

Reunification Railway

A lurch and clatter in the easy lickety-clack lullaby of the train momentarily interrupted my sleep. Drowsy eyes adjusted sluggishly to the sootiness of night and took in a sketchy blur of houses and shops. Slowing to a sedate lumber the train crawled towards the confines of a station whose name I couldn't catch, emerging again without stopping amid the clamour of bells and the warning flash of lights. Then again the express picked up its beguiling melody and I dozed off, cocooned from the outside world, as it careered on through the night.

First light on Vietnam's Reunification Railway revealed heart-stoppingly beautiful scenery. Filaments of sunlight cast a radiant flush over brilliant green paddy fields extravagantly framed at their furthest boundaries by chains of mountains, the summits of which were ringed by tutus of cloud. Across the carriage the opposite window was filled full frame with a vast calm sea speckled with fishing boats.

Almost eleven hours earlier we had chugged out of Hanoi on the first leg of our journey southwards to Saigon. A fracas with the taxi driver over the pre-agreed fare to the station leapt to the fore as my mind went into rewind, not that this final memory should have over-ridden the infinitely pleasanter ones of our hospitable guest house keeper who had hugged us when we left or the excellent cups of coffee drunk at a cafe on the shores of the tranquil Hoan Kiem lake, or the international sculpture symposium we had stumbled across in the botanical gardens or the slightly incongruous early morning fragrance of freshly baked baguettes which serves as a daily reminder that from 1902 until 1953 Hanoi was the capital of French Indochina.

No French influences crept into the breakfast served to us on the Reunification Railway as part of our ticket price however. A pallid dumpling-like creation squatted unappealingly on a plastic tray; cautious investigation exposed a heavily spiced meat filling and a miniature hard-boiled egg about the size of a quail's. My partner Rob and I were not the only ones to look askance at the standard issue breakfast, it was met with equal distaste by the two Vietnamese travellers we shared the compartment with. But the unpalatable repast was mitigated by the elderly lady who had slept in the bunk below mine generously distributing sweet rice and fruit amongst us. In return, to her delight, we got to grips with the Vietnamese word for thank you.

Stepping onto the platform in Hue an intensely sticky fetid heat wrapped itself around us in a suffocating embrace. The pace of life too had hotted up, with touts haranguing us on all fronts, eager to cart us off to the hotel of their choice. We looked back at the train just in time to catch sight of our breakfast benefactor waving vigorously.

Hue is the ancient imperial capital where the emperors of the Nguyen dynasty lived in unashamed splendour. Built on the banks of the evocatively named Perfume river, Hue was also the scene of the Vietnam War's most bitter battle, the 1968 Tet offensive. Reclaiming the city from the Vietcong inflicted grievous damage on many

of its opulently decorated palaces. Both the Imperial Enclosure and the Forbidden Purple City now lie in picturesque tatters amid tangles of long grass. But it was the population of Hue who bore the brunt of the fighting. During the Tet Offensive 10,000 people died, most of them civilians.

Following the war one of the first tasks undertaken by the new government was the restoration of the country's ravaged rail system. The Reunification Railway stood as a potent symbol of Vietnamese unity, but repairing it required superhuman effort. Along the 1726 km of track between Hanoi and Saigon, a staggering 1334 bridges, 27 tunnels and 158 stations had to be rebuilt from scratch.

To its credit it now runs with admirable efficiency. Its travelling options follow a strictly hierarchical order with six classes of varying degrees of comfort divided into: half-seat, hard-seat, soft-seat, hard-berth, soft-berth and super-berth. For the overnight journeys we opted for soft-berth where the compartment is shared by only four people and has the luxury of a door and fan. As the next leg of the journey from Hue to Danang was relatively brief we booked a bum-numbing stint in hard-seat.

Surprisingly few Westerners travel by train, perhaps because the government sees fit to charge foreigners 400% more than Vietnamese travellers for the privilege of travelling by rail, or perhaps because visitors to Vietnam prefer to remain herded together on the air-conditioned buses laid on specifically for them. Which is also where the government would rather keep them. Tourism in Vietnam is far from being a haphazard business.

Even travellers on the adventure end of the spectrum rarely venture far without looking at their Lonely Planet guides for confirmation. And of course, we were guilty of that too.

The dearth of foreigners on the train meant that our presence had a certain novelty factor. Mouths concealed behind wizened hands, the two old women in the seat behind us giggled furiously while craning their necks to get a better look at our pale skin and unfeasibly large noses.

The ticket collector joined us for different reasons. He spoke excellent English and told us that he had worked with the US army during the war, a period he clearly regarded with affection. After South Vietnam was defeated by the communist north, he spent eighteen months in a 'reeducation camp'. He rejoined us at various intervals throughout the journey, in the latter stages shamefacedly trying to cover up the fact that he had drunk too much rice wine.

For Tien, a delicate childlike student on her way to visit her family in Danang, it was our ability to communicate in a fractured version of the French language which attracted her. As a French undergraduate she welcomed any opportunity to practice conversation, although her textbook fluency put our hamfisted efforts to shame. She harboured a wistful desire to visit France, but told us with gracious acceptance that her chances of doing so were remote.

Vietnam is a country in the throes of turbo-charged transition. Less than five years ago its population was still gripped by the soul-grinding penury which prompted the eighties exodus of boat-people. With the loosening of the communist stranglehold the Vietnamese people have embraced the capitalist ethos with alacrity. Not that this was ever an alien concept to the southern segment of the country. Always more anarchic than their northern counterparts they tended to pay only lip-service to the doctrines of Uncle Ho and still operate resentfully under the repressive mantle of communism.

At his waterfront restaurant in Hoi-An, San reflected on recent changes.

“Only a few years ago it was big trouble to be seen talking to a Westerner,” he recalled.

“If we were seen talking amongst ourselves in a group of three or four then the police would be onto us in case we were plotting something.”

Life was better now he continued. He relished the freer political climate. The tourists flocking in its wake made a bee-line for Hoi-An with its whimsical and slightly ramshackle charm, their dollars swelled the coffers of his eating house, providing a gratefully received financial security. Yet part of him hankered for the simplicity of the old days when he worked as a carpenter and had time to cycle to the beach with his family and dabble his toes in the silky waters of the South China Sea.

Saigon (only in the north are you reprimanded for failing to refer to Vietnam’s most famous metropolis as Ho Chi Minh City) was already beginning to hum as we pulled into the station just before dawn. Piling onto a cyclo we went in search of somewhere to stay.

Unfortunately this practical, aesthetic and environmentally friendly mode of transport is in the process of being phased out, victim of the government’s spurious claim that the cyclo is the cause of traffic jams.

There are those who believe that this misguided plan has its roots in oppression. A significant proportion of Saigon’s 100,000 cyclo drivers are former South Vietnamese soldiers who found themselves on the wrong side of the tracks when the war ended. Some of these men enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle before a change of regime turned their lives topsy turvy. Implementing a ban which would rob them of their livelihood would be the ultimately vindictive blow.

Whether the reasoning behind the ban is sinister or merely arbitrary Saigon will be a poorer place for the loss of the cyclo.

Sipping green tea in a cafe while waiting for a vacant hotel room we watched the day crank into life. Saigon throbs to the beat of an idiosyncratic vigour, and the commonplace hubbub and bustle of the east appears to be magnified one hundredfold. As the rapidly rising sun chased away the softness of dawn young women anxious to protect their skin from darkening donned big hats, cotton face masks and long gloves ending above the elbows. We too retreated and went in search of a cooling shower.