan’ surrounding by her humble belongings. The wooden bed sat in the corner of a between-house, where the walled house ends and the opening part begins with minor covering exposing itself to the weather. On the wall laid a small mantle with pictures of Dung’s ancestors. We both lit incense and paid respect to them.

How do you begin a conversation after 30 years? What words can adequately convey the feelings of love and longing? There were just tears. Yet they said plenty.

Beaming with pride, Co Sau introduced Dung to everyone around, some related, some just there. The timid woman talked and talked, smiling and just would not let go of Dung's hands. A huge rat ran through the open-air part where they put the dishes, and no one said a thing.

Residence on Huynh Tinh Cua

We and Co Sau took a short taxi drive to visit where Dung used to live more than 30 years ago. The residence was impressive and over built for the modest street called Huynh Tinh Cua. It is a fancy restaurant now called Hoa Cau. Painted with odd colors of blue and red, the folks who lived there just did a bad job hiding its past glory. Standing outside Dung was just speechless and sadden. This was where she grew up before the end of the War. I took some photos from outside, then asked the hostess permission to take additional pictures of the inside. Co Sau and Dung were troubled as not to tell them why we were there.



We crossed the street and entered into an alleyway across from the restaurant. The walkway angled down to the center, where a small stream of water trickled through it. Smelly and claustrophobic. Near the end of the winding alleyway, we entered a small residence. About 10 feet by 12 feet was a living room, family room, dining room, bedrooms, kitchen and staircase all rolling into one cramped space. The family and families of Dung's cousins shared this space. And they were all so glad to see Dung.

Within minutes, there was instant family reunion. Ong Duong, his children and grand children came out from nowhere and everywhere. Dung was touched and happy to see them. Stories flowed from one to another. Stories of how Dung's house was occupied after the war, then stripped off of valuables, rebuilt and added on. Dung asked many questions about their lives and their families. She told them of hers. Laughter and giggles. No pretensions, just happiness of seeing families.

Cau Mo Tai

We then took another taxi ride to visit another relative of Dung. The driver took us on a street called Cach Mang Thang Tam (old Le Van Duyet). This long street busied with shops and people. Mopeds and mopeds everywhere. No street signals, or they just there non-functioning. People and thousands of people everywhere. Dense, congested, moving in all directions. No sense of order, yet safely yielded. This is the Saigon that I remembered in my dreams, just ten times more intense.



Cau Tai and family lived in a big house (Dai Gia) by Vietnamese and American standards. A handsome house on Mai Son Street erected four storied high with double wide frontage of eight meters, rather the average four, completed with carports and alleyway for servants. The house doubled as a restaurant as well, but only opened for reservations only. Cau Tai was at the race tracks, and Mo Tai welcomed us with hospitable kindness typical of a Southern Vietnamese. She graciously showed us her

house, and invited us to stay for lunch. Dung and I excused ourselves and took a short trip, while the servants prepared our lunches.

509 Tran Hung Dao, Saigon 2

The taxi driver took us to my old house on Tran Hung Dao Avenue. Dai Lo Tran Hung Dao is just as majestic as ever. It must be the largest and cleanest street in Saigon. We drove by the old movie theaters, shops and high rises. The driver did a u-turn and stopped in front of our old house. There it is and there it is no more. The old four storied stately residence is now a storefront for Electrolux. Not anymore a beauty parlor with the ever-twirling sign it used to be. The façade was completely changed as well. There were bars on the second floor and an unsightly add-on on the terrace. With the taxi parking in the middle of the street and entrance closed up with mopeds, I quickly snapped several photos and moved on.



The place called Bo Lao Dong nearby, where I used to practice my bicycle riding, was also changed. It is now some sort of official government establishment. Trung Tam Canh Sat across the street was also changed into an official government property.

