

Shine on

Four decades after the war he once covered, James Fox – author of *White Mischief* – returns to Vietnam for the first time

I barely recognised Saigon from 40 years ago when I was reporting the war. It was acutely disorientating, like a nightmare of being suddenly lost in a familiar place. My gyring compass could fix, at least, on the Continental Hotel, scrubbed almost unrecognisably out of character since then. Only its façade is unchanged from 1972 – or indeed from the Fifties, when the Continental provided the pivotal location for Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. I searched in vain for the shabby, cockroached Hotel Royal, where a few of us journalists used to bed down. Its proprietor, M. Ottavi, of the old Corsican mafia of Indochina, was addicted to opium, which he took, like a gentleman, with formal punctuality. Opium has a tendency to slow the waterworks and, when the quality stuff from Vientiane was held up by hostilities in 1972, its cruder replacement caused M. Ottavi extra exasperating hours addressing the porcelain, his palm flattened against the wall. As we left for the front, he gave us Talleyrand's exhortation to young diplomats: 'Above all, gentlemen, not too much zeal!'

Back in Vietnam for the first time since then, now with my wife and son, we divided our time between chasing the past and flopping near water. One immediate diversion on arrival, however, was to the snake park and venom-research station at Dong Tam in the Mekong Delta – a place where only Vietnamese families seem to go – because I wanted my 11-year-old son to know what it feels like to have a large python wrapped around his neck. (Whenever it moves, you imagine it tightening.)

And so, next day, to Da Lat, in the Central Highlands, where the French used to holiday, a group of whose villas, designed in granite, Brittany brutalism or domestic Colditz style, now constitute the Ana Mandara Villas hotel. The food here is excellent. The landscape around Da Lat is green, hilly and wooded with pine, a little like coastal Portugal or parts of Scotland. This region is the country's orchard and its garden. The central food market – which makes any glistening Korean vegetable shop in New York look like a corner store – has, on its first floor, a mass of cafés where you can eat lovely spring rolls, piling pork and greenery, sweet basil, bean shoots and mint onto >



Left, Jimmy Fox at the snake park in Dong Tam. Below, Vietnam's Emperor Khai Dinh in Hue in 1916

