

Three Months in Vietnam during the War

John Williamson

I arrived at Wright-Patterson AFB in April 1967 as a new 2nd Lt. A year and a half later, I had survived the first winter in Dayton and was facing the coming second winter, when Col George Orton, the new Chief of ManTech, stopped by my office and asked if I would like a 2 week vacation in Vietnam. Well, of course, I accepted enthusiastically.

Well, maybe it didn't quite happen that way. The Laboratory management had decided that it would be extremely valuable to obtain first hand information on materials problems in the field (Vietnam), to help address these problems. A request for volunteers within the lab was ignored by all. The Air Force Academy came to the rescue and offered to send some of their professors over there to do the job. But these professors only went over for a couple of weeks at a time, knew little about materials, and little productivity came from their efforts. About the same time Col George Orton came in to run the ManTech division and came around meeting all of the military individually in his organization. He mentioned to me that he had been to Vietnam for a couple of weeks and would like to see many of the junior officers have the same experience. I told him, that I would be interested. He immediately (and unbeknownst to me) recommended to management that I be sent to Vietnam to continue the activities that the Academy professors had been doing. Somehow by the time I was notified, the 2 weeks had grown to 3 months. After qualifying in the use of an M-1 rifle and obtaining all the necessary orders (I had blanket TDY orders to go any place in South East Asia), I was on my way. (You should see what a 3-month TDY voucher looks like!).

When I arrived at Tan Son Nhut AFB in early November 1968, I had just made 1st Lt. The first thing the Colonel running the office, that I was assigned to, said was "Well at least you've made 1st Lt," which made it quite clear what he thought of having a junior officer assigned to the office (all others in the office were Majors and Lt Cols). Picture taken outside of office.



I was also required to obtain a Vietnamese Drivers License, though I don't know why, since I never once drove a vehicle off base.

ADM/GSO-39
April 1962

AMERICAN EMBASSY
SAIGON, VIET-NAM

APPLICATION FOR ISSUANCE OF VIETNAMESE DRIVER'S LICENCE
(RECEIPT)

December 18, 1968
date

Monsieur le Directeur du Protocole
Département des Affaires Etrangères
Saigon

Monsieur le Directeur,

Nous avons l'honneur de vous envoyer la/les demande (s) de transformation des permis de conduire des voitures de tourisme du/des membre (s) de notre Ambassade mentionné (s) ci-dessous :

Mr. John R. WILLIAMSON / CMR Box 12469, APO 96201

Nhận của Đại Sứ Quán Mỹ tại Saigon Việt-Nam,
một bằng lái xe ngoại quốc còn hiệu lực và đơn
xin đổi lấy bằng lái xe Việt-Nam cho tên kê trên.
Received from the U. S. Embassy, Saigon, Vietnam
a valid foreign drivers licence and request for the
issuing of a Vietnamese drivers licence for the
above-mentioned person.

Nhận và đóng dấu Saigon, ngày, tháng năm 196
Nha Nghi-Lê, Bộ Ngoại-Giao,

Received and stamped, Saigon 196
Foreign Affairs, Protocol Department

Nous vous prions de bien vouloir insister auprès du Service du Contrôle les voitures automobiles pour lui/leur faire délivrer du/des permis de conduire Vietnamien (s) avec exonération de taxe.

Avec nos remerciements, veuillez agréer, Monsieur le Directeur, l'assurance de notre considération distinguée.

Số _____/PRO/PD
Kính chuyển Ông Giám Đốc Nha Công Chánh Nam Phần
(Số kèm tra xe hơi) để xin cấp bằng lái xe cho các đương sự.
Saigon, ngày tháng năm 196
Giám Đốc Nha Nghi Lê Bộ Ngoại Giao

Embassy of the United States of America
Charles J. KONYA
Charles J. KONYA
Contracting, Customs and Travel Office

When I arrived at Tan Son Nhut, there were no vacant quarters on base. I was assigned a luxurious hotel about 1 mile from the front gate. The hotel even provided a nice gecko roaming the walls to chirp me to sleep at night.



The hotel also had a front Door Man:



The main road to the front gate was a mass of bicycles and small motorized 3-wheel vehicles.



