

## A Visit to Dalat

Written by Peter M. Geiser

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During colonial times, Dalat was the perfect holiday spot. The hill station was recommended in 1897 by the French medical doctor Alexander Yersin, and in 1912 the city proper had been founded. Because of its cool climate, it soon became a popular retreat for Europeans who wanted to escape the often oppressive heat of the coastal cities and the Mekong Delta. Sometimes nicknamed the "Paris of the East," it included all the amenities necessary for the social life of the colonial gentry.

Access was vastly improved with the opening of the Cremallere Railway in 1928. It linked Dalat with the main railway at Thap Cham, near Phan Rang. Due to repeated Viet Cong attacks, the railway was closed down in 1964. Today, the line has been partially repaired, but only the first three miles are operated as a tourist attraction.

Today the city of 125,000 is a popular honeymoon retreat for Asian couples. Most attractions, such as the famous Valley of Love cater to their tastes. Once named 'Valley of Peace' by Vietnam's last emperor Bao Dai, it was renamed in 1972 by university students who used to meet here for romantic rendezvous.

A very small entrance fee is charged and an additional mandatory insurance, which is ten times the entrance fee. I was not quite sure who was to be insured: was it really me, or was the fee to 'ensure' a high salary for the ticket seller? But as the prices were still relatively low and I was in a good mood I entered anyway. The first thing I encountered were the numerous stalls selling souvenirs of every kind including clothing for the babies that will hopefully be produced during the honeymoon.

This is one of the best places to meet the 'Dalat Cowboys'. Dressed as an American cowboy, a guide will lead tourists around the lake on his horse. Another possibility is to rent a boat in the shape of a swan or a dragon and enjoy the quiet of the lake.

Upon returning to the city, I had lunch at a restaurant next to another lake. The Thanh Thuy

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Restaurant on the shore of Xuan Huong Lake offered not only a beautiful view, but also excellent food for reasonable prices.

In the afternoon I visited the central market. It offers fresh vegetables and fruits and newly cut flowers from the Flower Gardens complete the colorful appearance. Climbing some stairs toward the central area I came upon a very small hill tribe market. Members of ethnic minorities from around Dalat were selling their wares.

Wandering slowly through the French quarter I admired the old colonial houses. If you discount their derelict appearance, they give a wonderful impression of how Dalat must have looked some sixty or seventy years ago. I concluded the evening in the Saigon Nite, a small bar in the French quarter. There you can enjoy good music in a nice surrounding, sipping one of the many drinks on offer or play some billiards against the local champions.

The next day I visited Bao Dai's Summer Palace. The 25-room villa, built in 1933 in then modern French style, is still furnished with its original decor. There is an excellent guided tour in which everything of, in and around the house is explained in great detail.

Bao Dai and his son, Bao Long, used the palace in summer as their base for hunting expeditions for elephants, tigers and other game. On the ground floor, the offices and reception rooms are filled with many interesting relics such as busts of Bao Dai and his father, Emperor Khai Dinh. Several photographs of members of the royal family decorate the walls. The first floor contains the private rooms. In the large living room family meetings were held with the Emperor and the Empress sitting on the huge semicircular couch while the sons sat in the pink chairs and the daughters used the yellow ones. Standing there I imagined how formal these meetings must have been and compared this to modern families in our industrialized countries!

Near the top of the stairs a big metal device painted in the royal color yellow caught my eye. The guide explained that this was a Rouathermique infra-red sauna machine, used by the Empress Nam Phuong. She offered a chance to try it, but everyone politely declined.

Looking out the window I could view the French style garden. It strongly reminded me of the gardens in Europe. Well, Bao Dai was not only educated in France until his accession at the age of 12, but also heavily influenced by the French colonial government. His villa could well

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have existed in France without causing special attention.

The Summer Palace is surrounded by a pine forest with some small gardens. Of course, being a famous tourist spot, there are several 'Dalat cowboys' offering you a ride through the peaceful forests.

I had seen a lot of pagodas in Vietnam already. As the Lam Ti Ny Pagoda was close by, I decided to have a look. At the Pasteur Institute I turned left, and when I got to the Lam Ti Ny Pagoda, my first impression was that of a small deserted monastery. I was on the verge of leaving the 'ruin' when a loud barking greeted me. Following the dog was a man in brown robes stepping out to give me a warm welcome. I could not guess his age, but the eyes under his hood were still young.

