

by Chris Ray

ISLAND OF GHOSTS

On an isle off Vietnam's southern coast, the setting's natural beauty masks a brutal history: a place where prisoners were held in appalling conditions during the country's long years of war – and which now draws huge numbers of pilgrims to the tomb of a long-dead teenage heroine.



SWEETSCENTED smoke rises from burning incense sticks, carrying martial messages to the affetto. Men and women murmur prayers and bow before an altar they have decorated with flowers, fruit and offerings made of paper. The ritual is commonplace throughout Vietnam, a country blessed with shrines, tombs, and altars. It could be family altar, temple or community house dedicated to a neighbourhood guardian spirit. These pilgrims, however, line up to a graveyard on Con Son, a former prison island of some beauty, to contribute with the spirit of a long-dead schoolgirl assassin.

Her name was Vo Thi Suu and her tomb draws hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese every year. The daughter of a labourer and a noodle-seller, Suu was declared independence in 1945. Two years later, as France fought to hold on to its colony, she killed a French soldier with a hand grenade. She was captured at age 16 while attempting to assassinate a notorious collaborator and sentenced to death.

In jail, the "other sisters" of the independence struggle reportedly taught her embroidery and "how to deal with enemies in prison". She became eligible for execution when she turned 18, in 1952. Worried that news of her death would spark a riot, the French authorities secretly shipped her to Con Son, about 600 kilometres off Vietnam's southern coast, where she was shot by firing squad the day after disembarking.

Vo Thi Suu's is the most visited tomb in Hang Duong Cemetery, a carefully tended memorial to about 25,000 political prisoners and combatants who died in Con Son's seven jails. They were prisoners of the French colonial authorities and later, during the Vietnam War, of the government of South Vietnam, which was backed by the United States and allies including Australia. Unlike Vo Thi Suu, who was posthumously named a Hero of the People's Armed Forces and became an object of mass veneration, the remains of most inmates are unidentified or yet to be discovered. Hang Duong contains almost 2000 tombs and only 713 bear a nameplate, though all anonymous graves are marked with the five-pointed gold star of Vietnam's national flag and a vase of pink lotus flowers.

An hour by air from Ho Chi Minh City, Con Son is the largest, in a cluster of tiny islands known as the Con Dao archipelago. It balances a profile historical site and national memorial, a growing forest and marine reserves, and a growing leisure-orientated tourist destination. Compared to the mainland, Con Son is unenclosed and laid-back. Much of the island is thick rainforest fringed by wide-sand beaches, but it is under mounting pressure from tourism-related projects. There have been public protests against land clearing and the environmental threat will only increase when the island's airport doubles passenger capacity this year.

The onset of the dry season late in the year delivers perfect beach weather to the southern Vietnamese mainland. But on Con Son, a different weather pattern brings implacable skies and strong winds that force the local fishing fleet into harbour. My hotel overlooks a wide bay where low black clouds roll in over a dark choppy sea. The bay is bisected by a colonial-era stone wharf called Pier 914, named after the number of prisoners worked to death during its construction. Between the bay and a verdant mountain range sits the island's only town. It has a near-silent, colonial-era core of mud-brick, yellow-ochre buildings shaded by sinuous banyan trees. The settlement almost disappears behind sheets of rain during a sudden downpour, which clears to reveal mountains hung with mist like fine lace.

A local guide, Mr Cong, takes me shopping for my visit to Hang Duong Cemetery. I come away with two expensive boxes of flowers and replica objects made of paper and plastic (from thought useful to the dead). Government and Buddhist authorities oppose expensive offerings as wasteful superstition, a financial burden on the poor, and a source of corruption. The paper and plastic is rarely burned. However, offerings to discourage the departed are being quietly faded out.

After entering the cemetery, I place a box at the base of a towering oleck that memorialises the Con Son martyrs. It contains yellow lotus flowers, fruit, biscuits, accounts, gold bars, cigarettes, sandals and an unadorned green military uniform. The second box goes on the altar at Vo Thi Suu's tomb, where the young woman's defiant face is etched in white marble on a black headstone. Her offerings include lotus flowers – white to

persons. In Vietnam, it is popularly believed that the spirits of those who suffer a violent death stray from home without proper burial and are condemned to wander in pain and poverty. They should be soothed with incense and offerings to avoid bad luck.

