

## **AWESOME ADVENTURES - VIETNAM**

It has been 28 years since I touched Vietnamese soil under my feet for the first time. But it is the moment when I crossed the bridge in Hekou to leave China on foot, dragging my luggage behind me, that will stay with me the most, still passed 21 years as well. On the opposite side of the river, Lao Cai - Vietnam !

As if it were yesterday, I can still remember the muddy paths that winding like a snake between the Vietnamese mountains, all the way north to the picturesque town of Sapa, which has now become a major tourist attraction since the opening of a new highway between Hanoi and the mountain town. Next week I want to dig deeper into that subject during the next A.A. (Awesome Adventure) – part II about Vietnam.

In December of 2012 (and again in the same month a year later) I decided to board the MS Volendam in the port of Singapore, a cruise ship of the Holland America Line that would dock the next 14 days at some Asian ports between the city state and Hong Kong. In addition, 3 different Vietnamese ports including Haiphong near Hanoi, the gateway to the Ha Long bay, officially recognized by Unesco as a world heritage site.

Ha Long Bay, located in the Gulf of Tonkin, Quang Ninh Province, northeastern Vietnam, is 165 km from the capital Hanoi. Covering an area of 43,400 ha and comprising more than 1600 islands and islets, most of which are uninhabited and untouched by humans, it forms a spectacular seascape of limestone pillars and is an ideal model of a mature Karst landscape created during a warm and wet tropical climate. The outstanding scenic beauty of the area is complemented by its great biological importance. The spectacular limestone karst peaks, with a variety of coastal erosion features, such as arches and caves form a majestic natural landscape. The repeated regression and transgression of the sea on the limestone karst over geological time has led to a full-fledged landscape of clusters of cone-shaped peaks and isolated towers that were modified by the invasion of the sea, adding an additional element to the process of lateral undermining of the limestone towers and islands.

Allow me to explain a few notes regarding the floating villages of Halong Bay

Originally built as a place for returning fishermen to sell their fresh catch from the night before, Halong Bay's floating villages quickly became residential areas. But it didn't stop there: In these small, self-sufficient floating villages, people lived, ate, slept, worked, partied and even went to school. Each village is a completely self-contained society, in perfect harmony with the land and the sea, surviving the daily trials and tribulations by working together. At the time of my visit it was all there and a unique experience to visit these villages. These are resilient people, unencumbered by modern problems, living lives that have changed little through the passage of time. The villages have houses, shops, schools and even police stations. Their boats and houseboats are tied together to provide security and stability when tested by weather elements.

But then something changed:

A few years ago, the government issued a directive that would force residents to move inland and leave their floating homes behind. At first, the people of the village were outraged and refused to leave behind the houses - the community they had built for generations. But the government's position was firm: People's quality of life, and especially children's access to education, would improve enormously if they moved inland. Pollution and environmental protection also played a major role. The directive was final. Today, Halong Bay's floating villages remain intact, just as they were when residents lived here full-time. Although people do not live here full time now, the locals still perform many activities and tasks here such as fishing, net weaving and pearl processing. In 2019 I visited the area again. The charm, the waving schoolchildren, the bustle and life around the limestone peaks was completely gone. So sad.