

China & Vietnam



Our swing through mainland China (three ports) and Vietnam has been amazing. We thought we would wait to report until after Thailand but we have experienced so much we want to get our impressions to you. Coming from the Philippines, we believed we had a grip on “big cities” in terms of the people and the local environs. Arriving in Shanghai Harbor, we were stunned by the sheer size of the port and city buildings. Shanghai is the largest city in China at over 24 million (three times the size of New York City.) We were docked on the Huangpu River facing the historic *Bund*, the city’s waterfront promenade. Our next stop was Hong Kong, a special protectorate of China as a result of its return from the British in 1997. Hong Kong, like Shanghai, is wall to wall skyscrapers with very modern structures side by side more traditional buildings. Both Shanghai and Hong Kong represent “new China” which is reflective in rising economies and building booms. At the same time they face critical housing shortages and labor imbalances. There are not that same social safety nets that we have seen in the region and while medical services are very good, long waiting lines are the norm. We also visited Haikou, the capital of Hainan province, which is on an island just off the mainland. This city is a mix of skyscrapers and colonial style Portuguese and French architecture. Lastly, visiting Vietnam was strange for us. For me, it was up close and personal for memories dating some 50 year ago. For Lorraine, it was getting a feel for what my military tour in Vietnam was like in terms of

geography and culture. The changes, of course, in 50 years have been remarkable. I served in the Central Highlands in Vietnam and never made it to Saigon so I had nothing to compare it to in the present. But, the sights, smells and language were all so familiar.

General

We have simply been very, very fortunate in terms of weather. Storms seem to follow us but have not impacted the voyage at all. The three-day sail from the Philippines to Shanghai was in light to moderate seas. Some passengers were affected by the sea swells but Lorraine and I were fine. The biggest change was in temperature as we sailed well north of the Equator. When we arrived in Shanghai it was 40 degrees and the temperature never exceeded 50 degrees. Strange to break out sweaters and jackets for touring. Shanghai is along the same latitude as Brunswick, Georgia and has winter weather the same as Raleigh, North Carolina. As we headed south, however, the temperature rose to 72 degrees in Hong Kong, mid-70s in Haikou and back up into the low 90s in Vietnam. Humidity rose too so once again passengers had issues on the longer excursions.

After getting over a cold that lingered for almost a week, we are both back to normal exercise schedules. I have backed off a bit to allow more recuperation time and I continue to drink as much water as possible. As noted, it is still challenging to find “western bathrooms” so I am glad I was a soldier. It has been more traumatic for Lorraine but she has been a good sport. We continue to eat a balanced diet which ironically has meant going back to basics for some meals and eating more salads at lunch. The food remains a trip highlight as the Viking Sun brought on a number of new crew in Shanghai to include a new guest head chef, Tammasak Chootong, from Thailand. He has presented cooking classes as well as special menus for the Chef’s Table Restaurant. The gelato makers continue to amaze with new sorbet flavors to include Mandarin Orange, Acai Berry, Blueberry, and Pear. Wonderful.

Entertainment has included a symphony orchestra, ballet, and special vocalists for the official Viking Sun christening ceremony (more on this separately) in Shanghai. We had two performances from the foursome Jukebox Rogues, a group from Australia that did a mix of popular tunes, classics and selections from musicals. Their two songs from Les Misérables were very, very well done and their encore was Queen’s Bohemian Rhapsody. Heather Clancy, our Cruise Director, put on another show that reflected her classical training and great vocal range. Our next performer was Vivek Mahbubani, a Hong Kong bred standup comedian. He had won a number of competitions in Southeast Asia and brought a nice sense of regional humor to his performance. We had a very unusual guest entertainer whose instrument is the 160-string dulcimer. Pingxin Xu is a world famous musician with concert appearances in major venues throughout England, Scotland, Wales and the European continent. The music was soothing but at the same time almost spiritual. A unique performance. Another group that performed was called Stringfever. This quartet of three brothers and one cousin played electric cello and violins and had played extensively in the United States, China, Mexico, and Brazil. They have

taken a classical education from the Royal Academy and Royal College of Music in London and morphed into a very eclectic group playing classics through pop music. Very clever and very entertaining.

