



Despite years of war
and grinding poverty,
the spirit of the
Vietnamese people
remains undefeated –
just as their country
has remained
undefeated for
over a 1,000 years.

What can you say about Vietnam that has not already been said? There have been so many stories of love, war and tragedy. Daily life is still a struggle for most, but no one complains much. Everyone is willing to give a stranger a smile. They seem to have so little, yet they don't seem to want for happiness in the way so many others, who have so much more, do. Vietnamese people are some of the most dedicated to family that I have ever met. They work endlessly to aid in the survival of their own, and do their best to serve their young. I guess when you've been stripped of so many things and left with only the basics, you learn to cherish what's really important.

VIETNAM

A TESTAMENT TO SPIRIT

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN FRANCIS MARTIN



Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as it is formally known, is the economic capital of Vietnam. It's a bustling, hectic place to visit, let alone to live in. The official population is about 5 million, though the actual population is closer to 7.5 million. To live in any part of Vietnam, you must have an identification card, and the only way to get the card is to have a job or property in a particular city or place. Job seekers are in the city without permission, so no record of them exists.

Still, Saigon is the destination for people searching for a better life than in the countryside, where crops of rice and baskets of fish barely bring in enough income to feed themselves, let alone provide for their families.





The streets of Saigon are crowded with every kind of wheeled and motorized contraption you can imagine. Mopeds zoom around you in what seems to be madness. There's a constant sound of horns and putt of motors. To add to the chaos, there are no traffic lights and controlled intersections are rare. You have to use caution crossing the road. As a pedestrian, you have no right of way or special consideration, you're just in the way!

Somehow, though, the traffic moves. Like water running in a river full of rocks, people flow in and around the city with little effort. No shouting or dirty looks, no hand waving or finger flying. Like much of the country, things seem to be in disarray but they also seem to work.

As you watch the young people cruising around Saigon on their mopeds, you can't help but wonder where they're going. A night on the town, to a show, to a restaurant with their girlfriends and boyfriends? In fact, they're mostly just enjoying the freedom. Young people have little spending money and few places to go for entertainment or privacy. The moped gives them the kind of space and freedom living with their families in a crowded city does not.

You watch them on their mopeds, the girl on the back, hair flowing in the wind and arms tight around her lover. In the parks, they sit on their mopeds and hold hands or kiss shyly, alone with each other amidst the busy streets. It seems the simplest love. In a country that has little to offer in monetary ways, you see what is of value, even among the young who in most other parts of the world have become the 'me' generation.

The young women do their best to protect their skin from being tortured by the hot sun and pollution. Their faces covered with scarves and arms in long gloves, they look like bandits riding through the streets. But to a Vietnamese woman, light coloured skin is a symbol of beauty and much more desirable than skin darkened by hours of working in the fields or rice paddies.





In Vietnam, don't expect to find rows of tourist hotels lining the beaches and English-speaking locals catering to your needs. At least not yet, thank god. Tourism is still relatively undeveloped, though sure to emerge in the next decade – investment from Japan, Taiwan, America and Europe will see to that. Along the coastlines, you can see the early signs: road construction and property development.

Some of the areas targeted for tourism development, however, are also important fishing and agricultural areas. For local people, tourism development is creating excitement and hope for a better future. It may be a huge boost for local economies, but it could also be dangerous. Other developing countries have counted on tourism for economic growth and been let down. Vietnamese people could suffer a similar fate. People who now rely on fishing or other traditional means of support may lose their beaches to big hotels. Once the land is purchased, the construction complete and the money spent, the lives of local people may be forever changed.

Hopefully, tourism developers will realize that a big part of Vietnam's appeal is the people and their simple lifestyle. Visiting the villages is one of the most interesting experiences. The people are friendly, warm, inviting and just as curious to meet you as you are to meet them. Having a bowl of soup with the locals at a makeshift vegetable and fruit stand by the roadside is interesting as well as delicious.





Vietnam is a relatively small country, but the changes from one region or province to the next can be quite dramatic. It stretches nearly 3,500 kilometres north to south, from the Mekong Delta and its flooded rice paddies and river systems, to the central highlands, to the cooler regions near Hanoi. Lifestyles and cultures vary according to the landscape and environmental conditions. There are more than 53 ethnic minorities in Vietnam, with populations ranging from a few hundred to tens of thousands.

Until you visit Vietnam, though, you can't really comprehend just how foreign this landscape must have seemed to American troops being dropped in to the jungles and rivers. You wonder what it must have been like for the soldiers. You can't escape that thought, as there are constant reminders of the war. The sites are easy to get to and many have hardly changed. Vietnam was left to its own devices after the war, and recovery from the tragedies and horrors of that terrible time has been slow.



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Travelling along the rivers of the Mekong Delta is an experience in itself. The smells and sounds are unique. You feel removed from western life as you travel in small canoe-like riverboats, which putt along at a quick pace among other boats of all sizes and shapes. The water is muddy and as busy as a freeway.

People work and live on these rivers. They trade their goods in open water markets from boat to boat. They travel for miles, congregating to exchange their daily catch and the day's pick of vegetables, fruits and meats. Life for the river people has not changed much. They have no knowledge of the outside world and don't care to. They seem content, though poor, and do not seek change. Their existence is simple.

For all this, the river people welcome strangers. They offer you fruits to taste, asking for nothing in return. They have no apprehension of you visiting their daily life. It is like a scene from another time, one that leaves you wondering how they survive on such meagre means, yet can laugh and smile at the foreigner among them. Their life is hard, but it's not defeating them.



Vietnam faces stiff challenges ahead. It has little infrastructure or social safety net, and change is slow in coming. Foreign investment is pouring in, taking advantage of cheap labour, low taxes, inexpensive property and lax environmental controls, but some say this is just taking advantage of poor people. Unfortunately, in a country where a professional such as a doctor or lawyer earns less than a minimum wage earner in North America, poverty will continue to be a fact until the country can build a stable economy through exports and tourism.

Change will come to Vietnam, as I believe the people are resilient and determined to make change happen. The efforts seem small, but they are being made. As the wounds of war heal, the culture and pride of the Vietnamese people will flourish again. For those with an open mind and a willingness to learn, Vietnam has a lot to offer. You will never understand it completely – just take it as it is. Once you've been there, it will stay in your mind forever. ☘