Crunchy Pig Snouts

July 18, 2007 By Regan Hofmann

We awoke this morning (Tuesday) for our second day of the Vietnam leg of the trip to the sounds of incessant honking. Hanoi, like New York City, seems to never sleep, and neither do we. Thankfully, today we had a bit of a breather on our busy journey. After a brief press conference this morning at the American consulate with the press and cultural attaché Angela Aggeler and local Hanoi reporters we were on our way for a three hour tour through seemingly endless (and beautiful) rice paddies peppered with water buffalo and people in knee-high rubber boots (as protection against the leeches) tending to their precious chartreuse-green crops.

As we rolled along the new highway that leads from Hanoi to the coast, we discussed the local cuisine with Ngo Dinh Quynh, the cultural affairs specialist whose job it is to see we get everywhere safely. He asked if I had any dietary restrictions (as we were headed out to rural Vietnam for the day). I said no, though I did try to avoid intestines and pig snouts (two of the more interesting things I saw for sale along the streets of Hanoi?s French Quarter the day before). Now, I know he?s working for the embassy and is used to Americans many of whom don?t appreciate the wonders of boiled innards and noses, but Quynh?s diplomatic skills are unparalleled. Without insulting me in the slightest, he corrected my view that intestines and snouts are to be avoided, informing me that, to the contrary, they are delicacies to be savored. Quynh claims that the texture of the pig?s nose is what makes it so special. It is crunchy. He went on to tell us that pig?s ears and dog meat stuffed with dog intestines (first boiled, then grilled) is another great culinary wonder in Vietnam. Special spices are used when cooking dog and most families raise several dogs, keeping the wisest as a pet and guardian and either butchering or selling the others when they are grown. There is a piece of local folklore that (loosely translated) says that after a dog was butchered, he complained to the King of Hell about how he was butchered and the king said, ?Stop! Your story is making my mouth water. If you continue I may have to eat you!? And, there is a saying: It is worth living on the earth if you have dog intestines to eat. I have learned that fresh food in this part of the world means that when you are hungry, you buy your meal alive and it arrives on your plate in short order dressed up with herbs and sauces. I have to admit, because the notion of eating dog is so foreign to me, it was hard to imagine?yet this is one reason why we travel the world: to realize that what is considered normal at home is only normal because it is familiar. Many of the things we Americans do are bizarre to those in other countries. As he talked, I wolfed down packets of peanuts cooked in coconut milk and crisps flavored with prawns I?d gotten from a roadside stand, washing them down with Diet Coke. No one drinks Diet Coke here and you usually have to go to a hotel to find it. And, apparently, only the children eat little bags of salty snacks and it is strange to see a grown woman stuffing her face with crisps. But I was starving, having eaten mostly fruit, rice and fish for more than a week. Sometimes, especially at certain times, a girl just have to have some carbohydrates and salt?maybe even a pig snout here and there.

We were headed to Ha Long bay, otherwise known as the Bay of the Descending Dragon. Quynh pointed out that before the country became more open to foreign investment five years ago, the same journey would have taken 5 hours instead of 3. And 10 years ago, it would likely have taken 8 hours. The Japanese (and other foreign investors) are pumping a lot of resources into Vietnam. Quynh joked that the Japanese? desire to build roads and bridges might have something to do with their desire to sell more cars to the Vietnamese people. Where once there were barges that crossed back and forth shuttling people and supplies across the Red River (Hanoi?s largest; it is a milky raspberry color) now there are modern suspension bridges. Vietnam?s government is Communist but they have realized that offering economic growth and development to the nation is key to their maintaining stability. Interestingly, for a long time, everyone owned small plots of rice paddies and had to give their crops to a communal, government-run central supply post?they would get back for their family a small subset of what they had grown. Today, the Vietnamese people pay taxes and keep the crops they tend and harvest to themselves. Though they were reluctant at first to adopt a more self-sustaining model of farming, the Vietnamese seem to be

evolving to accept a new sense of self-reliance. The influx of foreign cash also has factories booming and the construction business is on fire?as is the business of making building supplies for all the new construction. Boats so laden with coal (to power the electrical plants that power the factories) and sand (to make concrete) can barely stay afloat as they chug downstream to reach their destinations. Bricks are made by the thousands in row upon row of long chimney-topped buildings made from?what else??bricks.

