

My Vietnam Travels - An Amazing Trip!

My Vietnam Travels

Vietnam . . . Amazing . . . Breathtaking . . . Surreal . . .

Just a few words that many of us from the MARL Class VIII were thinking, saying and feeling about our trip to Vietnam. Our MARL (Minnesota Ag Rural Leadership) group are some of Minnesota's finest ag leaders and I could not be any prouder than to be a part of this group.

And . . . We were in Vietnam as part of our international trip. Let me share my memories. I hope you enjoy all the pictures and experiences. And, believe me, there was a lot!

Day 1 - Travel Friday, February 19, 2016

It's 4:00 a.m. and all 28 of us arrived at the Minneapolis airport. Many of us, including me, did not sleep very well the night before. We tried but just couldn't. We all know this was going to be trip of a lifetime. Excited and nervous, all wrapped together, for what adventures we would all experience. Our flight pattern to Vietnam included three stops--Minneapolis to Chicago to Tokyo to Hanoi.

And some 30 hours later, we would arrive in Hanoi.

Here was our route to Tokyo. I had no idea we would be going north through Alaska enroute to Tokyo.

And here was our view over Alaska . . . Stunning.

We flew on a Japan Airlines plane and let me just say, this was a large airplane. When your seat number is row 57, you know this is not your average plane. The flight was long, but a good flight. We were all envious of the individual "pod" seats at the front of the plane. These fortunate soles were given slippers and could stretch out - a very nice feature when in the air for 13 hours. And because this plane was operated by Japan Airlines, we were the recipients of Japanese cultural traditions including the hot finger towels.

When we landed in Hanoi, Vietnam and picked up luggage, we were met at the airport by our tour guide, Tung. He accompanied us by bus to our hotel where we were greeted with hot tea and a private dinner.

At 1:30 a.m. Hospitality at it's finest. And we are loving it after our very long flight.

As we were traveling to the hotel, we drove by a wholesale flower market. The market, at midnight, was a flurry of activity. It was huge--spanning blocks and blocks. And according to our tour guide, the market continues until about 5:00 a.m. when everything is packed up until the next night. This particular flower market is intended for buyers who sell retail. I have never seen anything like it because you expect it to be daytime with all of the activity.

As you would expect, our bodies were having a time adjusting to the time. We were 13 hours ahead of home and we crossed the international date line. So it felt like we lost a day. But we adapted.

After we ate at the hotel, we immediately went to our rooms for a short night as our wake up call would come at 6:00 a.m. But we didn't care. We were pinching ourselves. Are we really in Vietnam?

Day 2

Good Morning Vietnam! (Okay, I couldn't resist)

We all woke up on time for an early breakfast. We still can't believe we are in Vietnam. Adjusting our internal clock would be a little bit of a challenge.

Here are a few pictures from Hanoi.

Our main goal for the day was to meet up with our overnight boat cruise. Yes, our schedule was putting us on an overnight cruise in the Ha Long Bay! (Yes, I am pinching myself yet!) In order to reach Ha Long Bay, we would ride a bus about four hours. On the way, we made a couple stops. The first stop was a place where they work on needlecrafts and other artwork. What made this place so unique is they place disabled people and teach them a needlecraft. They work on their needlecraft on site and then sell their products. Here are a few pictures of what they were working on. The pieces were beautiful!



Absolutely stunning!

Oyster Farm

Our next stop was a business where they processed cultured pearls from oysters. We weren't able to see the actual oyster farm but we did see and learn how oysters were created and made into jewelry.

Next . . . Onto the boat. Let me just say, the cruise was exquisite. It was so peaceful and beautiful. And something we all needed.

For those of you wondering if jet lag showed itself. Yes, it did. And it happened on Day 3 for many of us. I will say generally that I did not sleep well at during our trip. It wasn't because of the places we stayed or the beds we slept in. We actually stayed in some very nice hotels and resorts. But

when you experience what we did, at night my mind just raced thinking about all the things we saw and did. And, honestly, I kept thinking to myself - "Who does this?" Lack of sleep wasn't a surprise to me as I was expecting it. Plus, I didn't want to miss a thing . . .