Viking also brought on a new group of guest lecturers, one had been with us before, photographer Alistair Miller, as well as two passengers with unique qualifications to lecture on Vietnam. The first was Commander Porter Halyburton, USN (ret) who was a prisoner of war in the Hanoi Hilton for 7.5 years and his wife, Marty Halyburton, who chaired MIA and POW organizations at the national level. Porter gave a moving, detailed account of life in captivity and how they coped with the oppression of the North Vietnamese soldiers, and Marty talked about burying her husband as he was presumed dead under Navy criteria at the time only to find out eighteen months later that he was alive and a prisoner. Their story of faith and perseverance was uplifting just before we visited Vietnam. Other lecturers included Paulette Mitchell, an author of 13 cookbooks and an expert in Asian culinary arts, and Rob Warne, a former senior State Department official responsible for the Strategic Hamlet concept in Vietnam. We lastly welcomed a new Resident Historian named Sir William Simpson, OBE late of the Royal Air Force and twice decorated personally by HM Queen Elizabeth II. He has written a widely acclaimed biography of Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan the future king of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Special Event

As this is the inaugural world cruise for the Viking Sun the plan had always been to christen the ship in the homeport of the ship's godmother ... a longstanding maritime tradition. As the Viking Sun is partially financed by a Chinese commercial bank, the godmother is a senior bank official named Ms. Yi Lou based in Shanghai. Viking played up the ceremony throughout the voyage and promised "an elegant evening" which began with gift bags contained Viking souvenirs (pins, book, umbrella, etc.) being delivered to every stateroom. With high expectations (perhaps too high), passengers were bused to a nearby event facility for dinner and the opportunity to watch the actual ceremony on 40" closed circuit televisions.

The buses were delayed arriving at the pier, we were not allowed to simply walk to the event facility, and once we arrived, no one really guided us to where we were to go, how the dinner would be served (turned out to be two, split buffets), and what the ceremony program was to be. Thus, passengers were "arriving" for over two hours, the food was difficult to decipher, and the only beverages were a non-descript wine, warm orange juice containers and water. We could see the ceremony but not hear the Chinese to English translations. The impression was that the focus was all on the Chinese guests for the ceremony (who also were fed aboard the ship as the passengers were gone) and by the end of the evening, as the buses slowly reappeared, many passengers simply walked back to the ship.

We appreciate that this was a once in a lifetime experience having never seen a christening before but again, planning could have been much better and our place in "the elegant evening"

more transparent. Senior Viking leadership is aware of the issues and seven days after the event we received a letter of apology and a meeting was held in the Wintergarden by the ship's main pool hosted by the Viking Director of Hotel Operations where a number of passengers expressed their concerns. Viking staff took notes and responded where they could to questions. There was recognition by all concerned that the christening had not met anyone's expectations. At least Viking made an effort, albeit somewhat after the fact.

Excursions



1. **Shanghai (two days).** We arrived in the Shanghai Harbor just before sunrise and were docked directly across from the most impressive part of the city promenade. Several of

the buildings were simply futuristic and later, at night when lit up, put Las Vegas to shame. Just amazing sights right out our cabin balcony. I was a bit under the weather as mentioned previously so while I rested up for the christening ceremony the next day, Lorraine went on a shore excursion titled Shanghai Museum and Yuyuan Garden. Both the museum and garden tour were terrific. The museum is extensive and traces the development of the city through the centuries starting when the city was a small fishing village 5,000 years ago. The displays in all the museums we visited are perfect depictions of the subject matter (rice farming, local culture, etc.). Galleries included Chinese painting, Chinese calligraphy, Chinese sculpture and an ancient Chinese jade. The Yuyuan Garden was immaculate and by design offers different themes represented by the selection of the type of trees and bushes. Bonsai in China tends toward larger scale pieces and they are spectacular. The next day we both went on the excursion to The Garden City of Suzhou. After a bus ride of over an hour we arrived at the famed walled city of Suzhou. The original city is surrounded by a huge moat and five connecting canals and the first part of our tour included a sampan ride on the canals which has housing clusters right by the river. Again, sanitation is often provided by communal buildings rather than in individual homes. Every house had laundry hanging from every conceivable space. Eye opening to say the least. We also had the chance to visit a special gallery of silk painting. This art form uses extremely thin silk thread and tiny needles to create pictures that look like paintings. Unique to this particular studio was the use of "two-sided thread" which comes in over 400 colors and allows a highly skilled artist to create pictures that on one side may look like a tiger and on the other side look like a lion. Many of the works took over 2,500 hours to sew and were breathtaking in the level of detail. Lorraine bought two very small samples of the artwork and they are beautiful.