The Lam Ti Ny Pagoda was founded in 1961 and houses only a single monk. Vien Thuc (see Destination: Vietnam July/August 1995) is a special man, a monk with a mission. Although living alone for over twenty years in the house next to the pagoda, he nevertheless enjoys good company in the form of tourists. He even keeps several books of business cards, letters and photographs of his guests from all over the world.

And indeed he enjoys his visitors. Always friendly and smiling, sometimes uttering a crazy chuckle, he is happy to show people around and explain in detail about his life. In addition to Vietnamese, he is fluent in several other languages that he studied at Dalat University, including English, French, Thai and Khmer. He has refurbished the pagoda himself and planted several gardens, one of them a small Zen garden complete with a bridge on its premises. All the gardens have signs with their names in Chinese. It is a small world, but to him it is one full of happiness.

Once inside, I was surprised by the huge number of paintings. On each wall hung dozens of paintings, complete with frames and glass covers. Large piles of paper were stacked on every table and in every corner. The walls were filled with paintings of a very distinctive style.

What makes these paintings so special is the way they are created. They are, of course, not from this world. Being a Zen-Buddhist-Monk-and-Painter, he creates them when he is deep in meditation on the way to satori, the blissful oblivion.

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But it wouldn't be Vietnam if this were the end of the story. These paintings are not only on display (if you can call the thick bundles of paper being on display), but they are for sale. They come in any size from postcards to wall-size screens, and of course there are no fixed prices. Everytime someone decided on a painting, the monk exclaimed delightfully (and as if he had seen it for the first time) "Oh, this is beautiful!" and congratulates the prospective buyer on his or her excellent choice. But that alone would not do. Every picture has a meaning, even if it might be obscured. So he takes a few moments to decipher the meaning of the picture and to find a suitable name.

When I finally left, I had bought three paintings: "When Looking Here Every Sorrow is Dissolved into Emptiness" with warm, sand colored formations that indeed dissolve into a white nothingness at the top right, a brown, green and violet maelstrom that signifies the "The Mystique Silence and Melody Universal of Love" and a dream in blue, white and crimson that was "Expecting The First Sunbeams of The Rosy Day".

In the entrance to the pagoda the monk stood grinning and waving a last goodbye. Beside him, his dog barked wildly.

For those who would like to learn more about Zen Buddhism, inquire at the new Zen Buddhist monastery directly at the lakeside of Quang Trung Reservoir. Anybody willing to live the simple life of the monks is happily welcomed. Courses last at least one week. The day starts at 3 a.m. with meditation. After breakfast the monks tend the gardens. More meditation and work in the garden fills the afternoon and soon after dinner around 6 p.m., it's bedtime. Although the stay is free, a generous donation would be polite and is gratefully accepted.

Back in the real world, I thought of visiting the Cam Ly Falls, but the description in the guidebook kept me away: the area around the waterfall is decorated with stuffed jungle animals with which the Vietnamese love to be photographed. The 'highlight' is to get dressed as a cowboy and have your photograph taken. If you have not seen one of the great waterfalls on the way from Ho Chi Minh City and would like to visit a beautiful one in the vicinity, consider instead the Prenn Waterfall, some six miles toward Phan Rang.

I chose to go past the former *Petit Lycee Yersin*. Now it serves as a government cultural center that offers lessons in a wide variety of musical instruments, both western and Vietnamese--this is a good place to meet musicians.

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Dalat is also famous for its easy access to minority villages. The mild climate of the hill station makes it easy to explore the surrounding areas by hiking, riding a bicycle or even a horse. Either way you have to be aware that some areas are off limits to foreigners, and there are reports of heavy fines of up to US \$300!

Whether or not you like the villages depends on your taste. I very much preferred the relatively unspoiled area in the north. But if you are traveling only in the southern part, this might be the best chance to encounter minorities.

Another way to learn more about the ethnic minorities in the area is a visit to the Lam Dong Province Museum. It houses a variety of traditional products ranging from clothing and jewelry to weapons and musical instruments. Models of traditional houses complete the displays.

The next day I had to leave. The winding road allowed a last glimpse over the city. A bit further the driver pointed out the thick pipes delivering water from the Xuan Huong Lake to the plant where it generates the power needed by Dalat and the surrounding area, including Phan Rang, my next destination.

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