

Reasons To Hate Vietnam

Hanoi, Vietnam

Oh Vietnam, how I hate you... Let me count the ways...

I Hate Vietnam's Lies

I'm tired of being lied to. It's as if the population has a compulsive lying habit.

I was lied to when I instructed a shuttle bus driver from the airport to transport us to a specific hotel (where a man jumps out of a building claiming this is the address I asked for, insisting that he's full, but will take us to another one around the corner). I was lied to when picking up a spare backpack left at a Hanoi hotel, with the staff trying to extort US\$30 from me for a few days of keeping it chained to a desk in the corner of their lobby—we walked off without paying.



I'm constantly being lied to for stupid, simple, insignificant stuff as well. Like when I was purchasing some rather interesting cutout/popup greeting cards from a tiny store outside the tourist bubble. Tatiana asked how they were made, and the woman motioned that she made them herself with a scalpel. This was a total fabrication—I could see the bloody burn marks left from a laser that created the obviously mass-

produced cards. I suppose she put that barcode sticker on the back of the card as well, huh? Liars. So many damn liars.

I Hate Vietnam's Dual Pricing

Although common in many countries, alternate pricing for foreigners is visible and in your face in Vietnam. The same boat ride that a tourist pays 100,000 dong for, finds your Vietnamese citizen neighbor paying 80,000d. I might haggle for a piece of fruit, but my ending price is still twice that of the local buying it next to me, because the vendor inflated the initial price 400%.



Most foreigners are seen as targets of opportunity. According to Nguyen Huu Viet, an official from the Tourism Department of Hanoi, overcharging foreign tourists is not necessarily a kind of fraud, but part of the "culture".

An excerpt from an article entitled ["The price isn't quite right"](#):

"American and Russian tourists are very generous but the most generous customers are from Japan, they hardly bargain at all," says Thu Huong, who works in a small souvenir shop in the Old Quarter. "Even with a price 10-times the going rate, a

Japanese customer might consider it cheap. But Italian or German tourists would just take a look and smile."

The more naive of these tourists are called "ga beo" (fatty chicken), a slang term for those that jump at the price of \$100 for a fake \$10-Rolux watch from China or \$40 for a \$5-dollar-string of artificial pearls.

"To be honest I don't really care about the souvenir shops or fruit sellers trying to get a bit more cash out of a foreigner, haggling for goods is part of the game," says Daniel Lewenstein, an American lawyer living in Vietnam on and off for 10 years. "But it's really annoying when there's a set price and people try to chance their arm anyway, like the last time I arrived at Noi Bai airport the taxi driver tried to charge me VND280,000 for a trip to town even though it said VND150,000 on the sign!"

I Hate Vietnam's Noise

It seems like this country has developed or enhanced every known way to pollute the environment with noise. The decibel level reaches a point on the street where I need to put ear plugs in because my ears are "eeeeeeeeeeeeeing" by the time I get back inside the hotel.

Hundreds of thousands of muffler-less vehicles belch sound as they zoom through the streets. Horns are repeatedly honked by every motorist, on average, every five to seven seconds. They honk when passing someone; they honk when turning; they honk when pissed; they honk when happy; they honk when people aren't moving fast enough; they honk when they're driving the wrong direction, against traffic on a one-way street; they honk to show off their custom horn; and they honk because everyone else is honking next to them. I watch and listen as some just keep the horn depressed as they drive along the avenues. In Hanoi, not a moment passes in the day when you don't hear the sound of a horn—inside your hotel room, or not.

Socialist megaphones are installed in Hanoi that, several times daily, force tourists and residents alike to plug their ears to keep them from bleeding. The volume that emits from these hour-long news, weather, music, and advertisement announcements is actually so loud that it drowns out the honking. It's that loud.

Having a street-facing hotel room in Vietnam is one of the last things you really want in the country, especially when you have one of these microphone attached to the building, jarring you awake at 7:00 in the morning with the amplified sound of their ugly language.

Between the vehicles, the constant construction, the language, and the karaoke bars, I find myself envying the deaf.

