

### III

## Searching for Saigon

### Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and the *Hotel Majestic*

---

Words and Photography by Kennie Ting



Fig. 1 – He’s smiling.

“I’ve known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you’re more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged.”

Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*

### *Saigon Blues*

So here’s a portrait of the man himself, prominently displayed in the General Post Office Building of the city that is named after him. He appears to be happy, or at least content. He is smiling enigmatically, like a latter-day Mona Lisa, though unlike Ms Lisa, this smile is more of a smirk; an *I know something you don’t know* sort of expression. I am forced to ask: what does he know exactly that I don’t? Because I’m not getting it. I’m not getting this whole clattering, discombobulated city of his, named after him.

Where in the world is the Saigon I came all this way to see? Where is the Saigon of beautiful women in conical hats and pastel-shaded *ao dais*, cycling leisurely to the markets? Where is the voluptuous, nubile, brazen harlot of a city in Marguerite Duras' *The Lover*?



Fig. 2 – Colonial map of Old Saigon, with the city to the right, and the satellite town of Cholon – Saigon's Chinatown – to the left.

These were the thoughts that coursed through my mind as I sat on a bench, contemplating an immense portrait of Comrade Ho hanging in the magnificently over-the-top neoclassical French-colonial General Post Office Building that sits in Paris Square, Ho Chi Minh City, or, in local terms, Công xã Paris, however one pronounces that in the unintelligible and opaque French Latin script used to transcribe a wonderfully melodic and infinitely more complex language (than French)<sup>1</sup>. Around me, I was quite literally swamped by locals, coming here to noisily purchase postal services – the place still miraculously functions as a general post office – or to just

---

<sup>1</sup> The whole latinisation of the Vietnamese language was just completely absurd and, to my mind, a grave crime against humanity. For this act of cultural genocide, Alexandre de Rhodes, the French perpetrator, gets a street named after him, and still named after him today. Trust the Vietnamese to continue revering the man who, in one fell swoop, rid them of any connection whatsoever to their traditional literature and history.



noisily take up space in an already crowded public building. Noise appears to be the thing in Ho Chi Minh City. That, and motorcycles, which in turn create an overabundance of noise. Outside, Công xã Paris bears no resemblance to Paris at all, overrun, as it were, by thousands and thousands of these lemming-like mopeds rushing off to the edge of some proverbial cliff. At the centre of Công xã Paris, impervious to it all, sits the gothic Notre-Dame de Saigon, channeling the Ile-de-France and looking completely out-of-place. The Vietnamese don't seem much bothered by it however. From my vantage point, I noted at least two wedding couples trudging heroically through the sweltering heat in tux and gown to take their wedding shots in the shadow of the hideous, salmon-pink French monstrosity.



Fig. 3 – The Notre Dame Cathedral.

Saigon is probably one of the most notorious of all the cities in Southeast Asia. Everyone's heard of it and everyone knows which country it belongs to. Reams and reams of text have been written on the city and dozens of epic dramas set in it. Many of these have been transferred from page to stage or screen and the ensuing products have gone on to win Tonys, Oscars, Cesars, Emmys and the like. There's even been a West End Musical – massively successful and profitable in the '90s – inspired by events that took place in the city during the Vietnam War. Therein, however, lies one of the main problems about Saigon's recent history and reputation,

literary and popular: it is indelibly and inconveniently linked to that of the Vietnam War. It is almost impossible to detach Saigon from the Fall of Saigon; to isolate the old French Colonial City, once known as the Pearl of the Far East, from the basket of ruined hopes that this 300-year old place became in just a brief two decades between 1955 to 1975. Three decades after the War ended, I'm still feeling them Saigon blues.



Fig. 4 – Here's a shot of The Symbol of Our Subjugation, for old times' sake.