Truong Thanh Linh

I asked the driver to take us down Nguyen Bieu Street pass Cho Nancy, and we took a left turn into Phan Van Tri Street. I know this way very well, as I have spent years walking down these paths going to grade school at Truong Thanh Linh. Bac Ai Hoc Vien has changed into Truong Su Pham. And even Truong Thanh Linh had changed its name as well. “Trung Hoc Ba Dinh” is the new name. I took more pictures and stepped inside the old school for several pictures as well. How tiny is it compared to my old memories. The stairways were still there and looked the same. The old classrooms still brought back so many memories. I remembered Anh Hung, Chi Vy, Anh Hung and I used to stomp this turf. This was where I grew up and first went to school. I looked up and saw the fourth floor dormitory still there, and imagined my miserable boarding school days.



I snapped up several pictures of our old homes on Phan Van Tri Street. The new owners chopped down cay “Vu Sua” that was in front of one of our houses. And I just cannot recognize the other one at all, but took a picture anyway.

Vietnamese Lunch

Back at Mo Tai’s house, they had cooked up a storm. Saute crabs, boiled shrimp, seafood soup, and vegetables. I could not tell if it was the heat, the appetite, or just the pure freshness of the foods that make the lunch so delicious. Perhaps it was the atmosphere and the hospitality as well.

Mo Tai has a daughter of about twenty something named Tu. Tu works for Vietnam Airlines. She is well educated, well traveled and sociable. They are proud of Tu, and Dung and I did enjoy her young Vietnamese's perspectives of things.

After lunch, we invited them to dinner with us at Hoa Cau; Co Sau stayed behind with them as we left for the hotel.

Dinh Doc Lap

On the way back to the hotel, I asked the taxi driver to drop us off at Dinh Doc Lap. The palace is still full of grandeur. The new regime left couples of tanks on the front lawn showcasing its victory; and for less than 50 cents, we took a tour of the building and its surrounding.



We walked through the empty halls and rooms of the palace. I camcordered the Cabinet Room and others, where once powerful men had met and determined the fates of millions of Vietnamese, ours included. I went on top of the building and took pictures of Saigon from up high. A lone helicopter still sat there memorializing the old regime. Dung used to roam these halls, but cannot remember the exact details. A thought came to my mind on how the rich and powerful had lived here in comparison of how things are now for

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everyone. Would I have ever had a chance to meet and marry Dung, if things had been different?

It took us nearly five minutes to cross the street from Dinh Doc Lap. Mopeds everywhere. Several Xich-Lo drivers stopped and offered us rides. They must have known that we are Viet Kieu. As we walked from Dinh Doc Lap to Nha Tho Duc Ba, several children followed us first trying to sell us things, then begging us for money. I missed Van, Vinh and Minh. Barefoot, dirty and nagging, these kids are being told to do so and were observed by their parents from afar. We were actually fearful of stopping and buying anything from them afraid that they could have easily swarmed us.





Nha Tho Duc Ba was much smaller than I remembered, but we stopped by and I offered a prayer for the old country and its people. We crossed the street to Buu Dien and bought Dad a simple souvenir. We then walked pass La San Ta Be looking for Truong Saint Paul, but could not find it. We then follow Dong Khoi Boulevard back to the hotel.

Cho Ben Thanh

At the hotel we changed quickly and headed out to Cho Ben Thanh. We walked pass the Continental Hotel, Hotel Caravelle, Toa Thuong Vien, Toa Ha Vien, Bung Binh, Cu Xa Tax, Rap Rex and made our way to Cho Ben Thanh stopped only for Dung to get a quick drink of fresh Nuoc Mia.



Cho Ben Thanh is nice and clean inside compared to what I had imagined, though it was crowded and hot. No ventilation and noisy. We walked through isles of fruits, cosmetics, fabrics, souvenirs, foods with no obvious apparent order. A set of Phuoc Loc Tho statues caught my eyes, and for 750 thousands Dong, I just could not refuse. Dung bought Cam Thao from a stand managed by a nice old lady with her young daughter whom did not aggressively pursued her.

