

The following text is an excerpt from *Phong Nha, the Making of an American Smile* by Tammy Nguyen, published by Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020.

My husband and I met our tour group in Quảng Bình Province, the region of Vietnam through which the Phong Nha Karst weaves. I was immediately awestruck by the sight of the mountains in the distance. Miles of rice paddies surrounded them like a carpet, or a grand driveway, or a gigantic lawn meant to emphasize the importance of a place. The rice paddies glistened electric green, a shade you might see at a nightclub or painted on a Lamborghini. It was strange to see such a green in nature.

Our group consisted of a German family of four and a young Dutch couple who were both dentists. Our guide, Đông, had lived in the Quảng Bình his whole life. On the drive over to the Oxalis Adventure office, Đông gave us a friendly brief about the region. “A long time ago,” he said, “the whole region was water, and you can tell which caves are younger because water still runs through them.”

We had to walk forty-five minutes to get to the mouth of the first cave. As we entered the forest from a flat dirt road, the landscape turned immediately picturesque. In the distance, the mountains waited peacefully for us, covered in foliage like dense, curly hair. A stream appeared where some buffalo were drinking water; a few young ones tailed their mothers and others grazed at the grass. As we kept walking we came across some large dirt platforms. “This is how the village people bury their dead,” explained Đông. “After the body decomposes, the remaining bones get transferred across the road, where the other family members are buried.”

“This is also the home of King Kong,” Đông continued. In 2016, Warner Brothers, Legendary Entertainment, and Tencent Productions brought part of the \$185-million dollar *Kong Skull Island* production to Quảng Bình. They set King Kong’s birthplace in the exact area we were passing. “They shut down this whole area for weeks,” said Đông. In a video posted online, the director, Jordan Vogt-Roberts, can be heard praising the region’s beauty over a soundtrack of Hollywood adventure music. “I kept asking, do people understand how beautiful this is?” he asked. “To me, it’s so otherworldly and spectacular, and it’s just the daily life of other people. I hope that they realize how special the place that they live in is.”

Đông continued to educate our group. “Our village didn’t get electricity until 2003. Before tourism, life was hard. Many people were hunters and gatherers, using hand weapons and oil lamps to gather food and to make a living. You could eat anything you found in the forest. Most of our meals were wild birds, rats, and small gofers. We have more opportunities now with more people coming to visit.” The grass got taller until we were walking amidst human-sized shrubbery. We reached another stream and submerged ourselves, entering the water up to our waists to cross.

There were two porters who followed our group, carrying our jugs of water, and snacks: bananas, packs of Oreos in strawberry, original, and blueberry flavors, and rice crackers. The porters also helped us to get over difficult crossings, where it got steep or thick with shrubs. As we moved along, one of the porters started to sing a Vietnamese country song. I didn’t know the song, but I have deep childhood memories of the style: my grandmother would play similar songs, loud, from VHS recordings brought over from Vietnam.

“O-O-O-O-O-O-O!” The porter’s lone voice bellowed around us. These songs often feature a bird, a fish, a river, a longing for a past time, usually a lover. The melodies are

melancholic, each long note slurring into the next, never a bright interval. They almost always end in a fadeaway. Wherever I hear these songs—at my parents’ home through their booming karaoke system, or here, in the jungles of Vietnam—I can feel the structure of the melody sculpt itself into the physical world. Each word ricochets off whatever surface it can find—be it a living room couch, rock, chair, or leaf—and molds its sadness onto my surroundings.

“These must have been the same songs that were sung in war,” I thought to myself. We were not just walking along an adventure trail to a geological wonder; these jungles were part of the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. I asked Đông where exactly the trail was. “It was everywhere,” he said, his hands gesturing all around him. “If not for the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, we would have lost our country.”

Also known as the Trường Sơn Trail, the Hồ Chí Minh Trail was not a trail in the sense of a path that connects point A to point B. It was a changing, breathing organism: a network of dirt roads much like the one my group and I were trekking on, that started in the south of Hà Nội in Northern Vietnam, then moved southwest into eastern Laos and Cambodia, through the Annamite Mountain Range, where the Phong Nha Karst lies. Through mountains and jungle, the trail continued southward into eastern Cambodia and terminated in South Vietnam, west of Đà Lạt. Many people credit this network, which was the conduit for humans and supplies moving from the North to the South, as the reason for the Northern Vietnamese victory in the American War.

Use of the trail began in 1959. The US Navy had blocked the coastline, so the Northern Vietnamese army needed to find a way to transport supplies to the south. Colonel Võ Bẩm of the People's Army of Vietnam was assigned to the task. He was a soldier who had fought in the anti-French war in the Annamite mountains, from 1946-1954. He recalled that the Việt Minh (anti-French) leaders had created a supply line, the "Reunification Trail," that ran through Vietnam's Central Highlands. The colonel hypothesized that if there could be a similar trail allowing for weapons to be handed off at stations farther south, and if several trips could be made over the course of a year, the South had a chance to be unified with the North.

The soldiers who circuited the trail were called Hà Nội's 559th Transportation Group, and by 1961, there were about 2,000 of them. Their force was amplified by thousands more volunteers—many of them teenagers and women—who helped make the network fluid. The heart of this system was the porters, and arguably everyone was a kind of a porter: each person had some kind of a vessel—rucksack, shovel, box, bicycle, truck—that could carry weapons and food to their brothers and sisters in the South.

The United States knew that they needed to eliminate this network in order to win the war, and they tried. Three million tons of explosives were dropped. That's a million more than were dropped on Germany and Japan combined in all of WWII. Chemical defoliants including agent orange were also sprayed, destroying thousands of acres of jungle. But the People's Army of Vietnam had control of the ground; they kept moving. For each crater created by a bomb, teams of volunteers with shovels would fill in the hole. Sometimes they would set traps, tricking the US air force into blowing up the side of a mountain so that they could use the gravel that resulted from the explosion.

The trail became the site of daily life for the people who kept the network alive. Songs were sung, pictures were drawn, diaries were written, and plenty of alcohol and smoke were passed around between comrades for the cause. While many Vietnamese people on the trail died as a result of bombings, even more succumbed to environmental hazards. Thousands died from heat exhaustion, fever, and snake bites.

The snakes that didn't bite were killed and eaten, along with gophers and other rodents, over salty rice cooked over open fire.