

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF PROJECTS ABROAD VIETNAM



Morning exercise practiced at Hoan Kiem lake



September 2013

The month that changed my life

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I have always liked to challenge myself and do things out of my comfort zone as I believe that is when you learn the most about yourself and you see your true potential. So when Diep emailed me before my trip and asked if I would be interested in going to a government-run centre for homeless people, which was in desperate need of help, two hours out of Hanoi to work with children, people with disabilities and the elderly – I couldn't think of anything better. The whole purpose of me taking part in this journey was to help people less fortunate than myself because I was due to go to university in September and before I started embarking on my own reality of the world, I wanted to see how different the reality was for those people living in third world countries, so this placement was a no-brainer for me. I quickly confirmed my placement and began preparing for my journey of a lifetime.

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INSIDE OUT

Mid- autumn Festival

Vietnam can be considered as a country of festivals and traditional holidays. With hundreds of festivals of different scales celebrated each year, the local people have the chance to enjoy the festive vibe with their beloved family and friends. Beside the biggest traditional holiday – the Lunar new year festival - the Mid-autumn festival which is celebrated on the 15th day of the eight lunar month in the year is enjoyed the most by Vietnamese children and people. It is said that on the 15th day of the lunar August, the moon will be having its fullest shape of the whole year and this is the occasion for Vietnamese family members to gather, share the happiness while enjoying the traditional Mooncakes and fresh fruits. Mooncakes are delicious pastries made with different fillings and is bought or self-made to be given to the ancestors first, as a way to show respect and to formally invite them to gather with the family members.

Also, during mid-autumn festival, children are often taken by parents to the Old Quarter streets where there is a mid-autumn fair with toys and traditional 5-pointed star-shaped lantern, especially groups of Lion dancers will be performing on the streets. Our volunteer team also joined in this festival by taking a troll around the old streets for a social outing of the week. Photos featuring the colourful streets and the volunteers are as follows:



Lion dance



Star-shaped lanterns



FEATURE STORY

The month that changed my life

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I didn't want to just help these children for one month and as soon as I was finished just leave, I wanted to actually do something that would continue to help after I had finished my time there. So I wrote to big companies and asked all my friends and families to donate clothing, books, colouring pencils, pens, toothbrushes, toys etc. so even once I had left they would still have something from my time there. I couldn't have asked for a better response, I got a huge amount of things – too much for me to be able to take on a 20kg suitcase! So I then wrote to the airline and asked if it would be possible to have additional weight; with much persuading and perseverance I was given an extra 10kg!

The time then came for me to depart for Vietnam – this was my first time to Far East Asia so I didn't know what to expect, but I was excited to find out! Once I landed I got picked up from the airport and taken to the volunteer housing in Hanoi where I would be staying for five days. I certainly wasn't in England anymore, the car journey alone demonstrated that to me – we weaved in and out of all the traffic and the whole system contradicted everything you are taught about driving in the UK – it was madness!



The following day I went to the Projects Abroad office and had my induction and met the local volunteer who would be accompanying me on my placement, Anh. Instantly we hit it off and the following day I went over to her family's house where I tried my first bowl of Pho – a Vietnamese noodle soup. On the Saturday, it was a 'Dirty Day' at Bo De Pagoda Orphanage in Hanoi which I went and helped out at, this gave me insight into what to expect at my placement and also allowed me to have something to compare the similarities and differences of my placement to. It shocked me how bad the conditions were of the centre and it was here that it really hit me that this was a country that needed help.

Monday morning at 9am I went to Projects Abroad office in Hanoi where we departed for Hoa Binh, Tam came with us from Projects Abroad to settle us in and introduce us to all the staff. I can still remember as the car pulled up to the centre - I was filled with nerves and excitement, I couldn't wait to start!



