PHO REAL:
How I Survived Breaking My Arm in Vietnam

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Whoosh! Like most accidents, it happened in a nanosecond. Call it vanity if you like. Or just bad luck. Regardless of what inspired me to stand on a chair in a Hội An hotel room, here's what led up to that fateful evening.

In early January, about a month before I left for Southeast Asia, I developed an earache. But it was not until a neighbor knocked on my door, complaining about my loud TV, that I realized I'd gone deaf. Despite a round of prescribed antibiotics, the problem persisted and I considered cancelling my trip. But the cons outweighed the pros and I flew from Amsterdam to Bangkok in early February. Alas, Thai massages and steamy soups did nothing to improve my hearing.



Conical hats are the ultimate souvenir from Vietnam.

A few days later, I needed eyes, not ears, to process the first surprise of my adventure at Hanoi's Nội Bài International Airport. Withdrawing the equivalent of 100USD at an ATM, I became an instant millionaire with more than two million dong in my wallet. It took a few minutes to figure out that the highest denomination banknote, the dark blue 500,000-dong note, is worth less than $20 USD. Later, I learned the difference between paper money, which is tossed into peoples' graves and sometimes used as an insulting "tip," and plastic money, which includes notes over 10,000 dong – about 40¢ in US currency.



Cha-ching! This is what remained in my wallet when I returned from Vietnam – about $1.65.

This higher math was handy for calculating tips, including the 50,000-dong note I handed the taxi driver who delivered me to my Hanoi hotel. After checking in, my next stop was the pharmacy across the street, where two pharmacists quizzed me about my ailments via Google Translate, examined my ear, and charged me less than 20USD for an armful of drugs no doctor at home would prescribe.



Annam Junk dining



Motorcycles are the primary mode of transport throughout Vietnam.



For breakfast, lunch and sometimes dinner, we filled up on pho.

But I was still quite deaf when I met fellow travelers on my Intrepid Travel "Real Food Adventure" that evening. Our group was small and congenial: three 60-something Aussie couples, two single Aussie ladies, and one fellow American. For Anh, our tiny Vietnamese guide, we became "honeymoon couples" and "single ladies." Fortunately, my hearing issues did not impair my appetite on our walking tour of the Vietnamese capital.

Navigating streets swarming with motorcyclists, Ahn protected us like a bodyguard, belying her small stature. Along wide boulevards and narrow alleyways, she guided us to "wedding street," where we indulged in sweets typically offered at Vietnamese nuptials – appetizers for a roaming dinner of banh mi (the Vietnamese version of a submarine sandwich), rice pancake dumplings, and a hearty bowl of pho, a classic Vietnamese noodle soup garnished with herbs and bean sprouts.

Among the sweets typically offered at Vietnamese nuptials are these jellied orbs.



Engaged couples enjoy one-stop shopping for weddings on Hanoi's "wedding street."

HAUNTING HA LONG BAY

The following morning, we boarded a minibus headed for Ha Long Bay, a UNESCO-listed site a few hours east of the capital. In this dramatic landscape, even a deaf person could appreciate an otherworldly seascape as grand in scale as Norway's fjords but more haunting and delicate, with forested spires and jagged islands. From a rowboat we admired nature's artistry and the effects of eons of erosion – a dreamy world of towering granite walls rising from the milky-green waters of the Gulf of Tonkin.

Steeped in Vietnamese legend, Ha Long Bay translates to "Descending Dragon," a reference to a mythic creature who created the islands floating in the bay to protect Vietnam from invaders. Fortunately, none threatened us on our home for the night, the Annam Junk, a traditional wooden sailing vessel with 10 cabins – enough to give each of the single ladies their own space. While lacking modern amenities, the two-deck craft had charm as well as an intimacy larger vessels lack. A chef with impressive culinary artistry – a true sign of his Vietnamese heritage with its focus on aesthetic presentation – was a bonus.



Fine dining on Ha Long Bay



From a rowboat we admired nature's artistry on Ha Long Bay.



In this dramatic landscape, an otherworldly seascape emerged.



On Ha Long Bay, we slept on the Annam Junk, a traditional wooden sailing vessel



Dinner in Hue was at a private residence with an imperial shrine.



Age and gender pose no barriers for riding a scooter.



A sculpture garden welcomed us to An Nhiên, a restaurant set in a 450-year-old ancestral home.

MANY SHADES OF HUE

Back in Hanoi, we packed up for an overnight train ride to Hue, Vietnam's former royal capital. Ensconced in sleeper cars, filling up on spring rolls, noodles, and other take-out fare, we waved to adrenaline-seeking bystanders sitting inches from the tracks on Hanoi's "train street." Fortunately, my bunkmates included the only doctor on our trip, a woman with 39 years of medical practice in Australia. While I'll never know whether time or the drugs she offered me did the trick, by the end of the 12-hour journey, my hearing had finally returned.

After a hearty breakfast of pho in Hue, my travel mates embarked on a tour of the city's imperial monuments on the back of motorbikes driven by local Vietnamese. Too dangerous, I thought, remembering my surgeon's words after breaking my hip in Italy a year earlier: "If you fall again, it's all over." A year later, I never suspected that standing on a chair in a hotel room would be more deadly.