As we cruised along the new highway, water buffalo and cows lazed about in the mud and sun, sleepily chewing grass while farmers avoided the midday heat. We were headed, eventually to Hai Phong City, Vitenam?s third largest city?a giant port where the HIV/AIDS infection rate is very high?to meet with a support group of people living with HIV and those that support them. In Vietnam, there are an estimated 120,000 people living with HIV/AIDS. The U.S. has spent millions of dollars since 1999 helping Vietnam fight AIDS. In fact, Vietnam is a recipient of PEPFAR (President?s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) funds; there is the belief that the funds and man and woman power will be well-spent here as they have the potential to make a great impact in preventing AIDS from spreading. The Health Minister and Prime Minister are very supportive of fighting the disease and I have been told that Michael Marine, the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam who is holding a reception for us tomorrow night, is very aware of HIV/AIDS and is a wonderful advocate for those living with the disease. My work in Vietnam will be a bit different I think than in Taiwan. Here, I will meet with more grassroots groups and people living with the disease. In addition to working with the support group I will work with the UNAIDS communication technical working group Wednesday afternoon and Thursday we?ll meet with various advocacy groups back in Hanoi.

I typically feel tireless when doing this work. Even though we have done much traveling and it can be stressful and exhausting to adjust constantly to new places, new people, new food and new languages, even though it?s hard to relax when you?re always ?on??concentrating and listening, learning and sharing what you know?most of the time I seem fueled by some invisible force. I love what I do and I love that all over the world there seems to be tremendous energy and determination to conquer AIDS. I have to say, I am far more encouraged than I thought I would be on this trip. The desire and resources to prevent infection are available and people in this part of the world do not have AIDS fatigue and they seem very eager (if sometimes uncomfortable at first) to discuss how to save their own lives and the lives of others.

Still, it is necessary to refuel and it was heavenly to relax in the air-conditioned van for three hours listening to the history of Vietnam and to see the countryside unfold. Quyhn is a very impressive man. He was raised on a farm. He said it was ?above his imagination? as a child that he would have a different living than his father; he grew up tending water buffalo (he said they are very docile and you can ride them) and finding food in the forests. They were so poor he ate the root of banana trees as well as the fruit. But he did well in school, and excelled at the university where he studied to become a teacher. As a student, he saw that Vietnam was opening up and he wanted to work for an American company. When a job opening became available at the U.S. embassy, he applied and got the job. He seems so excited that the U.S. and Vietnam are exploring partnerships and friendships and with his excellent English, encyclopedic knowledge, optimism and astute

insight, he embodies a new generation of Vietnamese people who will surely change this country considerably. I only hope that the development doesn?t spoil the natural beauty that is nothing short of breathtaking. Even today, when Quyhn sleeps deeply and peacefully, he dreams of the rustic beauty of days in his youth spent with the cows, fishing for his lunch.

We stopped for lunch at a roadside restaurant where the food was incredible (Sean had an entire chicken?feet and all) and shopped in a place full of handmade crafts and household goods. It was a big cavernous space filled with beautiful women in long red dresses who followed me around, turning on lights and fans as I inspected a particular section of goods. After rolling through miles of roadside fruit vendors selling pineapples and all sorts of cool tropical fruit I have never seen before, we reached the bay.

Ha Long is an expanse of light blue-green water with hundreds of dramatic rock formations jutting through the surface; erosion has eaten away the base of the rocks so they appear to be floating on the water. The harbor is filled with colorful wooden boats; the whole scene is very Pirates of the Caribbean. We rented a boat for four hours having no idea we?d have a private captain, endless cold beer and stops at a magical cave full of stalactites and stalagmites lit with glowing neon and an afternoon stop at a floating fish market where Sean picked out our lunch.

As we ate grilled shrimp pulled from the sea that day, cruising slowly through a landscape that looked straight out of a pirate movie, I felt a little guilty. But, reflecting on the last week?s work, and realizing we hadn?t had a day off in more than 10, I allowed myself to lay back in my wooden chair on the deck of the ship and day dreamed of black pearls (I later bought some of those famously harvested in Ha Long Bay) and fresh boiled pig snouts.

Below are some pictures from our journey around Ha Long Bay.



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