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The month that changed my life

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We got shown to our room which would be our house for the month, it was much nicer than I had expected, yes it was basic, but I was going to volunteer in a homeless shelter not a hotel so nothing shocked me. We were given the afternoon to rest and get settled in, but Anh and I were eager to meet everyone so we went and introduced ourselves to the children. Anh was a life-saver because at the centre no-one spoke any English so she was well utilised for translating between the staff and children and it meant I was able to learn the children's backgrounds which was very interesting (and heart-breaking). At first the children were very apprehensive which Anh explained this was because I was the first person they had seen who had pale skin, blonde hair and blue eyes – they kept saying that I had cats eyes because that was the only thing they had ever seen with blue eyes. But within a couple of hours it felt like home. The children were so welcoming: holding my hand, playing games with me and making me feel like a part of their family. After staying in Hanoi for 5 days, Hoa Binh felt a million miles away. It was quiet and tranquil, other than the occasional (or maybe not so occasional!) beeping horn in the distance - you really can't escape the horns in Vietnam! The centre had a lot of ground, so it really did seem like the children's happiness was the most important thing. It amazed me just how happy the children were, considering everything they had been through they were the happiest children I had ever met. However you could tell the centre was under staffed because the children just loved having this new attention, the staff did as much as they physically could but it was so nice to be able to feel like you were somewhere which actually needed and appreciated the extra helping hands.



The next morning at 5am I was startled awake by the morning alarm, when I say alarm what I actually mean is a piece of metal hanging from a tree being hit with a hammer for about two minutes straight! It isn't the most relaxing way to be awoken that's for sure, but it certainly does the job.

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The month that changed my life

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At 5am the children go for a morning run for about 30 minutes which became my gruelling exercise regime whilst in Vietnam, then they do chores – due to this being the rainy season quite often it was sweeping the rainwater into the drains. Then they have breakfast and the older children go to school whilst I taught English to the disabled children. 11am to 2pm is lunch time in Vietnam and then nap-time for everyone, so during this time I was able to do as I pleased, but due to the centre being in the middle of nowhere (the nearest store was 11km away!) it meant that I mostly just read or copied the Vietnamese way and also took a well needed nap. After the lunch break, we would play games with the children and then after dinner I taught an English class from 7.30 to 9pm for the children who had been at school. However, this sometimes had to be cut short because, as I mentioned earlier, it was the rainy season and whenever there was rain the electricity would usually trip out – sometimes it would be out for days at a time. To me this added to the excitement of the trip, because I had to strip away all of my natural instincts and learn to live in a completely different culture with no phones, no internet, very little running water and sometimes even no lighting. Having no luxuries allowed me to be fully immersed in the culture and the experience, which meant I was able to develop in ways I had never imagined possible and appreciate the things I had at home which the people here had never even heard of. The true point of realisation was when I gave the staff the presents that I had brought over from the UK. When I gave each child a new toothbrush it was as if I had given them each a bar of gold and they were happier than any child I had ever seen, it was like Christmas day. The manager then told me that although the centre is run by the government, the government gives them less than \$1 a day for each person at the centre to cover all costs, this is when I realised why everyone was so gracious for the small gifts I had brought with me.



“...Having no luxuries allowed me to be fully immersed in the culture and the experience, which meant I was able to develop in ways I had never even heard of...”

The month that changed my life

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During my month in Vietnam I was also able to do some travelling and see different parts of the gorgeous country. My first trip was with Anh to a small village called Mai Chau. We went from the centre by bus which again is an experience in itself – there were 24 seats on this bus and at one point the total went up to 57 people! Not only were there people on this bus there was grain, wood, suitcases, children, everything imaginable. People were even having to enter and exit through the windows because the door was



so blocked up with people! It was a two hour bus journey where I spent the whole time sitting cross legged on the floor, but it was definitely worth it. Once we arrived at Mai Chau it was a 2km walk down a dirt track to the 'hotel'



where we were staying, but the views were astonishing. It was greener than I have ever seen, I live in the countryside in England and thought that I was used to seeing fields and greenery but nothing compared to this view at all. The smell was something else altogether too: the sweet, delicate smell of rice fields encompassed you and the air was so pure and fresh – a life away from the bustling city of Hanoi. Once we arrived at our hotel we soon realised

it wasn't the normal sort of 'hotel', it was just one room with individual mats laying on the floor where all the guests slept together – something else I loved about my experience in Vietnam because it was something I had never experienced anywhere else.

