

2009 FARM STUDY TOURS

Vietnam: land of diversity

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SECTION 1
OVERVIEW

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TOP: A happy group of Vietnam study tourists with Vo Nguyen Huy (Mr Wee), the king of the Chau Doc pool table.
BOTTOM: Irrigation, Vietnam style.

As we flew in from the Gulf of Tonkin, up the Red River valley, we were presented with a beautiful patchwork of brilliant green rice fields interspersed with small villages. The Red River is appropriately named as it flows deep and wide with a heavy load of red silt from the mountains of North Vietnam. The valley is also Vietnam's second most important food bowl, behind the Mekong Delta in the south.

The next morning saw us heading by bus through these seemingly endless rice fields. The holdings on this end of the country are very small, usually subsis-

tence, which is probably the result of the communist heritage of North Vietnam and the various land reforms over the years.

Vietnam is now the second biggest rice exporter in the world, but it all comes from the south of the country. In the north, everything is done by hand – we didn't see even the most rudimentary farm machine until we had been in the country for a week.

We called in to a plant breeding institute which produces over half of the rice seed sold in the country. They also breed custard apples and other fruits, which made for a healthy lunch. After a long day in the fields, it was a relief to feel the cooling breezes of Halong Bay.

Back in Hanoi, we were treated to a great overview of agriculture in Vietnam by Geoff Morris, the country manager for the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) which handles most of Australia's agricultural aid projects. Not only does Geoff have a great knowledge of Vietnamese agriculture, he also speaks the language (plus a couple of hill tribe dialects) and drives himself in Hanoi and through the rest of the country. Anyone who has experienced Vietnamese traffic would recognise this as a very brave or foolish thing to do.

We worked our way down the country, seeing plenty of rice and vegetable farms, some irrigation schemes, eucalypt plantations, some nice beaches and some good cheap tailors. For some, the highlight of the trip was the bargain price on the pearls in the back streets of Nha Trang. For those with a more spiritual nature, the many temples and places of worship were the attraction.

After a sweep through the Mekong Delta, we left the tourist trail well and truly behind and travelled by land and river through to Cambodia. The River is the lifeblood of the country and the banks are packed with rice and maize storage facilities, fish farms and intensive cropping.

A fairly minimal gratuity was required so we didn't have to unpack the boat at the border and then it was on to Phnom Penh where the spectre of the killing fields seems to somehow still hang. It is hard to believe that such a seemingly peaceful people committed such atrocities only 30 odd years ago.

But when we got to Angkor Wat, the carvings on the temples seemed to suggest that mass killing and war has been a feature of the region for quite a while.

The great advantage of a trip to Vietnam/Cambodia is that a two week trip can cover a huge diversity of agriculture, landscapes and cultures. It is also easy to get to with friendly people and great hotels. Look for the next Greenmount Travel trip to Vietnam, probably in 2011.