Let me also make the acknowledgement of the tour company, [Buffalo Tours](#). They were amazing! All of our tour guides were second-to-none. They were all life-long residents and had a wealth of information. Many times as we were traveling from point A to point B, they would be talking with us about Vietnam and answering any question we had.

Ha Long Bay

At this point I would like to expand a bit on the River Boat cruise on [Ha Long Bay](#). Towers of Limestone and small islands created a labyrinth in the bay. In fact, there are about 1600 of them. The scenery was beautiful and peaceful. And there were caves. Very big caves, in fact. Ha Long Bay was listed as a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#). UNESCO's purpose is to protect cultural and historical sites around the world. Here are some pictures and a video. Enjoy!

While on the boat, we traveled to the [Me Cung Cave](#), a remnant of the Stone Age era some 10,000 years ago. This cave was very large. There has been some modifications inside to make it more accessible to visitors. We accessed the cave by a small boat from our Cruise boat.

After spending the night on the boat, many of us woke early and headed to the upper deck at 6:00 a.m. to do Tai Chi. Even yours truly. I kept thinking to myself, "Here I am in Vietnam, cruising on Ha Long Bay doing tai chi on the upper deck of a cruise boat in one of the most beautiful and tranquil places." (again, just pinching myself) I just wanted time to stop and take it all in.

The Weather

We started our trip in Hanoi which is in northern Vietnam. The weather was cooler than I anticipated. Highs about 60 degrees. I didn't plan well for that as I thought it would be warmer. When we arrived on our second leg - Hoi An (middle of country), temps were about 70 degrees and Ho Chi Minh City (southern Vietnam) was about 90-95 degrees.

Pineapple Farm

Our tour included visiting a pineapple. But this was no ordinary pineapple farm - it was the *largest* pineapple farm in Vietnam. We literally turned off on a road heading to the farm when the bus pulled over. Through the guidance of our tour guide, Tong, we walked alongside the farm where pineapples were growing.

According to Tong, the smaller pineapples were more tasty than the larger ones. I think we had pineapple, bananas (also small in size) and watermelon nearly every day we were in Vietnam. They were very tasty. I also tried other tropical fruit such as dragon fruit and rambutan. I particularly liked [rambutan](#) and would buy it today if it was available. It took me a while to try it because it doesn't look very appetizing.

So probably one of the most *memorable* moments for me was our visit with the pineapple farmer. Let me just state, this family did not know us nor did they know our tour guide. It's a testament to the country's attitude towards Americans when 30 of us walked up to their farmyard and welcomed us with the token "tea drink." Many times during our trip, we saw how the Vietnamese people do like America and Americans. And to welcome us as they did was just a wonderful example of their hospitality.

We asked numerous questions about their life and their farm. One question that I asked sticks with me to this very day. I asked what they were most concerned about. Even though we are a half a world away and our farms looked and are operated completely different, we still share the same concerns. His answer?

The weather and prices.

ALL farmers share the same concern - no matter where we farm.

Their living quarters were quite humbling compared to how we live. But they were self-sustaining and appeared to be quite content. We were told none of the houses had heat - when the weather turns cold you just bring out a jacket or a blanket.

The house was three rooms - a living room and two bedrooms. The family living in the house consisted of about eight people. The kitchen was housed in another building next to the house. Water came from a cistern right outside the home. And the kitchen preparation area was outside.

After I left the farm I thought to myself, "I have waaaay too much stuff." When you see how content they were on so little it really makes you think about your own life.

Farmland in northern Vietnam is not owned, but rather leased. Farmland parcels are determined by how many children are in the family. Prices for commodities are fixed. There is no market competition.

There were two young children in this family. School is only a half-day long but they go Monday-Saturday.

Ho Chi Minh Square

We also visited Ho Chi Minh Square where the communist leader is laid to rest.