The streets were typically filled side to side with vehicles. Size matters. Larger vehicles just plowed their way down the middle of the street and everyone moved aside.



A bus that made stops at other similar hotels picked me up in the morning and took me to the base. I was able to acquire on-base housing a couple of weeks after I arrived at Tan Son Nhut. About a week after I moved on base, someone threw a hand grenade into people waiting at the next stop after the stop I normally got on. Many were injured, but thankfully no one was killed.

We worked 7AM-5PM, 6 days a week. But with nothing really to do on the 7th day, most everyone worked 7 days. There was a tennis court just across the street from our office and often we would take an hour and go over and play tennis to relax a little (if playing tennis in 92-93 F weather relaxes you). I remember on Christmas day we each volunteered to take shifts to man the office for any important phone calls that might come through. The assumption was that the others would be in their barracks writing to their loved ones. I had a morning shift. About 10 AM, I looked around and almost everyone was in the office!!! Being alone on Christmas day in the middle of a war zone isn't the most popular thing.

We often went to the Officer's Club in the evening to have a drink (there certainly wasn't anything else to do). Often on weekends the Club would have entertainment. The only one I remember going to see was country singer Tex Ritter. The time of the Vietnam Conflict was about 10-15 years after the high point of his career, but he drew a very large crowd. Some of you may remember his famous hits: 'High Noon,' 'Deck of Cards,' and 'I Dreamed of Hillbilly Heaven.' He died 6 years later.

An irony was that at Tan Son Nhut all we knew about the war was what we read in the morning paper. I certainly don't remember Robin Williams yelling "GOOD MORNING VIETNAM." Airplanes would be taking off and landing all night, and you just got used to it. I do remember being at one air base one night when the Cong lobbed some shells onto the base. With sirens blaring in the middle of the night, we ran from our barracks to the nearest bunker and holed up until it was safe to come out. It was a reminder that a war was going on around you. But in general the war was fought in the jungles and villages.

The men in my office were nervous about going downtown Saigon. When we went (which was only twice in my 3 months), we rode in a Volkswagen Beetle, with no air conditioner and the windows rolled up, so no one could throw a hand grenade through the window, and we all wore fire arms. But you could not tell from the activities in Saigon that there was a war going on. We tend to remember the photos of war scenes from the burning villages and jungles. We forget that when the French controlled the country, it was a prosperous country with rubber plantations and rice fields everywhere. Saigon was often called "the Pearl of the Orient" or the "Paris of the East." Saigon was considered on the par with other similar Asian cities. It was a thriving, bustling city with modern colonial style buildings downtown, but very poor suburbs with thousands and thousands of bikes and motorcycles. Some typical buildings in Saigon at that time are:

Saigon Opera House



Saigon Notre Dame Cathedral



Another Saigon Church



Navy Building that we visited on our trips down town



The city was a thriving bustling city in the midst of the war. This street market scene was typical of down town.



Activities in Saigon went on as normal, like children going to school,



or people riding the local buses:



or just riding your motorcycle to work.



The dress the woman is wearing in the picture above is called an “ao dai.” Most of the women in Saigon area wore these dresses at that time. I was back to Vietnam a few years ago and most of these dresses had disappeared. Now they are used mostly for special occasions.

A few pictures to introduce Tan Son Nhut. The first is a view of the base. It was the largest base in Vietnam.



The second is a picture of the typical barracks at Tan Son Nhut (although the one I stayed in was only one level):



Over the next 3 months I visited every Air Base in Vietnam and 3 of the 5 in Thailand. All flights to Thailand went into Bangkok. I was not very good at planning travel schedules and every time I went to an air base in Thailand, I had to spend a night in Bangkok, going and coming. And later I became Chief of Plans??? Planning in Vietnam was a little different. You just went over to the flight line and asked when they had an airplane going to wherever. Flying

involved helicopters such as Hueys to closer locations and C-130s to further locations. The picture below shows the flight line from a distance. Pictures of the typical aircraft I that I flew in are below.

The C-130 was the way to reach all distant bases:



But my favorite way to fly was the local trips by helicopter. I often flew Huey's that were open-sided with a machine gunner on one side and me on the other.



