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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

ONE HOUR OUT | MAY 14, 2010

Saigon

By SAMANTHA COOMBER

Vietnam's largest, most dynamic and sophisticated city is the one still widely called Saigon. Now officially Ho Chi Minh City, it's captivating, but its chaotic traffic would test the patience of a saint, while the frantic grasp at consumerism and commerce leaves me, at times, spiritually bankrupt. I need a fix of divine intervention.

My prayers are answered. Still within city limits, but in the sprawling outskirts where few visitors venture, rest two 18th-century Buddhist pagodas (a word used for both the main building of each complex and for the complex as a whole). Wonderfully preserved, Giac Vien and Giac Lam pagodas are not just cultural treasures and officially protected historical sites, but also serene urban sanctuaries. Although they share many similarities, each is one of a kind and worth a visit. And they lie just a couple of kilometers apart.

Quitting the touristed downtown, my taxi heads due west, cutting through outlying districts that meld into an indistinguishable blur of shops and services. I am tempted to bombard my driver with an "Are we there yet?" barrage, but realize it would be juvenile (and futile—he doesn't speak English).

After 30 minutes and six kilometers, we turn off the main street and pass through a tall red archway announcing Giac Vien Pagoda. The taxi continues down a long, twisting alley until it reaches a front courtyard and can go no farther. It halts, and I step out—to be surrounded immediately by kids selling incense, opening their pitch with the obligatory "Whass yer name?"

Before me stands a rambling, low-rise edifice, mustard-hued, with a clay-tile roof, typical architecture for pagodas in this part of the country. Built in the late 1770s and once known as Earth Pit Pagoda (from the vast amounts of earth required to fill in the site

before construction could begin), Giac Vien was southern Vietnam's center for prayer and Buddhist teaching in the 19th century. Emperor Gia Long, who unified the country and founded the Nguyen Dynasty (which lasted from 1802 to 1945), worshipped here.

The unassuming exterior doesn't prepare me for what lies behind the red and yellow wooden doors. I step in and find myself in a dimly lit cavernous chamber, yielding a jumble, evidence of centuries of worship on the site: mini-altars, statues and antiquities, interspersed with tables and ironwood pillars inscribed with gilded nom characters (ancient script based on Chinese ideograms). Side walls are stacked with gilded funerary tablets and photographs of the deceased. Hanging above it all is the pungent smoke from burning incense.

Giac Vien is a mini-museum, containing some 150 beautifully carved wooden statues and engravings—though more modern concessions have crept in: flashing fairy lights and (disappointingly) pretaped chanting, issuing from a sound system hidden beneath altars in the rear sanctuary.

As a backpacker years ago, I hung out in Vietnamese pagodas for so long that invariably, a kindly monk would offer me a cup of green tea. As I loiter on this day, I discover that this hospitality is still the rule. The invitation comes not from the saffron-robed elderly monk sprawled asleep on a large dining table, but from a young smiling monk, who ushers me over to another. Tea-drinking is an important social custom in Vietnam and it's considered impolite to decline. Tired and hot, I am happy to oblige.

As I down several china cups of tea, two curious pagoda employees join our table—evidently not many foreigners make it out here. As always with strangers in Vietnam, conversation turns to my marital status and English football. This gentle monk can't contribute on these subjects, but reveals that Giac Vien has been "home" since he was six years old (he's now 28). Monks are not the only residents; bats, seen as symbols of good luck and happiness, lurk in the lofty rafters and I occasionally spot one flapping around.

Bidding me farewell, the monk watches as I step out into the savagely hot day and head back toward the main road. This packed neighborhood of humble dwellings encroaches on the pagoda grounds; washing hangs out to dry on walls surrounding mini-stupas containing monks' remains. Dam Sen Park, one of Vietnam's largest theme parks, is also now a neighbor.