Dinner at the Old House

Dung and I went out for dinner at Hoa Cau Restaurant, her former residence. We invited Ba Sau, Ong Duong, all the cousins, Cau and Mo Tai. All 22 showed up. I camcorded the house and the event for Dung. She and her relatives roamed the restaurant freely pointing out the rooms and talking about how it used to be. The old house obviously was gutted. The walls and marble flooring were removed, perhaps for selling, and all the rooms were converted to private air-conditioned dining rooms.



We ended up eating dinner in the private dining room that once was her own bedroom. It was hard for me to tell if Dung was glad or sad to see and be in her own home, that was no more. One thing I know for certain is that Dung's family must have been extremely wealthy before 1975. I did feel sad for her parents walking through what used to be their extravagant master bedroom.

The foods were bland and the service was bad; but the company was welcome and enjoyable. Dung and her relatives were genuinely happy to see each other. Cau Tai showed up and took many snide remarks from other folks, perhaps for his being the wealthy one in the family. Two million Dong (US \$130) later, everyone were full and satisfied. Lots of beer. Vietnamese folks in Vietnam can drink lots of beer.

Sunday
February 20, 2005

Long Thanh

We hurried through breakfast again at Bong Sen Hotel. The chauffeur Man had reserved earlier for us showed up 15 minutes ahead of time to take us on our outings. A nice Vietnamese man of late forty called Anh Ngoc was the driver, and the car was a new Daewoo from Korea, even though he insisted that it was a General Motors.

Anh Ngoc took us to Long Thanh, a province 50 miles southwest of Saigon, where my father used to be the Provincial Governor for 10 years. My sister Huyen, the Optometrist, was born there in 1962. The trip took about two hours, as we wended through Ben Bach Dang, Cau Thi Nghe, Xa Lo Saigon, Tu Duc, Bien Hoa, then made our ways through Long Thanh to visit Anh Tao and his family.



Just outside of Saigon, there were a number of subdivisions of expensive and modern housing. The highways were congested with mopeds, automobiles and heavy trucks. Some parts of the highways have dividers, and many have not. For those areas where there are no dividers, big trucks made u-turns among mopeds and pedestrians. A scene of utter disorganization. Once in a while all traffic slowed down indicating Cong An ahead. These Cong An (highway patrols) dressed in ill-fitted khakis waving their radar guns and

gestured speeders to stop. The guys are tiny, darkened by the sun, often standing next to their trucks, representing terrors for drivers, as Anh Ngoc told us the speeding penalty is quite severe in Vietnam.

Along the highways, where once were nothing but farmland, now stood factories and shops. People were out and about. Dust everywhere and small restaurants and cafes were ever-present. The scene reminded me of Beijing and Nanjing, China. If this is any indications of the modernization of Vietnam, I can see a much brighter future for Vietnam in years to come.

We drove through several rubber plantations on our way to Long Thanh. My parents used to own several of these plantations, and I remembered well driving through them on my way to my father's palace. Although I just could not remember where his palace used to be, I noticed that all of the provincial government buildings along the way are monumental and new. It was obvious that the government of Vietnam is taking care of its officials very well.

Anh Tao's Family



Anh Tao's family lived well. Several family members lived in a cluster of nice new houses with a large common courtyard. Ten years ago, Anh Tao visited his older brother named Tan, and given him US \$10,000 to buy a truck. Anh Tan used the truck to

transport goods from Long Thanh and Saigon, and made his family wealthy for Vietnamese standard. Today, they had multiple residents, some clustered within this compound, others are on the main highways. The single truck had now become a fleet of three ran by his sons and their families. A true Vietnamese success story.

Anh Tan now is taking care of their elder mother, raising German Shepherds, and managing the transporting operations. His wife, a southern Vietnamese lady with sweet accent and pleasant smile, fed us all sort of fruits: Mang Cau, Vu Sua, Buoï, Sau Rieng, Soai, Chom chom... And his mother, a petite lady of 91 year old, was glad to see us there. The children and grand children ran from house to house, while Kareoke music was blaring in the common. This reminded me of my visiting Bac Ba and Gi Hai in Nha Trang, when I was little. Stress free, poor and happy.

