

## Hue—the Imperial City

Sexual Intelligence continues reporting live from 3 weeks in Vietnam. After an uneventful flight, I arrived in Hue, a peaceful city (population 300,000) of lakes, gardens, and the Perfume River. I was delighted to find that my hotel room which I have booked online at [hotels in Hue](#), faced the lovely wide river, so close I could see and hear the water taxis and miniature barges from my balcony.

The river here is everything—a source of transportation, food, poetry, and, less tangibly, the emotional heart of the area. Upstream, the river valley passes through hills crowned with old mausoleums and other royal monuments. Downstream, the river carries commerce to the sea, connecting Hue with China, Hong Kong, Cambodia, and the rest of Asia as it has done for centuries.

I spent a day touring the traditional sites. First, I visited the lovely Thien Mu Pagoda, a 400-year-old Buddhist monastery (religious school, temple, burial site, and garden) on the site of a 2,000-year-old Cham Temple. By the 1930s it had become a hotbed of Buddhist opposition to French colonialism; in 1963 one of its monks became world-famous when he drove all day to Saigon's downtown, sat down in the street and set himself on fire to protest the corrupt Ngo Dinh Diem regime the U.S. was supporting. The burned shell of his car, and the well-known photo of his self-immolation, are on display here.

Next, I went to the gigantic 19<sup>th</sup>-century Citadel, a small city that was home to emperors, their hundreds of wives, concubines, and mandarins, and thousands of workers supporting them. A walled compound with spectacular buildings in various condition, it's a showcase of Vietnamese architecture, religious practice, and a 200-year-old ruling dynasty that only ended with the Communist "liberation" of Vietnam in 1945.

The next day I went outside Hue to visit the mausoleums of 3 different emperors. Each contained the traditional elements (giant ceremonial gate, mammoth stone staircases, giant stone obelisks and inscribed stone, life-sized stone soldiers guarding the tomb), although each was executed differently. In addition, each offered a carefully designed lake, lovely formal gardens, thousands of trees in their natural setting, and grounds for royal meditation. Meditating on the grounds of your own future burial site must be interesting, if a person can stand it.

In addition, I had a few more prosaic adventures. At the end of a country lane, I found the small temple dedicated to the elephants which sometimes died battling tigers in the Royal Arena. My guide was skeptical that we'd find it, but we did—the first tourist-free place I'd enjoyed in the whole country.

I then went to a workshop in which a dozen half-naked men sweated to make enormous bronze bells weighing tons each. The fires (over 1,000 degrees) roared as apprentices fed hardwood into or around various clay molds. I also watched old craftsmen, sitting barefoot on their heels or a single brick, carve delicate designs (backwards!) into the molds. There was still plenty to see and questions to ask, but with my hair and clothes reeking from smoke, I finally ran out of the hot, dark, noisy—and wonderful—place.

I was really eager to see a Vietnamese train station. Access inside them is strictly limited, so Saigon and Hanoi were out; Hue was my big chance. Of course, the petty bureaucrat in charge firmly dismissed my idea, asking for an actual ticket going somewhere. Finally, I had my guide push the guard really hard on behalf of the famous professor from California, and I was allowed to see...tracks! Unused trains standing still! A few workers "examining" things and even pretending to repair stuff. It was a long day, capped by a bath, room service, and writing this blog. It was easy to go to sleep. I was sure I'd dream about driving south to

Danang, Hoi An, and the South China Sea.

### South From Hue—Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death

As planned, I drove south from Hue today. But the day was nothing like I'd planned. It was, in fact, amazing—a perfect example of why even a great book or video about a place can't match the experience of being there. It was drizzling when I left Hue at 10am, and within an hour it was raining—the only thing that could dampen my anticipated enjoyment of Hoi An's famous beaches.

I drove south along a gorgeous coastline, past an airport built by “the Americans,” bunkers left by “the Americans,” and demographic changes driven by the war. In this area just south of the DMZ, in the narrowest part of the country, the U.S. military had tried to interrupt the north's supply lines supporting the war in the south. Tens of thousands of people living here died or fled.

