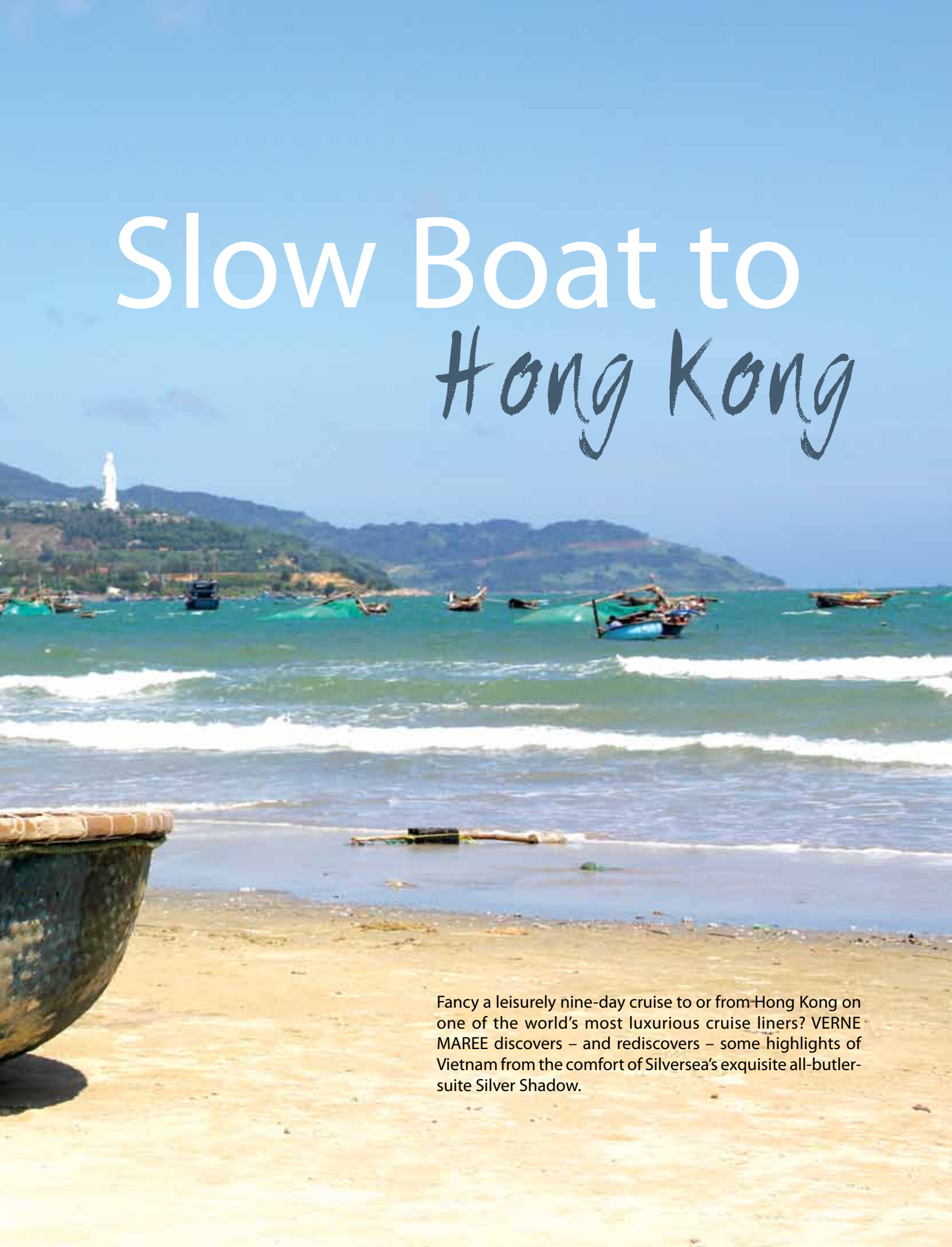




BÚC TÁM

Slow Boat to *Hong Kong*

A scenic view of a beach with waves, fishing boats, and a lighthouse on a hill in the background. The foreground shows a sandy beach with a large, dark, rounded object (possibly a boat or a container) on the left. The middle ground features several small fishing boats with green nets in the water. The background shows a hill with a white lighthouse and a clear blue sky.

