



**TWO WOMEN** wearing masks carried rubble in a basket.

# Saigon's heart beats to sound of scooters' roar

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The heart of Saigon, the former capital of South Vietnam, beats with the song of a four-cycle motor scooter at full throttle.

Thriving, growing, changing, Saigon — known officially to the Communist government since the “American War” as Ho Chi Minh City — still dances to a capitalist tune. Tourism drives much of the economy, but manufacturing and commerce are growing.

Shipping containers, parked by old colonial buildings outside the suburbs, testify to burgeoning trade that draws new wealth to this poor country. Cheap labor means more work in a third world where the traditional players, such as Taiwan, now are too developed to compete.

Saigon has its contrasts. Unlike China, Vietnam still has few cars. Everyone, it seems, has a scooter. Flocks of them swarm down the city's streets, carrying men on the way to work, restaurant hostesses in fancy dresses, whole families at once: Dad driving, Mom on the back seat holding the baby, son on daddy's lap.

Many of the women you see wear masks covering their entire face, mostly to shield their skin from the tanning effects of the sun, but also to keep them from breathing all those fumes on the street.

Contrasts abound. Walking among the scooters and Western-dressed women, you might spot an older woman wearing the traditional cone-shaped hat of Vietnam. It's not uncommon to see workers, men and



**IN A TRADITIONAL** hat, a woman waited to cross the street.

women, carrying debris and materials with a pole across the shoulders. Vendors offer a chance to have your picture taken wearing both.

Downtown, the parks and old colonial buildings left by the French stand beside new American and

European hotels. Tree-lined boulevards lead to the old presidential palace, built by the old regime in the 1960s but now a national museum — with two tanks out front.

Leading every way from the city center, propaganda posters hang from old colonial lamp posts, a reminder that, yes, this is one of the handful of Communist countries left.

While the party still runs the government, though, its leaders seem to realize that economic advancement requires a pact with the capitalist devil. New hotels and factories sprout at will, it seems, though U.S. Ambassador Michael W. Michalak, who meets us for breakfast, says the government has a ways to go before business people will trust it with real money.

There seems to be little bitterness left from the war, though our guide notes that something like 60 percent of the population has been born since it ended. And in freewheeling Saigon, at least, more than half the others sided with the U.S.

The old Communist stronghold outside of town the French and Americans once called the Iron Triangle holds a war museum, known as the Cu Chi Tunnels. We have our pictures taken with wax dummies of Viet Cong fighters and watch demonstrations of tunnel stealth.

Cynthia wanders about the souvenir shop, where like at the airport, everything is priced in dollars, not Vietnamese dong (exchange rate 16,000 to 1).

“Maybe we did win,” she muses.

Maybe everyone did, in the end



**LEGIONS OF MOTOR SCOOTERS** buzz through downtown Saigon, some (as the lead bike shows if you look carefully) carrying whole families. Few riders wear helmets. Visitors are advised to just step into the street and walk, but never to stop or back up. Bike riders just weave around them.



**A GUIDE** demonstrated how a Communist fighter could disappear into a jungle tunnel.

— Herald staff photos by Steve Haynes



**THE FORMER PRESIDENTIAL** palace (above), today a national museum, sits in the center of Saigon, though the landmark multi-story American Embassy is gone. Publishers

Cynthia and Steve Haynes (below) pose with wax dummies of Viet Cong “liberation fighters.” Political slogans (right below) hang along old French boulevards.