Invigorated and hungry, everyone returned from their motorbike ride ready for lunch at An Nhiên, a restaurant set in a 450-year-old ancestral home overlooking a garden studded with abstract artworks. Our vegan meal, a medley of small plates, was prepared by 21st-generation descendants of the royal family. But you don't need a royal pedigree to prepare good food, as we learned that evening at a private residence with an imperial shrine. In her humble kitchen, the lady of the house cooked our multi-course dinner, which we washed down with strong rice liquor proudly poured by her husband.

ON THE ROAD TO HỘI AN

It was a drizzly morning in Vietnam's ancient capital when we set off on the four-hour drive to Hội An. First stop: Kin Coffee for a jolt of salt coffee, a local specialty. More like a creamy milkshake than a cup of joe, it's made with sweetened condensed milk and robusta coffee topped with sea salt. Also popular in Vietnam is egg coffee made with espresso topped with a meringue-like fluff made with whipped sweetened condensed milk and egg yolk. Properly caffeinated, we learned to make incense and checked out traditional conical hats – the ultimate souvenir from Vietnam – at Thuy Xuan Incense Village.

As we drove across villages, rice paddies, oyster farms and mountain passes, Anh regaled us with tales. We learned about her parents' shame that she wasn't married but was looking for a girlfriend. About forgiveness for a war many Boomers protested against that young Vietnamese only learned about in history books. And about our destination, a UNESCO World Heritage site with a name that translates as "shops by the sea." Named the fourth most beautiful city in the world in 2024 by *Travel + Leisure*, the little port town is also known as the tailoring capital of Vietnam.

Lured by the prospect of owning a custom-made garment, many of us headed for Luly Tailor when we hit Hội An's lantern-lit shopping district. After browsing through notebooks showcasing fashion options, I chose a knee-length summer dress with a notched collar and short, cuffed sleeves. A seamstress took my measurements and showed me fabrics ranging from lightweight linen to flowing silk. I selected a bold, tropical silk print that ultimately survived surgery and several days in a Hội An hospital. But I'm getting ahead of the story.



Enroute to Hội An, we drove through villages, rice paddies, oyster farms and mountain passes.



Hội An lives up to its name, which translates as "shops by the sea."



A bouquet of colorful incense greeted us at Thuy Xuan Incense Village.



500 performers interpret five centuries of Hoi An history at Hội An Memories.



At Hoi An Impressions Park, performers breathe life into 400 years of history.



Outdoor mini-shows set the stage for Hội An Memories.

Getting Smashed

After a morning cooking class the next day, I returned to Luly Tailor for a fitting. I chose pearl buttons for my new dress and asked that the hemline be shortened. My finished garment would be delivered to my hotel, I was told. That night, I learned how much more there is to Hội An beyond retail therapy.

Armed with take-out fare from Banh Mi Phuong, named best sandwich shop in Hội An by Anthony Bourdain in an episode of *Parts Unknown*, I joined the other single ladies for an evening at Hội An Impressions Park, Vietnam's first themed cultural park. Amidst a throng of locals and visitors, we watched performers in traditional costumes breathe life into 400 years of history in a handful of minishows – prologues for Hội An Memories, a multi-stage, open-air production with cutting-edge sound and lighting.

From my VIP seat overlooking a giant outdoor stage and the water beyond, I watched some 500 performers interpret Hội An's saga from the 16th century to the present. The mesmerizing spectacle unfolded over an hour, featuring a melancholy love story, scenes of separation and reunion, an opulent wedding ceremony, and an ensemble of women in traditional Ao Dai costumes and conical hats gliding across water, representing Vietnam's journey to modern times.

Back at the Sincerity Hotel, we booked massages for the next day and the concierge handed me a package. I knew what was inside and wanted to try it on in my room. But there was no full-length mirror. So I moved a chair closer to one that hung over a desk and stood on it for a better view. Before I could glimpse my reflection, the chair's bottom gave way, landing me on the floor, my right forearm dangling at a surreal angle from my elbow. Horrified, I called Ahn, who had me in a Hội An hospital, still in my dress, within an hour. Clearly, I'd never have that massage or be able to continue with the group to Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta.

Hospitalized in Hội An

"It's broken," a Vietnamese doctor announced, looking at an X-ray revealing a fracture below my right shoulder that confirmed what we all suspected. "But it will heal in a month," he assured me. Fortunately, the surgical team was able to spare my dress through an operation that pinned my arm together. I wore it for several days before switching to hospital garb.

And so began my recovery and the struggle to facilitate communication between the hospital and my travel insurance company with my right arm in a sling. Compared to the two weeks I spent in a hospital in Puglia, IT a year earlier that included a teenage roommate who smoked in our room, two demented seniors who screamed day and night, and a burly Italian who threatened to kill me and throw me out the window if I played movies on my iPad, my room in Hội An's Pacific General Hospital was quiet and private.

When a woman from my native Southern California moved in, I was pleased to have an English-speaking roommate. Her injuries were incurred in an accident far more dramatic than mine: falling from a bike when a dog ran across the road. We compared notes daily and chose our meals each evening from four set menus, all with Vietnam's ubiquitous spring rolls and a fried egg thrown in. While hardly gourmet, three hearty daily meals were far more ample fare than the meager rations I received in Italy.

Six days after my Valentine's Day accident, I was able to fly home to Amsterdam with an escort assigned by Allianz Global pushing me through customs in a wheelchair. By mid-March, the sling was off, as my Vietnamese doctor had advised. I never got to the southern half of the country, but I survived breaking my arm in Vietnam and confirmed a lesson that should resonate for real: never leave home without travel insurance.



Thuy Xuan Incense Village