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Vietnam shows new face in pursuit of U.S. trade:[01 Edition]

STORY and PHOTOS by DICK PIROZZOLO. Boston Herald. Boston, Mass.: Aug 21, 1994. pg. 018

Full Text (1835 words)

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SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

Dramatic change has come to Vietnam, the tiny Third World nation that looms large in an American nightmare, and the United States has become part of it.

Once parochial, Vietnam's cities are becoming international. Its future includes Pepsi, Pizza Hut and General Electric; two Boston-area companies, Gillette and Digital Equipment Corp., have exhibited in a trade show in Hanoi, once America's archenemy.

Soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War would hardly recognize parts of this land where many of them came of age more than two decades ago.

The engine of change is trade. Relations between the United States and Vietnam have warmed in the past year, especially since President Clinton lifted a 19-year U.S. trade embargo Feb. 3. Now the former enemies are gingerly exploring closer trade and diplomatic relations amid Vietnamese efforts to help resolve the tragedy of outstanding MIA cases.

And earlier this month, Le V. Bang, Vietnam's highest-ranking diplomat in the United States, came to Boston on an informal trade mission to get more Bay State companies to do business in his country. He predicted full diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam by 1996.

"I know the two countries are destined to work together," he said.

Giang Tran, who escaped Vietnam as a boy, made some money in real estate in Santa Ana, Calif., then returned to his homeland, is as qualified as any to speak for the new Vietnam.

"Half of the nation fought on the same side as U.S. servicemen," he explains from the Hanoi office of his San Diego-based firm, Vietnam Investment Information and Consulting. "About 40 percent of the 70 million Vietnamese were children during the '60s and '70s and don't even remember the war. But establishing relationships with Americans goes beyond doing business. The Vietnamese people genuinely like and trust Americans and share similar values when it comes to entrepreneurship, independence and perseverance."

Beyond the rapidly modernizing face of parts of Vietnam, however, the country retains another, older face. It's still a place of sorrow, struggle and determination best expressed at the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum in Hanoi, where

thousands of Vietnamese pay homage to the father of communist Vietnam. The inscription inside reads: "Nothing is more important than independence and freedom."

Despite its gains, Vietnam as a whole still qualifies as a backward nation, as it did decades ago: Car travel is slow, trains are crowded and uncomfortable, road-building is antiquated; rice fields are irrigated the same way they have been for thousands of years; cold storage for meat and produce is non-existent in the marketplace.

On the other hand, the country is rich in both human capability (reportedly 90 percent can read and write, many speak English) and in natural resources such as oil, now being developed by international consortiums. And its seacoast, the length of California, is attracting hotel developers, as veterans who remember China Beach and Vung Tau can easily imagine.

Taken as a whole, Vietnam today is a country of contrasts, where motorbikes crowd city streets while water buffalo bear the burden of transport in the nearby countryside; where modern hotels with Western cuisine tower over timeless slums; where the infamous Hanoi Hilton prisoner-of-war dungeon has become a backdrop for "Cheers" hats for sale.

A place of ghosts - and hope.

"When you talked to foreigners three years ago, the police would come," explains a waitress in Ho Chi Minh City, which many citizens still call Saigon. "'What did you say to him? What did he want to know?' they would demand. Now the government doesn't pay attention. Now there is more freedom."

As a prelude to the lifting of the U.S. embargo, the Vietnamese government in Hanoi relaxed rules on foreigners traveling in the country and on the conduct of Vietnamese citizens. In moving from a centrally planned economy toward a free-market system, it has allowed its citizens to enter into joint-venture agreements with foreign investors as well as to embrace Westerners and their practices.

Putting on a good face for foreigners seems to be a national passion these days. A 14-year-old girl, for example, running a cigarette stand in the former Saigon, told a photographer not to photograph an amputee, one of many in this war-torn land. "Don't show that about Vietnam," was her plea.

Beyond its newfound capitalism, however, Vietnam is unforgettably a communist country. Beyond the modern hurly-burly of Ho Chi Minh City, even in the lands of water buffalo and rice paddies, faded billboards still proselytize about the glory of the state.

As one former South Vietnam officer who was trained as a Navy SEAL in the United States puts it, "I do business here and they all know what I did in the war - we just don't talk about it."

Says Duong Thanh Duc, who immigrated to France from Vietnam in 1963 and is now a partner in a Vietnamese furniture-manufacturing business in Phan Theit: "The fact that I left the country in 1963 makes a difference in the way I'm regarded by party officials. Those who left after 1975 have a more difficult time."

That's because those who left earlier are given the benefit of the doubt: Duong could have left merely to get an education, for example, rather than to escape the communist regime.

Although the Vietnamese can count politeness as a national character trait, a Vietnamese-born woman who lives in Fremont, Calif., and came back to visit

after 16 years doesn't see it that way. Blame the ghosts of the past for that.