We eventually ascended into the mountains and switch backed our way through the drizzle, up past the clouds and power lines. Thousands of feet below the bay glistened.

Just a few minutes later we began our descent, on a serpentine road that varied from blacktop to muddy trail. The occasional posse of farm animals stopped or accompanied us. At the bottom of the mountain we drove a few minutes on a nicely paved road through several villages, when I saw a big crowd of people spilling onto the road. Following the travel principle “stop for crowds, they might be doing something interesting,” we stopped.

It was a Buddhist military funeral.

We spent over two hours watching and participating.

It was all there—the altar with the guy's photo, incense, and offerings (food, cigarettes, tea), monks in gray chanting and leading the group in call-and-response, guys in black playing simple haunting music on a gong, flute, and drum, about 40 mourners in white on the ground, a dozen old men in military regalia, and about 60 or 70 men, women, and children standing around watching, talking, laughing, smoking.

Apparently, I was welcome to hang around and take photos as much as I wanted. I put a few dollars into one of the donation envelopes, and was immediately urged to light a stick of incense and offer my respects, which of course I did.

The people seemed as interested in me as I was in them, and a few even smiled for photos. Once they saw me taking pictures of the young children (well-know travel principle number 2), some even brought their kids near for a shot. Meanwhile, the funeral chanting continued.

Finally, it was time to move the coffin itself. The altar was moved aside, and about a dozen young men lifted the thing, carried it through the crowd, and placed it on a bier made of large red wooden planks.

As they struggled to get it out onto the road, various people offered increasingly loud advice. Eventually the whole thing—altar, mourners, musicians, coffin, soldiers, villagers—headed down the road toward a hill about a half-mile away. Interrupted by the occasional truck or motorbike, the procession of several hundred people was more or less dignified—with plenty of talking and smoking along the way—until it turned left. Then, coffin, altar, and old people alike half-scrambled, half pulled each other up the unkempt, stony path. It was a perfect replica of the common traffic pattern in Vietnam—no lanes, pushing and shoving, noisy, the occasional injury, old and young mixed together.

We finally reached the top, sort of, and there was a resting period. Then the military veterans did a little ceremony over the coffin, draped it in the Vietnam flag, and then

relaxed a while over smokes. Meanwhile, several people started digging the actual grave, while the Buddhist monks, dressed in gray, chanted in unison.

That took roughly forever, but there was plenty to look at on the crowded little hill. There were 3 or 4 other burial sites, a few little altars, and of course the various people giving advice to the grave diggers. A few hundred yards beneath us a freight train rolled slowly by. Finally, it was time to carry and then slide the coffin into the hole, which of course wasn't quite big enough. So that was the next temporary delay.

The coffin was finally slid into the grave, and then the widow, barefoot and dressed in white, started wailing and proceeded to faint. It was quite dramatic, and seemed a bit choreographed (note of cultural sensitivity: I say this without any judgment whatsoever). People started throwing flowers and handfuls of dirt onto the coffin below us when a loud argument began. Apparently, the people from Hanoi have different burial traditions than those of this area, and the two contingents were struggling over some procedure. The argument got louder and erupted into some shoving. The widow—suddenly recovered from her fainting—charged over and loudly berated the apparent leader of the northerners, who shouted right back at her.

Then the widow tried to hit the guy, he tried to hit back (remember, they're both standing on soft, unstable earth on a little hill, surrounded by people paying various degrees of attention), and soon bodies were moving every which way. A few guys finally had to take Mr. Northern Ritual away from the widow, order was restored, and we finished the burial. People started straggling down the hill, cigarettes were smoked, food was prepared (which we skipped, thank you), and people appeared to congratulate each other on a job well-done. I snapped a last picture or two, climbed into my car which had magically appeared, climbed in, and continued south to Hoi An.

Life, indeed, goes on.

Source: [Get Vietnam Visa](#)