

The city with two names

Ho Chi Min City (HCMC), as it was proclaimed moments after the North “liberated it,” (the official government line), has become a booming capitalist megalopolis. The communist North may have won the war but socialism has lost and Saigon is rising again. Large department stores, Pizza hut, KFC, and designer stores line the streets. Beneath the edifice of the boom, lies the war which ruined many lives shaped the destinies of millions of people. The reminders of the war are everywhere in Ho Chi Min City, every museum has its courtyard filled with old tanks, guns, and bombs from the war. The Presidential Palace of the former South Vietnam government is kept as it was in 1975 when North Vietnamese troops smashed through the gates with there Soviet-made tanks. The maps on walls of the bunker beneath the palace still show a series of had written troop positions showing the broken lines of defense as the ARVN army retreated south. The War Remembrance Museum, formally the “Museum of American War Crimes,” shows an, all be it, one sided look at the horrors of war. The museum is full of pictures documenting the war, mostly from Western news sources, and surprisingly most of the time it’s original captions. There are a few added lines such as, “American soldiers lead prisoners to concentration camps,” which I’m sure did not air in the original source. While the museum certainly had a one sided bent, it was not as blatantly propaganda filled as I expected. Among the more disturbing sections is the portion devoted to the use of Agent Orange, which included a couple grossly deformed fetuses in a jar attributed to the American use of Agent Orange. While there are plenty of buildings and museums illustrating the toll of the “American war of aggression on the Vietnam” (as it is called in Vietnam), the streets of Saigon are filled with the living reminder of the toll paid by the losers. You can’t walk a block without hearing the cry “where do you want to go” from the many moto and cyclo drivers/peddlers that hang out on the street corners. Talking with any of the English speaking ones inevitably leads to their service fighting with or in the American army. In a country starved for English speakers to work in the flourishing tourist industry they are still, even today, frozen out of the good paying jobs in retribution for their past transgressions. I spent an hour drinking Bia Hoi (Vietnam’s version of draught beer) with a self described ex-Marine (who defiantly spoke like it) turned moto driver. For the most part the conversation stayed away from the war but at one point with some bitterness and profanity he mentioned how the VC had put him in prison in 1975 after the war. However he added quickly, “That is the past, we look to the future now.”



The War Remembrance Museum

Teletype machines in the bunkers beneath the former South Vietnamese Presidential palace.



Statues of Ho Chi Min side by side with the Virgin Mary and the Buddha.



Woman in front of Communist poster.



Incense coils in a Chinese temple in the China town section of Saigon.

Statue of Ho Chi Min in front of a Colonial period building in Saigon.



Hanging hat at a temple in Saigon.