Embassy Visit

We spent the first half of our day meeting with Embassy staff. We were not able to visit the embassy as it is undergoing remodeling. One of the takeaways from our embassy is just how much Vietnam really likes the United States. We may be tough to deal with initially with trade agreements but they can trust us to follow through. Vietnam wants to expand their economy and they know they can't do it by themselves. That's why they welcome the U.S. and Europe to help them. Generally, the people of Vietnam do not like China but they know they need them .

It was interesting to me about how many people know about TPP (trans Pacific Partnership) and how they want it to come to fruition. Pretty sure that most Americans don't know what TPP is.

Corruption is also a major problem in Vietnam. That was reiterated in the meeting with embassy personnel and with all three of our tour guides.

Rice Fields

I want to talk a little bit about the rice fields. Rice is a big, big deal in Vietnam. We saw miles and miles of rice fields and many of them had workers in them. Rice fields are small - but there are many of them. In northern Vietnam, they can grow about two crops a year. Each crop equates to about \$150 U.S. dollars, which results in about \$300 U.S. dollars annually. Needless to say, the Vietnamese need to supplement their income in other ways. Whether that means growing vegetables in their yard or running a small market or store front. We were told the Vietnamese farmers are hard-working but have little money.

The larger cities are seeing more grocery stores being built, but in the villages (rural areas) the markets are still the main source of food for villagers. They shop for their food daily. I saw numerous times raw meat on a table being sold on the streets.

The labor used to work the rice fields is manual labor, water buffalos and some tractors. We were told in southern Vietnam that more tractors are being used but we didn't see a lot of tractors as we traveled the country.

Again, it really was the people that made this trip memorable. We stopped and met a woman working in her rice field. We did not know her nor did she know our tour guide. She was a little embarrassed because she was dirty. She was in mud up to her knees. But we assured her we were farmers and we get dirty too.

A few of the MARL group wanted some hands-on experience so they offered to help her. She was transplanting rice plants in order to get the maximum amount of plants in the field. I think it looks easier than it was. She, by far, did a much better job! Sorry guys!

We also visited a number of temples. Buddhist is the prominent religion in Vietnam. Christianity consists of about 10% of the population. We also visited a number of Confucianism temples. In fact, we visited the original University of Confucius.

We visited a number of temples. Here are some pictures.

We ended our day with an original water puppet show. It was a puppet show that depicted the Vietnamese life and culture and is performed by puppeteers in the water. Very unique.

Our next stop was a flight to Danang.

Hoi An

Hoi An is located in the central part of the country. It's about an hour flight south of Hanoi.

In my opinion, Hoi An was more touristy. They have a very strong market place. But along with the market place came constant haggling. You couldn't hardly walk anywhere without someone pursuing you to come to their "shop." This was definitely something to try and get used to. For me, it was a little on the irritating side.

Textures, silks, leather were all items that were plentiful. Many people in our MARL group had custom made clothing items made. Literally in one day you could have an clothing item sewn. Many of the guys had suits made for a greatly reduced priced compared to the U.S. And everyone I talked to said the clothing fit them like a glove. No, I didn't do this. Probably my one regret. I never went with the intent of doing this and when they kept haggling with me, my German roots took hold and I became a little on the stubborn side. Oh, well. The trip was still amazing.

Our Day 7 took us on an EcoTour. It was a full and interesting day to say the least! We started our day by riding bikes into the backroads of Vietnam. I kept thinking to myself, "here I am in Vietnam, riding my bike in the rural areas - who does this?" (I am sorry if I am repeating myself, but it is honestly how I felt on most of the trip!) We ended up in a village area where they were growing organic crops. *The gardens were beautiful.* They almost looked photoshopped - they were that beautiful. We also rode a water buffalo. It's not a pretty picture but I did it.

Later in the day, we watched the Vietnamese fish using nets and we rode in basket boats (made from bamboo). To sum it up - it was a crazy, fun day! Enjoy the pictures and videos!

