

Exmouth & Budleigh Salterton Explorer Scouts

Summer Camp 2015 – Vietnam



Saturday 11th July – Saturday 1st August

Day 1 - Saturday 11th July

I'm pretty much the only one awake and Esther's bored and won't stop walking around the plane so she's made me do the diary entry for the first day. As with everything, this brings with it both hardships as well as opportunities. Hardships in the fact that not a lot has happened which limits my subject matter and opportunities as my hand writing is horrific so I'm going to write as much as possible for Esther to type out when we get back. As I'm writing this we're on the plane, about eight hours from Hanoi.



Group Photo

We all met at the Scout Hut but I was late and Esther had to come and fetch me, everyone had their parents with them to wave us off except for me as mine are on holiday already.

The coach was an hour late picking us up so Esther and Bob were starting to get a little panicky and were trying to get hold of the driver. Eventually she turned up but drove passed us as she thought there were too many people for her coach. This set the tone of the journey to Heathrow. The driver seemed to have no grasp on the workings of the motor car which lead us to maxing out at the ripe old speed of 50mph on the motorway and when we

arrived at Heathrow she clapped herself as she'd never driven so far before.

We then did the usual checking in thing which for 3 of our group was a new experience because they have never flown before. We managed to get all our home baked produce through security but Ben had sun tan lotion in his bag so it was confiscated.



Handing out T-Shirt's



In Departures

While we were in the departures lounge the leaders gave out our new summer camp T-shirt's but we weren't allowed to wear them as we were all looking smart in our uniforms.

As for the flight, I enjoyed a succulent pork dinner but the in-flight entertainment is limited to say the least. We are being looked after by lots of very smiley Vietnamese women in blue dressing gowns.

Day 2 - Sunday 12th July

We awoke at various times during the night and finally all rose at around 7am Vietnamese time. We had a breakfast of either omelette with various fried things or egg fried rice. Unfortunately at this point of the flight three of our company decided to feel a bit sick and had to use the lovely sick bags. They started feeling better after a while though so all was good.

After landing, going through passport control and collecting our bags, we had our first experience of the heat and humidity of Vietnam, something I don't think any of us were prepared for.

We were met at the airport by our guide Duy, he would be spending the next 3 weeks with us as we travel the length of the country. We took a coach from the airport to the centre of Hanoi but it wasn't possible to get the coach into the centre of the old town so we all had to get off and grab our luggage and walk the last few hundred metres. This might not sound very far but we were all really tired from the flight and mixed with the heat and humidity and the amazing sights/sounds/smells of this country it was a slow walk for our group.



Arrival in Vietnam



Out First Lunch

We only had enough time in the hotel to drop our bags to our rooms and change out of our Explorer uniforms before we were off out again for lunch. Our first taste of Vietnam was a good one with spring rolls, rice with chicken, fish and salad, with fruit for pudding.

We then went to the military museum which was about the American/Vietnam wars. Interestingly we call it the 'Vietnam War' but in Vietnam they call it the 'American War'. It had many artefacts including American bombers and tanks. It was very hot as we hadn't acclimatised from cold England so we struggled walking round the museum. Many of us found a shady spot and bought a cold drink.



The War Museum

Hanoi by Night



We went back to the cool hotel and had a shower in time for our briefing with Duy.

We walked to a restaurant for dinner next which was much of the same as lunch but with a different meat. We also had a 'do it yourself' wrap system which was interesting. After dinner we were given chance to walk around the night market and experience Hanoi after dark. We headed off in small groups but everyone in my group was very tired so we didn't stay out very long but what we did see was good, everywhere was packed with people and the hustle and bustle was like nothing I had experienced before.

Day 3 - Monday 13th July

It was an early start today so we headed straight for breakfast on the top floor of the hotel. We thought there would be a restaurant up there but breakfast was hosted in a hallway and two unused bedrooms, so random. I wasn't feeling the early morning rice so opted for the bread and jam and I'm glad I did because shortly after Greg found a maggot in his beans. To quote Greg "That is a maggot and that is breakfast over".

