

The Bridge by Rose Saltman

Everything in the reception area cum dining room speaks of place, from the crisp breakfast baguettes and condensed-milk fortified coffee to the cane furniture and photos of Hmong women tending their looms. Almost everything, that is. A fireplace in the midpoint of a feature wall has a brick surround, iron chamber lining and timber mantelpiece. What is this British-inspired hearth doing in a Vietnamese hill town?

It's September 2008 and we've booked a few nights at the Thai Binh Hotel, a budget family-run hotel a few flights up from the markets, cafés and restaurants of central Sa Pa, 300 kilometres north-west of Hanoi. Seeing my eyes fixed on the fireplace, the owner – Nam – says he fell in love with the style when he was doing postgraduate studies in Dunedin. He had to have a bit of New Zealand in his hotel.

Nam comes and goes while we're in residence, offering advice on activities, restaurants and attractions; he is solicitous but doesn't intrude. Qualified as a maths teacher, he taught the subject once upon a time, but we gather that his current role – working for the local department of education forecasting school needs – pays better. He is one of many locals we encounter who work more than one job. 'Everyone is employed, no one is working and it's not enough,' he volunteers with a wry smile.

Over breakfast one morning, Nam confides that he'd like to do a PhD at Monash University. He's been to Sydney before, but not Melbourne. His wife and child, however, would have to stay behind – security against any thoughts he might harbour about converting his student status to permanent residency. Although his conversational English is good, I wonder about his written expression. So often I've encountered non-native English speakers whose writing falls short of their oral skills. I offer to help edit his application to Monash, no charge.

When it comes time to pack up and head back to Hanoi, Nam suggests meeting us in the border town of Lao Cai for a mini-city tour before our train departs. At the end of the tour, he drives us to a bend in the river and points to a bridge linking Lao Cai to Hekou in China. The twinkling lights from each town and the bridge's density of human and vehicle traffic are a far cry from February 1979, when China launched a

surprise offensive in response to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. Several Vietnamese border towns were captured in that month-long conflict, after which China was satisfied that its point had been made and the occupying troops were withdrawn.

With the resumption of commerce and free movement between Lao Cai and Hekou, a new bridge became necessary to ease pressure on existing crossings. It opened in 2001, its design reflecting the artistic collaboration of the countries that built it. A sober temple-style gate stands at the Chinese end while a white cable-stayed archway comprised of two giant 'claws' that look about to snap shut on prey in a pincer movement, marks the Vietnamese side.

'The arrangement was that each country would build its share of the bridge, meeting in the middle,' Nam tells us. As the two sides drew closer, it became apparent that the Chinese section was 15mm higher. 'It was China's way of showing superiority,' Nam says, and Vietnam had to rise up, literally, to make the project feasible.

Some months later I email Nam repeating my offer of editing assistance. He doesn't reply. I'll never know if he got that PhD.

~~~~~

## **The Bridge**

**Written by Rose Saltman**

**Posted on the CHOL Share Your Stories Site in July, 2025**