

Vietnam reflections

A long-planned and serially postponed family non-Christmas in this fascinating yet enigmatic country was bound to arouse interest in what lies beneath the beaches, hills, pagodas and tourist bling. Vietnamese people give little away, so we took the initiative to peer a little deeper - even as far as a potted history lesson for the many born after the last war there ended.

Most of us associate Vietnam with tropical beach holidays, delicious cuisine, and quite likely, a senseless war too.

Yet if Vietnamese are bitter about the war, they certainly do not show it: they are as gentle and warm as any you'll ever meet anywhere.

Perhaps that is unsurprising: the last war did end 40 years ago, and there is much to be gained from being friendly to foreigners: with its abundance of natural beauty, tourism, from Europe, Australia and from South Korea is an important source of income for many Vietnamese people.

The other thing you may associate with Vietnam is the Communist regime that has ruled it since the Americans departed in the mid-1970s. Yet, to judge from its vigorous local commerce, Vietnam seems to be an example less of suffocating communism than of red-in-tooth-and-claw capitalism. The streets bustle with small businesses that are not obviously state owned, controlled or even regulated. Bars and restaurants are lively, as are markets, tailors, coiffeurs and masseuses, while taxis are everywhere. All are fiercely competitive.

Small businesses are a healthy symptom of a lively economy, but, to be sure, much of any country's wealth is bound to reside in large firms. By far the biggest company in Vietnam is Samsung Electronics Vietnam, a subsidiary of Samsung in South Korea, with a reported value of \$72.4 billion. A distant second, valued at \$20.7 billion, is state-owned Vietnam Oil & Gas Group (PetroVietnam), followed by Vietnam Electricity - EVN, also state owned, valued at \$17 billion. Of the top ten companies in Vietnam, five are majority or wholly state owned, with the dominant enterprise mostly foreign-owned.

Vietnam is industrious, or rather, Vietnamese people are industrious, but they are not yet rich. Yet unlike in other relatively poor countries, the country is not obviously unequal: you do not see displays of ostentatious wealth by a small caste of well-connected individuals that you would find in Brazil, India or China - or Britain or the USA. That is manifest, too, in the apparent lack of petty crime. Not only do you not hear tales of pick-pockets or bag-snatchers as you do in other tourist destinations, but if you drop your late model iPhone in the street, someone will come running after you to return it to you and not expect anything in exchange.

If the government is taking a light touch to regulating and taxing commerce, it seems equally light on government services. While roads are mostly in good condition, there appears to be no investment in public transport, for example,

with private motor bikes and cars the main mode of transport. Also absent is the traffic chaos you usually see wherever public transport is lacking. Rather, surprisingly quiet small motorbikes and private cars move freely at an unthreatening pace, despite few traffic lights.

Perhaps the apparent lack of public services is unsurprising, given the relatively low rate of tax collected: 12.9% in 2022 compared to about 27.7% across OECD countries. That in turn suggests that many of the small enterprises you see may be operating informally, so not paying taxes, while large state-owned firms may benefit from tax loopholes.

Police and military, too, are sparse for an authoritarian state. In fact, we saw none outside the airports and the military museum we visited. That of course does not exclude the possibility of plain clothes police, but it is striking, nonetheless.

Without speaking to ordinary Vietnamese, it is impossible to know how well the government provides for education, health services and social security work for them, and how they feel about the prospects for their children, though the generally low level of English-language competence suggests a gap in public education. It is also impossible for the outsider to know how free or otherwise speech is. But if these people are oppressed, they certainly don't show it in the way that, say, East Germans did before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

A visit to the Ho Chih Minh museum turned out to be enlightening. Certainly, it's full of propaganda, but it's Vietnamese propaganda, so gives an idea of how Vietnamese people see their history. Lots of grainy photos of the serial invasions and wars the country endured over the last two centuries or so, and plenty of imperialist weapons captured by the resilient and resourceful Vietnamese (not unlike Ukrainians now defending their home).

The museum turned out to be a great opportunity for a nutshell recap of those wars and invasions to my 13-year-old granddaughter. Remi is a pretty normal teenager, with pretty normal teenager preoccupations, so you'd expect her to be bored rigid with tales of brutality and injustice from the "olden days", not to mention remote geo-political manoeuvring and what-not. But my delightful granddaughter was entirely absorbed in the story. The injustice must have hit the spot, as I don't imagine it was my story-telling skills. In the end, her face told me that she agreed that these people had been to hell and back and are to be admired.

The History lesson

The late eighteenth century was a monstrous, global land grab, as Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British and French (erm, the same people who now complain about immigration) blasted their way to enslave, humiliate and contaminate with deadly diseases. Vietnam, or Indochina as it was then, went to the French, who were keen to rival the British, who had taken coastal China, Malaya, Burma and, when the Dutch had pulled out, India, among other prizes. The Dutch also had Indonesia, while the Spanish had The Philippines and the Portuguese Macau and Timor Leste.

Mid nineteenth century turmoil in French politics presented the opportunity to organise resistance to French rule, but without modern weaponry, it took more than another 100 years, two world wars and Ho Chih Minh to impose such costs on the French that they were ready to throw in the towel. That was in the 1950s, and by then it didn't suit the Americans, for whom Vietnam was too important a piece of real estate to forfeit control of, especially to the USSR, their geo-political rival. So they first came to the aid of the French, then took over from them.

So, just when the Vietnamese thought they were getting somewhere, their exhausted people found themselves up against a new and even more powerful occupying force. They kept battling for another twenty bloody years - with considerable help from the USSR, it must be added, who were always happy to annoy the Americans.

Following another 20 years of conflict, this stunningly beautiful country was in ruins, its farmland sabotaged by anti-personnel mines, its magnificent forests devastated and poisoned by exfoliants sprayed from American military aircraft; hundreds of thousands, if not more of its people heading overseas, anywhere to escape the hell their home had become. Even then peace was fleeting. Barely had the survivors buried their dead, waved goodbye to loved ones they may never see again, and caught their breath, when the Chinese thought it a good idea to invade, perhaps unsettled at the prospect of Soviet regimes both to their north and south. Ho Chih Minh, still in charge, and now equipped with abandoned US weaponry and munitions, saw off the Chinese and established something approaching peace and stability, even if prosperity remained a distant prospect.

You don't need any propaganda to understand that over 200 years of perpetual struggle for self-determination (which, by the way, Article 1 (2) of the Purposes and Principles of the UN Charter deems a basic human right) would engender a certain sense of national identity and pride, even in an ethnically diverse population.

Which brings us to perhaps the most surprising feature of all: the ubiquity of Western culture and brands. After more than two centuries' struggle for their independence, Vietnamese seem to have surrendered completely to the hegemony of popular Western "culture".

Having come to Vietnam for its Buddhist-tinged atheism, we were non-plussed by the ubiquity of the worst of Christmas tack. Particularly anodyne renditions of Jingle Bells and We Wish You a Merry Christmas were inescapable, while Asian families seemed to make an evening of photo-shoots of their children in red and white outfits in front of effigies of Santa Claus, reindeers, sleds and snow-dusted pine trees. Staff at hotels and restaurants wish you a merry Christmas and you wonder what they make of that greeting. Despite the achingly-beautiful, gentle tinkle of music you hear in Vietnamese pagodas, the main respite from sanitised Christmas carols is louder than life K-pop. Vietnamese teenagers chant along to lyrics that are entirely incomprehensible to them.

The oddity of Vietnam is that it trounced the world's mightiest military force, only to surrender voluntarily to its consumer icons.