

Sác Forest

Guerilla Base in Cần Giờ

LOCATED AROUND 70 KILOMETRES SOUTHEAST OF HỒ CHÍ MINH CITY CBD IN CẦN GIỜ DISTRICT, SÁC FOREST GUERRILLA BASE HAS RECENTLY BEGUN TO RIVAL CÙ CHI AS A DAY-TRIP DESTINATION OF CHOICE FOR VISITORS TO THE SOUTHERN METROPOLIS.

Cần Giờ rural district of Hồ Chí Minh City comprises over 70,000 hectares of wetland which was recognised in 2000 by UNESCO as Việt Nam's first World Biosphere Reserve (www.cangiomangrove.org.vn). Dominating the reserve is more than 40,000 hectares of mangrove swamp which houses an extraordinarily diverse range of animal and plant species. These include 157 flora, 63 plankton, 130 algae, 100 aquatic invertebrates, more than 120 fish, nine amphibians, 31 reptiles, 19 mammals and, in the intertidal mudflats and sandbanks, over

140 birds including waders and migratory birds.

This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that from 1968-1973 the entire area was a war zone, bombed heavily and sprayed with toxic chemicals by the US Army to remove vegetation and root out the revolutionary forces operating in the area. After Reunification, the local authorities resolved to restore the wetland to pristine condition, and from 1978 a reforestation programme was initiated. It is a tribute to their efforts that today foreign scientists regard Cần Giờ as one of the best-preserved mangrove forest areas in South East Asia.



LONG-TAILED MACAQUES ROAM FREELY IN CẦN GIỜ FOREST PARK

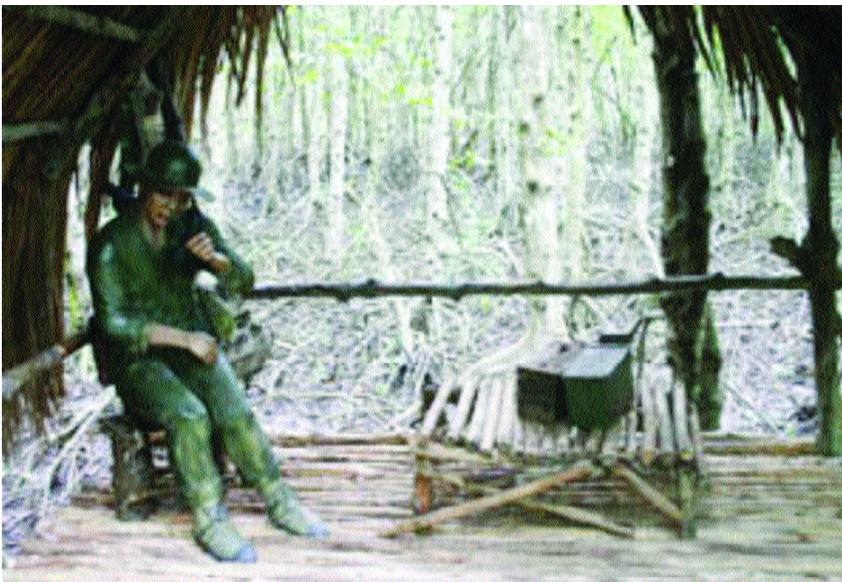
Cần Giờ district is still being developed as a tourist destination, but already it offers the visitor a range of interesting



CẦN GIỜ DISTRICT MUSEUM TRACES THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF CẦN GIỜ THROUGH THE AGES



A 20-MINUTE SPEEDBOAT RIDE ALONG THE "WAR ZONE CANAL" TAKES VISITORS THROUGH THE DENSE MANGROVE SWAMPS TO THE REMOTE FORMER SÁC FOREST GUERRILLA BASE



THE INFORMATION AREA (NHÀ THÔNG TIN) WHERE PLATOON 10 KEPT IN TOUCH WITH ITS REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS USING A CAPTURED RADIO RECEIVER

attractions, most of which are grouped together in Long Hòa commune as the "Cần Giở Ecotourism Area." Topping the list of attractions in Long Hòa is the Sác Forest Guerilla Base, a national historic site which skilfully recreates the VC guerilla base of the late 1960s and early 1970s, hidden deep in the mangrove swamp.

Before visiting the Guerilla Base, visitors can tour the Cần Giở District Museum, which traces the history and development of Cần Giở through the ages. It introduces the local plant and animal life, displays archaeological artefacts dating from 1000 BCE to the 6th century CE, and charts some of the momentous events of the two Indochina Wars which took place in the area.

They can then take a leisurely stroll through Cần Giở Forest Park, known locally as "Monkey Island" after the more than 1,000 inquisitive long-tailed macaques which roam freely here. Beware –the animals are now so familiar with tourists that they have a habit of grabbing anything which looks like food and have also been known to bite. The Park also incorporates a Wild Crocodile Conservation Area containing around 80 saltwater crocodiles which can be fed fish on a line for just 20,000. Other attractions in the park include an Animal Circus which operates only at 9am and 3pm on weekends and holidays.

A 20-minute ride by motor boat along the "War Zone Canal" (Kênh Chiến

khu) takes visitors through dense mangrove to the remote former Sác Forest Guerilla Base, one of the most important Special Forces bases in the Mekong Delta during the American War.