Fancy a leisurely nine-day cruise to or from Hong Kong on one of the world's most luxurious cruise liners? VERNE MAREE discovers – and rediscovers – some highlights of Vietnam from the comfort of Silversea's exquisite all-butler-suite Silver Shadow.



Silver Shadow Crib Sheet
 Number of suites: 194, 80% with teak balconies
 Built in: 2000
 Terminology: "Venetian" guests are passengers who have sailed with Silversea before
 Casino facilities: blackjack, roulette, craps, slot machines and bar
 Spa: Mandara Spa
 Sports facilities: gym, outdoor jogging track, golf driving cage and shuffleboard.

The Silver Shadow does the eight-night cruise between Hong Kong and Singapore in both directions several times a year. Whichever direction you choose, residents of both cities are blessed. Unlike the mainly Americans, Brits and Europeans who have to fly a long way to get here, all we need is a single flight: either to the starting point, or to get home afterwards.

From Singapore, the first of its four stops is Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in the south of Vietnam; the second is Nha Trang; the third Chan May in Central Vietnam, gateway to Danang, the historic

town of Hoi An and the ancient citadel of Hue; and finally a couple of nights in Unesco Heritage Site Halong Bay, from where you can take a day trip to Hanoi if you wish.

Magic Moment #1: Seeing our Deck 8 suite

Most heart-gladdening is the capacious walk-in-wardrobe with space for all our stuff, and I love the luxury of a bathroom with full-length tub, separate shower cubicle and his and hers basins.

A curtain screens the king-sized bed from the sofa, easy chair and desk. There's also a vanity dressing table



with a mirror so hugely magnifying as to effectively demolish the vanity of anyone older than 30 – and that’s almost every guest aboard this ship; few are under 60.

We meet our genuinely warm and friendly butler, Jerry, who – like his colleagues throughout the ship – does all he can to make us happy. Silversea is justifiably famous for outstanding service.

**Magic Moment #2:
Our first drink at The Bar**

Once you’ve tried it, all-inclusive cruising is the only way to go. Whether you’re sipping Chivas on your own verandah, swilling Monopole Champagne at The Bar, sipping margaritas next to the pool, or working your way through the wine-pairing menu at any given lunch or dinner, it’s part and parcel of your package.

Situated aft, like all the public areas (except for the spa, gym and Observation Lounge on Deck 10), La Terrazza does a buffet breakfast and lunch, and turns into a jolly good Italian à la carte in the evenings. You need to book for that. And for the Relais & Chateau-accredited La Champagne, which seats only 30, it would be safest to book before you even board. We just squeak in for the last night.

Our second night on board is the only formal night of the cruise; three others are designated casual, and four informal. (We like dressing for dinner, and are glad to see that most of our fellow passengers look ravishing most evenings anyway.) It follows our first full day at sea, en route to HCMC. Warning: the going can be a bit bumpy.

Captain Cataldo Destefano’s reception in the Athenian Lounge is followed by our first dinner at The Restaurant on Deck 4: foie gras, porcini velouté infused with truffle, followed by Maine lobster served over Arborio rice for me, and an excellent Tuscan baked bacalao (reconstituted dried cod) dish for Roy. The Restaurant also has a steakhouse-type dinner menu available every night.

Back in the Athenium again at 10pm, tonight’s show by the resident



Art Tour

The Silver Shadow is full of valuable contemporary art, as part of a unique art programme. Twice a week, you can join a tour of the 130 works of art displayed throughout the ship. Most are for sale. In the lobby alone are a number of pieces ranging from US\$6,000 to \$65,000 – three Dali bronzes, a couple of Picassos and a Chagall.

