

Vietnam: The Paths Less-Travelled

Fokion first emailed me in November 2015. He was planning a trip to photograph Vietnam, he said, and needed our help with logistics and ideas for locations. He wanted to explore ‘vistas of high photographic interest’, and meant to visit us at different times of year to document Vietnam’s seasons. Looking at his website, I could see he had an eye for wild, almost oppressively vast landscapes of raw nature. In his Iceland panoramas, the lava fields, the ocean, the sky stretch away, only to turn in on themselves, inverting our idea of nature as freedom. But his portfolio also included macro photography, images of nature’s miniature kingdoms, and even something close to documentary, the industrial architecture of Thessaloniki Port. For all the variety, a geometrical precision marked Fokion’s work, and he would use this to expand our sense of space and perspective. I wrote back to him with a proposal for his first trip: Sa Pa, Ha Giang, Cao Bang and Bai Tu Long Bay, Vietnam’s far northern frontier.

Five months later, Fokion arrived at Noi Bai airport. Along with him came Mata, his wife, best friend, photo critic and constant travel companion. We’re a family company, combined from two families actually, and with Fokion and Mata we felt an unusual kinship from the start. Despite the distance travelled, the differences in background and generation, and the fact it was pouring with rain when I’d assured Fokion the wet weather would have passed by now, we chatted like friends on our first evening together at our cafe on Hang Vai street. ‘Life is full of shocks,’ said Fokion at one point, ‘you never know who you’ll cross paths with and where.’ He and Mata had already fallen for Hanoi, its ramshackle streets and distressed colonial facades, the youth everywhere, bursting like buds on a ragged old tree. And, for that, we knew they’d fall further for the northern provinces, no matter the challenges of a 2,000 kilometre expedition in the Vietnamese back country. The rain stopped that night, and at daybreak they hit the road north, arriving in the Hoang Lien Son mountain range at noon.

Fokion had introduced himself as a landscape photographer, and thought of his Vietnam project mainly along such lines. His pictures from Sa Pa and Y Ty, the Dong Van Rocky Plateau, Bai Tu Long Bay, and from the second trip, Mu Cang Chai and Lai Chau in the northwest, explore epic extremes in Vietnam’s hinterlands. Generations of invaders have tried to tame these mountains, at least long enough to hold Hanoi and the fertile land along the Red River Delta: the Mongols, the Chinese, France, Japan... all with varying degrees of failure. Before the modern day Vietnamese,

only the hill tribes had kept a toehold on these wild slopes, for unknown centuries migrating between high land and low, moving freely across the region. This is why Ho Chi Minh hid out and built his rebellion in rugged Cao Bang province, and why General Vo Nguyen Giap knew he could destroy imperial France even at heavily-defended Dien Bien Phu: whoever mobilized the hill tribes in this wilderness would win.

Today, national roads connect these remote outposts, but the H'mong, Dzao, Thai and other groups continue to live in the wooden stilt houses or bungalows of a century ago. Phone lines criss-cross the countryside, most families have at least a motorbike for transport, and yet the buffalo still reigns among farming technology. In Fokion's images, we often sense the precariousness of human life at this threshold of nature. A farmer's shack teeters at the edge of a flooded rice terrace, the water a shattered window onto endless sky. Luminous green paddies wash across another image; adrift amidst the colour, wooden stilt houses like boats in a storm. In a H'mong plantation, the pitiless Vietnamese sun blazes down, farmers minuscule under a flimsy net canopy. More often, though, his pictures give us nature in its purest state: the charred volcanic mountainsides of Ha Giang; a cataract in Hoang Su Phi, pounding eternally over rock face; an immense river cave in Ba Be, scooped out of limestone over untold millenia. As with Ansel Adams' landscapes of the national parks of America, we marvel at our insignificance. Nature ruled before us; it still rules; long after we're gone, it will outlast us.

Over two trips in the north, in spring and autumn 2016, Fokion covered some 6,000 kilometres of road, track and trail. When the trail ended, he and his guide Colm clambered over rocks and into forest, often finding themselves amidst a different kind of epic. Deep in the jungle, foliage sprouts wildly, leaves, fronds, vines and trees surging with abandon, ruled only by hunger for water and light. Fokion abandons the point of focus in these images, upending our fragile sense of human perspective. Lost in the forest, we smell the damp leaves, hear the whine of the cicadas, feel the vines tighten around our ankles. Months after I first saw these pictures, I encountered Nguyen Gia Tri's astonishing lacquer painting in Hanoi's Museum of Fine Arts, across which dense vegetation also sprouts and stretches, as if about to spring from the picture. The two visions entangle each other across a century of art, history and technological change.

For all its natural wonders and startling geographical diversity, Vietnam is a country of people, nearly 100 million of them. As perspective, consider that this is tenfold the population of Fokion's homeland Greece, although Vietnam is only two times the size. Visitors gawp at the traffic in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the floods of motorbikes inundating the streets during waking hours, apparently heedless of any internationally-accepted conventions of road rule. And the pavements overspilling with traders of all sorts: shoe-cleaners, key-cutters, tea-vendors, as well as entire restaurants, the kitchen a couple of gas rings amid a collection of pots, the clientele seated all around at plastic tables and chairs, chosen not just for their cheapness but also their portability when the local police drop by to enforce fanciful laws against public clutter. Fokion's street photography from Hanoi captures this barely-managed mayhem subtly, with less attention to the people themselves than their constant motion: the headlight traces of traffic around the Opera House and Long Bien Market; the blurred figures of Old Quarter pedestrians in an evening downpour.

Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City may dizzy us with human chaos, but the majority of Vietnamese live in the countryside, so it was natural that, once on the road, Fokion would turn his lens to the people. He'd arrived with only landscapes in mind, but almost from the outset of the first trip, he found himself capturing portraits of locals and their daily lives. To my eye, these are among the most impressive pictures from all of his work in Vietnam. Many photographers romanticize or exoticize the hill tribes, the colourful costumes and hand-crafted jewellery worn in pictures like garments in a fashion shoot, their eyes photoshopped to glitter with preternatural wisdom. It's a digital take on the old cliché of the noble savage, orientalism edited in Lightroom. But Fokion's portraits of

country people, in natural light, catch a humanity rarely presented in photography of Vietnam. While the orientalist give us people as types (wise, wrinkly elders; flamboyantly-outfitted tribal women; cute, irrepressible kids) in these pictures we have a simple sense of each person's individuality, their unique life. The pictures take us beyond surface, and into a relationship with the subjects, as close as you might get without meeting them, and in a way even closer. 'You never know who you'll cross paths with and where.'

The photographs in this collection show us a Vietnam known only to those following less-travelled paths, on often gruelling journeys to the horizon. But even then, it takes a special eye to give us the view as if we're standing right there. At the farmer's shack, we smell sun sizzling off the paddy field after rain; on Ha Giang's volcanic mountains we feel an icy wind on our faces gusting down the Ma Pi Leng gorge from China; in the plantation we hear the H'mong women's voices shouting across to each other, '...oi!' Even for those of us calling this place home, Fokion's photography is an irresistible invitation to adventure.