I remember one time while flying in a helicopter, the pilot called over the head phones, "Brace yourself, we're going down." I didn't know what in the heck was going on, but I tucked my head down and waited for us to hit the ground, which we did softly. We landed in a dry rice patty. I was looking everywhere, expecting to see Viet Cong come running at us. The co-pilot jumped out, further confusing me. He ran around the helicopter, jumped back in and we took off. It turns out a warning light had come on in the helicopter and they landed to see if it was a real problem or a false light. They saw nothing and we finished the trip back to Tan Son Nhut.

One of the great things about flying in helicopters (particularly the open sided ones) was that you get a great view of the ground. This really allowed me to get a feel for Vietnam.

One of the first things I noticed was the mass of people who had fled war areas and taken refuge near Tan Son Nhut. The next picture shows the base at the upper left corner and the mass of housing just outside the base fence.



As you might expect, most of this housing was not very substantial:



But you also got to see the real Vietnam, such as the magnificent rice paddies:



The next picture is of a village in the Mekong Delta south of Saigon.



You also got to see the typical small villages:



I also saw an occasional rubber tree plantation and their tree farms. The picture below is of a rubber tree plantation that appeared abandoned. The picture below it is a farm of hundreds of acres of rubber trees.



On one of my trips, I don't remember where, I was able to catch a ride on a helicopter making a mail run to several locations. One of the locations was a small village down in the delta area. We landed and were able to walk around the village for a short while before heading on to the next stop. The people were very friendly. The village is shown below:



Once and awhile I traveled by Forward Air Control aircraft (O-2's). These aircraft flew lower and gave coordinates to the bombers and fighters to strike. Flying low isn't really the thing you want to do. The first O-2 I got into had several bullet holes in the panel just behind the door. I wasn't sure I wanted to get in, but the pilot assured me "they missed the door." This is the picture of a O-2 I flew in to Ben Hoa. It at least didn't have holes in the side.



My first trip from Tan Son Nhut was to a base flying C-123s. The C-123 airplanes sprayed various herbicides. They had a problem in that the herbicides destroyed conventional rubber seals at the spray nozzles in a very short time. The Materials Lab scientists had identified n-butyl rubber as a potential solution to the problem. Scientists in the lab acquired new seals, and I carried over enough of these seals to outfit one airplane. I don't remember, but I think there were about 15 nozzles on each wing. They were installed and I went back a month later to see how they were doing. All were still in perfect condition except one that had been obviously damaged during installation, and it was unclear what happened to the other. The maintenance crew there was very happy. I was so impressed with the rubber that when I built a small fish pond in front of my house in Beavercreek 20 years later, I called around and found n-butyl rubber sheet material at a supplier in Fairborn and lined my fish pond with it. That was 25 years ago and the material has far exceeded the predicted life of a vinyl lining, which tends to degrade under UV radiation.