Courtesy of LA art dealer and publisher Andrew Weiss, who owns the rights to them, you’ll also find an exhibition of stunning original photographs of Marilyn Monroe. There’s also a collection of paintings and sculptures by contemporary Chinese artist Wang Zi Hu.

six-strong group of singer-dancers features Motown hits. They’re on almost every night; with themed performances such as The Beatles, Broadway Hits and Duets safely aimed at pleasing the baby-boomer majority.

**Magic Moment #3:
Breakfast on deck**

This is the way to break your fast – alfresco on the deck outside La Terrazza, aft of the ship, making our way up the Saigon River past the sprawling suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City. It’s a really

good breakfast spread, too – everything from fresh fruit and nuts to a selection of eggs to order and herrings. The latter no doubt pleases the Norwegians next to us. They’re the ones who kept the bar open until 4.30am this morning, we hear.

After breakfast, many of the passengers go off on half-day or full-day excursions, either in HCMC itself or farther afield. You can explore Life in the Mekong Delta, or visit the Cu Chi Tunnels or an Artists’ Village. Later, Good Evening, Saigon offers an experience of traditional Vietnamese



and cultural entertainment, starting at the legendary Majestic Hotel (built in 1925).

But we've stayed at the Majestic before, and seen the main tourist sites in and around the south Vietnam capital. This time, we content ourselves with revisiting old haunts in the city centre. A half-hourly bus shuttles passengers in to the fixed-price government-run Tax Centre in the city centre, from where it's an easy, flat and mostly shady walk to many popular sights.

Cho Ben Thanh market was opened in 1914 and sprawls over 11,000 square metres. In this mass of seething entrepreneurship, you'll find everything from triple-A Cartier tank watch copies (everyone in Singapore will think it's genuine, sir!), to silk scarves and a toddler's ao dai, the traditional Vietnamese dress (opening ambit US\$28, final price \$7, could have scored it for \$5).

Knock-off or fell-off-a-lorry garments are piled high, from Adidas to Levi's to Ralph Lauren; Vietnamese coffee beans; magnificent veggies, probably from the

fertile valley of nearby Da Lat; and at the back, a cluster of stalls where you squat on those infamously Lilliputian stools and slurp a bowlful of pho, the local chicken or beef soup that's full of fresh leaves and herbs. I opt for cool green coconut juice; Roy for a glassful of thick local coffee.

Next to the French colonial-style Municipal Theatre – where we saw a local production of the ballet Giselle seven years ago – is the excellent Caravelle Hotel, where we spent a few nights.

Magic Moment #4: A Saigon Beer at Saigon Saigon Bar

This institution on the Caravelle Hotel's rooftop, featured in *The Quiet American* (Brendon Fraser and Michael Caine), is where war correspondents hung out in the 1970s, looking on while US forces bombed the city.

The place buzzes at night; this lunchtime, a handful of tourists like us saunter in for a cold one and a light lunch of delicious rice-paper rolls,



deep-fried duck spring rolls, palm-heart salad and shrimp mousse on lengths of sugar cane.

From here, you can look across at HCMC's own Notre Dame Cathedral. On the other side of the busy intersection with Dong Khoi Street is a plaza featuring a colossal statue of founding father Ho Chi Minh, in front of the attractive old City Hall. It's a lot grander than we remember it, full of colourful flowers, topiary and manicured lawns. Here too



is the charming old Rex Hotel. Given a whole new façade since our last visit, it now boasts a luxury shopping arcade complete with Cartier, Rolex, Montblanc, Ferragamo, Ralph Lauren and more. Many more traffic lights are now evident too, and some of the traffic actually obeys them.

Vietnam has what is probably the world's most flattering national dress: the ao dai. My black, sleeveless version with white long pants was custom-made for me seven years ago by Liberty Silk at 85 Dong Khoi Road. It's still there. If you can't find the perfect fit and colour on the rails, it takes them just a few hours to whip one up for you. Back then I paid US\$75; when I checked this time, they quoted US\$100. It's the perfect souvenir.

