

## Rice paper drying in Nha Trang in the countryside



## Piggies on the farm



# The Sandovals see Southeast Asia Part 4

Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam , & Hong Kong

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## *Nha Trang*

My focus for Vietnam was to see how the people really lived, as opposed to what the tourists are usually shown. For that reason, I couldn't wait to partake in the Nha Trang countryside tour, offered by Mr. Dung at [www.nhatrangrivertour.com](http://www.nhatrangrivertour.com). We had a custom tour, since we didn't have time to ride a bicycle around. His e-mail is [nhatrangrivertour@yahoo.com](mailto:nhatrangrivertour@yahoo.com). Four of us had a driver, Mr. Dung as our guide, fresh fruit, lunch, and a day full of seeing family industries and adventure for \$40 a piece. June and Arthur, a fun couple from Great Britain, joined us for our day of education and sightseeing, while I pummeled Mr. Dung with questions about life and customs in his native land. If you can get a larger group for the van, the price decreases accordingly. But, it was nice having only four of us to get in and out of the van at our numerous sites.

This port is being cultivated as a beach resort, and Russians head up the list of those visiting from foreign lands. There is an island you can reach by gondolas to spend the day at an amusement style park and 5-star resort. The cruisers that took that option said it was outstanding and not crowded at all. The beach front right along town is nicely developed with grass and huts,

and beautiful beaches. Driving along that stretch of town reminded me more of Huntington Beach than Vietnam. First stop on our tour was the embroidery factory, where young girls spend months turning plain silk into intricate pictures. You could buy all sorts of silk products, from material, to the native Vietnamese costume, purses, and large embroidered pictures costing thousands of dollars.

From there, we left the tourist area, and went onto the back roads of Nha Trang. Nha Trang is a town of entrepreneurs (in a Communist country, so go figure), from the numerous street-front one-room barber shops and beauty salons, to the mechanic shops fixing motor bikes and bicycles. Little stores selling dried goods are interspersed. Larger open areas sell meat and produce on the ground, from farmers that bring it in fresh from the farm to sell.

As we meandered onto smaller and smaller streets, I asked how the locals knew where to go, as the streets did not appear to be marked in any way with road signs, and I had not seen any maps of the area. The guide said you just grew up in the area, and knew where to go. The streets did not seem to be on any kind of grid, so even if I could have driven with all the cross-traffic coming at me, I would still be circling the streets endlessly, looking for a landmark to get me back where I started from. The internet site for our tour said we were visiting “villages” where different products were made, so I envisioned little neighborhoods where all the families made a certain product. While that might have been true at one time, it is not today. The stove “village” was an extended family that produced stoves from clay in their over-sized jungly backyard. The clay mixture is put into a mold, that then dries for a day or two before it is fired in the backyard kiln, which is a large, handmade brick structure. The ovens have wood put in the bottom, which turns to a charcoal. A pot is then placed over the round stove and cooks food. We actually saw them in quite a few houses we visited or peeked into in our travels that day. The family brought home a fighting cock on their motorbike. The cock was loose between the father and son, and would fight during Tet.



Next stop was to see a Buddhist shrine, that also houses an orphanage and old folks home. Apparently, they take kids abandoned on the streets, some of which were quite tiny. The wee ones were playing in a big room with cement floors, with no furniture or toys to speak of. They did have a toy tambourine, and sang us a song. The area designated the kitchen for this operation was an open area covered with a roof, with some big pots on the fire. All the kids came to say hello, and loved to see their friends in our video camera. Our travel-mates had thought to bring pens to share. I wish I would have brought crayons and coloring books. Here were kids with nothing, who were so happy and friendly. I thought of all the kids in the US who have so much and seem so unhappy, and wondered if they would appreciate all that they had if they could have switched places for even a day. I thought the kids had weird haircuts because of head lice, but it was done in the bud-  
dhist fashion, for both girls and boys.

### The kids and kitchen at the Buddhist orphanage



From there, we visited a family with a shed out back for their mat making industry. They make very large mats that people use for their living room furniture and bed, all in one. Or, small mats are made to sell to tourists for place mats. The grandpa spun straw, with the biggest smile on his face. Now, this was a stress-free job. The loom is so large that one woman sits on it, and the other one sits next to it with piles of straw dyed different colors. She twists a piece of colored straw around the top of a big stick in three turns, then shoves the stick between the ropes on the loom. The first woman then slides the wood piece on the loom to compact the straw into the mat. It looked so easy, and they were as fast as a machine in their actions. Then, it was my turn to try. I would have never known what color to put on next, as there were no written directions to follow. But, even with that instruction, I couldn't get the straw to wrap around the top and stay there until I could shove it through the loom. So, it took three tries before I wound it right. Then, I had quite a time putting the stick in between the ropes correctly. It took me around two minutes to put in one piece of straw. I figure I could have got a mat done in a less than a year, if I really kept at it. They sold 4 place mats for \$6, which I am sure was tripled for the tourists. So, I would starve to death as a mat maker in Vietnam.