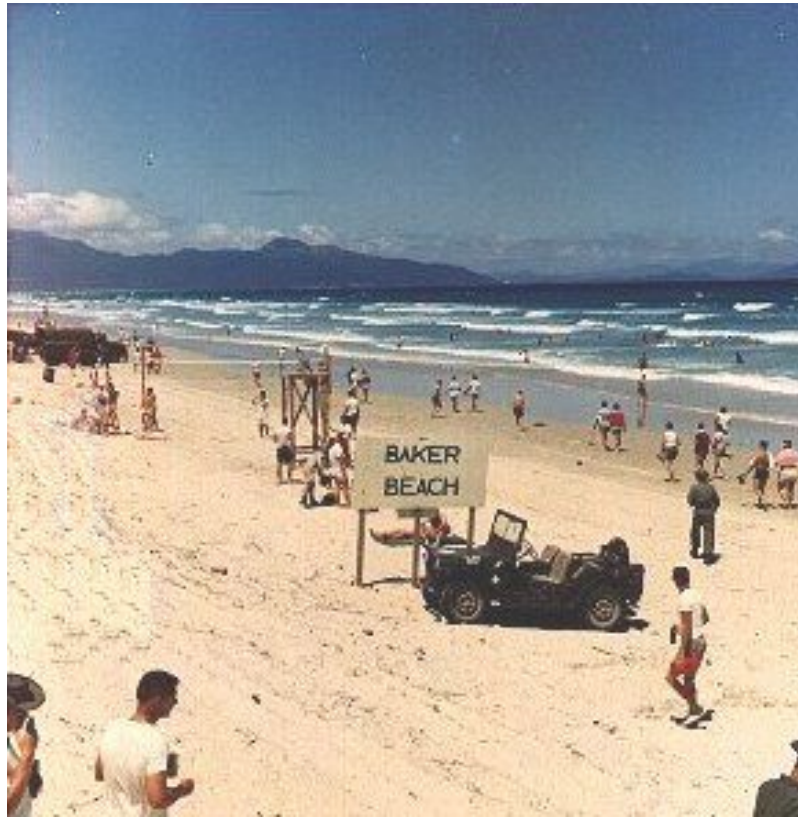
Another thing I did during my tour in Vietnam was to take over a Polybenzimidazole (PBI) flight suit that the Lab had fabricated. In the 1950's a scientist for Celanese invented PBI while studying the creation of high-temperature stable polymers for the Air Force Materials Lab. During the 60's both the Air Force Materials Lab and NASA sponsored considerable work on the material as a non-flammable and thermally stable textile fiber, particularly for flight suits. There were questions about comfort and breathability, as well as other questions to be answered. I wore the flight suit on some of my travels. I found it quite comfortable and with no wearability problems. Unfortunately, the story, as I heard it, is that duPont threatened to sue the Air Force for using government funds to compete against their privately developed Nomex II. But I have also heard that the Air Force did not use the material because it is much more expensive than Nomex II. For whatever reason, the Air Force stopped sponsoring research and development of this material as a flight suit material. But this fiber developed under Air Force Materials Laboratory funding is now used in many safety and heat resistant garments, such as Safety Gloves and Firefighter uniforms; insulation material for rocket motors; nose cones; and many commercial applications

I don't have many pictures from the bases, since one barrack or maintenance building looks pretty much like another. Also pictures on the flight lines were frowned upon (as an Air Force Security Policeman reminded me one day). But I did capture a picture now and then.

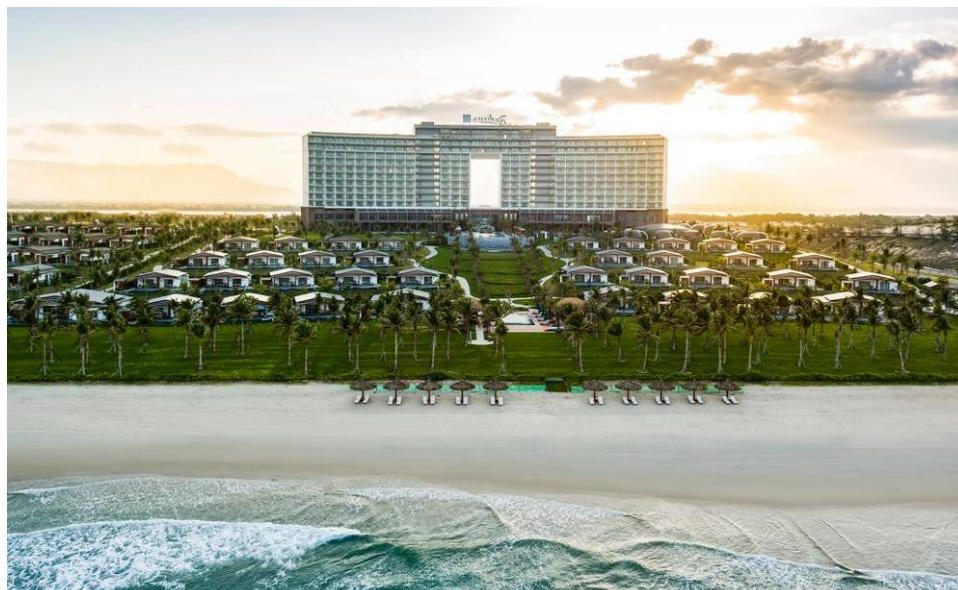
The first is at Cam Rahn Bay AFB, the second largest Air Force base in Vietnam (after Tan Son Nhut). These are pictures taken of the famous Cam Rahn Bay Beach. It was very pretty (except for the barb wire).