At the end of Dong Khoi is the Majestic Hotel. Though you risk life and limb crossing the road to get to the river bank, from there you turn right and it's a ten or 15-minute walk back to the Silver Shadow.

Magic Moment #5: Afternoon tea

Inexplicably ravenous once more or simply greedy, we indulge in the daily afternoon tea ritual in the Promenade Lounge. After a decadent three-tier assortment of cream scones, sandwiches, cookies, tarts and cakes, just one of us hies herself to the ship gym's treadmill to work off the equivalent of a small pastry.

Magic Moment #6: Arriving at Nha Trang port

For a change, I'm up with the light and out on the Observation Deck in the relative cool of morning as we cruise into the already-stirring port of Nha Trang. From the extension bridge one deck below, Captain Destefano calls his orders to the helmsman. We're here for barely half a day, before heading off after lunch for our third port of call, Chan May.

Magic Moment #7: Averting death by pedi-cab

Intrepid pedaller Thum expertly avoids collision with a couple of silly girls on



a scooter at seaside town Nha Trang's busiest intersection. The one riding pillion covers her eyes with her hands; I know exactly how she feels.

We're on a guided tour (US\$49) along with a few dozen fellow-passengers, trying to make out the rather garbled commentary coming through radios hung around our necks. Here's Nha Trang Cathedral; there's "the most beautiful beach in Vietnam"; those are the ancient Cham towers; and as our wiry men get off to push us up the curve of a the bridge over the Cai River, that's

the old fishermen's village to the left. And there's Cho Dam, the market where you can buy what the fishermen catch, plus just about anything else you can think of.

Like the rest of Vietnam, the traffic here is organised chaos: lorries, cars, scooters, bikes and pedi-cabs like ours (known in Hanoi as cyclos) all weaving their way through a fearful sea of metal. Pity these friendly chaps tasked with hauling us overfed tourists around – or, more usefully, tip them well for their efforts.



Magic Moment #8: Swimming off China Beach (Marble Mountain Beach)

The sun's out, the beer's cold, and the cool waves curl gently onto a beach full of little double sea-shells that beg to be picked up.

It was difficult to choose between the three main Central Vietnam destinations available from tiny Chan May port. Rather than the architectural delights of Hoi-An, or the historical attractions of the ancient citadel of Hue, we opted for a 5.5-hour excursion (US\$89) to Da Nang – the third-biggest city in Vietnam; it includes stopping for a swim at China Beach.

Our startlingly informative guide is scathing about the tourism officials (or “coconut heads”) who insist on calling it “Marble Mountain Beach”. He says that when the American military first came to Vietnam in March 1965 and established their recreation (“prostitution”) centre in Da Nang, they found a lot of old China pottery on this beach. So it became China Beach; no direct link with the Chinese.

Marble Mountain village is full of shops with variously pushy and graceless attendants

Priceless Da Nang Tour Commentary

He shall remain nameless for his own protection, but here are some jewels from our guide's no-holds-barred commentary on his country's history, politics and economics:

- There's still a strong north-south divide in Vietnam. “What they call Reunification, we call Occupation,” he says. He's dismissive about the new Reunification Express Train, which takes anything from 30 to 41 hours to cover the 700km from north to south. “We call it the Occupation Express Train.”
- Explaining Da Nang's many hundreds of seemingly identical bars, he tells us that the city's 1.1 million people like to relax. “We drink much more beer than the rest of the country, so girls are warned not to marry Da Nang men.”
- Mocking Da Nang's new Golden Gate Bridge: the engineers who built it are serving nine-year sentences for shoddy work and corruption, he says, adding that they'll almost certainly bribe the officials and spend just three years in jail.
- Clarifying why the women on passing bikes are covered head to foot in hot, long-sleeved garments and face-masks, even on such a hot day, he explains it's to protect them from the sun. Fair skin is highly prized in Vietnam; the whiter, the more beautiful.
- Vietnamese people are superstitious, he says. 2012 was the year of the auspicious Golden Dragon; which is why so many couples had babies last year. Tiger girls are inauspicious, so most women born in any given Year of the Tiger remain unmarried.
- Most popular colours for ao dais are white and purple. White is traditionally worn by high school girls aged 16 to 18, to signify that they are virgins. “But there is no more virginity in Vietnam any more,” he says. “They should wear black.” Worn by a married woman, purple indicates that she is loyal to her husband.
- Weddings are cripplingly expensive in Vietnam, so divorce is unaffordable. “In life, we have six goals,” he adds. “They are: one wife, two children, a three-storey house, a four-wheeled car, travel to five continents, and in the end a smart coffin with six sides.”





