

More Musings On the Mekong

Visiting the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, we were required to cover our shoulders and knees. Everywhere present were men in olive greens uniforms, unsmiling, ever vigilant. Men in black are members of the KGB. It is quite apparent this is still a communist central government. Our guides somewhat nervously mocked their government- "We have three leaders" says Tommy (a name Vikingized from Tung) a Prime Minister, a President, and the head of the Communist Party. Obama come here in May. He will meet with all three, no one is sure who has the most power."

The wars have defined this country like water defines the rocks and hills. They declared their independence from the French in 1954, who had colonized their country since 1887. There were constant battles with the Chinese; and, lest we forget, the Americans. We saw the Hoa Lo prison, famously dubbed "The Hanoi Hilton". The name conjured up a cringe as I recalled images of horror from my teens. The prison originally was used by the French to intern Vietnamese political prisoners. Their cruelty was depicted in sculptures, photos, and wall carvings. They, of course, underplayed the torture of Americans. Exiting this place there are photos of demonstrations around the world- Australia, France, England, and America, protesting the Vietnam War.

This adventure brought me back to face my youth. I remember the fear of friends being drafted. I remember Memorial Days honoring the fallen from my high school. The memories are more intense for my husband whose high draft number kept him out of the war.

Our guide grew up in the post war era here. He said when he was small he envisioned the leaders of the United States with horns sprouting from their heads. If they were not evil, why else would a government authorize dropping bombs on innocent villagers, he reasoned. The Vietnamese seem to have less judgment of the people in the United States as these were the faces they saw protesting the war.

I don't think when we planned this trip I imagined coming face to face with feelings I experienced in my girlhood. The images of wooden fishing boats, men with long oars rhythmically pushing and pulling, and people wearing traditional conical hats elicited memories stuck deep in my psyche. This all feels simultaneously foreign and familiar. Like a vigorously shaken martinis travel is good for shaking up our lives, jarring us from the comfort and predictability of the rules and rituals defining our daily lives.