

Why I'll Never Return To Vietnam

Matt Kepnes

Traveling through Southeast Asia, you are frequently asked where you are going. "Everywhere," I tell people. This is my last adventure through the region. Except, I'll be skipping Vietnam. After my experience there in 2007, I'll never go back to that country. Never, ever, ever. A business trip or a girlfriend may force me there in the future but for as long as I can see down the road, I'll never touch down again in that country.

No one ever wants to return to a place where they felt treated poorly. When I was in Vietnam, I was constantly hassled, overcharged, ripped off and mistreated. I never felt welcome. I met street sellers who constantly tried to overcharge me. There was the bread lady who refused to give me back the proper change, the food seller who charged me triple even though I saw how much the customer in front of me paid, or the cabbie who rigged his meter on the way to the bus station. While buying t-shirts in Hoi An, three women tried to keep me in their store until I bought something, even if that meant pulling my shirt.

On a trip to Halong Bay, the tour operator didn't have water on the boat and the operator overbooked the trip, so people who paid for single rooms suddenly found themselves with roommates... sometimes in the same bed!



One of the worst experiences came while in the Mekong Delta. I was catching a bus back to Ho Chi Minh City. I was thirsty, so I bought a common drink in Vietnam - water, lemon, and some powdery, sugary substance in a plastic bag. You can find it everywhere, especially in transit stations. I went to the one next to the bus and pointed at what I wanted. She looked at me and nodded. The woman then started making this drink, turned to her friends, said something, laughed, then

started laughing at me while clearly not putting in all the ingredients into this drink. I knew I was being blatantly ripped off. "She's telling her friends she's going to overcharge and rip you off because you're white," said a Vietnamese American who was also on my bus. "She doesn't think you will notice." "How much should this really cost?" I asked him. He told me. It was some tiny number -- a few cents. I gave the vendor the correct change, told her she was a bad person and walked away onto my bus. It wasn't the money that I was upset about but the disrespect and contempt she had for me.

I wondered if it was just me. Perhaps I simply had a bad experience and Vietnam was really great. The countryside is stunning and I can only imagine what it looked like before America napalmed most of it. Maybe I just had bad luck. Maybe I caught people on an off day. However, after talking to a number of other travelers, I realized that we all had the same story. They all had tales of being ripped off, cheated, or lied to. We all had to struggle for everything. We never felt welcome in the country.

Additionally, I witnessed other people having problems in Vietnam. I saw friends of mine getting ripped off. Once my friend bought bananas and the seller walked away before giving change back. At a supermarket, a friend was given chocolate instead of their change. Two of my friends lived in Vietnam for 6 months, and even they said the Vietnamese were rude to them despite becoming "locals." Their neighbors never warmed up to them. Wherever I went, it seemed my experience was the norm and not the exception.



While in Nha Trang, I met an English teacher who had been in Vietnam for many years. He said that the Vietnamese are taught that all their problems are caused by the West, especially the French and Americans, and that the West "owes" Vietnam. They expect Westerners to spend money in Vietnam, so when they see western backpackers trying to penny pitch, they get upset and treat them poorly. Those who are spending money, however, seem to be treated quite well. I don't

know if this is true or not but based on what I had seen and the experiences I had heard, it did make some sense.

Two friends were out eating once and a woman came riding up on a very nice looking bike. My friend Sean describes it as one of those Huffy mountain bikes you were always jealous your neighbor had as a kid. The

woman locked up her bike and then proceeded to go around the restaurant asking for money. When she came to my friends, they asked the Vietnamese woman if she could afford such a nice bike, why couldn't she afford food? That's my sister's bike, the woman said. Sean looked at her and said "Then she can pay for your food."

I'm not here to make judgments about Vietnam or the Vietnamese. I only have my experience to fall back on. However, the stories and anecdotes I've heard from other people only reinforce that experience and the feelings I have. Travel doesn't always need to be perfect. I like it when it is difficult. I like the struggle and having to find my way through the world. I think it builds character. And I don't mind paying more money. A dollar for them goes a lot further than a dollar for me. I get that we will haggle in the market, have a laugh, and I'll still overpay. But what I don't like is being treated like I'm not a person. I don't like being disrespected or cheated. I don't want to look at everyone and wonder if they are trying to cheat me. Every interaction doesn't need to be a struggle. After three weeks in Vietnam, I couldn't get out fast enough and I'll be happy to never go back.

Author's Note: *While I had a bad experience in Vietnam, many people have had good experiences. You need to find out for yourself. Learn about the good, the bad, and the ugly to become an informed traveler, and then go experience it for yourself. I'm not advocating anyone skip Vietnam. I'm just saying I have no desire to return.*