Vung Tau

Anh Tan took us out to lunch at his favorite seafood hangout. The restaurant was huge by any standard. It can easily sit 300 to 400 persons and located in the middle of a mango farm. The seafood was exceptionally fresh, but the heat was intense. Dung and I ate quickly and drank lots of liquids.



Anh Ngoc took us down to Vung Tau afterward. The drive was pleasant as the highway was new and well paved. As we entered Ba Ria, the scenery along the highway became

even more enjoyable. Anh Ngoc informed us that Vung Tau is now a major tourist attraction and a resort area for wealthy visitors and folks from Saigon. Local government spent money lavishly to improve and upkeep the environment in and around Vung Tau.

When I was a kid, Vung Tau seemed big and overwhelming. The shops and streets seemed wide and attractive, the beach seemed endless and beautiful; however now, Vung Tau seemed so incredibly inadequate, and not even worthy to be compared to Cancun or Hawaii.

Anh Ngoc took us to Bai Sau, Bai Truoc, va nui Vung Tau; Dung and I were disappointed. The beaches were crowded, the hotels and resorts were mediocre, and the views were unimpressive. Perhaps my memories and expectations were too much and too high, but here we still got a long way to go.



We stopped by Thu Duc briefly for me to take pictures of An Phong Hoc Vien my old seminary school. But the old school had turned into a hospital and was totally unrecognizable. The long street leading to the old school where I used to walk every week now was occupied by shops and houses on both sides. It was sad that so many things had changed, and I felt completely lost.

On the way back to the hotel, Anh Ngoc drove by La San Ta Be, and I took some pictures to show Dung's brothers, who used to attend there. As for Saint Paul Catholic School, Anh Ngoc told us that they had demolished the school to make roads through it.



Song Nge Restaurant

That night Dung and I went to Song Nge restaurant, an upscale restaurant highly recommended by the folks at the hotel. Although it was a nice and clean restaurant frequented by the rich in Saigon and lots of Japanese tourists, take my advice and don't go there. The foods are expensive, yet not so worth it, for Vietnamese standard.

Monday
February 21, 2005

To Nha Trang

Dung and I took an early flight to Nha Trang on Sunday. Tan Son Nhat's domestic terminals are clean and modern. No hassle traveling inside Vietnam. We ate Pho at the Food Court at the airport, and joined many foreigners on a flight on a 737 to Cam Ranh Airport. The former American airbase in Cam Ranh is now the airport for Nha Trang. The old Nha Trang Airport is now reserved for small local domestic propeller flights.



On the flight, we sat next to a nice gentleman named Nguyen Van Tam. Anh Tam and his associates are building a 320-room 20 storied beach front hotel in Nha Trang. When finished, it would be the tallest building in Nha Trang. He has a son attending the University of Houston majoring in Hotel Management. Anh Tam offered us a ride to Nha Trang from the airport.

The highway between Cam Ranh and Nha Trang is newly built. It hugged the mountain on one side and yielded incredibly beautiful views of Cam Ranh Bay on the other. The views just took our breath away: Blue emerald water shone against the crystal white sand on the endless beaches. True natural beauty unspoiled by hotels and resorts.

Along the way, Anh Tam showed us the new Tu Vien Sao Bien; and we actually stopped by and took pictures for Anh Hung, since he once was a student at Sao Bien. As told by Anh Tam, the old Sao Bien was confiscated by the new regime and moved to the new location. Seminaries do not need to be by the beach they said.

Nha Trang Lodge

The folks at Bong Sen Hotel in Saigon recommended Nha Trang Lodge, and it was quite nice. Nha Trang Lodge resided on Tran Phu Street facing the beach. We got there early enough to take some gorgeous pictures of Nha Trang beaches from our balcony.



Dung and I set out immediately to search for our old houses at 5 Phan Nam Street. We both were quickly disappointed as the young hotel clerks and folks around there do not remember the name Phan Nam any more. It had been renamed 30 years ago by the new regime. We did walk down that direction following my vague memories. Found none.

Determined not to waste any time, Dung signed us up for a boat trip to the islands of Nha Trang.