To be honest, it wasn't all barbed wire. I obtained this picture off the internet from someone stationed there in 1966:



I began wondering what the bay looks like today. America is back! Here is the Radisson Blu at Cam Rhan Bay. (Not the exact same location)



The Cam Ranh Bay air base is now an International Airport. See photos below of the previous Cam Ranh Bay air base terminal and the International Airport Terminal today.



Another air base, I visited was Phan Rang, which was also on the coast. I was able to capture a nice picture of it from a helicopter. Today this air base is closed and abandoned.



Today Phan Rang is known as a fishing village. The first two pictures are pictures I took on a trip to Vietnam in 2015. The first is a fishing village on a small island in the bay. The second is a local taxi service to take you from your boat to the shore. The 3rd picture is a hotel a little further down the coast from Phan Rang.





I don't really have any good pictures of DaNang AFB, the most northern of our bases. It was monsoon season up north and it was constantly raining very lightly. The picture below is a typical day in DaNang area:



As I stated earlier, the war for many of us was the war we read about in the newspapers. But when you got up north around DaNang, every now and then you got a glimpse of reality. I guarantee you would not have wanted to have been here when it happened:





I was told by the pilot that this was an abandoned Green Beret Camp. I could not confirm that.



It is hard to imagine what DaNang looks like today:



My favorite base was probably Pleiku Air Base in the highlands of northern South Vietnam. Being in the highlands, the air was much cleaner than the coastal areas of southern South Vietnam and the temperatures much cooler. Also because of the forest in the mountains, many of the barracks were made of wood, which looked more attractive. A not so good picture of Pleiku Air Base:



Today, Pleiku Air Base is a regional airport



One of the things I got involved in was materials related, but certainly not what I was sent to Vietnam to do. I was working at my desk one day, when a Major at the next desk turned to me and asked “Lt what do you know about composite materials.” I said “they make great Corvette bodies, Sir.” He said “Great.” And I went back to work. A few minutes later I heard him pick up his phone and call the Jungle Survival School at Clark AFB, Philippines. He said that he was sorry he never got back to Clark to finish the helicopter pad in the mountains, but that he had a Lt from the Air Force Materials Laboratory who was an expert in composite materials and that I would be coming down to finish the job. I am yelling, what, what, what, I don’t know anything about composite materials. He told me that was fine, it was a simple process, and he would tell me how to do it.

So a few days later I arrived at Clark AFB. It seems that as part of their training the Jungle Survival School took pilots into the Philippine mountains, dropped them off and then they had to avoid being captured by Negrito natives (who got a bag of rice for each pilot they captured). The landing areas they had in the mountains were constantly being overrun with very fast-growing elephant grass. So someone in AFSC had suggested laying down epoxy/fiberglass landing pads. When I got there I was assigned a sergeant and two Negrito natives to help me. The landing area had been somewhat crudely leveled. We had to take a 50-gallon drum of resin and sheets of fiberglass and other materials by helicopter. Since a 50-gallon drum weighs about 350 pounds, it is not easy to handle, and the very small Negritoes were of no help. The sergeant and I got it off the helicopter, but it hit him in the head coming off, and I am sure he had a large bump for the rest of his life.

Some pictures of the mountain area are attached. The only way here was definitely by helicopter:





Our task was to build a helicopter pad at the top of one of these mountains. Right!! But we did it! A couple of pictures are below. The first is a skinny 1st Lt applying epoxy resin to the fiberglass cloth on a very hot day. The following 2 show the finished pad. The metal strips beside the landing pad are what we were replacing with the fiberglass. Grass grew right up through the metal strips.





We were able to complete this landing pad in about 3 days. I unfortunately had to go buy a complete new outfit, including shoes, since I had more epoxy on me than the pad did.

I did have the opportunity to do a little sightseeing, before my schedule flight back to Tan Son Nhut. I got a brief glance of the Philippines.