I came to Saigon – let's just call it that for now – determined to adopt a decidedly anti-war approach to my tour of the city; as in, I would studiously avoid any attraction in the city that was related to the War, and attempt to tap into the essence of the French City that existed *before* the Americans and Russians came round to screw it up<sup>2</sup>. I might as well have tried to avoid seawater in the Pacific Ocean. Just when I thought I had found one museum (the Fine Arts Museum) that would appear to have little to do with post-war guilt-tripping – voila! – there's an entire section dedicated to that sole purpose. The city's most visited attractions are irretrievably associated with THE WAR. The two most visited of these attractions are the Reunification Palace – where Comrade Ho's Vietminh ended the War in 1975 by driving a tank into the

---

<sup>2</sup> The French pretty much created the city, so there wasn't much of it to screw up before they arrived.

palace façade and absorbing South Vietnam forcibly into Communist North Vietnam – and the War Remnants Museum, where for a minimal fee, one can admire deformed foetuses, decommissioned ammunitions, and read in garish detail, the hundreds of unforgivable atrocities the Americans committed on the Vietnamese, as though the North Vietnamese themselves were guiltless. It's a strange way to promote tourism, but it appears to be succeeding. The Reunification Palace at least, was thronged with Vietnamese and Americans, happily snapping away at the symbol of the City's shame.



Fig. 5 – Ho Chi Minh's spanking new skyline: the Bitexco Tower sits to the right.

Elsewhere, the old French City is slowly but surely being eradicated by the relentless onslaught of yet another Western European power – Capitalism. Whole blocks of French colonial villas and public buildings have been demolished for the construction of such towering hulks of nondescriptness like the Bitexco Towers – the tallest building in the city; and the Vincom Towers, the city's most luxurious mall. I get it though. I really do. The City has moved on. It wishes to turn away from its ignominious past and pursue a more “normal” course of development that other cities in the region, notably Singapore, started on decades ago. It really wishes not to be Saigon, but to be Ho Chi Minh City: just any other modern, everyday humdrum sort of place. *Well then, I have to counter, was the War not then a complete waste of*



*time?* Was all that *sturm, drang und tod* really necessary when the Communist Ideology it was unleashed to protect has been supplanted after all? Did the Communist North really, actually *lose* the War in the end? But I'm being unfairly disingenuous.



Fig. 6 - The legendary Hotel Continental Saigon, beside the to-be-unveiled new Eden Center, thankfully designed to blend in with the colonial architecture of its surroundings.

I spent the afternoon sipping tea at the outdoor terrace of the legendary *Hotel Continental* (1880), pondering over these indelicate thoughts of mine. The Continental is the oldest and most legendary hotel in Saigon, situated on the most celebrated street in its time – Rue Catinat, now bombastically known as Đường Đồng Khởi, or Total Uprising Street. During the War, it was the centre of political intrigue, accommodating heads of state, spies, journalists and writers. Graham Greene stayed in a suite here, and set entire scenes in his book, *The Quiet American*, on Rue Catinat. Somerset Maugham too, resided here and described how agreeable it was to sit in the exact same spot I sat in, having an innocent drink before reading about heated affairs in the local papers. Even then, it seemed, Saigon was brewing with resentment, and far from a Far Eastern idyll.



Fig. 7 – She’s smiling too.

The Continental is one of the few colonial-era landmarks that still largely stands in its original form. Across the street sits the beautifully restored Opera House, now a Municipal Theatre. Within five minutes walking distance sit the landmark *Rex* (1961) and *Caravelle Hotels* (1959), built in the late ‘50s, and infamous for playing host to American G.I.s during the War. Further along Đồng Khởi Street towards the Saigon River sit a further two legendary hotels – the *Grand Hotel* (1930) and the *Majestic Hotel* (1925)<sup>3</sup>. The rest of the street, however, is a battleground on which Capitalism appears to be waging a winning war: one regards a landscape of construction and re-development, spanking-new building, the airbrushed visages of the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow and Scarlett Johanssen, and the serpentine logos of Dior, Louis Vuitton and Chanel. It is a chilling reminder that old Saigon is once again being subjected to a joint French and American onslaught, but this time the Saigonese are running towards rather than running away.

