I can highly recommend BfD Beekeepers’ Safaris. You stay at the best accommodation available, see the tourist sights and get to see the rural countryside. You meet the real people of the country and see their bees whilst enjoying fellow beekeepers’ company.

Despite November being a difficult time to leave my bees and a very dry spring, I am really pleased I decided to join the Safari to Vietnam. My previous Safari with BfD to Turkey in June had been excellent. Shirley and I added a pre-f week touring Cambodia before travelling to Saigon (or Ho Chi Minh City as it is now known) to join the Safari. The city traffic is hectic with many scooters, cars, trucks and buses clogging the roads.

We had a great group: five UK beekeepers, in addition to me and Shirley from Australia. The Safari was very good - an excellent mix of beekeeping and tourist activities. The meals were impressive, often consisting of seven courses and sometimes even ten!

The Safari started with the bus taking us to Ben Tre a city on one of the eight huge arms of the Mekong River as it crosses the Mekong Delta. We travelled by boat and then rode bicycles to the home stay. In a palm tree we discovered a small swarm of Asian bees thought to be Apis florea. We visited a brick works, coconut factory, and saw coconut lollies being made.

We visited a local beekeeper with approximately 240 colonies of Apis cerana in two locations. He moves his bees to other locations; coconut palm appeared to be the main honey flow. He harvests on average 100 kg of honey each month of the year but it can be highly variable. The beekeeper broke open a coconut husk and lit it with a cigarette lighter and as it smouldered he blew a faint puff of smoke across the bees as he gently removed a comb. The bright yellow stripy bees were very gentle and still on the comb.

The next day we visited a commercial beekeeper with dark Italian bees with golden abdomens. 250 ten-frame single hives were in the shelter of Longan trees. The beekeeper had a teapot that had bellows added to make a smoker. He opened seven hives and they had seven frames covered with bees and copious amounts of feed bee as a paste spread along the top bars of the frames. As I had seen before in Turkey, frames of foundation are only added to the hive as the colony becomes strong enough to cover the frames. The brood was impressive with large slabs filling the combs. A feeder with dry white sugar was in the bottom of the hive. Varroa management is 80% formic acid soaked into the green florist foam block (oasis). Chopsticks are used to handle the small block which is left in twice a year to control Varroa.

The colonies produce about 80 kg of ‘jungle’ honey over an eight month season. It appears that the outside frames are extracted every week regardless of being capped. The resulting honey we sampled in Vietnam had in all but two cases fermented flavour and was extremely thin. Local beekeepers believe that the fermented honey is medicinal. The most outstanding thing here was that the very yellow Italian bees were so quiet that they were left open and looked at for over 40 minutes before showing any signs of annoyance. Considering smoke was not being used I was most impressed. Not one person was stung in the group or the local press that came to report our visit. It was said that the Italian bees out-compete the Asian bees and there are no problems with mating Italian queens. If the sealed brood is smooth Varroa is not present. Honey prices to the beekeeper are US$1.5- 2.0/kg.
We heard of a migratory beekeeper based 100 km north-west of Saigon, with 400 Italian bee colonies harvesting 50 tonnes of honey a year which is sold for US$1.5/kg. US$75,000 is a massive annual income in Vietnam: workers in Vietnam earn about US$200 per month.

We visited the Cu Chi Tunnels and experienced crawling through them in total darkness. I was pleased to get out! Rubber tree plantations provide forage and the latex is harvested through the night.

We flew in to Da Nang airport, passing the huge resorts, and on to Hoi Ann an old, scenic city. The sightseeing and shopping is very good; as was the visit to My Son to see temples similar to those at Banteay Srei in Cambodia. I was fascinated by the marble carving industry in the area. The bus travels along the steep and rocky coast line to Hue. Visiting the Palace reminded me of the Forbidden City in Beijing. We saw a spectacular Mausoleum of ornate decorations with statues of warriors and elephants.

At the next Mausoleum we saw an Apis dorsata colony hanging in the arch of a temple, and watched the bees fluttering wing patterns when they were disturbed. You could see the bees dancing on the surface of the colony.

We visited another beekeeper with Italian bees after a walk down a jungle track. Once again the bees were quiet but not as quiet as those we saw in the Mekong Delta. These bees are fed sugar for 3-4 months. During the honey season the frames are extracted every 7-10 days. It was claimed there were Eucalyptus trees for honey production, but I could only see endemic jungle trees (Acacia). A huge old quarry cleared area was being levelled by a bulldozer. This is for renting out to migratory beekeepers who want to come and share the resources. It was said that the thin, fermented flavoured honey is said to be preferred by the honey buyers and does not candy. The beekeeper had changed to European bees as they appear to be more productive. It seems that this retired Vietnamese army soldier was content with his 50 colonies and made money from selling off his extra bees.

