

News from Vietnam

Contributed by Emily and Kelly

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Xin Ciao!

We are officially into our hottest season here in Ho Chi Minh City and I may actually melt. It has been unbearably hot for the past three weeks or so with no signs of a cool spell any time soon. We are also approaching rainy season so the random downpours have begun. I say random but it seems to rain at about the same time every school day that it rains – at “home” time. So, the kids either get soaked riding home on their motor bikes or parents arrive very late to pick up their kids because of the rain. I can’t complain about the rain though because it gives us a moment’s relief from the intolerable heat!

Now, let’s see. I last wrote at the end of March and LOTS has happened since then. First, we had two friends come and visit from home. Our friend Christa (who we taught with in Egypt) came all the way from Newfoundland and Sean Sloan (former Wawa resident) met up with her in Toronto. They were here for a short time but we packed their days with many adventures and I think they had a great time.

On their first weekend here, we packed up, and along with Tammy and Kristi, were off to Hoi An. I’ve written about Hoi An before, it’s where you can get all the clothes tailor made, but I enjoyed it even more the second time around. It is a beautiful little town and many of the streets are blocked off from traffic so you can wander around, shopping your heart out without the worry of getting run down by a motor bike! We spent lots of time at the tailors again, having all kinds of clothes made.

We also shopped for paintings and we were there on the day of “Earth Hour”. It was so great because the whole town was dark and by the river, there was a celebration and people were sending colourful paper lanterns down the river. It was a beautiful sight and great to see the whole community celebrating together.

Back in Saigon, we had a great time catching up with our friends as we went for some nice dinners, did some shopping and had them into our classrooms to meet our students. Kelly was able to go to the Cu Chi Tunnels with them one day and we also had an exotic fruit tasting “picnic”. And yes – there was durian involved! They say it didn’t taste too bad if you can get it past your nose but the texture was not the greatest. I didn’t go for it. I still can’t get over the smell. We had a lot of laughs, that’s for sure! Unfortunately, after nine short days, Sean had to go home but Christa had one more weekend with us. And of course, we were off again.

This time we went to Hue (pronounced Hway), the ancient capital city. Hue holds a lot of pre-communist Vietnamese history, including the Citadel, many temples, palaces and pagodas. However, even with all of this history, the highlight for me was this little store that we had read about in the Lonely Planet and found quite easily, just after we arrived in Hue. I have to tell you about it. It’s called “Healing the Wounded Heart Shop” - part of the SPIRAL foundation. And everything that is made at this shop is WONDERFUL. Why? You ask. Everything is made from recycled materials. We’re talking chip bags, noodle packages, telephone wires, and more! Everything is hand made in Hue, Vietnam or Nepal by disabled artisans. We met some of the Vietnamese artisans who are young adults who are mutes and are now able to be

contributing members of society when ordinarily their country would see them as a burden. Lastly, all proceeds go to fair salaries for the artisans, social and medical insurance for the artisans, and heart surgeries for poor children in Vietnam!

We also met the founder of the project, Marichia. She is Italian but lives in the U.S. and funded this project to give back after seeing the devastation of the war in Vietnam when she was a teenager. She was so passionate and wonderful that it made our shopping experience even more memorable. Anyway, if you want more information on this fantastic foundation, please check out their website: <http://www.spiralfoundation.org> .

Sadly, a few days later, Christa was on her way home too. And we were left to get back to reality. But not for long! The last weekend in April was a long weekend for us so Kelly, Tammy, Kristi and I went to Halong Bay and Hanoi for the weekend. Halong Bay is absolutely amazing and one of the most beautiful places in Vietnam by far! Imagine 2000 or more incredible islands rising from the emerald green waters of the bay. It is a World Heritage sight and these many islands are covered in grottos, forests and majestic caves. We spent the weekend on a small cruise, sailing through the islands, climbing in enormous caves, and floating in a coconut boat through a fishing village built entirely on water! Some of the people from the village have never been to the mainland! It was amazing!