I Hate Vietnam's Language

I can best describe the Vietnamese language as the undulating growl emitted by a cat that's been disturbed while it chews on a mouth full of dry cat food. *meruughh-meowruugh-rruughh*

I could also describe most men sounding like a recording of mentally handicapped person with a mouth full of Novocain, making an impression of a goose, played in reverse.

[A linguistic sample](#), recorded off the radio.

I Hate Vietnam's Traffic and Pedestrian Woes

There are over 1.5 million motorcycles in Hanoi owned by city dwellers, plus over 400,000 motorcycles from outside the city—increasing at a rate of 14% each year. That's a f**king lot of motorcycles, as evident by the hazardous conditions for pedestrians.



Every sidewalk is packed to the brim with vendors and households doubling their street-level floor as a business. This means that pedestrians are forced to walk in the street. The feeling of wind that rushes past you as you're nearly clipped by a speeding motorbike or auto is at all times constant.

There are few crosswalks in a city that actually really needs them. Even when present, it only mitigates the risk of getting struck on the street by a vehicle slightly, as you'll never get a

green walk signal without vehicles turning right onto an adjoining street, or left from a green left-turn light.

The process of crossing a street saturated with traffic and no traffic control is simply to take the "Indiana Jones jump from the Lion's Head Leap of Faith" approach. Think of the traffic like a raging river, and you as a slowly moving stone—the traffic will part, so long as you don't stop or run.

This process scares the living daylights of Tatiana, who fears for the safety of the child in her belly every time she ventures outside the hotel. Going anywhere is a major ordeal, as the thought of being struck by an errant motorbike and the subsequent consequences on our unborn son would be devastating. I always hold her hand and stand between her and the direction of the oncoming traffic—the padded human shield technique. I can't blame her, but she still has the habit of wanting to stop when it looks like she's about to get hit, which is the wrong thing to do. That's going to get us all killed. **Do not stop. Do not run.** Those are the rules. You must let go of your fear like you're about to jump out of an airplane, and trust that all will be well.



I filmed a quick video of what the streets look like all day long, and what you've just got to cautiously walk into, here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BDekHnNxZ4>

I Hate Vietnam's Visa Price

I hate how much it costs to enter this country, and [how much of a pain in the ass it is](#) to do it economically.

I Hate Vietnam's Skinny Buildings

Climbing countless flights of stairs because the Vietnamese like to build their hotels at the width of a single room pisses me off. I've had to pass on quality rooms because they're on the eighth floor and a near seven-month pregnant Tatiana can't walk past the third floor without getting winded.

I Hate the way the Vietnamese Obstruct Storefronts



The cultural habit of parking motorbikes in such a way that every square centimeter of space in front of a store or restaurant I want to enter drives me nuts. The lack of thinking and courtesy towards others that is embodied on the roads manifests itself in parking protocol: Push and shove your way into any available open space and claim success.

I realize there's no space for anyone or anything in this unholy place of traffic misery, but not everyone is a 43-kilo twig-shaped-ninja that can maneuver through these things—just look to Tatiana's massive belly to understand how it prohibits her movement here.

I Hate Vietnam's Mutant Lobsters

I knew better than to believe I'd actually get something resembling lobster for US\$3, but we were in the middle of the Gulf of Tonkin, and seafood was the most prevalent item on the menu. *Just maybe I'll come out Aces*, I thought.



What was tossed on my plate was one of the most visually revolting animals I've ever seen. These sweet and sour covered mutants of the sea looked like the evil offspring of a prawn and lobster. I didn't dare look as Tatiana extracted what little meat was actually contained within their hideous exoskeletons.

A quick video of my disappointment can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yx55ZgUEKRc>

I Hate Vietnam's Chairs, Cockroaches, and Cholera

I know the people are small, but why am I so often forced to eat while sitting on a [stool designed for a four-year-old?](#)

Cockroaches on the street. Cockroaches in my transport. [Cockroaches found cooked in my food.](#) Just plain foul. It's no wonder this country still has cholera issues:

HANOI (Reuters) - A cholera outbreak in northern Vietnam has affected more than 200 people. The ruling Communist Party's daily Nhan Dan (People) quoted Health Minister Nguyen Quoc Trieu as saying over 1,600 people have suffered vomiting acute diarrhea, 202 of whom tested positive for cholera bacteria since Oct. 23. The reports did not say whether anyone had died in an epidemic of acute diarrhea in 13 provinces and cities out of 64 in Vietnam, where the last widespread cholera outbreak was in 2004.

