

The Long Wall of Quang Ngai

In Central Vietnam a wall which once divided communities now unites the history and culture of an entire region and connects distinct ethnic groups

Writes **ADAM BRAY**

Quang Ngai province is situated just below the ancient port town of Hoi An and north of the coastal city of Quy Nhon. Hoi An is famous for its Chinese temples and unique shop-houses which blend Chinese, Japanese, French and Vietnamese styles. Quy Nhon is a modern Vietnamese town known for its pristine sandy beaches and ancient Cham temples.

Until recently, Quang Ngai was relatively

unknown to tourism other than as the location of the war-era My Lai Massacre. However, a discovery announced earlier this year ties these three seemingly unrelated localities and their diverse histories together.

DISCOVERY OF THE CENTURY

In 2005, Dr Andrew Hardy, head of the Hanoi branch of École française d'Extrême-Orient (French School of Asian Studies), found a reference to an unknown "Long Wall of Quang Ngai" in an 1885 Nguyen Dynasty document entitled "Descriptive Geography of the Emperor Dong Khanh."

Over the course of nearly six years of exploration and excavation, teams led by Hardy and Dr Nguyen Tien Dong, archaeologist at Vietnam's Institute of Archaeology, have discovered the greatest engineering feat of the Nguyen Dynasty and the country's most important archaeological discovery in a century: a wall stretching 127.4 km from northern Quang Ngai Province, south into the province of Binh Dinh.

The remarkable thing about this wall is that it was not built as an impassable military barrier like China's great wall, but rather a permeable partition (much

like Hadrian's Wall in the UK), meant to regulate both trade and travel between two communities. The wall, which was meant to divide the ethnic Hre to the west, and Vietnamese to the east, shows hallmarks of engineering from both cultures.

WHO ARE THE HRE?

The Hre are linguistically related to the Ca Dong, Sedang, and Bahnar -all Mon-Khmer groups indigenous the Central Highlands. The Hre have been known by many names, including Chom and Cham Re; both indicative of the fact that they were once part of the multi-ethnic kingdom of the Cham people, known as Champa.

Traditionally the Hre live in wooden longhouses on stilts, like neighbouring tribes. Women wear long, dark skirts and both silver and bronze jewellery. Some men still wear turbans like their Cham brethren. Though most of their traditions, such as buffalo-stabbing festivals, resemble their hill tribe neighbours, the Hre still keep sacred wells with 'guardian spirits', much like the ancient Cham did when they occupied central Vietnam. In fact it was the Cham who actually dug the sacred

wells of Hoi An. This same well water is required to make 'authentic' Hoi An cuisine, such as the town's renowned Cao Lau noodles.

In 1470, Vietnamese Emperor Le Thanh Tong pushed the Cham southward and conquered what is now Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh provinces. This effectively left some members of Champa, particularly the Cham Ro (a remnant of Cham in Binh Dinh Province who intermarried with the Banhar), Cham Jarai (also known as Gia Rai) and the Cham Re (Hre), isolated in the central mountains.

Early coexistence between the Vietnamese and Hre had some difficulty and there was looting and incursions on both sides. The Vietnamese built military forts along an ancient mandarin road (more than 50 of which have been located), which divided the territories of both groups. This road was originally an important thoroughfare between the original Cham capitals of Vijaya (near modern Quy Nhon in the south), and Indrapura, Singhapura and the valley of My Son to the north.

The Long Wall was later constructed along the same road for increased security and to regulate trade between the highland Hre, lowland Vietnamese, and Chinese merchants that navigated both sides of the wall. The new wall certainly led to another of the names given to the Hre by the Vietnamese: Moi Luy (Tribe of the Wall).

THE CHINESE CONNECTION

Chinese merchants navigated ancient trade routes through the wall and into the mountains. They built markets and temples along the way. Some of their shrines to 'The Goddess,' the 'white tiger' and various deities still exist. Some of the deities - particularly those devoted to the goddess Thien Y Ana - were borrowed from the Cham and may have been built on top of ancient Cham shrines.

These same Chinese traders purchased goods from indigenous peoples such as the Hre, Cor, Ca Dong, Sedang and Banhar, bringing them to port towns like

Hoi An to ship to China. Ceramics were an important trade item, but cinnamon, which is still grown by the Hre and Cor, was perhaps the most important item traded along the Long Wall, fetching high prices for its important use in Chinese medicine and cooking.

TOURISM AT THE WALL

The Long Wall of Quang Ngai was recently designated a National Heritage Monument. Intensive discussions are now underway between government and international experts regarding how to best conserve and sustainably develop the wall and surrounding countryside for tourism. To this endeavour, a conservation corridor has since been established for 500 meters on either side of the wall.

Quang Ngai City, the provincial capital, is the base from which tourists can visit the Long Wall. Most visitors will arrive at the Da Nang airport or train station, just north of Hoi An, and continue by train (or bus) for 2-3 hours south to Quang Ngai City.

Signs have been placed on the country roads near four archaeological sites, within an hour and a half drive of Quang Ngai City. Two are located in Ba Dong Commune (Da To District) and another two in Hanh Dung Commune (Nghia Hanh District). These include both sections of the Long Wall and

ancient military forts.

Although the wall itself is certainly interesting, the real value this monument is the story of the people who built it, the people whose lives were affected by it, and the communities that live around the wall today. Tourists should ask to visit some of the Hre villages surrounding the wall. Additionally, driving with a guide from Kon Tum or Plei Ku to Quang Ngai presents opportunities to visit many different types of minority villages along the highway, including those of the Banhar, Sedang, Jarai, Ca Dong, Hre and M'ngong.

For a safe and fulfilling experience, it's best to visit the Long Wall with a competent guide. Try River at Vietnam Easyrider

(Tel: 098 925-3394; www.vietnam-easyrider.com), Long'

at Vietnam Easyriders (Tel: 090 920-1075; www.vietnam-easyriders.com) or Binh at Mr. Binh Sahara Tour

(Tel: 098 929-7648; www.muine-adventures.com).

Other sights in Quang Ngai include ancient temples, Champa ruins, hot springs, and waterfalls.

See www.longwallofquangngai.com for more information.■



Photography: Adam Bray