

Game Night in Vietnam

by CAROLYN B. HELLER

Our grilled fish, garlicky beans, and Tiger Crystal beers had barely touched the table when a man approached, holding two red ribbons. He tied one around my husband Alan's forehead, did the same for me, then returned to his friends.

Raising their glasses, they pointed to our headbands, which read "Viet Nam Vô Địch," and translated across the crowded room, "Vietnam! Champions!"

Less than an hour earlier, Alan and I had been contemplating our dinner choices as we strolled in the direction of Da Nang's brightly lit Dragon Bridge. Along the way, we passed jammed storefront restaurants, bars with patrons squeezed shoulder-to-shoulder, and homes with people spilling across tiny gardens and out onto the streets.

After a curious few minutes, we realized that everyone was staring, transfixed, at television screens. Each screen was tuned to the same soccer game.

Outside of a massive restaurant, we stopped to gaze through its glowing windows where dozens of people were drinking beer and eating from overflowing platters of fish and crab. Between bites and sips, they were cheering and calling to children whose faces had been painted with red and gold Vietnamese flags.

"It's the final of the Southeast Asian Games," Alan said, peering intently at a wall-mounted screen. "Vietnam's playing Indonesia." Although every seat in the place seemed full, a server waved us in.

He carried a table toward the far side of the restaurant, positioned it half-outside, near a pack of parked motorbikes, and took our order. Shortly thereafter, we were headband-wearing honorary members of Vietnam's cheering squad.

One with the crowd, we settled into our meals and the action on the screen. Suddenly, the room went crazy with people jumping and screaming. "Three to nothing," Alan said. And, though it was obvious, "Vietnam won!"

A man sprinted through the dining room, waving a Vietnamese flag. Another began setting off firecrackers, just steps from our indoor-outdoor table. Two small boys flashed us a thumbs up, shimmying past in a victory dance.

We joined the flow as the euphoric fans swarmed into the street, forming an impromptu parade of roaring motorbikes, honking horns, and flapping flags. As we shared in their reveling, our headbands elicited smiles and waves.

Tonight, everyone in Vietnam was a champion, including us.