Another flight, this time to Hanoi. A long ceramic mural decorates the road side through the city. Huge developments with a new billion dollar airport are being built and funded by the Japanese. Hanoi buildings are a mixture of old and new, large and tiny, smart and dilapidated: many are very narrow and 4 to 5 storeys high. Apparently you pay council rates by the width of your house frontage, so best to have a narrow building that is high. Some of the new houses are very impressive. It is common for three generations of a family to live in the house with the older generations on the higher floors of the building. In the city the ground floor is rented out as a shop and the family lives above often enjoying a good lifestyle from the rent.

Tourist time in Hanoi: locals appear to eat all their meals in the streets often sitting on very small stools, it seems no cooking is done at home. The trip to Ha Long Bay and cruise around some of the 1969 islands of Limestone Karsts was very scenic.

We caught the overnight sleeper train to Loc Cao near the Chinese border, then onto the mountain town of Sapa where we had breakfast before staying at the Victoria Hotel. The higher elevation means it is much cooler here and the clouds and mist swirl around. Vietnam has 54 minority tribes and we saw some of them selling their wares in the streets of Sapa. The markets
are interesting and people live subsistence-style. We visited a beekeeper. He has *Apis cerana* in hives around the house, once again very gentle and easy to inspect with no smoke or veils.

The Black H’mong tribe live beside the town and we walked down the steep terraced hillside to see them making crafts to sell to tourists. The women are excellent at dyeing material with Indigo dye making colourful clothes to attract a husband, and the men need to be strong and good carpenters to attract a wife! Some tribal women blacken their teeth by rubbing them with the root of a plant. It looks very strange but makes the teeth tough and strong enough to last a lifetime.

We walked through the countryside and saw the local farmers with paddy fields, fish farms, buffalo, pigs, birds, dogs and various other animals. Large amounts of vegetables are grown.

We visited the Red Dzao village where the women wearing distinctive red head dresses are waiting for the bus wanting to sell their craftwork. We walk through the village to see a colony of *Apis cerana* bees in a wooden box; the honeycomb is cut off as natural wild comb. Once the local people realise we are willing to pay to see the bees, they are eager to show us more.

On our last day our bus took us about an hour north-west of Hanoi to Hoa Binh Province and we met beekeepers in a village of 420 houses. All houses have a couple of *Apis cerana* colonies producing about 2 kg per colony per year. The more ambitious have 20-30 colonies. The people are very friendly and all want us to see their bees, but we have only limited time. We see a swarm of *Apis cerana* being caught and because these bees tend to abscond when times are tough the beekeepers are experts at catching swarms using ladders made from bamboo. They tell us that if migratory beekeepers with European bees come into the area they are told to move on as the Italian bees within a kilometre will rob out the more docile *Apis cerana* bees. It is best to open *Apis cerana* hives in the morning. Many are kept in vertical log hives with a removable lid and top-bar frames. A 5-frame hive with *Apis cerana* sells for the high price of US$200. A lot of women in this village are beekeeping with *Apis cerana*.

Vietnam produces 45,000 tonnes of honey per year. There are 35,000 beekeepers of these 5,000 are professional beekeepers. Commercial beekeepers each operate 250-10,000 colonies and travel up to 1,000 km a year. Honey flows are from cashew nut, rubber tree, *Lychee, Longan*, *Eucalyptus* species (*Exeserta, Camadulensis, Robusta, Citridora*), *Jujube ziziphus*, Rambutan, Belbowrie (*Melaleuca leucadenedron*), coconut, *Bidens Pilosa*, white snake root (*Eupatorium ordoratum*), coffee, and *Acacia makferra*. The government is planting forests of trees for honey production.

EFB is combated by making the colony queenless and the bees clean up during the break in the brood cycle. There is no Chalk brood. Wax moth is a major pest as bees often abscond. Sac brood also affects *Apis cerana*: colonies are requeened and old combs removed. Hornets can be a problem and attack colonies. Beekeepers watch for them hovering in front of the hives ready with a bamboo swatter. Commercial beekeepers’ colonies are inspected twice a year by government inspectors. This account of my trip is my understanding of what the translators said - sometimes it is hard to decipher beekeeping terminology.

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