Hang on. I’ve already established some paragraphs back that this isn’t Saigon that I’m in. This is Ho Chi Minh City. I have still yet to find traces of Saigon in this

---

<sup>3</sup> All of these hotels, save the Continental and the Majestic have been refurbished almost beyond recognition, with multi-storeyed towers clumsily added onto the existing buildings to double or triple the number of rooms offered. The Majestic is also slated to undergo such a dubious refurbishment, though there was no sign of this when I stayed there.

town. I still can't decipher the old man's smile. Gwyneth's is eminently more transparent.

*One to Rival the French*



Fig. 8 – The façade of the Hotel Majestic, at No. 1 Đồng Khởi Street.

In Ho Chi Minh City, I chose to accommodate myself in the Hotel Majestic, rather than the older and much *much* more legendary Hotel Continental. In Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, the Majestic is mentioned in passing a few times as a place for doing business in; a sanctuary from the tedious and terrifying reality of war-torn Saigon, as opposed to the Continental, which is where one went to be in the thick of it all. In particular, the Majestic's rooftop bar – cooled by the breeze from the Saigon river, and famed amongst wartime expatriates for its seven p.m. cocktails – is referred to as a slice of Paradise more than once by the main protagonist, Fowler, when he is caught in some untenable and potentially horrifying circumstance outside of the City. Given its majestic riverfront location, and my own intentions to evade the War at all costs, I decided that the Majestic would have to be my base while I searched for Saigon.



The Hotel Majestic opened its doors in 1925 and is a good 45 years younger than its more illustrious cousin down the street. Interestingly, it was built and owned by a local Chinese tycoon, Mr Hui Boon Hoa, who also quite a few other buildings in Saigon, and had desired of establishing a hotel to rival the French-built and designed Continental. In archival photos, I noted that the hotel's Chinese name – 大旅館 (Grand Hotel) – had previously adorned the top of the building, where now, only its English name does, in big gold letters. Despite major face-lifts over the years, I expected that the hotel wouldn't look too different than when Greene had patronized it in the 1930s, which is to say it still maintained a delicate, palatial Art Deco facade that wouldn't have looked out of place in Cannes or Nice, on the French Riviera.



Fig. 9 – The lobby of the Hotel Majestic.

The Art Deco styling continues into the interior of the Hotel, which is ornately decorated with stained glass and coloured marble. Strangely, however, I found the hotel lobby cold (literally and metaphorically), a tad too dimly lit (even though it was bright sunlight without), and not very inviting. This was more than compensated, however, by the excellent and very professional Madame la Concierge. That's her, right there in the photo above, dressed in a gold *ao dai* and directing a guest through the main door. The minute I checked in, Valerie – not her true name – took me

firmly in hand, showing me my room and advising me on where to go to find authentic Saigonese cuisine for dinner that evening. Once again, my Singaporeanness was a boon. She seemed to take an immediate, sisterly shine to me, warning me firmly to make sure all my valuables were locked in my in-room safe. “Vietnam is not safe as your country, Mr Ting” she said gently, “We still working on it.” And then she left me to my own resources, reminding me to seek her out – “My name is Valerie, Mr Ting.” – if I should need any assistance.



Fig. 10 – The Colonial River View Deluxe Room.

My room was quite simply delightful. With creaking wooden parquet floors and neoclassical detailing on the walls, it oozed colonial flavour. Some of the fittings weren't all quite there – there was a hot and cold bath tap in the bathroom but no bath, for example, as though the bath had been torn right out and not replaced – but the slight imperfections actually made it more charming. The best part of the room was the balcony overlooking the Saigon River, and the very busy thoroughfare of Tô Đức Thắng. I stood out there on the balcony for some time to absorb the atmosphere and to listen to the soothing hum of the thousands of motorcycles: from up high, they didn't sound quite so loud and jarring. In the near distance to the right sat the Port of Saigon and the old Custom House, built in 1862, which now housed a Museum on Ho Chi Minh's life. As I watched, medium-sized barges floated east across the river

lethargically, weighed down by the goods they carried. The boats passed a trio of floating restaurants moored along the waterfront, and which would come alive with light and music in the evening. This was, I thought to myself, the most evocative and magical view I was likely to get all year.