Islands Tour

For US \$7, we were jammed into a mini-bus with ten “Tay Ba Lo”, a term that local folks called backpacking foreigners, and taken to a small fishing port. A small modified fishing boat took us and about 30 other tourists, many are foreigners, to four different islands in the Bay of Nha Trang.

Before reaching the first island, Dung had already made friends with several retired couples from French. She and they started to converse in French. Soon the younger American group joined in, then Dung started to speak English to the American, French to the French, and Vietnamese to the rest and me. Everyone was amazed of her language ability, while she was just having a great time talking to people. I was proud of Dung and happy for her seeing her in her elements.



We visited Dao Mun (black rock island) and the captain let people go snorkeling. The water was clear blue, but there wasn't much fish to see. I guess the fishing had decimated the fish population round these islands. Since we were not prepared, we did not go snorkeling; instead I sat and listened to Dung speaking French, English and Vietnamese; which was quite enjoyable.

We stopped at another island nearby for lunch, as the US \$7 price tag included lunch. After lunch the captain and his crew put on a live band performance, and invited everyone to join in. It was non-sophisticated, cheap and fun. We then proceeded to Dao Mieu, where we played volleyball while others explored the island. We made the last

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stop at Lang Chai (fishing village), where we selected from the retainers huge lobsters and giant squids for dinner. Dung and I bought one large lobster (one kilogram) and a large fan squid. We carried our food onto a float where two little kids pulled the rope transporting us from the boat onto the restaurant on shore.

The lobster and squid were prepared with local spices and served with special sauces. The meal was so big that we invited the captain and one of his men to eat with us, and we could not finish them all. On the way back to the boat, Dung gave the kids pulling the rope some money and made their day.

Later in the day, we ate dinner at Hai Vi Restaurant next to the hotel. It was good. Nha Trang is beautiful and peaceful at night. The moon shone upon the waves reflecting millions point of lights; the islands appeared softly from a far in the moonlight making the scenery surreal and romantic.

I love being with Dung on days and nights like these. This might be what living is all about.



Tuesday
February 22, 2005

Nha Trang, Day Two

Originally we both planned to visit Nha Trang then go to Binh Cang to visit Co Huong and give her some money to help the orphanages; but after seeing the condition of Dung's cousins in Saigon, we decided to give the money to them instead. We decided to spend our second day in Nha Trang exploring the town.

Nha Trang is small. From Cam Ranh to Hon Chong there was not that much to see. Dung and I walked to Cho Nha Trang at the foot of the hills, and checked it out. We bought some Mang Cuc and Chom Chom. The market is much smaller than that of Cho Ben Thanh and has substantially less to offer. On the way back to the hotel, we asked the locals about Duong Phan Nam, and found out that it had been changed to Pasteur Boulevard and Tran Hung Dao Boulevard. Following Yersin Street to Pasteur, I found 5 Pasteur, supposedly our old addresses. The villas were no longer there, as they had flattened it to build new offices for the government people. I took pictures of the areas anyway; perhaps Mom and Dad can make something out of these photos.



At lunch, we picked the best authentic restaurant and ate nem nuong, a dish that made Nha Trang famous. It was good. We walked the beaches trying to avoid as many

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beggars and vendors as we can, and then in the evening we ate jumbo shrimps at Pho Bien (beach shops). It was also good.

In Nha Trang, the local folks get up very early in the morning and perform Tai Chi in the parks, while others play badminton and walking along the boulevards; but as the sun goes up, people go to work and disappear into their offices and homes.



Wednesday
February 23, 2005

Back in Saigon

Anh Tam came by and took us to Cam Ranh Airport in the morning, and we flew back to Saigon. Anh Tam had his chauffeur waited at the TSN Airport and took us back to Bong Sen Hotel. He gave me one of his contacts, who has a software company in Dalat, and asked me to make introductions when I visit Dalat. Anh Tam was a nice guy. Very wealthy, yet humble.

