



Cruising For a Cause

As Giselle Whiteaker finds out, there's more to the Saigon River than noxious smells and polluted waters.

Photos by Khoa Tran

The veins that feed Ho Chi Minh City are the tendrils and tributaries of the Saigon River, which wander through the heart of the city, influencing the character of the people and places they touch. The river is busy with boats loaded with heavy cargo sitting inches from the waterline, fishing boats with families casting their nets, and all manner of brightly painted traditional wooden boats with eyes painted on the bow to guarantee safe passage.

The dichotomous nature of the city could not be clearer. And as you travel away from the centre on the waterways, it's hard to believe how quickly the high-rise buildings give way to sparsely populated greenery. Lone fishermen sit on the banks, angling for a catch, and water hyacinth swirls in the eddies, collecting under the massive barges carrying dredged sand into the construction sites.

We're on a river boat trip that winds south, passing riverside shanties huddled in the shadows of tall apartment blocks. The first stop is a pagoda where our guide explains religion in Vietnam as the monks surreptitiously observe us. A short cruise away is a local market. The villagers laugh and interact with us as we walk past. It's like they have never seen foreigners before. Oh wait. Maybe they haven't. The guides give detailed explanations, including taste tips on different fish, why the eggs come in four colours, and which rice tastes best even though the grains look exactly the same. The women sellers happily pose for photographs as they offer their wares. I ask to buy two bulbs of garlic and the woman waves away my money.

This is as far away from Ben Thanh Market as you can get.

Our guides warn us that beggars wander the market, and ask us not to give donations. While this may seem harsh, they don't want the locals to rely on begging as an income. Instead, the Saigon River Express subtly offers donations on behalf of all passengers to the pagodas, ensuring the money goes to productive ends.

Back on the boat we try exotic fruits from the market until the next stop. Roaming the secluded river pathways, we catch glimpses of local life. A group of men wave excitedly as they husk a boatload of coconuts, and a man positions freshly dipped incense sticks on drying racks. Local children skip past boats anchored in alcoves surrounded by green fronds. This is the real Mekong Delta.

◦ A River Runs Through It

Lunch is special. We file into Long Thanh Temple, where Blu Bar and Grill have set up shop serving local southern specialities. Sitting on the veranda, we eat salads, spicy soup, ginger chicken, caramelised pork, and the piece de resistance, fried fish with a tamarind sauce. The crunchy scales wouldn't be my choice, but in the spirit of new experiences, I grasp a few with my chopsticks and nibble. They are deliciously crispy. When we are full to bursting, platters of fruit appear.

Long Thanh Temple was built in 1960 by a Buddhist nun, and expanded in 1990 with the appointment of the current head monk, Thich Quang Tam, and funded by

Viet Kieu donor Tran Thi Kim Chi. Next door to this pagoda is a small orphanage, Kim Chi Homes. The orphanage was inaugurated in 1994, but the donor passed away before seeing the orphanage in operation. The orphanage was named in her honour. Saigon River Express, in partnership with Blu Bar and Grill, now support this orphanage, which has space for 50 children. Half of the children are true orphans, while the remaining come from families living in extreme poverty. These families consider the temple a last resort in ensuring their children are fed, and receive a basic education.

The children attend public schools in the vicinity and the school fees alone cost the temple around VND40 million annually. Currently, ten of the children attend university in Ho Chi Minh City, and two more are preparing for college entrance examinations. They are still supported by the temple. Donations to the temple contribute to this. Saigon River Express are seeking other ways to cooperate, including computers and training assistance, so that the children have a better chance of finding work once they reach adulthood.

The trip back through the river system takes around an hour. Most of us are lulled into a stupor by the gentle rocking of the boat, gazing dreamily into the river. All are smiling. There are few better ways to get away from the crowd and experience a moment of true delta life, especially knowing that the impact on the communities is a positive one.

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