2. **Hong Kong (two days).** With a population of over 7.34 million, the city is the fourth densest by square mile in the world. Entering Hong Kong by ship is a treat because you can see the sheltered nature of the harbor (by other small islands) hemmed in by wall to wall skyscrapers. Housing is vertical in the city with modest green space as the city tries to accommodate the local population plus a large number of guest workers (often domestics from the Philippines.) Construction is non-stop and we noted with both trepidation and admiration that the scaffolding used on even the tallest buildings is made from bamboo. It is lightweight and weather resistant and preferred over steel or aluminum alternatives. Workers are even paid a differential to work with bamboo scaffolding. On the first day we took a tour called Hong Kong Cultural Discovery which included a visit to the Museum of History. The museum had numerous displays of historical artifacts to include a full scale Chinese junk and maps showing how land has been reclaimed around Hong Kong over the last 75 years. Particularly interesting was photo displays and official uniforms from the period of British rule (1841-1997) and the turnover to the Chinese on 1 July 1997. The period of the Japanese Occupation (three

years, eight months between 1941 and 1945) is also extensively covered and is referred to as the “Dark Ages” in Hong Kong history. According to our guide there is still tension between Hong Kong and Japan that sometimes has resulted in street demonstrations against Japan and damage to vehicles made in Japan. For this reason, most of the cars in Hong Kong are from Volkswagen and General Motors. Notably, Hong Kong has more Rolls-Royce and Mercedes Benz automobiles than any other large Asian City. From the museum we travelled to the largest Taoist temple (Wong Tai Sin) in the city.



3. Lorraine has some wonderful pictures of the temple where literally hundreds of people were offering gifts and prayers for good luck. The statues and other carvings were impressive and very colorful. From the temple we went to the Kowloon Walled City Park which is often described as the finest park in China.



The City Park sits on the site of the old Walled City which at one time served as a fort and defensive perimeter against external threats. We visited the Garden of the Four Seasons, the Garden of the Chinese Zodiac, Yamen (the last surviving building of the original city), the Mountain View Pavilion, as well as eight floral walks. The bonsai once again were spectacular interspersed with natural rock carvings. This was a great visit. We left the tour at this point and proceeded on our own to walk all over the portion of the city near the museum down to the waterfront. Our destination was the famous Peninsula Hong Kong Hotel. Opened in 1928, this hotel is a classic combining colonial and modern architectural elements with impeccable service. It has the largest fleet of Rolls-Royce automobiles of any 5-star hotel. With eight restaurants we chose one on the second mezzanine after noting the long, long line for afternoon formal tea on the main floor. Lorraine had a salmon sandwich and I had a Reuben sandwich and yes, it costs a fortune but like the Great Barrier Reef, it is The Peninsula Hotel! On the second day we took the excursion called Post Cards of Hong Kong designed to hit the real highlights of the city. We drove to Victoria Peak (about 1,800') and took great pictures of the city and harbor area. We then went down the mountain by a 120-person tramway which was fun as the decline is about 27 degrees but the seats also are at an angle. It feels like you are going down at 45 degrees and all of the buildings we passed appeared severely canted. The tram dates back to 1888 and has been updated from

steam to electric and is now controlled by microprocessor technology allowing two trams to occupy the same track with a minimal crossover station. We went to the Aberdeen area of Hong Kong for a sampan ride around the harbor. We passed by the largest floating restaurant in the world aptly called, The Jumbo Floating Restaurant. It really was huge and has been used as backdrop to a number of action films by Jackie Chan and Steven Seagal. The rest of the harbor was occupied by extremely expensive yachts often adjacent to large Chinese junks which are the permanent housing for the "boat people" or original inhabitants of the area who still fish for a living. It was fun to see the city from the waterline. We returned to the city to visit a "jewelry factory" which was not in the excursion description and turned out again to be a "shopping opportunity." While there may have been some bargains to be had, the jewelry stop detracted from the time allocated to the overall tour and cut short our final stop at the famous Stanley Market. The market was bustling and overjoyed to see 800+ tourists from the Viking Sun. Lorraine bought three beautiful, embroidered scarves for \$3 apiece.

4. **Haikou.** The capital of Hainan province, the population is just over two million. Known as the "Garden City," it is also more popularly known as the "Coconut City" for the profusion of coconut palms that dominate the green areas of the city. While characterized like Shanghai and Hong Kong by wall to wall skyscrapers, the city is more dispersed. Once used to exile adversaries during the various Chinese dynasties, there is more land available near the city so buildings are more in clusters rather than a continuous line. City streets and thoroughfares are much wider than in Shanghai and Hong Kong and there is even a separate lane for motorcycles and motor bikes. While cars predominate in other cities, Haikou is full of two-wheeled transportation in part as a reflection of high gas prices but more as maneuverable transport in crowded areas. Our excursion was Haikou Highlights and it was very obvious that few cruise ships regularly called in the port. After a short drive we went to Baishamen Park which is along the South China Sea. It was lightly raining but we all left the bus and toured the park. There was a concert of regional Chinese music playing traditional instruments which was very interesting and we later learned that the local orchestra had been practicing for three months for the performance for the Viking Sun. The weather cleared and warmed up as we travelled to the Old Town part of the city which is like we imagined China in the late 1930s in terms of architecture (a mix of Portuguese and French buildings with Arabic and Roman features with Asian style.) We loved just walking down the streets and walking in and out of open shops. We visited another Taoist temple which holds a collection of antique scrolls and also carved stone tablets recording business transactions over 300 years ago. By luck, we and another couple had one of the guides take us two flights up in a restaurant to an area where they had not seen tourists in years. He ordered lunch for us which included a half boiled chicken (with head and one foot), mixed vegetables, and peppers and sliced beef. With only had