We also spent a day in the capital city of Hanoi. It is a typical capital city in many ways but does have some beautiful old architecture. It is a lot busier and crazier than Ho Chi Minh City, and by the end of the weekend, we were ready to come back to the "quiet" of home. In Hanoi we did lots of walking, some shopping, ate great food, saw the water puppets which are famous in Vietnam and tried to visit Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum. It was closed when we were there so we weren't able to go inside but we did visit his old house. A good weekend overall, and I would love to go back and do the cruise in Halong Bay again.

Okay, so that brings us into May. We had 2 four day weeks and then a weeklong holiday! YAY! Our last holiday of this school year brought us to Singapore, Hong Kong, and Macau with our friend Valerie. We spent the first few days in Singapore and two of our other friends were there as well. We visited the Singapore Zoo and Night Safari, the Singapore Flyer, the Science Centre, Sentosa Island, the famous Raffles hotel, and we saw the musical Chicago! Now, most of those don't require much more information, however, I should tell you more about Sentosa. It is a man-made island off of Singapore that is pretty much a tourist trap of man-made attractions. Universal Studios has just opened there and there are many other outdoor activities to keep you busy for a day. There is an indoor wave house where you can surf which Kelly wanted to do but he didn't have any photo I.D., but he did get to go out on a Segway and a zip line over the island.

Next on the agenda, Hong Kong. But we didn't stay long. We spent the night and got up the next morning and took a ferry to Macau. Macau is so strange because it does not feel like you are in Asia at all! It used to be a Portuguese colony which is still very evident today. Most signs are still in Portuguese and Chinese and there are many delicious Portuguese restaurants. We visited the ruins of St. Paul's which is the façade of what used to be St. Paul's Cathedral built in 1602. We also visited the Macau Museum which was very well put together and walked through beautiful parks and old grave yards. There is a street in Macau called "Rua da Felicidade" which means street of happiness where all the doors and shutters are painted red. This is one of the places where they filmed scenes for the Indiana Jones movie "Temple of Doom". The strange thing about this Asian city that has a very European feel is that it is now said to be a bigger gambling centre than Las Vegas! There are casinos EVERYWHERE and as we took the ferry back to Hong Kong that night, the entire skyline was filled with the flashing, bright lights of the Las Vegas of the East.

Now, back to Hong Kong. We spent the last few days of our holiday in Hong Kong, exploring the islands by ferry, bus, cable car, street car, taxi and tram. We took a cable car to the top of Lantau Island to see the Big Buddha. Unfortunately, when we got to the top of the mountain (after a 20 minute cable car ride), it was so foggy that even after climbing the 268 stairs, you could just barely see the outline of the Buddha. We also went to a fishing village where everyone is still living in houses on stilts near or on the water. Our guide told us that locals bring their children here to see the only place left in Hong Kong where people still live this way. We took the Peak Tram for a beautiful view of the actual island of Hong Kong which is really cool because the tram runs up such a steep hill that it looks like the buildings going up the hill are built at a 45 degree angle! We walked through the botanical gardens and zoo, walked along the Asian Avenue of the Stars, and watched the world's largest permanent light show. Of course, there was lots of shopping to do on Nathan Road and in the local markets and this was all done along with eating at many fabulous restaurants.

After leaving Hong Kong, we flew back to Singapore (for some reason it's cheaper to fly to Singapore and then Hong Kong than flying Saigon to Hong Kong direct). We met up with our friends Katie and Sean again who live and work in Singapore and they had us over for a nice dinner and then we returned to Saigon the next day. It was a great vacation filled with many miles walked, lots of laughs, great food, catching up with old friends and spending money that we didn't plan on spending!

The day after we got back home, we had two visitors arrive. Another former Wawa resident Whitney Arnold and her boyfriend Russell stopped by on their South East Asia tour and after traveling for two months with another month to go, they were happy to enjoy an air conditioned apartment with hot showers and a washing machine. They spent about five days with us and we had many good chats over dinner each night and tried our best to help them with whatever they

needed in Ho Chi Minh City. It was great to have them here and we really hope they enjoy the rest of their time in Vietnam. They left Canada on March 10 and will return on June 10 from their adventures.

As for now, we are back to work for our last two months – actually we are down to six weeks now but who's counting?? At the end of June we will be back to Wawa for the summer. Lots to do before then!

Thanks for reading!