Among Vietnamese she's called Viet Kieu, which can mean simply "foreign Vietnamese" or, more sinisterly, Vietnamese-Americans who oppose doing business with the communist regime in Vietnam.

"We are treated differently," she complains. "We're spotted as Vietnamese-Americans and we're no longer Vietnamese."

Ho Chi Minh City - Vietnam's largest city, with about 3.5 million people - is where the present meets the past and the future.

Take the REX, which served as a U.S. military bachelors officers quarters in 1968. It is now a hotel conveniently situated on the corner of Le Loi and Nguyen Hue, the street of flowers. It fronts a plaza where on Sunday nights thousands of Vietnam's young people do what teen-agers do the Western world over - cruise the streets. Instead of cars, however, their prides and joys are Hondas and Yamahas, which cost about \$3,000 and are available on credit to those who can present evidence of employment.

Just around the corner stretches what once was Tu Do (Liberty) Street, formerly a mecca for GIs on three-day passes. But, like so much of the old Saigon, Tu Do Street is no more. It's now called Dong Khoi (Peace) Street. Gone are the bars and bar girls who asked GIs to "buy me tea," replaced by souvenir shops and restaurants catering to Vietnam's increasing number of tourists of varying means.

For a casual meal, there's fashionable Paloma Cafe; Maxim's offers five-star continental cuisine; The Vietnam House serves upscale Vietnamese food. A noteworthy piece of the past, however, survives amid the new: Givral's, a French-style cafe, founded in the early 1960s and made famous during the war as a meeting place for Vietnam's journalists and literati. A croissant there now costs the equivalent of 18 cents - a cheap journey to the past.

Meanwhile, inside the REX, Pham Thi Trang, 23, dances, her earnings going to support a mother, three brothers and grandmother. She wears the graceful ao dai that is seen less and less frequently in today's Vietnam. But the dance hall, with its 1950s innocence, is way out of step with the emerging international night-life scene of Ho Chi Minh City, where places like Thai Son, Cheers, Apocalypse Now, le P'tit Bistrot and the Q Bar attract an international crowd.

California expatriot David Jacobson founded the Q Bar with his girlfriend, California-bred Phuong Anh Nguyen. The decor of the bar, tucked under Saigon's City Theater, also smacks of California and is tres nouveau. It's the kind of place where Vietnamese, Americans, Japanese, Filipinos, Thais, Australians, French, Norwegians and Indonesians meet to drink until David decides to close for the night.

David prides himself on the fact that "this is a conversation bar. There is no pool table, no dart board, no television, just good booze (he's got the biggest selection of single-malt scotch in Saigon), good music (Ella Fitzgerald and rap) and good conversation."

David doesn't just run the place, he holds court. He greets newcomers with a handshake and introduces them around. Sometimes, to no one in particular, he'll make announcements. "Win's here. She's from Cambodia and opened a boutique in Saigon with some money she saved up. She really has a great sense of style," Dave continues as Win finishes parking her red Honda and enters, wearing jeans and an open crochet top over a Wonder Bra.

While Saigon is fast becoming an international city lacking architectural

character (its glass-covered new skyscrapers could as easily call Buenos Aires home), Hanoi is a tintype of Vietnam's colonial history that looks like it will retain its unique character despite rampant change. A gentle city of about 2.5 million, colored ochre by its stucco, it blends nicely with the green leaves and blossoms of banyan trees that shade its boulevards. It is in many ways a throwback to the time before the Vietnamese threw out the French and the north fought the United States in what natives call the Second Indochina War.

A Little Italian is an informal gathering spot, run by Deborah May and boyfriend Benjamin Bolto from Perth, Australia, a couple that came to Vietnam thanks to Ben's father, a lawyer who foresaw a bright economic future in Southeast Asia. May, who approaches food with a sense of humor, said of the night's special, "I mixed up some ingredients in the kitchen and it tasted good - so tonight's special is `Spaghetti Tasio!'"

Over pizza made with cheddar cheese, Cecile, a Frenchwoman who is getting over a "bad love affair," announces that she is planning to stay in Hanoi "maybe two weeks, maybe two months."

Cecile regales a group of Americans with a story about her experiences on the streets of Hanoi that afternoon.

"I saw this on the street," she says. "It looked to me like a French woman was adopting a Vietnamese baby and the birth mother was there wanting to say goodbye. The new mother seemed so cold. I think she was anxious to go home and didn't know if she would get back to France. When the mother handed her the baby, it was as if all the breath inside her came out and she collapsed on the sidewalk."

As Cecile tells the story, tears well up in her eyes and in the eyes of the three men and one woman in her audience.

Perhaps her story, more than any other, symbolizes both Vietnam's new hope for the future and old desperation and pain.

The Sunday Herald's wire services contributed to this report.

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People: Jacobson, David
Section: NEWS
ISSN/ISBN: 07385854
Text Word Count 1835



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