

Joshua volunteered in Vietnam

The Real Vietnam

Vietnam....I hadn't been sure what to expect but now it is 'Việt Nam': an experience that will stay with me for a lifetime. At first I was completely baffled by chopsticks but after the four months I was able to pick up the smallest grain of rice. My teaching placement was in Binh Duong, an hour away from the hustle and bustle of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). It gives an impression of the 'real' Vietnam, in the sense that it is a town hoping to develop and industrialise.

Every day we were normally woken up pretty early by Ms. Loan knocking on our door with breakfast. Ms. Loan was our cook; a lovely, old lady who didn't speak a word of English and completely mothered us. In fact, she became our Vietnamese mother. At the start of the placement, when everything was new I hadn't been sure of what to expect, I wondered what I had let myself in for? I soon found teaching my students was always enjoyable, I never got through a lesson without smiling at some point. In the future, if I ever have to address a room full of people I will draw on the teaching experience. I grew more confident and relaxed in the classroom.

In the mornings we would usually teach two periods. With any new class there would be standard questions I would be asked, the last one always being 'Can you sing a song?' The Vietnamese love karaoke and I learned to be prepared for impromptu sessions! All of my teaching was from textbooks, sometimes with and sometimes without direct teacher support. I noticed a huge leap in my students' confidence in speaking English which was incredibly rewarding and reflected the need for contact with native English speakers. Afternoon lessons were again usually two periods. The classes would typically be about 40 students aged 18-22, most of whom were female and often giggling.

Teachers in Vietnam work very hard and are shown a lot of respect. In fact, Teachers' Day is a national public holiday. At any social occasion, bottles of rice whisky magically appear and Teachers' Day was no exception. Being the only Westerners meant that we were always being asked to make toasts and being toasted to. We were also interviewed by two local papers.

In the late afternoon, when the heat of the day had passed, we would often play volleyball or football with the students. Football was usually Skins vs Fake Replica Shirts on sandy rough ground behind the college, while the sun was setting.



It was little things like this that would remind me where I was and how very lucky I was to be there. We would hang around and chat afterwards, until we were driven inside by mosquitoes.

On Mondays and Wednesdays we taught evening classes that were open to the local community, there were different classes each week. Teaching young children was all about energy and improvisation whereas working with adults would often require more encouragement. Other evenings were spent with the students or teachers, exploring local Vietnamese coffee shops. Vietnam has a never-ending stream of traffic but after four months I was able to confidently step out into the mayhem like a local, learning that not stopping is really the key. At the weekend we might catch the bus into Saigon, where we would sometimes meet up with some of the other volunteers. During a week off, my volunteer partner and I travelled the Mekong Delta (rice paddies and floating markets) to Phu Quoc Island (white sand and blue sea). The rice paddies would stretch into the distance, dotted with palm trees along the footpath dykes and with the odd house on stilts. The markets bustle with trade and float on the river, with goods tossed between the huddled boats.

When we stayed at Binh Duong for the weekend, the students would often invite us to hang out with them. On one particularly memorable weekend we were invited to a student's brother's wedding. It was a two hour motorbike ride to his house; two hours of avoiding pot holes and not provoking lorry foghorns, to arrive with numb thighs from the rough roads. It was a traditional Vietnamese wedding, six courses of lunch (one dish was a whole chicken inside battered rice) under a brightly coloured, open-sided marquee. There was a champagne pyramid, speeches, three changes of the bride's dress, a few dreaded shots of rice whisky and then a relaxing hammock in the shade.

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Before my placement I was quite naïve to the subtle cultural differences between North and South Vietnam and between the different generations. Now that I have had a flavour of living in and becoming part of a different culture, I want more. I am already considering another Lattitude placement after university and I think that in the long term, I would like to work for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, working in embassies around the world.

I will miss the friends I made out there: the students, the teachers, our cook, the other volunteers and even the odd 'xe ôm' driver. I will also miss the feeling of being thousands of miles from home and trying something new, with the locals' warm smiles as it all went slightly wrong. I feel that my placement experiences, along with some travel, gave me a more balanced impression of Vietnam and its people. I hope to return one day, so it's not 'goodbye', rather it's 'hẹn gặp lại'!