I was also able to go to Ho Chi Minh city and Vung Tau for the weekend, before I went I knew there would be some differences between the North and South of Vietnam but I wasn't expecting the contrast to be so noticeable – it felt like I was in a completely different country altogether. Most store workers knew good English and there seemed to be more cars than motorcycles which is something unimaginable in Hanoi where every one's mode of transport is a motorbike.

On my final weekend in Vietnam I was able to go to Sapa from Friday night to Monday morning and then Halong Bay. Both of these places were absolutely gorgeous but again they felt like worlds away from each other. Sapa was similar to Mai Chau with the rice paddy fields, except these fields were layered and they were H'mong people – a minority group – who appeared very traditional in their ways yet spoke fluent English due to the quantity of tourists visiting.



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The month that changed my life

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Halong Bay was something that seemed it should only appear in a fictional film with the rocky pillars rising from the deep green water creating something extremely stunning.



The amount of new things that I did in Vietnam is endless; every day a new challenge arose and every day I was able to say that I had done something I had never done before – from trying rice to going on the back of a motorbike to showering outside – everyday was an adventure and one that I wouldn't change for the world. After my month in Vietnam I realised that all my life I had been working towards the wrong thing, in September I was due to start studying international business management and human resources

but after just a couple of weeks in Vietnam I felt at home and as if I had unearthed the real me and (not to sound cheesy) but it felt like I had found my calling in life. The day I got home was the day I got my results for university so it was a very anxious plane journey home but more so because I had to tell my family that I no longer wanted to study what I had been aiming for for the last two years. I got my results and I had got into university, but I was certain it was the wrong thing and I was destined to help those less fortunate than myself so instead of accepting the offer that most people would have been overjoyed with, I declined my offer and went through clearing to find a course more suited



to my new career path. After five unsuccessful attempts because the courses were all full, I was able to find a course focusing on childhood studies and the way in which children learn so when I hopefully achieve my degree I can go back to Vietnam to live and give more to the country than I was able to give this time.

This trip really did change my life because it made me realise before it was too late what I was actually meant to be doing in life and I was able to find the thing that I love to do. I have only the children of the homeless centre to thank for what I was able to get out of this month because they taught me more than any teacher has ever taught me about myself and about life. I can't wait to visit them again next summer and hopefully stay for longer; they helped me with my future so they deserve for me to continue to do the same for them.

Hannah Saunders-Pedersen, Care volunteer, UK

Vassar College undergraduate spends six weeks gaining medical experience as a volunteer in Vietnam

Evan Teske (22) had always wanted to travel abroad. He saved up and decided to do something that would benefit his chosen career path of one day becoming a doctor. With the goal of learning from another culture and other medical approaches, he signed up with Projects Abroad to participate in their Medical Project in Vietnam.

Evan's placement was the National Hospital of Acupuncture where the eastern healing methods like acupuncture and acupressure are mainly applied to treat the patients. At first, Evan felt a little overwhelmed by the large number of patients coming in in the mornings, the acupuncture and the kids' screaming. "I learnt to be more interactive with the patients, which is really important for being a doctor in the future", he shared.

An average day for Evan started at 8am when he arrived at the hospital and got his white coat on. He worked in the Paediatric Autism Department. "What I usually did was help with the acupuncture. The doctors put the needles in and then I hooked them up to machines. Each needle is connected to an electrical box so the electricity can go through the needles for the acupuncture treatment. There are usually 22 to 36 needles on one patient and the treatment can last for 30 to 45 minutes. When it's been done I turned off the machine and pulled the needles out to make sure they don't bleed so I have cottons in my hand to be ready. After that the doctors inject medicine into the children to balance and relax the muscles. I also helped with the acupressure and the massage for the patients. During the afternoons I helped the doctors with paperwork which takes them a lot of time. The days were long but they were all very good", said Evan.



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Vassar College undergraduate spends six weeks gaining medical experience as a volunteer in Vietnam

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Working with screaming and crying, ill children and getting exposed daily to the large number of patients and a totally foreign healing method during the six weeks offered Evan some valuable experiences, and he believes that they will be extremely valuable for his chosen career. "I learnt to be more patient with the children, be more compassionate and it was really valuable to interact with the patients, nurses and doctors. That is something I don't usually get when doing volunteer work in the USA. Also, now I have a broader view of different types of medicine. I'm now more open-minded to any type of medicine wherever it comes from: western or eastern. It is important to co-operate all the best things that actually help people and that is the main goal of becoming a doctor."