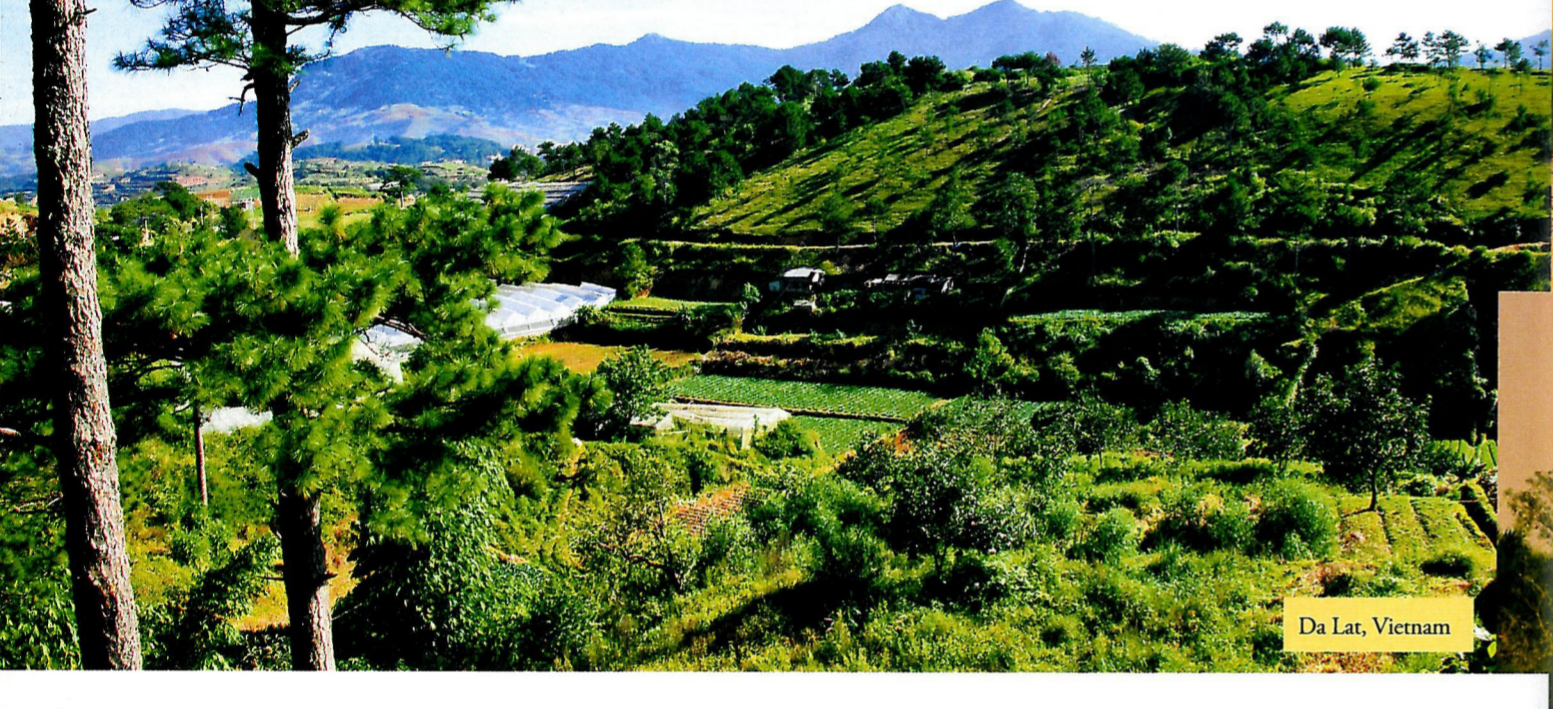


Left, James Fox and his wife Bella Freud at the Nam Ban Pagoda, Da Lat. Below, Jimmy Fox aboard the steam train from Da Lat to Trai Mat. Below left, a snooty resident of the zoo at the Dong Tam snake park



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Da Lat, Vietnam



Clockwise from top left, a fisherman at dawn in Hoi An; Bella with a python; cafés in Hoi An's Old Town; James with North Vietnamese Army veterans; Don Bet, on the Mekong River

< the paper-thin galettes before wrapping them up like fat cigars.

After a week of this kind of food – eating, as my wife Bella did, My Quang soup for breakfast each day – you feel markedly light and energised, very pure indeed. The soul of Vietnamese food, as any scholar will tell you, is in the stock, which is superior to any other, a subtlety owed in secret part to the grilled onion, star anise and cinnamon, which is added only in the last hour of the four hours or so of conventional bone simmering.

We spent one morning in the airy Nam Ban Pagoda, outside Da Lat, which doesn't seem to be in the guidebooks. In front of a giant Buddha, pyramids of Coca-Cola, Fanta and watermelon juice had been erected as tokens of respect. In the gloom, a monk tolled a low gong to wake the Buddha so he could hear the wishes of his visitors. But the real revelation was the garden of this pagoda – a garden empty of tourists, and indeed of any people at all, a place of great beauty and peace, of orchards of fruit and jacaranda, of box hedges and benches for contemplation. It had a formality about it, but a rough one, like a potting garden. Cultivated by the monks, it had their Taoist sayings pinned to the trees. I could hardly imagine spending a more delightful, peaceful hour anywhere on earth. Having worked so hard, we flew on to

Da Nang and to a superb hotel, the Fusion Maia, sitting on 17 miles of rockless beach stretching south of the port. We spent four nights here in a room with a large private pool in a walled garden, yards from the sea. The deal included two free spa treatments a day. And this in a hotel not outrageously expensive! Unlike many smart hotels, there's a lot to do here – it's fun. With the help of the spa's 55 very friendly attendants, you can try out things you always meant to do, like 'laughing yoga', meditation or Vietnamese cooking lessons – which we did.

The big outing is to Hoi An, an old port as if from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, with lanterns and bridges and small streets famous for their tailoring shops. We had a perfectly cut, pale-blue woollen suit made overnight for my 11-year-old son, Jimmy. Tipped off by the tailor, we had supper at Bale Well, a place for the locals and wised-up students down an alley off Trang Hung Dao whose speciality was skewers of barbecued pork. The madame of the place, like a faded sinister beauty from a David Lynch film, took a shine to the boy. 'Handsome', she growled, hand-feeding him her custom-rolled Goi Cuon.

