



EndoftheLine

The Smugglers

It was a weird time to be crossing the Lao/Vietnamese border at Lao Bao: no buses nor other tourists. After walking several kilometers into Vietnam, we finally came upon moneychangers and a minivan full of women. The driver of the van wanted too much money for a ride to Hue (\$9 each), but we were stranded, so we paid him.

As we climbed into the van, the women gestured to us, urgently patting the seats next to them. They told a woman to give up her window seat for Bryan, which she did without hesitation.

We thought that as foreigners, we were viewed as novelties, but we were actually good luck charms.

At the first checkpoint, the women were ordered out, and we were ordered to stay as the armed guards pulled up seat cushions and poked around the van. A male officer tapped my window with his long fingernails and gave me a creepy leer before making a comment about me to the onlooking women. A similar inspection took place about a half-hour later.

By the time we blew a tire, the mood had changed. Ho, the young woman seated in front of me, grinned as she proudly extracted cigarettes that were strapped to her arms and chest. The woman next to Bryan had hidden cigarettes in her leggings. Drinking glasses emerged from the floorboards, and chocolate bars came from the curtains. The van was full of contraband. The women were clapping their hands and laughing. Ho pretended to be handcuffed and giggled.

I'd been aware of the need to relieve myself since before the border crossing. I hoped to find a quiet bush while the flat tire was being replaced, but I was accosted as soon as I stepped out of the van. The women were grabbing by breasts, my butt, my waist, braiding my hair, kissing Bryan, kissing me, cupping my breasts, trying to lift up my shirt to see my breasts, smelling Bryan's passport photo constant attention that continued for the remainder of the journey. The unlikely smugglers were home free, and nothing could contain their exuberance.

Everyone got out at the same spot in what we were told was Hue, and the bus driver told Bryan and me to disembark there, too. We decided to get a beer (Huda) and figure out where to spend the night. This drew a crowd of about five giggling kids and five older men. It was hard to get a quiet beer, but even harder to relieve my taut bladder. Two of the girls led me past a man showering outdoors, into their house, and back outside, where their sister was forced out of a bathroom with shampoo still in her hair.

I returned to Bryan, who had learned in my absence that we were in the village of Dong Ha, more than 70 kilometers from Hue. We mounted an archaic blue Soviet bus with wood planks for seats, eating our knees and hoping this time we'd make it



to Hue - unmolested.

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