Back at my hotel, the manager, Mr Nam, says most people prefer to visit Hang Duong at night when the spirits are fully aware and most receptive to earthly messages. I tell him I'd like to speak to some of the pilgrims, and the others to act as my interpreter.

Under a cloudless sky, with the moon just off full, groups of people make their way through the cemetery. I stop before the tomb of a TV reporter from the northern city of Nam Dinh, and ask why she has come. "I learned about Vo Thi Suu at school, and I was really impressed by her example," says Hui, who is making her second visit to Hang Duong. "She was just a normal girl, but she died for our country in a heroic way when she was very young. I come to pray for her to be in peace and ask her to give me good health."

Ngô Văn Hùng, a 46-year-old fruit trader from the Mekong Delta, has come to the cemetery with his little grandson. He says he asked Vo Thi Suu to grant him good health and success in business, adding that he is grateful for the sacrifices made by all Con Son prisoners. "Without them, I would not be enjoying my current life and Vietnam would not be free and independent," he says.

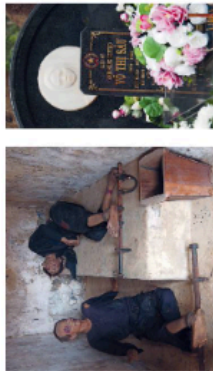
Onlookers gather around, listening and nodding. One woman is seen to have her say. She is Nguyen Thi Vinh, 77, a retired postal worker from Hanoi making a long-awaited first visit to Con Son. Vinh was in her 20s when the US made its hurried withdrawal from Vietnam. In 1975 and reveals the copiers of national reunification that followed 30 years of war. "Vo Thi Suu is one of our youngest heroines and she was fearless in the face of the enemy," she says. "Her courage inspired a lot of us to fight until final victory."

Inside the prison walls that still dominate Con Son township are the infamous "tiger cages" which gained global notoriety in 1970. Here, under French and US supervision, men and women were shackled to the floors of windowless concrete pits with iron bars for ceilings. The cages were exposed by an American aid worker named Don Lase, who was tipped off by a former prisoner. Accompanying two US Congressmen on a jail inspection, Lase managed to manoeuvre them away from their American minder and into an off-limits area enclosing the cages. They found men who had been routinely flogged with caustic quicklime poured through the ceiling bars, and a cell where women covered in sores begged for water.

The US Embassy in Saigon revoked Lase's privileges, but the aviral secret was out. When *Time* magazine reported they were unable to stand, it described them as "grotesque sculptures of scarred flesh and gauged limbs" who "move like crabs, skittering across the floor on buttocks and palms".

Con Son's admirably comprehensive museum displays grainy photographs of some of the island's earliest prisoners: distinguished-looking mandarins in ceremonial winged caps who opposed French rule in the late 19th century. More numerous are the photographs of tough young communists from a later generation of independence fighters. They turned Con Son prison into a school of Marxism-Leninism and their determined faces stare down from the museum walls.

Suu survived incarceration to go on to lead their country. They included Le Duau, who headed the Communist Party after Ho Chi Minh's death. Lo Due, the Suu's sister, died with Henry Kinsinger for peace, and Phan Văn Đông, the first prime minister of the reunified Vietnam. ■



Above, clockwise from top: pilgrims at the tomb of Vo Thi Suu; her five on the tomb; manuscripts show the cruelty of Con Son's tiger cages, where tortured prisoners sat in diarrhoea and with sores around their ankles cut by shackles. Opposite, from top: Con Son island; looking down on the iron-bar ceilings of the tiger cages.

symbolise purity – and replica gifts: slippers, jewellery, make-up, a comb, a mirror and a conical hat. After incense and prayers, we burn the gifts in a nearby furnace to send them to the spirit realm. However, we keep the pagoda and dragon fruit, which the spirits have blessed in response to our prayers.

MRCONG suggests I visit nearby Hang Koo Cemetery, where the French buried thousands of prisoners in the dunes behind a beach. Here, a monument with incense and fresh flowers is shaded by casuarinas and pine trees. Hang Koo gets relatively few visitors; its identifiable graves have been relocated to Hang Duong and only bones of the unknown remain in shallow pits.

Mr Cong says bones are often found poking above the sand. He tells Hang Koo a very sad place with many ghosts. Sad, but hardly unique. The American war as it is known in Vietnam, took a rural society to shards and left countless unidentified corpses and missing