'We set off for the old 'demilitarised zone', the scene of some of the major battles of the war, so I could cover old ground and we could see superb scenery. Driving over the mountains from Da Nang to Hue, with the sea to our right and fairytale forests to our left, gave a

real feeling of adventure. The beaches are incomparable, but so remote for most tourists that the Vietnamese will surely be able to protect this inheritance for many years to come. This is Highway One, the road north, nicknamed the 'Street Without Joy' by the French. We drove over steep passes and along high hillsides where General Giap, the military genius who defeated the French and the Americans, had done his usual trick of dragging up his artillery in bits and pieces on buffalos and bicycles under the cover of trees and night – which was how he won the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, ending France's rule in Indochina. To my amazement, I learned from our guide that Giap is still alive – aged 100.

We drove to Dong Ha and Quang Tri, where I last saw their inhabitants – terrified by the mortars and artillery – fleeing south to Hue and Da Nang, along with many South Vietnamese soldiers. It looked then as if the war would be over in weeks, though in fact it continued for another three years. I recognised nothing. Giap once said that the Americans had never understood the war, which is why they lost. Its architect, secretary of defense Robert McNamara, agreed, realising afterwards that the Vietnamese were fighting a war for independence and were never simply tools of the Russians or the Chinese. 'We were wrong,' said McNamara. 'Terribly wrong.'

Dong Ha and Quang Tri are both now built up and new, but at Quang Tri a school that >



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Below, the bar at La Residence in Hue. Left, a Vietnamese floating market

Left, Buddhist monks at prayer. Right, La Residence in Hue. Below left, the waters off Ebony Island, Nha Trang



I remember vividly the beer I drank in 1972, in the Cercle Sportif's dilapidated bar, with a last remaining Frenchman, the sound of artillery in the background

< was shot to pieces has been preserved. Its shrapnel-scarred shell serves as a plant shop, filled with shrubs and flowers and presided over by a woman in her 50s who, back in 1972, had made that horror exodus on foot. She didn't want to talk about the past, except to ask me, through the guide, 'Do you have any Vietnamese children?'

Hue, the citadel of the old imperial city, bore the brunt of Giap's 1968 offensive; much of it was destroyed as the US Marines retook it from his troops in 26 days of bloody fighting. But there's still enough to marvel at: long cloisters of dragon architecture and royal rooms which were miraculously spared. In the museum, I had an extraordinary encounter with a group of North Vietnamese Army veterans, all in full uniform and on an outing to revisit their old battlefields, the ones I had reported on in 1972. I would have given much to talk to them then. One of them told me his three sons had died from the effects of Agent Orange, the defoliant sprayed by the Americans that is still causing horrendous deformities three generations later. And yet, despite these war crimes, he said, 'I'm glad we have made peace with the Americans.' Another had been taught English by the Russians and, aged 19, had therefore been handed the job of interrogating downed American pilots. 'What is your name?' he barked fiercely at me, to prove his credentials. 'What base did you fly from?' We all laughed, but it wouldn't have been funny at the time.

In Hue we stayed at La Residence, a finely restored Twenties art-deco hotel on the banks of the Perfume River. Here, we had the very

best food of all, Vietnamese fused with French. Yet I couldn't separate this building from its past, when it was gutted by room-to-room fighting in 1968. You can see it in YouTube clips, the fighting along Le Loi Street, where the hotel stands. It was the first time the US Marines had been in close combat of this kind since 1950 in Seoul. Nor could I separate my favourite building just down the road, the Cercle Sportif. It was built in the Thirties in the nautical moderne style, and photographs show tennis tournaments and the elegance of French social life in Indochina. In 1968 its billiard table was the slab for Marines, wounded while barding up and down this street. I remember vividly the beer I drank in 1972 in its then-dilapidated bar with a last remaining Frenchman, the sound of artillery in the background. He was the manager of the Hue water company, whose tenure was clearly up. Now, I was standing on the roof terrace of this former tennis club, its main rooms refurbished with chinoiserie, a large neon Carlsberg sign along its front elevation and the flag of a united Vietnam fluttering from its ramparts.

There is so much to enjoy in Vietnam: mile upon mile of empty white beaches, the best street food in the world and a Buddhist culture where tourists are barely noticed. If you wander and probe without too keen an agenda, you can't fail to find yourself in some quiet and delightful places. It seems astonishing to say so, considering how it wasn't always like this. □

BOOK IT Cleveland Collection offers a nine-night tour of north and central Vietnam from £2,375 a person, including flights with Vietnam Airlines (clevelandcollection.co.uk or 020 7843 3531).



Bella in the garden of the Nam Ban Pagoda

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