

A Long Run

through the streets of

HANOI

BY J. CHISHOLM LYONS

No one needs an excuse to visit Vietnam but if an excuse is required going there to watch the Hanoi marathon is as good as any. That's what my wife and I did in January to witness our son run the Hanoi marathon - all 26 miles and 385 yards of it.*

Our son Chisholm, 29, a vice president of Trimark Investment Management Inc., Toronto, has run marathons in Toronto, Ottawa, Boston, New York and London, England. In Hanoi he was the only Canadian in an international field of 150 runners. According to the Hanoi media, there were 10,000 security officials in attendance. Chisholm observed that in the Boston marathon, the figures were reversed - 10,000 runners and 150 police.



Chisholm Lyons Sr is in good company along the marathon route.

Hanoi is an hour and 15 minute flight from Hong Kong. Until December, 1991, the flight from Hong Kong to Hanoi was through Bangkok and took a full day. Cathay Pacific/Vietnamese Airlines started twice-a-week joint flights in December of 1991 and now fly daily, a measure of the popularly-held belief that Vietnam is the new frontier.

Although the flight is advertised as a joint Cathay Pacific/Vietnamese operation the Boeing 737 carried Swiss colours, had a cabin crew of Italian nationals and was on charter from European Air Lines of Berne. Very international.

Julie and I had watched our son run marathons in Ottawa and London. To us the Hanoi marathon reflected organizational skills equal to international standards. The security forces were Hanoi police dressed in what appeared to be army discards. In dress and discipline they resembled New York police and commanded the same respect from the public. The Minister of Sport, who is an army general, said 200,000 spectators viewed the marathon. I believe him.

The race started in the heart of the city and went around the inner-city lake twice and then through the Hanoi markets and out to the agricultural areas and paddy fields. There were cheering crowds along the whole route.

A number of Americans participated. Some wore shirts bearing the words "Lift the Embargo Now." The shirt of an American army veteran said merely "USA/MIA." No one seemed to notice.

The weather was hot - 80 degrees fahrenheit and muggy, which adversely affected the runners.

A 40-year-old American won the marathon. He has run 132 marathons and won over 30 of them. His time was slow by international standards - 2:39:14. An English solicitor from Hong Kong came second - some 10 minutes after the American - and in third place was a Vietnamese who finished a minute later. The rest of the field struggled in over the next two hours. Chisholm's time was an agonizing 4:32 - an hour and 30 minutes slower than his time in the London marathon which is the largest marathon in the world with 35,000 runners.

There were 17 women in the race and the winner was a Vietnamese whose time was 3:25:21. She collapsed at the finish line and was taken to the hospital.

There are very few signs of the war in Hanoi. On the approach to the airport we could see clusters of bomb craters in paddy fields beginning about 20 kilome-

tres from the airport. Apparently smart bombs were not available before the Gulf War. There were about 20 MiG fighters parked along the runway. They didn't appear to have flown for a decade. It seems after fighting the French and the Americans for 30 years Vietnam has had enough of war and its memorabilia.

Hanoi is a shabby city, almost turn-of-the-century in style. There are few buildings over four storeys. The influence of France is apparent in the wide, tree-lined boulevards, numerous parks and in the architectural style of buildings erected during the French regime which ended with Dien Bien Pheu in 1954. A number of Vietnamese wear French berets while others wear hats inspired by Ho Chi Minh who is known reverentially as Uncle Ho.

We stayed at the Metropole, a first rate French-owned hotel in the heart of Hanoi. As much French as English was spoken there.

The Vietnamese, surprisingly, showed great warmth towards Americans. We were witnesses to that phenomenon because we were thought to be Americans. The Vietnamese mistrust the French and loath the Russians. During the Vietnamese war Russians were known as "Americans without dollars."

Hanoi has a population of two million and Vietnam 70 million. The Vietnamese are looking forward fervently to the lifting of the United States ban on trade with Vietnam. The country is poor, very poor, and needs help from abroad. It is still an agricultural, bicycle/pedicab country. Most of the cars in Hanoi were vintage Russian models but with horns on the cutting edge of cacophony.

Flying to Hanoi we met an agricultural economist for the University of British Columbia. He said Vietnam is making great strides in agriculture especially since the free market was introduced to farmers several years ago. The farmers can now keep up to 80 per cent of their crop.

* For those who may be interested, the additional 385 yards were tagged on to the modern marathon at the London Olympics in 1908 when King Edward VII requested that the marathon, which had its starting line at Windsor Castle, finish in front of Buckingham Palace, 385 yards beyond the 26 mile marker.