

## **Two Weeks' Teaching in Vietnam by Sally Haywood**

In 2015, I managed to wangle a leave of absence from work and my husband was between projects. We took off in the January for a 3 month "Grand Tour", starting and ending in Malaysia, with Vietnam, Australia and Thailand in between.

From Kuala Lumpur, we flew to Hanoi and spent a month in Vietnam. The part I am going to tell you about today is the two weeks I spent volunteering in a school on the outskirts of Hanoi, taking me far out of my comfort zone in many ways but also making it perhaps the most memorable part of the trip for me.

As my husband was chugging away by train to go and explore Ho Chi Minh City, the Chi Chi tunnels and over the border to Cambodia to the Killing Fields and Phu Qoc Island, I moved into the volunteer house, sharing a room which had 2 sets of bunk beds. I was so worried that my room-mates would be kept awake by my snoring and trips to the toilet that I could barely sleep! There wasn't much food and there was a heavy lock and chain on the door that I couldn't undo which made me feel trapped. I was given my bedding and a mosquito net. As a few people had just arrived, we went out to have a look around the city, visiting the National museum, a garden with a puppet show going on (for a LONG time as it was a national holiday) and ate pho (soup) on small plastic chairs outside. There were about a dozen of us. Most were aged 18 – 28 – a group of attractive, talented, bright youngsters making the most of life. At 57, I wasn't the youngest, there being one other American lady who didn't really approve of the youngsters making a noise playing games and going out clubbing every night, waking her up.

I caught the last night of one elderly American gent who was also a volunteer and had fully integrated himself into the local life for the last few weeks.

Some were volunteering in childcare settings, some for NGOs, but I was allocated to go to a school (I had been teaching adults at Cornwall College before leaving so I thought that might give me something to offer) along with JJ, a 28-year old guy from London who was the best company ever.

Crossing the busy - make that extremely busy – road at peak time of 8am, with about 20 rows of motorbikes waiting to take off the second the traffic lights changed, was a daily battle of nerves. You gradually learned that their motor scooters were very important and precious to them so you just had to grit your teeth and stride across the road and they would weave around you. On a rainy day, with them all in waterproofs and puddles everywhere, that was even more challenging.

We took a local bus to the school every day and had to learn where to get on and off. It cost 9p. Whether it was because I was "old" or white or both, the conductor would always haul someone out of their seat to give me a seat. JJ and I would chat away until the day someone "shushed" me – they like their peace and quiet and I can related now to hearing, a say, a group of Chinese people rattling away loudly in their native language and realised how annoying that can be so we kept quiet after that.

Some days, it was sorely tempting to get a taxi as I was forever “climbing” up and down very high pavements on my short legs but we never gave in.

The teachers were very nice. They had prepared lessons every day following a set programme. As JJ was new to teaching (but has since become a very successful teacher), he was only allowed to take a 10 minute slot at the end whereas I was often asked to take the whole lesson. I never did learn the art of writing neatly on a board at home and this was made painfully clear next to the teacher’s neat and organised writing.

The students were attentive and well behaved. I would always get to do some “fun stuff” too. When we did the song “If You’re Happy and You Know It” and it got to the bit “stamp your feet”, the kids did it with alacrity, knowing it wasn’t allowed. Within seconds, men were running into the room to find out the source of the noise. It was quite amusing.

When they realised that I had taught maths at the college – to adults who found maths really difficult so at quite a basic level – they asked me to go to a maths class. I was wary, with good reason. I went through my off-the-cuff repertoire and this group of 12 years old knew everything. They were so impressive yet the teacher wouldn’t let me observe her class because she felt embarrassed about an “English” person being there, as if we were somehow superior (so not true!).

After a few days, JJ and I were invited to the wedding of one of the staff members. It was a Thursday and the school was closed that day. (They normally went to school 6 days a week and some had tutors in the evening. The confident children all wanted to be doctors). I hadn’t met the teacher and didn’t have suitable clothes but, obviously, we were thrilled to be asked. The expectation was a big Bollywood-type affair with singing and dancing in to the wee small hours. Not to be.

Instead, we got on a mini-bus and had an interminable drive to the bride’s home village, stopping to see some pagodas on the way which were very special to the Vietnamese teachers. The driver couldn’t find the place we were going to so someone came on a moped to show us the way. The person on the back of the moped was wearing a long red dress – she was the bride!

The actual ceremony had taken place earlier in the day. We were there for the “reception”. On arrival, JJ and I were given big ornate wooden chairs to sit in as honoured guests while we sipped green tea. Then we all moved to the courtyard where there were several tables and lots of plastic chairs. Wipe clean tablecloths. The food was passed around by the bride and groom. It was awful. I thought I was going to break my teeth as so many bones were left in the food but, obviously, we smiled and said it was all delicious. No wine or champagne, instead a can of some revolting juice.

Having served the food, the bride and groom left and everyone got up and left...no speeches, no music, no dancing. Instead, we had a 3-hour drive back. We did stop off at someone’s parents house and they were charming and gave the whole group of us more mint tea and treated JJ and I as honoured guests again, even though they didn’t speak any English. And that was that. Our housemates were expecting us

to regale them about our amazing wedding experience but it was such a let-down that it was funny!

School days were quite hard work and we didn't even have to do the whole day. In the evenings, we would eat all together and then go out to a street cafe or play games and we tried a yoga class one evening (30p and great for me as the only one of our group who had done any yoga). There was someone with a guitar – just like student days. Karaoke night was brilliant. We hired a karaoke room and belted out the classics – what a laugh. I knew things will be a lot more staid for the rest of our journey! But could I take the pace anyway? Most nights, I went to bed at 9am, just as the others were going out for the night.

Another highlight was one day after work when JJ and I decided we needed a drink – I hadn't had any as I don't drink beer and that was all that was near the house. We found a "bar" and spotted the Gordon's gin. Checking how much it was in case it was Japanese prices, the girl shrugged her shoulders, gave us the bottle and said just to pay her what we thought as she didn't know. After a couple of hours there, I was a danger to myself, swaying back to the bus stop, giggling, with mad crazy traffic everywhere.

The school did lots of events, such as celebrating National days or putting on shows and presentations with everyone sitting in straight lines. They gave us beautiful gifts when we left – I treasure the gorgeous scarf they gave me, which seemed to have been chosen to perfectly match the colours of the clothes I'd been wearing during the fortnight. The kids were thrilled with us being there. They would clap and cheer when we arrived every day – not something I was used to at St. Austell College!

It was a full-on fortnight and I was more than ready to re-join my husband at the end to continue on to our Halong Bay cruise (the young volunteers were there at the same time on a party boat while we were on a luxury experience – I had pangs that they were having more fun even if we had a toilet with sprays, flashing lights and heated seats!).

The rest of our adventure was awesome in its own way but the time in the volunteer house was very special to me for the way in which I felt so welcomed by a group of youngsters and experienced a bit of local life we don't normally get to take part in. It has made me question the nature of our holidays and whether we should include a more meaningful experience now and again in amongst all the hedonism?