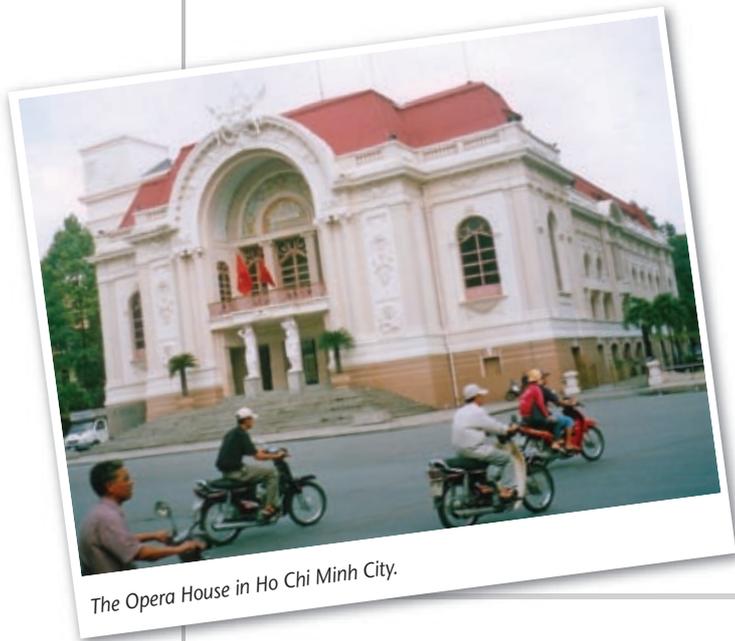


By Dr Evelyn Lim

A Different Kind of Vacation at Ho Chi Minh City



The Opera House in Ho Chi Minh City.

Having volunteered for the tsunami victims in Medan, I was convinced that medical aid was needed in ASEAN countries. Natural calamities and global warming have given medical relief a new dimension. With bird flu looming, I was given the opportunity to go to Ho Chi Minh City to treat the less fortunate.

The ride from Tan Son Nhat International Airport to the city is just 7km, so we arrived quickly at the hotel. The omnipresence of the motorbike reflects the ruler of the road. It was soccer night – motorbikes were parked before a large screen and riders stood on their vehicles to view the match between Vietnam and Thailand. We were told that if Vietnam won the match, the motorbikes would ride the streets waving the national flag. Vendors tried to peddle their mini national flags and it did not matter that we were not Vietnamese. The stationary motorbikes were causing a traffic jam, and a traffic police tried his best to organise the moving traffic but was not able to disassemble the parked motorbikes. It was a challenge for pedestrians crossing the road, with motorbikes zig-zagging to avoid you as they travelled non-stop despite the traffic lights and zebra crossings. Passing through Chinatown, a shop advertising ‘Singapore frog soup’ reminded me that we were not far from home.

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THE ‘BAC SI’ IS IN

The trip to the village the next day took another one and a half hours. The local *bac si* (doctors) arrived at 6am (the sun rises at 5.30am and sets at 5.30pm) and were already at work in the clinic when we visited. Permission was obtained from the local authority for us to see the patients with the help of a translator. A steady queue of elderly patients were registered, had their blood pressure checked, and then patiently waited as we examined and diagnosed them. They remembered to thank us before they went on to collect their medications. An interesting observation was the patient with dioxin poisoning and the after-effect on his upper limbs – a victim of the American-Vietnam war. Younger patients and children were seen in the afternoon. A dentist was at hand to do dental checks and extractions, and an optician screened and provided glasses for those who required it. Goody bags containing milk, instant noodles and biscuits were also given to patients. We further learnt there was a need to raise funds for a water

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filter tank to provide clean water. As for our day's work, we were each given two pomelos.

The next day, we visited the orphanage. The statue of Virgin Mary that stood in the courtyard was similar to the one in front of Notre Dame Cathedral or Big Cathedral. Local doctors translated for us as we checked on the children and staff. Sponsored by the Catholic church, the orphanage housed living quarters, classroom, clinic and wards for orphans ranging in age from toddlers to teenagers. There were routine urine checks for everyone and other investigations could be ordered on a separate sheet of paper. A tour of the orphanage confirmed that no chicken, hen or bird was present. Apparently, this was also the case during our visit to Ho Chi Minh City, and the eating places had stopped selling chickens, ducks and birds.

The paediatric cancer ward in the largest cancer hospital in South Vietnam was our next stop. Leukaemia ranked number one here as was evident by the bald children, while retinoblastoma apparently is number four and we were able to observe patients' asymmetrical eyeballs. Interestingly, families moved in to stay with the child in the ward as they came from various parts of the country. There was also a playroom for the children. We learnt that children up to 6 years old could get free medical treatment.

WAR AND PEACE

To see the patriotism of the Vietnamese, a journey through the Cu Chi Tunnels is an experience. The 250km long tunnels with intricate networks were used by the North Vietnamese resistance army to launch surprise attacks during the war. Squeezing into a mere 30m to 60m section of the tunnel, we were treated to a comrade meal of tapioca and tea.

The war museum is another propaganda for the Vietnamese in their fight against the Americans. With excellent photography, it only enforces the cruelty of war. The so-called 'tiger cells' are not something to be proud of. There is however, a section where, yearly, children are encouraged to draw pictures of peace and unity between mankind. The Reunification Palace represents South Vietnam in its former glory.

On a lighter note, Ben Thanh Market offers a variety of Vietnamese origins: highlands coffee beans, conical hats, *khai* silk, shoes and handbags. A bowl of *pho* (beef noodle) and *che* (jelly-like sweet drink) are tourist favourites. Vietnamese food consisted mainly vegetables – no wonder

I did not see any fat Vietnamese. *Sinh to* (fruit juices) are good and branded goods can be found in Diamond Plaza, the biggest shopping centre in Ho Chi Minh City. And like a true tourist, I went to spend my *dong* (Vietnamese currency). ■



Dr Evelyn Lim at the cancer centre.



The village where Dr Lim and other volunteers administered free medical aid.



A demonstration at Cu Chi Tunnels.