Our room at Bong Sen was not ready by the time we got there, so Dung and I took the taxi to the best Pho place in Saigon. It is called Pho Hoa on Pasteur Street. The place was packed when we got there. The lunch crowd of Vietnamese and foreigners sat side by side enjoying the authentic dishes of Pho. While it was not the pristine place that Dung would like to dine, it was satisfying enough for me. The food was good; the service was second-rate; and the price was right. Authentically Vietnamese.

Once back to the hotel, we changed and headed out to Cho Ben Thanh again. This time Dung was determined to find some Chuoi Kho to bring home; and we found it at the earlier place where Dung bought Cam Thao. She loaded the bags with Chuoi Kho and Banh Phong Tom. About 15 Kg.



Bo Bay Mon



Ba Sau, Cau Mo Tai picked us up for dinner that night. We all loaded onto a taxi and went to eat Bo Bay Mon (seven dishes of beef). It was awesome. We ordered two portions (a portion feeds two persons) and some Do Chay for Ba Sau. Cau Tai talked, so I ate and listened. Dung really liked the Banh Trang Nuoc Dua that goes with one of the dishes. We just could not find it anywhere else on this trip.

It turned out that Cau Tai became wealthy due to all the properties left behind when his brothers and sisters escaped Vietnam in the earlier years. They all deeded to him their properties all around his current residence, and he in time sold many of these properties and rebuilt his own.

He also related to us the hardships of the earlier years after the new regime took over. In turn, Dung told them stories about the hardships her parents had gone through to adjust to the new life in the US. My wife the ever diplomat.

Thursday
February 24, 2005

Dalat

Anh Tao came by the hotel early in the morning to meet with me and Linh Tang, President of Mobinex. We met and discuss the outsourcing opportunities, and Linh demonstrated his avatar chat software. During the meeting, I got a call from Nguyen, one of my earlier childhood seminarian friends, and we set up a luncheon for Saturday.

I was looking forward to meeting my old friends in Vietnam. Even though 30 years had gone by, I would still recognize them due to our Gabriels website, which I hosted. The call from Nguyen was greatly appreciated, and I was anxious to meet my old friends again.

After the meeting, Anh Ngoc came by to take Anh Tao and us to Dalat as planned. We took the same highway through Bien Hoa to go to Dalat, and stopped at a restaurant along the highway for a lunch of Com Tam. It was good, and I ate two full plates. Afterward we drove up to Bao Loc then Dalat.



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The highways were full of people, shops and houses long its sides. Children walked along the highway, as cars, trucks and mopeds zoomed by. Cong An positioned themselves all along the highways, but people still managed to speed.



It took almost seven hours to travel by car from Saigon to Dalat, a distance of approximately 150 miles. I am certain that it was not because of the road, since the road was fine; but it was because of not enough roads. The highways between Saigon and Dalat sometimes bottlenecked into two lanes streets, where passing was nearly impossible. The roads also wended through town where crowded vendors competing for every inch. And then there was Cong An, who forced all to slow down to less than 30 miles per hour.



We made it to Dalat late in the evening. Dung and I thought it would be cold and brought our leather jackets. It was quite pleasant, and jackets were not needed. We met Man at the hotel and checked into the same hotel.

Lien

Our friend Man is traveling with a woman named Lien. Ever since the death of Phuong, Man's wife, his friends and families had been introducing him to many Vietnamese ladies. I guess Lien was one of these ladies that Man had chosen to spend time with.

Dung thought it was too early for Man to start dating, but I told her to let Man live his life in his own ways. Lien seemed polite and timid. She did not talk much, but Man seemed to take a liking to her. He seemed happy to have a companion.

Friends of Anh Tao

We all went out to dinner that night. Along the way, we passed a street where one of Anh Tao's best friends used to live. Anh Tao stopped by and surprisingly found his old friend there, and we all went to the nearest restaurant. Anh Tao's friend named Khe also brought his sister with him, so now there were eight of us. At the dinner table one of Anh Tao's friends showed up as well. It was a mini reunion for Anh Tao.

The foods were lousy, but everyone enjoyed the company, especially Anh Tao. I told Anh Khe that I was looking for So 4 Duong Thu Khoa Huan, and they all knew exactly where it was.

