

VOLUNTEER ABROAD

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Volunteer Abroad Experience -
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Incredibly, my four weeks in Vietnam has come to an end. I travelled there last July with a volunteer organisation called E.I.L Ireland. It was an amazing cultural, emotional and spiritual experience which has left me awe struck.

I soon realised that travelling by myself was a great experience and gave me oodles of confidence. As I was flying over Ho Chi Minh City at night I had never felt more excited. I could see pockets of lights glowing like stars. The city was bustling and I could imagine the sounds of motorbikes and traffic moving beneath me.

I was greeted by a local volunteer at the airport and we went by taxi to the volunteer house. I couldn't keep my eyes off the window on the way. It was like being in a different world, completely different architecture, sounds and smells. I was buzzing when I got to the house and was greeted by everyone so nicely. I felt a sense of being at home straight away as I was given a cup of Barry's tea by another Irish volunteer.

After giving it a lot of thought, I decided to do my volunteer placement at The Mai Tam Centre. It is a centre located in the city for children aged from birth to teenage years who have HIV and AIDS. The children live there full time and attend school during the year. I worked there from Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 4pm. I travelled to and from there by motorbike which was exhilarating! On my first day I was very excited and apprehensive but was greeted by a very smiley happy bunch and was warmly accepted into the organisation. I spent my time teaching English, drama and music and we carried out art classes. The children were of different age groups and they just adored it. They also attempted to teach me Vietnamese and use chopsticks (the chopsticks I did succeed in!).

Every day brought new challenges, joy and laughter. We ate lunch together, the staff along with the Mother's who had HIV. The food was an explosion to the taste buds with an array of different spices, meats, noodles and of course, rice! Every day we also took a two hour nap on the floor. This was a lovely ritual and always gave me energy to teach my second class!

At the weekends I had an opportunity to go travelling with other volunteers who lived at the house. We travelled to Nha Trang, Da Lat, the Mekong Delta and the Chu Chi Tunnels. There we did boat rides, swam in the sea and did a day long motorbike tour of the countryside. What I adored about this trip was that I was totally immersed in the Vietnamese culture from both a tourist's and a worker's point of view.

At the Mai Tam Centre I made many friendships and learned about the lives and ups and downs that the children and staff go through. We shared many stories and they taught me so much, after class we would often go get a sugar cane juice or a 'Vietnamese Pizza' together.

As the plane took off on my last day, I couldn't stop smiling looking out the window thinking about all the happy memories I would take with me. It was a trip of a lifetime and one I would do it all again in a heartbeat. Cam on (thank you, in Vietnamese) to the CIT Volunteer Abroad Programme and E.I.L Ireland for making this trip a reality for me.



**Volunteer Abroad 2016 information evening on:
Tuesday 17th November from 5.30pm in the Gallery, Student Centre.
All welcome**