Day 9 took us to the [Reunification Palace](#) in Ho Chi Minh City or Saigon. Interesting note - many of the citizens prefer to call Ho Chi Minh City Saigon. They hold onto some of the south Vietnamese values. In my opinion, Saigon is more industrialized and modern. People and businesses can own land in southern Vietnam where we were told people/businesses could only lease land in the north.

The Reunification Palace is where a North Vietnamese tank crashed through the gates in 1975 to end the war. This war killed an estimated 58,000 Americans and 3 million Vietnamese. In fact, our tour guide in Saigon lost his father to the war.

Here are a few pictures from our visit:

We ended our day with watching the A O Show - an acrobatic show. The performers were extremely talented.

Day 9 took us to a hog farm and a visit to the tunnels used during the Vietnam war. The hog farm was very interesting. We all "showered in" which consisted of walking through a room with misters. We weren't able to see the sows or piglets because the owner was concerned that we would disturb them. Even with the language difficulty, you could tell the owner was very proud of his farm. The finishing pigs we did see were pigs he pulled out of other barns - kind of like our "sick pen." The owner sells to a niche market and claims he has the best pigs. Genetics were landrace and duroc. But one that was really unique was they tattoo a few pigs in a batch of hogs. He uses those hogs for marketing and branding. Interesting . . . to say the least.

Enjoy the pictures of both the hog farm.

We also visited the tunnels that were used during the Vietnam War by the VietCong. You just tried to imagine what the war was like. I remember the war from the continual news reports on TV. I also remember families that were worried their loved ones would be drafted into the war or families that were worried if their sons would come home alive. So to see Vietnam and the tunnels made the war more real.

One evening we had free time. A number of us went to the Hard Rock Cafe in Saigon! We all wanted a burger and fries fix. While there, we enjoyed a live band. Here is a snippet of what they sang. They were actually very good!

We also visited a "factory" where people who were affected by agent orange during the war were using their talents in crafts. Lacquer was their specialty which takes about 34 separate steps to create. These were some very talented people. And I purchased quite a few lacquer items as souvenirs.

Day 10 took us on a river cruise on the Mekong River. We would observe the floating market and visit Coconut Island where we watched how coconut candy and rice paper were made by hand. This day was very relaxing and was a great way to spend our last full day together.

I did purchase a number of souvenirs. Probably one of the most unique souvenirs was some snake wine for my son-in-law. Like I said earlier, the Vietnamese believe indulging in a little bit of snake wine daily is healthy. I, on the other, hand, will pass and find something else for my health.

Let's talk a bit about prices. There currency is dung. \$22,000 dung is equal to \$1 American dollar. Needless to say, many of us were millionaires in Vietnam! Costs were very low compared to America. A 10-15 minute taxi ride was about \$2. A large bottle of water was about \$.50. I bought a nice medium sized Samsonite suitcase for about \$30. Lots of bargains.

And then we had some really great food! People have asked me about the food. I really have to say the food was very good. Unfortunately, we had a few people that did get sick on the last day (actually our travel day) from some possible food poisoning. Thank goodness I was not affected.

The last official part of our schedule was visiting the international sea port at TCIT.

Writing this blog post was a huge undertaking. I am afraid I didn't do it justice. Please understand

this truly was an amazing trip. Before the trip, I really didn't know what to expect. But it certainly surpassed anything I could imagine. I know that I am truly blessed to live here in the U.S. So many things you take for granted that our fellow human beings across the world don't have. But even so, I appreciated being able to see the Vietnamese culture and country through their eyes. Even with the challenged living conditions, I did not see an unsettled population. Instead, I saw a very proud nation. Proud of their roots and history, despite being ravaged by war, they were thrilled to show us their country. And I am so glad I was there.

And I thank my fellow MARL classmates along with Mike and Olga.

If you haven't seen enough pictures, I have included some more at the end. Thanks to Lona Rookard for some of her amazing pictures also. Simply enjoy!