4 Thu Khoa Huan, Dalat



After dinner, they took me to the old home once owned by my parents. As we climbed the gentle hill, I immediately recognized the old home. The villa at 4 Thu Khoa Huan is now a radio and TV station for the City of Dalat. It used to be one of our vacation homes, and it was my Mom's personal favorite. It was late in the evening, so we went on back to the hotel leaving Anh Tao and his long lost friends at a café along the way.

Hotel Duyen Huong in Dalat is new, but not quite accommodating for Dung. It was loud and uncomfortable. I worked the phones with the deal with SimDesk before going to bed, only to find Dung struggle to fall asleep as well.

Friday
February 25, 2005

Dalat

In the morning, we ate Banh Cuon from a little place across from the hotel, than Anh Tao and I went back to take picture of the old villa. At first we took some pictures from the front side of the house, but it was mostly blocked by an unsightly new addition, so we went around the backside. Once there, I ran into the TV anchor woman for the station, and asked her permission to record the surroundings without intruding to the operations inside the station. She was surprisingly pleasant, after I explained to her that I am a Viet Kieu whose parents used to own this property.

I recorded the outside of the villa and its surrounding. My Mom would love to see this tape. My memories of Dalat were not so good. I remembered that I had never enjoyed the drive up to Dalat. The winding roads along the mountains always gave me motion sickness when I was a kid; and then the colder weather always made me sick. I did love the villa and the bread from the pastry shop at the foot of the hill, but not much else. My sister Ti and Anh Hung probably knew this place better than the rest of the kids, since they lived here longer than any of us.



While taping the villa, I received a call from Anh Chi, the friend of Anh Tam whom I met in Nha Trang. Anh Chi invited Anh Tao and me to visit his software operation in Dalat. Anh Tao and I went back to the hotel, and Anh Ngoc took us to VidalTek, Anh Chi's company. Anh Ngoc dropped us there and took Dung to Cho Dalat. He later came back to take us on a tour of Dalat.

Tour of Dalat

Dalat is a small tourist town of approximately quarter of a million people. The bakery shop at the foothill had closed, since the family there left the country. Ho Xuan Huong seemed much smaller than I remembered, and San Cuu is all fenced up with houses sprung up all around.

Anh Ngoc took us to Vuon Hoa Dalat. It was not much of a showcase garden, Dung was understandably unimpressed; and Anh Tao kept making fun of wasting his US \$1.50 entrance fees.

Afterward we went to eat ice cream at Ho Xuan Huong, then visited Dai Hoc Dalat (University of Dalat), where Anh Tao attended college. Anh Tao was very happy to be back in his old school. The guard at the gate let the car through and we drove inside the old college. Anh Tao took pictures of his old schools. Dung and I had not seen Anh Tao this happy in quite a while.



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We then went back to the hotel to meet Anh Tao's friends and went out to eat lunch together. While at the hotel, Ninh, one of my old friends called and wanted to meet. We all met up at the HP Restaurant, an upscale restaurant in Dalat. Ninh brought his wife, and Anh Tao met up with five of his old buddies. We all had a blast, and the foods were even better there.

My friend Ninh owned and operated a eight-ton truck, which he used to transport vegetables from Dalat to South Vietnam, and then loaded the truck with rice from the south and brought them back to Dalat. He said the work is hard, due to the temperature differences in which he operates. The truck is non-refrigerated, that means that Ninh and his wife must loaded up early in the morning in Dalat and then rush the vegetable to the south, before the heat can ruin the goods. His wife seemed nice and smart, and they seemed happy together. She sounded religious and talked to Dung at length about her older son, who had a rare skin condition that was cured by drinking the water from Fatima and praying. Ninh seemed tired from the morning run, but appeared happy.



We left Dalat at 3:30PM and made it back to Long Thanh about 8:30PM just in time for me to have a conference call with our lawyers and Ross Crawford about the Garage Round A matters. Finally we got back to Bong Sen Hotel in Saigon around 10:30PM.