Fig. 11 – The Hotel’s quaint little pool, in its quaint little courtyard.

Totally psyched, I decided to head down to the hotel’s swimming pool to beat the heat and to plan my agenda for the rest of my stay. Quaintly located in the hotel’s courtyard, and surrounded on all sides by the balconies of the hotel’s Pool-view rooms, the pool is completely cut off from the hustle and bustle of the world outside, and one can quite easily relax into a slumber. Which is exactly what happened to me that first afternoon in the city, at least, until I was awakened the shrill shrieks of Australian children splashing in the pool and their parents watching beamingly from the sides.





Fig. 12 – A glass of sparkling wine and a splendid view at the hotel's rooftop bar.

It was already 5 p.m. when that happened, and I thought it was time to check out the most famous part of the hotel – the rooftop bar. Refreshed and in a new set of clothes, I ascended to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the hotel and into a dramatically open space framed by an even better view of the Saigon River than in my room on one side, and by towering skyscrapers on another. The bar was silent and populated with a handful of Australian tourists – they would seem to be Australian all weekend. It had started to rain heavily then so I chose a seat as far out against the edge of the rooftop as I could without getting wet. It was clear to me that this couldn't have been the spot where Greene had imbibed his cocktails four decades ago – the hotel had only 5 floors in those days – but sipping at my glass of sparkling wine, with only the torrential rain and the torpid river to accompany me, I thought I could just about feel what Greene felt up here; which is to say that up here, one felt time passing as sluggishly and luxuriantly as the River itself. Unfortunately, the DJ chose that very moment to start blasting American Top 40s music and my bubble was quite burst.



Fig 13 – The Catinat Lounge, serving a relatively popular High Tea on the weekends.

Valerie was scandalised to find out that I had squandered away my first afternoon in Saigon by the pool and in the bar, despite her best efforts at directing me outside the hotel. “You have to see the city!” she tutted, brows furrowed, “You can’t stay in hotel whole day!” I shrugged sheepishly in response, informing her that I did indeed venture out to one of the restaurants she had recommended for dinner<sup>4</sup>, where I had very gamely tried local dishes like giant snail, some kind of shredded pork and rice ensemble. Laughing and shaking her head and laughing, she asked me what I thought of Saigon so far, and I couldn’t help but ask her the question that had been gnawing at me since I arrived. “Why do you call it Saigon, when it’s no longer Saigon, but Ho Chi Minh City?” She looked confused at the question. “What do you mean is no longer Saigon? Saigon never go away. It still here, inside,” she said, furrowing her brows further and patting her chest where her heart was, “And also there, outside. You not going to find Saigon sitting in hotel. You go out.” There was no argument at that point.

---

<sup>4</sup> Nha Hang Ngon, a sister restaurant to Quan An Ngon, both of which are the best restaurants in Saigon for authentic Vietnamese street cuisine. Both restaurants are housed in a stunning colonial villas and are always heaving with locals and tourists.



Fig. 14 – The mise-en-abime of the hotel’s main stairwell.

In the evening, however, I defied Valerie’s express suggestion that I dine out again, and instead, opted to have dinner at the Hotel’s Cyclo Café, serving bespoke Vietnamese Cuisine. Despite the positive reviews, it couldn’t have been a worse decision. For a start, the restaurant was completely deserted. There was only one other table occupied, and it looked like a business meeting was taking place. The minute I sat down at a table and placed my order, a three-piece traditional music ensemble was coaxed to take to a small stage at the corner of the restaurant, to regale me with a set of lilting, fluttering Vietnamese music. That seemed innocuous enough. I was embarrassed that they would go through all the effort just for me (the other table was strategically situated where they would not be able to see the stage), but the music was pleasant and atmospheric. I could sink comfortably into dinner with that music.

