

SOMETIMES THE BEST MEALS ARE A SURPRISE

When I travel, my husband and I love to go off the beaten path to discover things many tourists might miss. We love the back roads and small towns where every day life just moves along in its normal flow. While in Hanoi, we wanted to get a sense of life outside of the city, so we made arrangements for an unusual culinary side-tour which included hand-made vermicelli production and a lunch at the mayor's house. (It was a very small village and the mayor was able to charge a hefty fee for the honor).

We weren't quite sure what to expect, but within an hour of leaving our hotel, we were somewhere out in the country in a small village called Cu Da. Compared to the chaos of Hanoi where you take your life in your hands just to cross the street, this small village was almost silent and everyone seemed to walk at half-speed.



Our first stop was a small hut by the side of the road that was making hand-made vermicelli sheets. It's an amazing process to watch. Arrowroot is ground and mixed with water to make a paste. Then super-thin long sheets—almost the consistency of those fruit strips you ate as a kid—are spread out onto large bamboo trays to dry. They are then cut into thin strips, dried again before packaging, and then shipped around the world. The people of this village have been doing this for generations and it has become the main income for the villagers.



We were then taken to the mayor's house for lunch. We were told the mayor would not be joining us, but the host insisted we first take a nap. This was not optional. Not wanting to seem rude, we tried to relax on the hard bed and pretended to sleep. Watching us from a crack in the doorway was the mayor's granddaughter, an adorable and curious seven-year old. Catching my eye, she giggled and ran away.



When nap time was over, we were presented with a multi-course feast. Fried tofu, beef with scallions and bok choy, sautéed greens, vegetable spring rolls, some tasty stew concoction and, of course, vermicelli noodles served in a light soy sauce topped with fried shallots. The home cooked dishes were flavored so delicately and the ingredients were so fresh that it was better than any meal we've eaten in any Vietnamese restaurant.

We kept noticing our little spy standing in the shadows and eventually coaxed her out to come sit with us. She was as curious about us as we were about her. She kept staring at my iPhone, so I picked it up to show her how to take a selfie.



That seemed to wipe away any language challenges as we posed for our glam shot. Once she was satisfied we got a good one, she gave us a little hug, waved goodbye and ran out to play with her friends. As good as this lunch was, the company was even better.