I hail a cab and 10 minutes later arrive at Giac Lam Pagoda. The imposing yellow archway and extensive walled grounds hint that it's on a grander scale in every sense. Indeed, it's a vast complex. Built in 1744, Giac Lam is widely recognized as the city's oldest pagoda (although Chinatown's Quan Am claims a 1740 founding date). It bears the same low-rise, mustard-hued architectural style as Giac Vien, and has a similarly dark, atmospheric interior and cerebral ambience.

However, despite the similar hodgepodge of statues, mini-altars, Buddhist paraphernalia and inscribed ironwood pillars (98 of them), this pagoda appears not so cluttered. And

the sea of embellished dark wood tables and chairs, where monks sip tea, lends an elegant air.

Like Giac Vien, Giam Lam is an ancestral temple as well as a Buddhist pagoda. The front chamber, with its Altar of Patriarchs, is devoted to the monks who once presided here, plus other departed souls, whose images plaster cobwebbed walls. Many of the pagoda's 113 jackwood statues, plus numerous other objects more than 200 years old, are displayed in the adjoining Main Hall. There I find three multitiered altars chock full of antique gilded statues, dominated by an impressive Amitabha Buddha. The walls flanking the altars are lined with intricately carved and rare figures of Arhats (Buddha's predecessors and disciples) and Kings of Hell.

This pagoda is also a pilgrimage site for those praying for the dead, sick or elderly. In a small annex, it's standing-room-only as a sought-after monk writes out supplications on paper notes for devotees. Some of these are stuck to a large bronze bell, in the belief that when it is struck, the prayers are sent to the gods along with the echoing sound. Prayers are also attached to a tree-shaped wooden frame that bears 49 Bodhisattva statuettes and 49 oil lamps.

Asian monks, I've found more than once, are full of surprises. One of the 25 in residence here approaches me as I stand deep in contemplation in the Main Hall, and proceeds to converse in English. That is, until he is interrupted by a ringing tone. From beneath his brown robes, he whips out the latest mobile-phone model, utters "excuse me" and starts an animated conversation. His "calling" over, we resume our discourse until this novice monk is summoned again, this time to chant prayers for a small group seated at the altars. I hope he remembers to switch off his phone. The prayers, a hypnotic mélange of chanting and beating of bells, gongs and coconut-husk drums, take place six times daily. No recordings here; this is the real thing.

On the far side of the complex, an open courtyard leading to monk's quarters is decorated with delicate porcelain saucers embedded in the roof edging. Colorful murals display the 10 Paths to Enlightenment and contrasting 10 Buddhist Hells. The latter's gruesome punishments, like being boiled alive and sawn in half, put the fear of God in me.

But surrounding gardens offer a tranquil respite; among ornamental plants and trees stands a sacred Bodhi tree, a gift from a venerated Sri Lankan monk in 1953. The gardens are also a final resting place. A repository annex, comparable to Giac Vien's, contains countless ceramic funerary urns displayed in glass cases, each bearing the occupant's nameplate. Nearby stands a cluster of ornate abbots' tombs. I would suggest "bring a picnic," except munching beside these mortal remains, I fear, errs on the side of poor taste.

Beside the main-street entrance is the hexagonal Bao Thap Xa Loi—at 32 meters, one of the city's tallest Buddhist towers, inaugurated in 1994 after decades of frequently interrupted construction. I save this until last, timing my ascent with sunset. Each stark floor yields a garishly colored deity and 360-degree viewing ledge. From the seventh

level, I watch the sun sink over one of the densest urban areas on earth, now encircling this refuge.

I don't find complete serenity today—that perhaps would require the first flight out. But both pagodas have shown me a spiritual and traditional side fast disappearing from this city, and I have benefitted from several hours of reflection. With soul rejuvenated, I head back to town, feeling ready to face the frenetic melee—until I catch the evening rush hour. My newfound Zen nearly dissipates to the heavens like coils of incense.

—Samantha Coomber is a writer based in Ho Chi Minh City.

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