I Hate How the Pith Helmet is so Popular

Pith helmets are as prevalent in Vietnam as baseball caps in the United States. Men and boys of all ages wear them regularly, and the sight of it creeps the hell out of me. It feels like I'm behind enemy lines, surrounded by NVA (North Vietnamese Army)—and given my attitude these days,

I probably wouldn't mind pickin' a few of the aggressive ones off with a rifle, just to watch the communist relic of a bygone war drop to the ground.



I Hate Vietnam's Taxi Drivers

I'm not an idiot with taxis. My doors are always locked, my guard is always up, and I'm constantly monitoring where we're going—making a little map in my head or ensuring that the driver is generally following a path that I've memorized by looking at the layout of the city ahead of time. When

people don't pay attention, they get cheated, robbed, or worse. Taxi drivers are, the world round, the scum of the Earth. Way below that of lawyers.

In Vietnam, it's really to the point where we consistently expect the worst out of every taxi ride. This is a country known for rigged meters (that count faster than they should) and shady drivers. Hell, the people try everything they can to screw you over on the streets, so there's no reason to think they won't do it in a cab.

I recall how one taxi driver took us for an excessive 8 minute/two kilometer ride around a popular lake in the Old Quarter instead of driving directly to our destination. I called him out on it halfway around, and watched him try to claim that the flow of traffic didn't allow for it (when I knew there were several opportunities for him to do so). Others would drive around and pretend to not know where they were going (or they were really just that stupid); while two others absolutely refused to stop the cab when we no longer wanted to deal with idiotic behavior.

When we knew the fair should be about 18,000 dong and the meter, and at our destination it said 25,000d, 48,000d, or 55,000d, we'd refuse to pay the full fair. One three or more occasions Tatiana and I threw a 20,000d note at a driver and walked away. One wouldn't accept it and came chasing after us on foot, only to walk away with it after losing face.

We tried calling both expensive inexpensive cab companies to pick us up versus flagging them down on the street, but it yielded the same mixed results. There's absolutely no consistency to the companies or their drivers. The best policy is to just not put up with their shit and pay what you think is fair, regardless of what that little (rigged) box says on the dashboard.

I Hate Vietnam's Food Hype

The best Vietnamese food I ever had wasn't in Vietnam. That goes doubly true with Tatiana, as well. I find the spectrum of options and flavors within those options to be much narrower most places in SE Asia. To put it bluntly, the food is quite bland and uninspiring.

I know the South is "very different" to the North, where the motto is "if in doubt, boil it to within an inch of its life," but I have a hard time believing it gets much better elsewhere in the country. It's very easy for me to eat three Thai meals every day for a month, but it's something I would cringe at the thought of doing in Vietnam—there's way too much repetition.

I Hate the Cultural Insensitivity of the Vietnamese People

There is a real culture clash happening with travelers and locals in this country. Tatiana expresses to me how much she loathes it when people touch her—a sentiment that I share. She understands that it's a part of their culture to grab arms or elbows on the street to try to get someone to buy something or do an action, but it's a line that she doesn't like to be crossed.

"I understand why they do it, it's a part of their culture, but why can't they understand that it's offensive in mine to do it?"

I personally won't tolerate it from beggars and pith helmet wearing men on the street, regardless. I aggressively clapped my hands a few centimeters away one man's face to illustrate such a point—instead of slapping him, like Tatiana did one night on a separate incident.

Tatiana also hates how shop staff will follow you around so close "that you can feel their breath on your neck."

I Hate the Vietnamese Inability to Communicate, and Intelligently Anticipate or Extrapolate a Need



I already mentioned this in [a previous post](#), but not since Brazil have I encountered such difficultly communicating with people. I'm chiefly blaming it on their inability to comprehend hand gestures—as the Vietnamese don't often speak with their hands—and a general lack of intelligence. Yeah, that's right, Tatiana and I think most of the people are genuinely below average in the mental faculty department. "Many are nice, but they're dumb as rocks", Tatiana would say.