chop sticks so we would eat some rice and then pick at the communal bowls of the main courses. It was challenging but fun and certainly a unique experience having “real” Chinese food. Lorraine bought some more embroidered clothing to include a very nice blouse which she wore later to a special Chinese Feast Night aboard ship. We liked the city as the people were very friendly, not pushy, and genuinely interested in having a cruise ship visit the city.

5. **Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam, two days).** The city for me and for most of the residents is still Saigon. Its population is close to 9 million of a total of 96 million in the entire country. There are over seven million motorcycles and motor scooters. It was rare to see a bicycle where 50 years ago that is all you would see with just a few scooters and Pedi cabs (or cycle rickshaws). Now, rickshaws are for tourists and photo opportunities. On the first day we toured a “small town” called Ba Ria which, in fact, was larger than any town I remembered in Vietnam. There were a number of open shops selling everything from housewares to fresh fish. We walked to a large fish market which was literally 500 yards long with shop after shop selling dried fish and also live crabs (some that looked like Maryland crabs and others that were off-white with black stripes.) They were being kept fresh by a converted water pump connected to a 12-volt car battery. This was the type of ingenuity that I remembered from decades ago. There was a lot of trash which indicated how well the local government was working as well as the only two cases of outright begging by children that we have thus far experienced on the trip. This reflects on the economic disparity existing in modern Vietnam. The country as a whole leads Asia in the production of rice and is also the leader in textile production. However, while the general population is seeing improvements in private enterprise, major projects are strictly controlled by the communist government. Note that we did see numerous national Vietnamese flags and rarely one of the Communist Party. The people describe themselves as “national capitalists.” On the second day we took a 9-hour tour to Saigon billed as Highlights of Ho Chi Minh City. After estimating the bus trip to the city would be 2.5 hours, we actually arrived downtown in 1.5 hours. It was Sunday so less traffic than normal but more motorcycles and motor scooters than any other city we had visited. There are street lights but totally ignored by any two-wheel mode of transport. Our bus just plowed ahead to the Reunification Palace which had been the home of the President of South Vietnam during the war. After 1975, it was torn down but later re-constructed on the same foundation as the original palace. That it is a major tourist venue now tells one a lot of about how the people regard their nationalistic rather than communistic feelings. We also travelled to the nearby Notre Dame Cathedral, also under reconstruction and refurbishment using only materials from France, and stopped by the Central Post Office. We then visited the oldest Buddhist temple in the city which was packed with worshippers. Because we had extra time after correcting the travel time to and from the ship in the bus, we visited a nearby lacquer workshop where Lorraine picked up a necklace and earrings and finally stopped at the

Bin Tay Market. This market is indoors and huge and sold anything you can imagine and some things you cannot. All at a “bargain” price.

There is a palpable feeling of excitement in the three cities that we visited in China. People were friendly and upbeat. Housing seems the predominant issue which is understandable in a country of 1.4 billion or approximately one sixth of the world’s population. At the same time Chinese are having less children even though the official one-child policy is now gone. Fewer Chinese are interested in getting married breaking with generations of tradition. Vietnam has befitted the most over the last 50 years in terms of economic growth and, in fact, labor costs are now cheaper in Vietnam than in China. The relations between the two countries is fluid with disputes over islands in the seas claimed by both countries (plus Brunei and Indonesia) constantly in the news.

One last observation. The Chinese and Vietnamese we observed work very, very hard whether in construction, business, education, medicine or high technology. They also are pretty fastidious about clothing, taking care of automobiles, and keeping the streets clean (except in Vietnam). We never felt unsafe at any time. Other passengers took longer side excursions to the Angkor temples in Cambodia or the Terra Cotta Warriors and the Great Wall in China. Everyone was very happy with the tours although Lorraine and I preferred to see all the included ports rather than the side trips. Viking offers an 18-day China river cruise which has been well reviewed so we might look at that option in the future.

I enjoyed Vietnam and managed the “*déjà vu*” component as well as I could. Of course, a majority of the population was not born when I was there and everyone is about the future and not the past. Less than six percent of the population is over 65 years of age thus, few locals are war veterans. Their most recent conflicts (post 1975) were against the Chinese and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Everyone spoke glowingly of President Clinton’s normalizing of relations in 1995 as the starting point for modern Vietnam. Americans are not the enemy.