

GENTLY DOWN THE RIVER
JULY 30, 2006

COVER STORY, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH TRAVEL SECTION

In northern Vietnam there is a river so gentle that you might think it never moves at all. The water is sufficiently clear that you can see the weeds below like a long winding a fish tank, and where the water runs shallow the line between dry land and river is artfully hidden by crops of planted rice or wild flourishes of lotus flowers. Welcome to Tam Coc and the Ngo Dong River boat ride.

After a week of travelling the hill-tribes near Hanoi I had seen more rice than I could ever eat; village women planting out in the misty mountain valleys, old men driving bullock ploughs along narrow terraced fields and school children helping with the harvest among the flood plains of the Red River. But rice is nothing if not versatile.

Just a few hours drive south of Hanoi lies the township of Tam Coc, where the rice fields are broken up by dramatic limestone hills and a complex web of connecting rivers and lakes.

The landscape was once home to an ancient capital, and some remnants of the 10th century temples can still be found nearby at Hoa Lu. Most of the farm houses around Tam Coc look like they might not be much younger – little more than cottages built in-close to the steep hills where the rocky ground offers additional height from rising water levels.

As the boat heads down the river the cottages are few and the limestone hills are many. The gradual warming of the morning sun paints a haze across the more distant hills and brings life to those most daring of plants that cling to the sharp edges of limestone cliffs. The silence of the journey is a treasure. There are no outboard motors, no clunking diesels and no tooting of horns; just the gentle rush of the oars and the ripple of water below the boat.

There are just two of us for each vessel and occasionally we turn around to check on our guide. Her name is Chu Van and her face fills with smiles every time we look back. I think I can tell when someone is really happy and when they're just being pleasant, and this lady has all the signs of someone who loves their job. Her English is very basic but with an eloquent grasp of French she says, "The river is so peaceful you can hear a butterfly's wings."

Given her grasp of foreign language it's possible that Chu Van has endured a better education than I did. I wonder if she also accommodates Chinese tourists, and she obliges by telling me the age of her two children and how far they travel to school. There was more to her story but I'll need a few more lessons in Mandarin before all of it makes sense.

The course of the Ngo Dong River has much in common with the butterfly – they are both gentle, beautiful and dart in different directions for no apparent reason. At three stages along the journey the limestone hills engulf the water entirely and we float carefully beneath the jagged roof of caves. The butterflies do not follow us in here, but new ones are waiting at the other side.

Where the river slows down to a standstill and the water is too deep for rice cultivation, the lotus plants thrive and cover the surface with a different shade of green and rich blossoms of pink. Chu Van says

that when a young man finds the perfect lotus flower then his true love will be near. In a Buddhist country such as Vietnam the flower has special meaning, for the transition from the muddy substrate of the river to the sun-kissed blossom above the water is a metaphor for enlightenment in a world of suffering.

Our boat too sits above the water and we enjoy a few kisses from the sun.

The blossom of the lotus plant is more than a thing of beauty. The stamen of the young flower can be harvested for making lotus tea, and the fruit of the flower matures to yield a fleshy white pulp around the seeds. At the end of the paddle to the last cave we are greeted by floating shops selling ready to eat lotus seeds, along with fresh fruit and cold drinks. It was a pleasant surprise to find the price of drinks this far down the river to be cheaper than at the hotel, so we bought one for Chu Van as well.

For her the hard work was still ahead. Having taken us down the river she now had to row us all the way back again. The return trip seems to pass by much quicker, more like a dragonfly than a butterfly, and Chu Van agrees to our request to slow down her pace with the oars.

A few other boats soon catch us, including one rowed by an old man who might pass for the son of Confucius. His long white beard accentuates a generous smile and the traditional bamboo headwear has been swapped for a felt hat, circa 1920s. The most striking feature of note, as he paddles past us, is his use of feet to row instead of his hands.

As we get nearer to the town of Tam Coc the last stretch of river is marked by concrete bridges and hotels to accommodate guests who spend the night away from Hanoi. Soon the ripple of water pushed away by the oars will be replaced with a tide of touts and their incessant sales pitches.

On the very last bend we encounter one last patch of lotus flowers. I can see the butterflies fluttering above the blossoms, and for just a moment I think I really can hear them.

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ESCAPE 3



LOWDOWN

GOING FISHING: Near Hanoi (a good 100 miles) on a boat with connections to Hanoi and the city of Tam Coc.

WATER: Long, narrow, shallow, and clear. The water is so clear you can see the bottom of the boat.

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Vietnam's peaceful river ride

EWEN BELL goes with the flow along the Ngo Dong River

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