Wrapped up in the melody, I sipped at my glass of sparkling wine and stared out the window onto Tồn Đức Thắng street, glowing in garish neon shades. Without my noticing, a new melody was suddenly struck up; one that was considerably more upbeat, borderline techno. Turning around, I was aghast to see that a trio of dancing girls had taken to the stage, brandishing bright pink fans, and leaping and contorting to the music. They smiled valiantly as they danced, despite having no real audience



to appreciate their exertions. I felt uncomfortable and tried my best to look at them so they didn't feel too disheartened. But then my food finally arrived and I could excuse my inattention by digging into dinner; which, as it happened, was simply too salty<sup>5</sup>.



Fig. 16 – Traditional music ensemble in an empty Cyclo Café restaurant.

I tried to console and amuse myself by thoughts that less than twenty years ago, the hotel had hosted the likes of Francois Mitterand, Catherine Deneuve, and dozens of other French celebrities, who would have responded gravely to a similar over-salted dinner with solemn and impassioned exclamations of “c’est magnifique, quoi!” and “franchement, c’est exquis!” that the French are wont to lapse into. It also struck me that such dinner-cum-cultural performances were staples of lesser-developed countries that depend on kitsch presentations of cultural heritage to attract undiscerning tourists. Yet another sobering reminder that for all the Singaporean-isation going on in the vicinity, this was still a very poor city.

---

<sup>5</sup> In my mind I could see Valerie shaking her head in disapproval.



Fig. 16 – Fresh local fruits at breakfast.

The next morning, I headed up for breakfast at the Breeze Restaurant, situated on the fifth floor of the hotel, and adorned with an equally stunning view of the Saigon River as the Rooftop Bar had. Unfortunately, the view wore thin pretty quickly as the sun rose right in front of you, and made sitting outside in the charming al fresco area completely, sweat-drippingly unbearable. The breakfast buffet's saving grace was the selection of local fruit available – tropical fruit that to me were absolutely familiar, existing also in Singapore; but to the hotel's Australian and German guests looked about as appetizing as seaslugs. As I picked my fill of the more exotic varieties, I witnessed a German couple looking sceptically at the brightly coloured array and asking each other if some bright orange cubes on display were indeed papaya. Chuckling inwardly, I relished my own selection – passion fruit, guava, pomelo, chiku, jambu, and dragonfruit – a cornucopia of delights, all of which were deliciously sweet or lightly tangy where they ought to be.

After breakfast, I spent the remainder of my morning wandering the hotel's corridors and taking shots of its more arresting architectural features. In my head, I reviewed all I had witnessed and assessed whether I had indeed achieved my goal of

finding Saigon in the beast of a city that Saigon had morphed into. I decided that I had failed, quite resoundingly, and that the Saigon in books and movies was quite irretrievably lost in all the grime, noise and pollution. It was inevitable. One could not save a city that did not wish to save itself.

As it turned out, I was quite wrong. Without knowing, I had already experienced the essence of Saigon, all around me, except I hadn't quite noticed. Looking through the photographs I had taken all weekend, I came across this one that I had shot that very morning while standing in my dressing gown on my balcony, overcome with emotion at the beauty of it all.



Fig. 17 – Dawn over the Saigon River.

Here, on the banks of the River at dawn, was Saigon, in all its sensuous, timeless glory, and as far removed from the war as it could possibly be. After I uncovered this one glimpse of Saigon, the others fell into place – furtive and fleeting, no doubt, but very, very much *found*.

Feast your eyes on that, Comrade Ho.



### **Essential Reading, Viewing and Listening:**

Marguerite Duras, 1984. *L'amant*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Graham Greene, 1955. *The Quiet American*. London: Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition.

Somerset Maugham, 1930. *The Gentleman in the Parlour*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions.

Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, 1989. *Miss Saigon. Original Soundtrack Recording*. NY: Decca Broadway.

Pam Scott, 2010. *In Search of the Pearl of the Far East: Sài Gòn – Hồ Chí Minh City*. Vietnam: Thế Giới Publishers.

Régis Wargnier, 1992. *Indochine*. Paris: Bac films.



Fig. 18 – Au revoir Hotel Majestic.