Saturday
February 26, 2005

Last Day in Saigon

My friend Lan came by to pick us up at the hotel on Saturday's morning. He seemed well to do and had a company car and a driver. He took us to Vuon Cau Restaurant near Ben Bach Dang, where we met up with Nguyen, Phuoc, Phu Son, Hai and Linh.



It was nice to meet up with these long lost friends, but I can hardly recognize their faces. The hardship over the years made them much older for their ages. Lan probably the most successful guy of the bunch seemed happy and aggressive; while others seemed timid and uptight. Nguyen became a philosopher and argumentative. His hair is thinning, so he let it grow long to compensate. He talked quietly and slowly, and loved to related things back to the "early days". Phuoc is working in some kind of art shops making drawings and using PhotoShop. He did not talk much, though he seemed genuinely content. Phu Son worked in some sort of textile shop making clothing or clothing components. He rarely talked at all, but drank quite a bit. Linh seemed to be the poorest of the group. He work Xe Om to make a living, and that does not make money hardly at all. Hai came late, and seemed to be the wild card of the group. I don't recall what he said he is doing, but vaguely remembered that he is overly concerned about his children.

Overall the whole group seemed typical of the entire generation. Some are successful, while others still struggle. All the while, it seemed that this religiously rooted group somewhat out of place in a world of fast wheeling and dealing of Vietnam.

After the luncheon, Dung told me that she is concerned about Lan and his ability to make it in Vietnam. I told her that I have been sending a little bit of money to him, when once in a while he sent a desperate email requesting help. I think she felt better knowing I am trying to help.

Ba Co Sau

We checked out of the hotel and went to see Ba Co Sau. Ba Sau told us to drop our luggage at nha Cau Tai and that she would be joining us soon. We went to nha Cau Tai and spent some time with Mo Tai there.



It turned out that Ba Sau could not join us, because she could not get anyone to watch her belongings that she might go with us. She came late as Mo Tai was taking Dung onto her moped heading out to the market. As Dung got on the small motorcycle with Mo Tai, I was scared for her knowing the ways they drive in Vietnam.

I had some time talking to Ba Sau. This old woman is sharp. Her mind is clear and she is very articulate. I can almost detect a manipulative manner required to live in Vietnam

through this woman. She had done herself right to survive such treacherous conditions of living in such harsh environment. All the while maintaining her sanity and wit.

Dung's Cousins

I was more than pleased when Dung got back from the market. We took a taxi with Ba Sau to go back to the alleyway so that Dung can give her cousins some money.

In the taxi, Dung gave Ba Sau US \$300. That is a lot of money in Vietnam and probably can sustain her for at least half of a year. I looked the other way, as not to embarrass the old woman, but assumed that she would be happy with Dung's help.

After a short visit, Dung gave each of them (seven and Ong Duong) US \$50, which easily equates to about a month worth of salary for these folks. They were very happy.



Originally Dung and I planned to give some money to Co Huong and the orphanages, but after meeting and seeing how these cousins of Dung lived, we decided that blood is much thicker than water, and helped them instead.

Saturday's Night Saigon

Cau Tai invited us to dinner at their home prior to going to the airport, so we did. The meal was excellent. Fresh seafood, plenty of dishes served continuously by the maids.



They have a nice family there. His daughter named Tu works for Vietnam Airlines. Tu is well educated and speaks several languages. The classes in Vietnam are still fairly apparent. Cau Tai and his family enjoy a houseful of servants, good foods and companies; while Dung's cousins still lived in the alleyway cramping together watching an old color TV.

We left for the airport around 10PM. Lots of people at the airport, but mostly the farewell folks. Once inside, the lobby is fairly empty of travelers. The process of going through immigration was a breeze. No one cared that Dung had bought US \$150 worth of "mam" in our luggage.

On the plane to Japan, Dung asked me what I thought about Vietnam. I had mixed feelings. What I thought was home, I was glad to depart; so I decided to write this paper instead. Perhaps I can write about my feelings about Vietnam, when I am ready, if ever.

Vui