On 15 April 1966, the Southern Command (Bộ Chỉ huy Miền Nam) set up the Sác Forest Special Region, manned by Platoon 10, with the task of building a revolutionary base in the Cần Giở area to facilitate lines of communication from the sea, intercept US troops operating in the area and launch attacks on nearby US and ARVN bases. The team operated in extraordinarily difficult terrain, often with inadequate supplies of food and water. Later that year, when the Americans realised that the area was being used as a revolutionary base, US infantry platoons were sent into the Sác Forest to clear the area. However, Platoon 10 covered its tracks skilfully, luring American troops into several deadly ambushes.

During the Tết Offensive of 1968, Platoon 10 intercepted military convoys on main roads and launched attacks on numerous US and ARVN installations, seizing many weapons. In response, US forces began dropping chemical defoliants on the Cần Giở wetlands to remove vegetation and root out the revolutionary forces operating in the area. They also stepped up security along roads and rivers north of the base, severing lines of communication with Sài Gòn and effectively cutting off food and fresh water supplies to the Platoon 10 base. At this time too, when returning from bombing runs to the north, many US aircraft would circle the area, discarding any remaining bombs by dropping them on Cần Giở before returning to Tân Sơn Nhất Airbase.

According to those who lived in the Sác Forest Guerilla Base during this period, life for the guerillas was very hard. Members of Platoon 10 (which at one time included 52 women) survived mainly by drinking coconut milk and eating game and forest leaves. Later they devised a makeshift distillery to produce fresh water. Repeated attacks on the area by US and ARVN forces took its toll; on one occasion in 1970 virtually the entire platoon was wiped out. In total between 1966 and 1975 some 900 revolutionary soldiers are said to have died while serving at the base.



PHOTOS BY TIM DOLING



A PLATOON 10 TEAM PLANS THE 3 DECEMBER 1973 ATTACK ON NHÀ BÈ FUEL DEPOT

Despite all the difficulties and deprivations they endured, the revolutionary soldiers of Platoon 10 continued to strike effectively at US and ARVN targets. In November and December 1972 they launched a series of successful attacks on Rạch Dứa, Cát Lái and Thành Tuy Hạ wharfs and destroyed several enemy ships and warehouses along the banks of the Lòng Tàu river. However, their single greatest achievement was the attack on Nhà Bè Fuel Depot, carried out on the night of 3 December 1973, which completely destroyed the installation, along with 140 million litres of gasoline, 12 butane tanks and a 12,000 ton oil tanker which happened to be moored alongside.

In the days preceding the fall of Sài Gòn in April 1975, most ARVN troops in the area threw down their weapons and fled. However, in Cần Giò, ARVN Regiment 999 continued

The journey by road from central Hồ Chí Minh City to Cần Giò through District 4, District 7 and Nhà Bè District takes around two hours, including a 15-minute car ferry crossing from Bình Khánh Wharf. The ferry service operates from 7am to 7pm daily.

The Cần Giò Ecotourism Area is open from 7.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri and from 7.30am-5.30pm Sat-Sun and public holidays. However, the water level on the mangrove canals is usually only high enough to permit speedboat access to Sác Forest Guerilla Base between 10am and 3pm daily. Admission to the Ecotourism Area costs VNĐ60,000 adults, VNĐ30,000 children below 1.1m in height. The return speedboat trip to Sác Forest Guerilla Base costs an additional VNĐ550,000, with a maximum load of six persons per boat.

to resist stubbornly and engaged soldiers from Platoon 10 in a fierce fire fight before eventually surrendering. This was Platoon 10's last engagement before Reunification finally brought peace to Việt Nam.

In recent years the Sác Forest Guerilla Base has been recreated in the exact area where it was once situated, to show what daily life in the mangrove swamp would have been like for the revolutionary soldiers of Platoon 10. The base comprises a semicircular array of guerilla huts, connected to each other by bamboo walkways. Highlights include the small arms factory (Công binh xưởng), which shows how weapons and explosives were prepared for attacks on enemy installations; the Army medical area (Nhà quân y) where army doctors and nurses treated wounded guerillas; and a diorama depicting the planning of the 3 December 1973 attack on Nhà Bè Fuel Depot. A short documentary film on the history of the base (in Vietnamese or English on request) is screened in the Meeting room (Hội trường). In the Kitchen (Nhà bếp), visitors can also sample locally-distilled rice wine and simple guerilla fare such pressed rice cakes (cơm vắt).

For those with more time to explore the district's rich and diverse animal life, the nearby Vàm Sát Ecotourist Centre in Lý Nhơn commune incorporates a bird sanctuary containing 26 different bird species including 11 types of waterfowl, a wildlife reserve stocked with deer, varan, wild boar and otter, a bat reserve and a crocodile farm. The Centre also offers visitors a selection of ecotours of the Cần Giò World Biosphere Reserve.

Another worthwhile excursion in Cần Giò takes visitors to the Ông Thủy Tướng Mausoleum in Cần Thạnh town, which was set up to worship the whale deity Ông Thủy Tướng or Nam Hải Tướng Quân, patron of local fishermen, and houses a 12m long whale skeleton.

TIM DOLING