The six weeks Evan spent in Hanoi with his volunteer project was six weeks full of memorable experiences. "It was very interesting when I asked my translator to ask parents what improvements they saw in their children from the treatment and it was really great to hear from them that their children can walk better, can grab things or can hear because they were deaf before."

Duong Pham, Information manager

MONTHLY WORTHWHILE EVENT REVIEW

Volunteers helped raise fund for disabled children by making and selling crepes and fruit juices

Having decided to join in a fundraising event for the local disabled children organised by ACDC (Action to the Community Development Centre) - our local partner - as a worthwhile event, on Sunday (September 8th) nine volunteers working in different projects, a local volunteer and a house cook gathered at a volunteer house to prepare fruit juices and fry crepes to sell at the event venue. We also set up a stall and decorated it and the stall attracted quite a lot of children, parents and youngsters. After the day all the crepes made were sold out and so were the juices; the amount of money raised was 750,000VND which can be used to buy 30 mooncakes (a traditional cake for the mid-autumn festival) for the disabled children in the upcoming special festival. This was much appreciated by the organiser and our volunteers also very much enjoyed the day. Let's have a look at the photos taken featuring our volunteers:



October Calendar

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1 Astrid arrives	2		4 Visit Women's Museum	5
6 Jessica arrives	7	8	9 Social dinner: Vietnamese hotpot	10	11	12
13 Hans arrives Nadia's birthday	14	15 Anuja arrives	16	17 Vietnamese calligraphy lesson	18	19
20	21	22	23	24 Monthly workshop	25	26
27	28	29 Pernille arrives	30 Special Outreach event: Hanoi Story Slam	31		

October 4 - Vietnam Women's museum. A visit to this interesting museum will be an informative and enjoyable afternoon.

Address: 36 Li Thuong Kiet
30,000VND/person

Time: 2PM

Ticket:

October 9 - Social dinner– Weather is getting cooler which offers a great chance to enjoy the tasty Vietnamese hotpot.

Time: 6.30PM

Cost: 120,000-150,000VND/ person

October 17 - Vietnamese Calligraphy lesson– An opportunity to discover an interesting aspect of Vietnamese old culture—the calligraphy.

Venue: Projects Abroad office

Time: 4.45PM

October 24— Monthly workshop - More information to come

October 30 - Special Outreach event: Hanoi Story Slam on the theme 'Fear'. Tell your own story on the theme to get a prize from the organizer. Also, support a good children-related cause by joining in.

Venue: Son Tinh House (Xuan Dieu St) Entrance fee: 100,000VND/person-paid by Projects Abroad

Photos of the Month



**A French lesson led by 2 young volunteers
Benjamin and Aymeric**



Care volunteer Kathryn fed autistic children at her placement. She's been much enjoying her work!



**Coaching basketball to local students is what
Leonie enjoyed the most in her sport
volunteer project.**



**Danish teaching volunteers Linh
Le and Nadia during an English
class activity**



**Volunteers practiced making pottery in a weekly
social event**



**Physio volunteers Sascha and Ditte worked with
disabled orphaned kids at their placement. They
did an amazing job :)**

Contact Us

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Projects Abroad is the leading global organizer of overseas voluntary work placements. Our wide range of projects, including Teaching, Care, Conservation & Environment, Medicine & Healthcare, Sports, Culture & Community projects and Journalism, are designed specifically for the needs of the communities in which we work, whilst giving our volunteers the very best experience of volunteering abroad.

Based in Hanoi, Vietnam, volunteers can work on a variety of projects, including care work with disabled and orphaned children, physical therapy at local hospitals, and teaching either English or French in both primary and secondary schools. The latest projects to be opened is Community Village project and Occupational Therapy project. If you are interested in volunteering in Vietnam with Projects Abroad then please log on to www.projects-abroad.net for more information.