selling ornaments carved from the local marble. They range from the tiniest figurines to colossal statues of the Buddha, Goddess of Mercy Kuan Yin and more, and can be shipped home for you. The eponymous mountain itself is not much more than a scruffy hillock; just one, it seems, of many mines like it.

We spend half an hour at the yellow-painted Cham Museum; the current Cham population is only about 147,000 souls; but most of the land of South

Vietnam, including the Mekong Delta, was Cambodian. "So, though we regard the Chinese, the Japanese, the French and the Americans as invaders, we too have been invaders in the past," says our guide.

Once at the museum, away from the safety of the bus, he delivers a far more orthodox commentary on the history of the Cham people, remnants of the 7th and 8th century Kingdom of Cham. For serious historians, Silver Sea offers a

full day excursion to discover the Cham civilisation and the temples of My Son.

Reminiscent of Cambodia's Angkor temples, they were built to honour rulers and Hindu deities such as Lakshmi and Ganesha. Of the original 72, only about 20 sites remain, the rest destroyed by American B56 bombers when the Viet Cong used them as shelters. Sculptures, friezes and fragments of artwork can be seen at the Cham Museum, together with photographs of My Son.





**Magic Moment #9:
Frog-skinners of Da
Nang market**

Like many of our readers, I've seen a Southeast Asian market or two. But I could happily have gone through this particular life without witnessing the casual mass beheading and skinning of live frogs by two otherwise pleasant-looking young women.

Casually, they grasp each wriggling amphibian, slit its belly and swiftly turn the froggy skin inside out – much like a wetsuit, as Roy observes. As the pile of

pale pink bodies continue to thrash in the “done” bucket, I congratulate myself on having stuck to fruit for breakfast. Mere metres away, the passageway beauty salon is doing brisk business in hair-delousing, blow-drying, threading and pedicures.

**Magic Moment #10:
Sailing into Ha Long Bay**

Over a relaxed lunch at The Restaurant, we're charmed by the sudden apparition of the first of some 2,000 rocky limestone karsts of Ha Long Bay, an expanse of

1,553 square kilometres that have made this area a Unesco Heritage Site.

We've been here before, but cruising in from the South China Sea is far more spectacular than driving to Ha Long Bay town from Hanoi. Once we've moored, the Silver Shadow becomes a sort of mother ship, offloading her passengers into a fleet of smaller assorted vessels that come alongside and bear us off to cruise the bay for two or three hours.

It's not easy to make head or tail of the commentary, but I do get the following: Ha Long Bay is one of Vietnam's most important tourism sites; and until you've seen it you cannot say that you have seen Vietnam. Well, then.

On the second day in Ha Long Bay, Roy and I opt to stay on board. Most first-time visitors to Vietnam, however, have taken a tour to Hanoi: it's worth the long bus-ride if you haven't been there before.

Farewell

After arrival in Hong Kong, while we're collecting our passports and luggage and disembarking, the ship is readying itself to welcome another contingent of lucky passengers about to do the return trip to Singapore. If you like the idea of joining them one day, check out the Silver Shadow's itinerary at www.silversea.com.

Note: The ship organises transit visas for the time you're in Vietnam, and simply adds the cost of that (US\$31 incl.) to your bill – very convenient. 🙏