Two examples to illustrate our frustration:

The first is my unsuccessful attempt to find one of the most ancient of devices in a region of the world they should be plentiful in: A mortar and pestle—a tool used to crush, grind, and mix substances. I want to begin grinding Tatiana's prenatal vitamins that she can't stand swallow, instead of watching her cut it up with scissors and letting it dissolve in juice or yogurt. They're so common, even IKEA makes 'em.

Wikipedia says that this device has existed for over three millennia, and in terms of medical use, that "mortars and pestles [have] traditionally used in pharmacies to crush various ingredients prior to preparing a makeshift prescription. The mortar and pestle is the most common icon associated with pharmacies. For pharmaceutical use, the mortar and the head of the pestle are usually made of porcelain, while the handle of the pestle is made of wood."

Honest to God, I lost count with the number of pharmacies and supermarkets explored for this item. I even asked the tourist information center on a visit to the Old Quarter, where I was directed to the location of a nonexistent supermarket she marked on the map handed me.

At all these pharmacies I was making an effective demonstration of what I wanted. I used words like "pill," "tablet," "medicine," and "powder." I made a cup with one hand, fist with the other, and made a grinding motion. I looked up the word "grind" in an English/Vietnamese dictionary and showed it to staff members, who still didn't quite understand.

On the final attempt, one pharmacist listened to my demonstration, thought about it, and then proceeded to point to her armpit with raised eyebrows... (sigh)

The second example is of an attempt to alleviate Tatiana's itchy, pregnant belly. We went from pharmacy to pharmacy, trying to find her a cream/ointment. At one particularly memorable location, she was working hard to communicate her need. She'd written down the name of the topical cream—Caladryl. It's spelled the same everywhere, but just in case, she also used a more generic name, hydrocortisone.

The staff is baffled, so Tatiana makes itching/scratching motions across her large, third-trimester

belly. The girl says, "You have baby?", and Tatiana responds affirmatively, thinking she's got it. And in a move of sheer brilliance that can only have come out of Vietnam, the girl hands her a box of... birth control pills.

Final Thoughts on the Country I Love to Hate

I came into Vietnam much like I do with all countries—with an open mind and curious attitude. The opinions I've expressed above are a direct result of the experiences that I've had from the people and living conditions of the country. It's amazing to see such great displeasure aggregated in this fashion, but readers should also know that there were some instances where Vietnam pleased greatly—though few a far between.

I was absolutely dumbstruck when a street vendor I was regularly purchasing food from in Hanoi gave me a fist full of cash after I approached one day. They husband and wife combo said they'd accidentally charged me too much when I was there two days prior, and were returning the



excess. *Amazed*, I promptly used it to purchase more foodstuffs from them.

I was pleased to find better room deals in Hanoi than Bangkok. You've *really* got to work hard to find them, but when you do, you're liable to be getting WiFi, a mini-fridge, bathroom, hot water, large bed(s), satellite television, and air conditioning for US\$7-13/night.

I still think it's absolutely fascinating to be able to freely walk around the capital city of a country with whom such a fierce war was waged against not that long ago. I'm an American in Hanoi—amazing.

I really dig the little [meat barbeque/frying outfits](#) you can sometimes find setup on sidewalks.



During the day a corner of sidewalk might be empty, but at night it's bustling with the sounds of cooking food. Tasty stuff.

And easily one of the best experiences in Vietnam came with meeting up with my friend Aaron's former girlfriend. She's a sweet, intelligent, well-spoken woman (not to mention an established international writer/journalist) that can sometimes be found in her hometown of Hanoi when she's not in the United States or Thailand. Tatiana and I had the pleasure of her company for an evening, where she hosted us for an excessively filling meal. She understands all too well the issues articulated above, and has a way about her that almost makes you forgive and forget—almost.

I can't say as I'd ever recommend a visit to this country to anyone, but for the curious, there's nothing like experiencing it for yourself. I couldn't hope to write down all the stories and countless occasions where we felt like knocking some sense into people. So go ahead; go to Vietnam for two or three weeks, and return home with enough horror stories to choke a small horse.