

Canadians tap into Vietnam's growing economy

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Text and photos by Jeff Heinrich

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HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam – When Lucien Bernier left his job consulting and teaching marketing at Montreal CEGEPS and came to Vietnam last September, he leapt into the dark and found paradise.

He settled in Ho Chi Minh City, the freewheeling commercial hub of communist Vietnam, to teach the fundamentals of business at a new school for fledgling management students. Like many other foreigners, including about 200 Canadians, Bernier was looking for change – something different, something exotic.



Lucien Bernier in his Saigon classroom

"You can mention that I absolutely adore the Vietnamese women," 48-year-old Bernier said over a glass of 7-Up in the compound of his newfound home in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, still known by its former name, Saigon. "I only have Vietnamese friends here. I think it's better that way. You don't get as lonely."

Bernier had never been out of North America before he took his current job, a two-year contract with the Montreal-based Canadian Centre for International Studies and Co-operation, which sponsors development programs in the Third World.

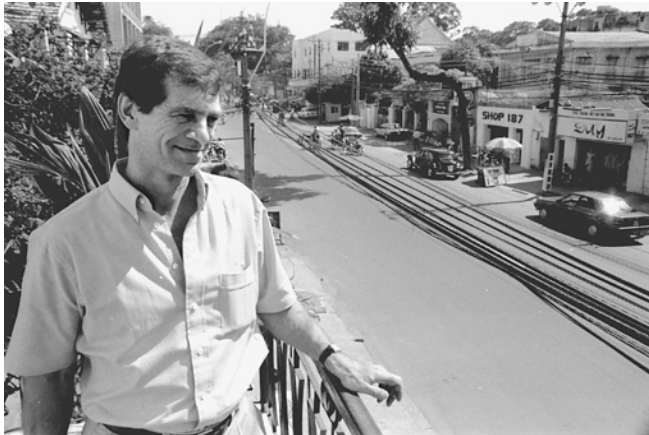
When he landed in Vietnam, it was the ultimate culture shock. Gone were his ex-wife and his two teenage children. Gone was the Western way of doing things. Into their place stepped the Vietnamese.

Not only do they do business differently ("They are so innocent and eager to learn – you talk about credit and debit and they're totally lost," he said) – but they approach all of life differently, too.

"Here, exchange is much more important than in Montreal. There, we're so individualistic; we try to do everything ourselves. But here in Saigon, I go into a restaurant and my girlfriend, she's Vietnamese, she insists on feeding me, like a child. I'm not a baby, I can feed myself, but you know, you get used to it."

Not only used to it. Bernier feels he has come east to find a kind of heaven. "I'm living the most beautiful experience of my life," he said, his eyes positively sparkling. "I'm in paradise here."

Paradise came in a different way to André Lauzon. He married into it. Lauzon met his wife in his hometown, Ottawa, in 1973, two years before the fall of Saigon to the Viet Cong. Lauzon didn't know it at the time, but his future wife was



André Lauzon in Hanoi

the eldest daughter of a well-known, French-educated Saigon lawyer and restaurateur, Suzanne Dai. Known simply as Madame Dai, she is an eccentric personality who entertains diners in her library in the heart of the city. Now 70 and still sought out by foreign visitors, Madame Dai is thriving and so is her restaurant. It is there that a visitor will find André Lauzon most nights, a place where his status as the husband of the eldest child assures him the constant attention of the servants.

"I'd been 28 years at Air Canada when I took the golden handshake and came here," Lauzon said. On the wall behind him, his wife's ancestors gazed down from photographs crowning the family altar. "I took off my tie, took off my watch, and said, 'That's it. I'm going to Vietnam.'" He came last October, leaving his wife and their two college-age students to follow when they are ready.



Madame Dai, Hanoi restaurateur

Today, Lauzon markets telecommunications equipment for a large company. But he can contemplate a day when he and his wife will take over the famous restaurant after Madame Dai passes on. And, like many hucksters in the new world of free-market Vietnam, Lauzon has an idea, a business proposition.

Conical hats. He wants to export them to Canada. They're the best-known symbol of Vietnam: a portable sunblock. "No other hat covers your head and your

neck, isn't hot to wear and is lightweight. You pick it up for 50 cents here. I would sell it for, say, \$4.99 in Canada."

Nguyen Anh-Phuong left South Vietnam in 1970 to study in Quebec, where he became a mechanical engineer and went on to work on big projects like Hydro-Quebec's LG-2 dam in James Bay. With the return of Vietnam to a market economy after 1987, Nguyen decided to return to his native land and lend his expertise. His marriage broke up in 1989 and a year later, remarried to a young Vietnamese filmmaker, Le Anh, he was in Saigon for good, as a consulting engineer who co-ordinates the Centre for International Studies' programs in the country.



Cyclo drivers in Hanoi

To the local Vietnamese, Nguyen represented the wealth of possibilities of exile and return. As he toiled around Ho Chi Minh City and countryside on his BMW motorcycle, an almost unseen sight in a country as poor as Vietnam, Nguyen was sending a strong message: he would be accepted as he was, or not at all, and he in turn, would be patient with his newfound countrymen.

"The problem in Vietnam for most foreigners is they don't have enough patience," Nguyen, 41, said over beer at a Saigon press club. "You must have patience. You must understand the way people work. Here, people don't want to talk. They want to do. They don't want to study or discuss. They want to act. Experience counts for them. Doing is what matters. But the skills aren't always there, and that's where you have to be patient, while they learn, and they do have the will to learn. That is undeniable."

That willingness to work is a magnet for foreign investors. From a Soviet ally and economic backwater in the post-war years, Vietnam has survived the eclipse of the Soviet Union by boosting business and foreign investment at home. So much so that South Vietnam, with all its mercantile values, appears to have won the war. In Asia, where it could easily be ignored in the tumult of development that has characterized the 1990s, Vietnam has emerged as one of the "economic tigers" in the region, a sort of little China where there is less mistrust of foreign influence, according to Canada's new ambassador in Hanoi, Christine Desloges.

"Like China, there is a planned economy here, but it is also more open, more exposed to the outside," Desloges, 38, said shortly after her arrival to open Canada's embassy, which was renovated at a cost of \$1.8 million after spending three decades as the Russian Trade Office. Testament to Vietnam's new openness to the West, especially to countries like Canada with no colonial history in the region, the embassy occupies some of the capital's most prestigious real estate, within saluting distance of Ho Chi Minh's Soviet-style mausoleum.

"Of course, it is difficult to get things done in this country, but people are helpful and there is a lot of good will, especially in the small things," said Desloges, a former trade commissioner in China in the early '80s. "They have one determination here: to improve the fate of the people through economic growth, and we're here to help them do it. There are two schools of thought that have to be reconciled if it is going to work. The small business on the street cares about immediate gain, while higher up, the better-educated care about the future, about sustaining that growth. It won't be easy."



Unloading river barges and cycling in Hanoi

Not easy, but come what may, Bernier and Lauzon and Nguyen and others like them are in Vietnam to stay. "Why would I leave?" Bernier said. "I work and all my expenses are paid. I have a house. I have people who work for me. I have a girlfriend. Paradise, I tell you."