Gay making a mat. Grandpa spinning straw

Next stop was to have fresh fruit in this home that was hundreds of years old, with furniture made out of natural wood from the area. Their altar housed all the ancestors' pictures, as well as incense, fresh fruit, and cookie boxes. From there, we drove out deeper into the countryside, through the rice paddies, dotted with the occasional worker and water buffalo. Herons and other birds hovered over the fields. Field workers and city dwellers alike wear the all-purpose conical hat. The family ushered us into the shed in the backyard where they make hats by hand. You start with twigs that get twisted into the skeleton of the hat, and get secured with straw. Next, you place the treated straw on the skeleton in long vertical strips, making sure there are no loose spaces. Then, you sew the straw in place with a needle and thread, but no thimble. This sewing was my task. It

was hard for me to determine where to place my needle on the inside, when I could only see the outside, so that it would come up next to the previous stitch. Then, I had trouble poking the needle through. The family was quite kind in showing me how easy it was, and only snickered occasionally at my lack of talent. They then coat the outside with palm wax, and add a fabric strap. These sell to the tourists for \$1 each. At my billing rate, and my speed, each hat might cost \$10,000.00. These all-purpose hats can be used to keep out the sun and rain, to dump water over your head when you are hot, to collect water from the stream for a drink, and to carry your produce from the field. After their patience, I had to buy a hat, which was quite the hit in the airport. But I must say, it works as great sun protection as I sit in the sun to write this up.



If you think I would starve making hats and mats, I couldn't have made it as a baker, and I do have experience making bread. Once again, this is a backyard operation, with the dog roaming next to the pile of fresh baked buns. They must mix the dough by hand, as I saw no electricity in sight. They rolled the dough in large rounds and set it on a brick tray to rise. Then, three of them stretched it into a flat round with their hands, and wound it into a long bun in three rolls with the hand. It went on another tray to rise again. From there, the oven master put the dough rolls onto a long stick and shoved it into the wood burning oven that resembled a pizza oven. He had the knack to remove the stick with the rolls staying in the oven. He did this over and over, while removing freshly baked buns that smelled and tasted terrific. Yummy!

We drove through more fields straight out of the pages of National Geographic to the rice paper making factory. While this was a larger operation than some of the others, it still appeared to have the labor provided by one family. The field was dotted with large straw mats covered in bright yellow and white. I had no idea it was rice paper drying. Even when I found out what it was, I thought it was rice paper that you wrote letters on. I didn't know it was rice paper that got

turned into noodles and won ton wrappers. This open shed was covered in very large vats with some hot brew mixture cooking away. When it was brewed enough, it went through a large hose onto a straw mat that was placed on a conveyer belt. The belt went through a cooking area that wasn't too big. Then, the mats were collected by a person pulling off the mats and stacking them, to take out in the sun to dry. When they were dry enough, the dried paper went to a machine that cut the paper into noodles. A bunch of pigs were kept in pens in the back, so I presume they eat some byproduct from the production line.

### The baker and the vegetable field



Making rice paper and noodles on the farm.

By then, the driver had decided I must be a really crazy tourist for asking so many questions, so offered to take us to his ancestral house out in the country, which had been in the family for centuries. We jumped at the chance. The front yard was covered with large piles of dried long grass that had been twisted into a circular pattern. I thought it had some special significance, but it turned out it was for the cows, that usually hang out there. The door was built in the Chinese style, so that you had to stoop your head down to get in. This meant that enemies coming in were at a disadvantage, and that you had to bow to the ancestors, who have the best place for the altar when you enter. There was essentially one big room that served as bedroom and kitchen. Another large area housed the wooden table that the family had been using for 500 years. It was as strong as ever.



**Our driver's ancestral home, with the altar.**

We wound around some more roads that lead us to the river. A man in a row boat had figured out how to row the oars with his feet instead of his hands. We turned off the road and into a jungly area, only to get out at our lunch destination. It had a thatched roof overlooking the river, with a rickety bridge nearby. The locals used this narrow bridge to cross on motorbikes that made the whole structure shake. It was a scene right out of a movie, while the table was piled high with all sorts of delicacies. Our lunch partners were squeamish about the sanitation level, so Joe and I ate all we could and didn't make a dent in our lunch.

We then went to the top of the hill to see the white pagoda, and the view of fields and town from the top, and went to the market, that has stalls for locals and tourists alike. They dye watermelon seeds bright red and eat them like nuts.

We drove back through the fishing village, where all the boats were in port for the lunar new year. They all are painted blue so the bottoms blend in with the ocean, and don't scare off the fish.

**Our river front lunch by the rickety bridge**



**High density housing abuts the fishing boats**



**Market transport & the White Buddha**







Our final look at the contradictions between the new areas of town with fancy resorts and the old countryside with fishing boats and family industries was on a modern bridge with sidewalks (unheard of in Vietnam). Walking down the middle of the 4 lane highway was a little old man with a cane. Numerous motorbikes stopped to offer him a ride, as he appeared to be blind, and maybe deaf, if he didn't hear the big trucks that almost ran him over honking. But, he just kept walking down the center of the road, obviously with just the right karma. Do what you can to go to Nha Trang, as soon as you can, before the charm of the people and their way of life goes the way of the the conical hat. If you hurry, you may just see the old man in the street.