First, Clark AFB was a really nice base. An example of an officer's quarter is show below:



Unfortunately, in 1991 a volcano eruption buried much of this base in ash. The Commander had evacuated the base before the eruption. The US did not return for 20 years. Some say, the US left because it was going to be too expensive to re-open the base. Others say the Philippine government took the opportunity to not renew the US lease and to get rid of the “imperial power” that had occupied it since WWII. It became the Clark Freeport Zone, the site of Clark International Airport, with parts of it owned and operated by the Philippine Air Force. In 2012, with pressure growing from China claiming sovereignty of seas in the area, the Philippines allowed the US to return aircraft to this base.

The lifestyle in the Philippines was not unlike a lot of Southeast Asia. Transportation was typically by small motorized vehicles:



And some times not motorized:



But the Philippines did have efficient lawn mowing services that not only mowed the grass, but fertilized it at the same time:



Even these mowing services must be properly maintained, a clean lawn mower, is a good lawn mower. (Not a good picture, but the man is washing his water buffalo.)



One thing brought home to me at Clark AFB was the realization that American soldiers are buried in far away cemeteries all over the world. One of these is at Clark AFB. I have also been to one in Tunisia. I think it would be good for the Air Force Museum to develop a display of our cemeteries around the world. I have a small flag that flew over a grave at the Tunisia cemetery on Memorial Day that I would be happy to donate. Here is a picture of the one at Clark AFB:



Near the end of my 3 months, I realized that I had never had a chance to visit one of the rumored to be great Vietnam beaches. So, I scheduled a trip to Nha Trang, which I was told even have a scuba diving club. I had no sooner checked into the VOQ around 5 PM, when the front desk told me I had a call from a Maj Bud Rheinhart at Tan Son Nhut (I think Bud had previously worked in the Lab and after the war he was again assigned to the Materials Lab). I called him and he told me he needed me the next day at Tan Son Nhut to assist in a crash investigation. I informed him that I knew nothing of crash investigations. He told me that it didn't matter; they just needed someone from the Materials Lab to vouch for their foregone conclusion (the pilot is always wrong). So there went my day on the beach. Durn. The investigation involved the failure of a landing gear. From reviewing the failed part, it was obvious that the landing gear had hit something hard and a crack had initiated. When the aircraft came down again, the crack further opened and the landing gear failed. Their conclusion was that the pilot came in too low and hit a tree branch, and then the gear failed on landing (of course the crack could have come from a previous landing?). I got to know Bud much better when he came back to the lab and I never failed to remind him of the time he kept me from a nice day on the beach. I copied these pictures from the internet of Nha Trang today.



As my tour wound down, I found out that a Gen Townsend had an entire crew in Thailand working on Gunship II problems and they were getting ready to fly back to Wright-Patterson AFB. I made arrangements to fly over there and come home with them. On my last day at Tan Son Nhut, I arrived at the office early ready to catch a noon departure to Thailand, when the Colonel managing the office comes over and tells me I have to deliver a package to Bien Hoa Air Base not far from Saigon. I tried to argue that I had to catch the airplane to Thailand, but he said I was the only one available and I WAS GOING. So I ran to the flight line and starting asking about for anyone that could fly me to the base. Finally a helicopter crew told me they were flying to someplace beyond that base and would drop me off on the way and pick me up on the way back. I thanked them and explained it was my last day and I had to catch an airplane. "LAST DAY, no way we are taking you any where on your last day. Are you trying to get us all killed?" The words came at me fast, but then they smiled and said get ready to take off. They kept their word and picked me up about a half hour after they dropped me and headed back over Saigon to Tan Son Nhut. When all of a sudden, the helicopter began a tight downward spiral and the co-pilot was grabbing around his seat trying to find something. As my heart jumped to my throat, my first thought was: "Oh crap, on my last day." But then the co-pilot came up with a camera and turned and took the picture of a Vietnamese girl sun bathing topless on a building roof top.

After my tour, I was followed by Maj John Kleparis and then later by Capt John Breland and then I think the "volunteers" ran out. Each of us went to all of the air bases in Vietnam and tried to learn what we could. It wasn't easy, because the men we were talking to didn't understand things like fatigue cracking. That often made it difficult to dig up what the real issues were. I tried to explain what I was looking for at each base, but ended up just having them show me what they were repairing. I then sent back weekly reports of what I had seen in the maintenance shops. I don't know if I was able to influence our research at the lab or not. I can only hope that I did.

