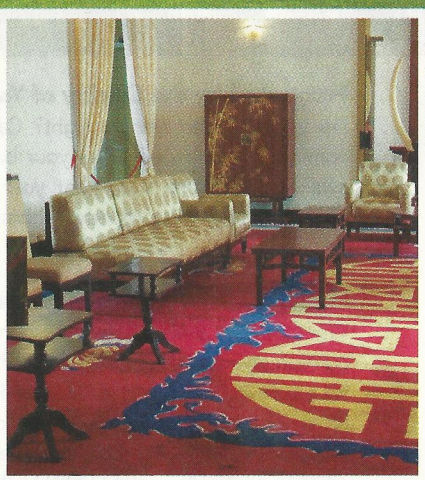
SAVE

AAA members **save $115** per person plus, receive a complimentary pre-tour night in Ho Chi Minh City on the visions of Vietnam guided vacation. For an expanded story and video tour of Ho Chi Minh City, visit **AAA.com/Go**.



Above: Reunification Palace in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Right: A set of reception rooms at the Reunification Palace welcomes foreign and national dignitaries.

Vietnam

THE ECHOES OF DISTANT THUNDER

BY LARISSA AND MICHAEL MILNE

The echoes of war still resonate in Vietnam and have gradually faded as the country has rebounded from decades of conflict. It now welcomes former adversaries.

Visitors are attracted to the war's historical resonance, the bustling activities of rebuilt cities or the stunning beauty of the country's coastline.

WAR REMNANTS MUSEUM

Our personal remembrance journey started in Saigon (now officially Ho Chi Minh City; locals say Saigon), at the War Remnants Museum, which highlights the Vietnamese perspective of wars against the French and Americans. In a subtle twist, the museum is housed in the former U.S. Information Office, considered by many combat reporters a constant source of misinformation.

The main entrance's open-air courtyard is dominated by battle-scarred American helicopters, tanks and fighter planes; all seemingly poised for action, surprisingly reminiscent of a U.S. military museum, although it was a sobering spot for us to visit.

One gallery is devoted to the suffering caused by the use of Agent Orange; the defoliant sprayed by American and South Vietnamese forces to deprive the Viet Cong of jungle cover. The gallery's walls, painted in harsh orange, are covered with before and after pictures showing how the chemical destroyed farmer's crops and coconut groves.

It also shows the human impact of Agent Orange; even among returning U.S. soldiers. The mood is heartrending as visitors contemplate life-sized photos of families who lived downwind of the aerial spraying.

However, there is a final message of hope. A large first floor gallery displays artwork by Vietnamese schoolchildren promoting world peace. Hundreds of paintings show children of all ethnicities holding hands around the globe. A display highlights then-President Bill Clinton's visit to Vietnam after diplomatic relations were first opened.

REUNIFICATION PALACE

An ornate Beaux Arts style palace housed South Vietnam's president. After it was bombed by two South Vietnamese Air Force pilots in a failed 1962 coup d'état, it was demolished, rebuilt and opened in 1966 as the renamed Independence Palace. Rebranded again, it is now the Reunification Palace, artfully combining modern and traditional Asian architecture. The stone façade looks like bamboo trunks spelling out Chinese characters representing a good future and freedom. The unchanged interior appears to be frozen in amber; with mid-century open-plan architecture and Modernist furnishings.

Despite its turbulent history, the cavernous Palace interior provides a quiet spot for reflection. Behind clear plastic partitions, bookshelves in President Thieu's private library are intact; revealing a taste for novels from Arthur Hailey's *Airport* to Leon Uris' *Topaz* along with several years' worth of *World Tennis* magazines. (Thieu was an avid tennis player.)

The structure served as the President's ceremonial residence and the command center directing military actions during the war.

The basement bunker still reeks of sweat and stale cigarette smoke and the President's War Room looks as if he had just stepped outside a moment ago to catch a breath of fresh air. Maps adorn walls revealing military movements by opposing forces as they encircled Saigon. A twin-sized bed sits forlornly in the corner of a room the size of a prison cell; a sign states "The Combat Duty Bedroom of the President."

The Palace appeared in images worldwide on April 30th, 1975 as North Vietnamese tanks smashed through its front gates, signaling the fall of the South Vietnamese government. A few blocks away U.S. Army helicopters flew their last evacuation mission from the rooftop of the besieged American Embassy.

REX HOTEL

Afterwards we visited the Rex Hotel, once an informal headquarters for war correspondents, with a rooftop bar where, during the war, reporters discussed the war's progress and sought safe haven from occasional street-level grenade attacks below.

Ho Chi Minh City at dusk.

Today the hotel provides an ideal setting to survey Ho Chi Minh City now booming, not from gunfire, but commerce. New skyscrapers pierce low-lying haze while the bicycles of yesterday have been replaced with over 2,000,000 motorcycles.

The war fought to preserve communism now operates as a rough veneer over capitalism raging beneath it. As we soaked in the scene, the Guns N' Roses song Civil War blared over the sound system; Axl Rose screeching, "I don't need no civil war." Considering the Vietnam War was the first set to a rock-and-roll soundtrack, the song seemed appropriate.

Later we met an American who had served here as a platoon leader, his deployment launched in January 1968 with the country about to explode from the Tet offensive. During the fighting, when his platoon's position near Danang was attacked almost nightly, he said to his sergeant, "You know in 30 years we're going to come back here and shake their hands. Why can't we just go ahead and do it now?" His sergeant thought the notion absurd.

But today, where that combat occurred, there's now a championship-caliber golf course designed by Nick Faldo, serving American military veterans returning in droves.

The country has survived the rolling thunder of several wars. But now there are just echoes, barely heard over the current economic boom.