POST NOTE: In 2015 I took an organized tour of Vietnam (North and South). We did not visit the base areas I had been to, but I got to see many places that I could not see during the war and changes that have occurred in Vietnam since that time period. Their economy is one of the fastest growing in the world. People every where are friendly to Americans (84% of them were not alive at the time of the war). I talked to one man who had spent 5 years in a "Re-education Camp." He was now a mayor of a small local village. He seemed to have no regrets, nor animosity to America, for abandoning them. He said: "**The Cong won, we lost, but most importantly this is the first time in 100 years that our country has not been at war.**"

(more below)

Viet Nam Today

I have proposed to Dr Bob Evers (ML Alumni) to provide a presentation on travel in Vietnam in the fall of 2020 at a course he organizes on travel at the University of Dayton Life Long Learning Institute. Bob does a great job of organizing this course with presentations every year on interesting places to visit. We now just have to wait and see if UD opens this fall for on-site classes.

I am sure that many of you are probably shocked by the pictures of the beach areas in my write-up above. So I thought I would make the effort to explain what has happened in the past 45 years in Vietnam and provide a few pictures that I will be using in my fall presentation.

First there is a web article that I think summarizes what has happened fairly well. It reflects the writer's bias, but still tells the story. I recommend that you read it.

[Vietnam 40 years on: how a communist victory gave way to capitalist corruption | News | The Guardian](#)

Let me highlight some things I have experienced and learned in preparing my presentation for Dr. Evers.

- A country of contrasts, from vibrant cities to sleepy little villages. A country of natural beauty from Mekong Delta rice patties to the beautiful Sapa mountains. A country with exciting cuisines (particularly noodle dishes), world famous beaches and resorts, and friendly people.

- From 1976-1986, the country was politically and economically isolated from much of the world. However, with declining aid from Russia in the 1980's, economic reform was undertaken: 1986 reformers changed the government. The government encouraged private ownership of farms and factories, economic deregulation, and foreign investment, while maintaining control over strategic industries. Since about 1990 Vietnam has average almost 7% a year growth, one of world's fastest growing economies. It now has a poverty rate lower than China, India, and the Philippines

- Among the friendliest people of any country I have visited. Vietnam is considered by many travel organizations as safer than the United States.

- Vietnam has an export to import surplus of almost \$16B, which is helping fuel their growth. And the largest importer of Vietnam goods is (you guessed it) the United States.

- The other thing that is fueling their economy is tourism. This country, the size of California, gets 18 million visitors a year. About half of those are from China and South Korea. But 750,000 visitors each year are from the United States. (You saw the pictures of the resort areas above. Every major US hotel chain has hotels in Vietnam.)

- Saigon has about 8.4 million people, about the same size as New York City.

- Hanoi has more than 7 million people (Los Angeles has 4 million and Chicago has 2.7 million)

Some Reasons to Visit Vietnam

- **Vietnam has 8 UNESCO World Heritage Sites.**

Here are a few of them below:

- **Halong Bay (noted for its hundreds of limestone formations and clear water)**





- **Hoi An** (ancient town and city of lanterns). In 2018, Travel+Leisure Magazine ranked [Hôi An](#) as one of the world's top 15 best destinations to visit. The first picture is the town lit by lanterns. The second is its famous covered bridge.





- **The Imperial City of Hue** (throughout the war both sides for the most part resisted attacking historical sites. For unknown reasons, during the 68 Tet Offensive, the Cong attacked and badly damaged this historical site. Fortunately UNESCO has helped restore it. Here is a picture of the entrance gate after the war and 5 years ago, when I visited:
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- **My Son Temple** (Hindu temples from 4-13th Century)



- In my write-up I showed some of the magnificent rice fields of the south. But the Sapa mountain region has spectacular rice fields, certainly another reason to visit Vietnam:



- Historical culture survives in many places in Vietnam. Look at these beautiful Sunday market pictures at a Sapa region market:



- Life in the Mekong Delta, including this market boat is another thing not to be missed



In conclusion, you know Vietnam has reached the 21st Century, when you see people lined up for a Big Mac.



Saigon today