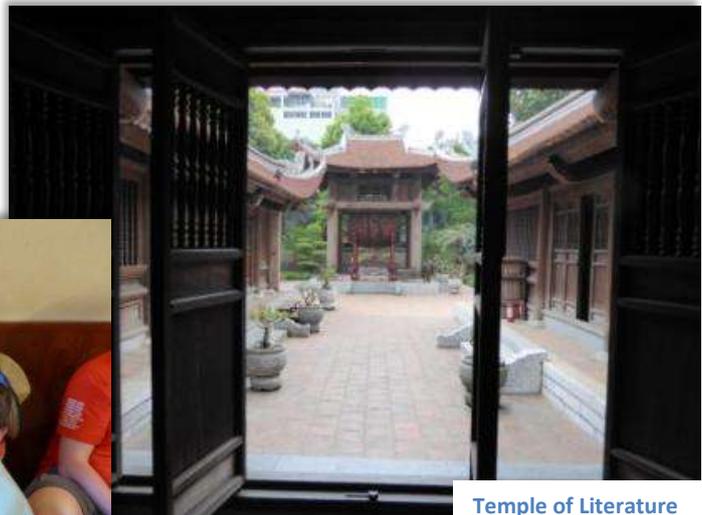


Ho-Chi-Minh Mausoleum

After breakfast we headed to Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum, except on Monday's he is on a break on so we didn't get to see him. We walked round the grounds which were really well kept; there was a lake in the middle full of carp.

Then afterwards we headed off to Hanoi Prison which was pretty cool but the labelling and descriptions weren't very good as the items were just labelled with "bottle", "gun" etc. We then had lunch at a restaurant where they train street children to be chefs and waiters. The food was amazing, especially the duck.

After that we went to the Temple of Literature which was the first University in Vietnam, it was very impressive but we were all getting tired and very hot. We all got very excited at one point because there were about 10 drops of rain.



Temple of Literature



Drinking 'Egg' Coffee

Duy then took us to a little backstreet cafe to experience a Hanoi speciality 'Egg Coffee'. It is cup of coffee with whipped egg on top, it was very sweet but delicious.

After that we went to get ice cream from Fannys because Esther had been there when she came to Vietnam before.

Then it was off to the famous water puppet show. It was really random but still cool. As the guide book said 'it's like Punch and Judy in water'.

As we were leaving some guy tried the old hard sell for the pointy hats outside the theatre but we weren't having any of it. We may only have been here for 1 day but we were getting used to saying no to people when they were try to sell us stuff.

We all headed back to the hotel to shower, pack up all of our stuff and get ready for dinner and then to depart Hanoi on the overnight sleeper train.



The Water Puppet Show

On arriving at the train station we ran across the train line to get to our platform with all the locals who were also heading for the train and here we are in our sleeper carriages for our overnight journey to Lao Cai in the north of the country.

Day 4 – Tuesday 14th July

After many hours of shaking in a flimsy bed we finally arrived at Lao Cai at 5am. It was way too early to be pushing through crowds of locals in traditional clothing asking us to “buy from meeee, ok?”.

We then had a coach journey for a couple of hours up into the mountains to reach Sapa where we headed to a hotel for a breakfast of fruit, rice, egg, rice, noodles, rice and EVEN MORE RICE.



Ready to start our trek

After breakfast we sorted through our big bags and packed everything we would need for our 2 day trek into our small day sacks. My bag was rather full with 12 packets of hula hoops and a bunch of Tesco value biscuits, a bag of rhubarb and custards, I also have a chocolate orange but by the time you read this Esther and I will have eaten it so unlucky!



Local ladies selling goods

As we left the hotel to begin our walk out of Sapa and into the hills we were suddenly surrounded by hundreds of local ladies all dressed in traditional costumes. They were all determined to sell us local handmade goods but we were all perfecting the art of saying no.

The ladies were very persistent and informed us that until we bought something from them they would continue to walk with us, it was going to be an interesting morning.



View while trekking

We were trekking through a wide valley lined with bamboo forest and covered in paddy fields enclosed in a stepped pattern with water flowing through it.

As we reached midday the temperature increased to 36 degrees and the going got hot and sweaty however we had plenty of purified water which tasted like a swimming pool. FACT! It was the perfect incentive to reach the bottled water at the end.

After several vicious inclines we entered a thick bamboo forest with our fantastic guide Mr Hai (pronounced Hi) leading us at an unrelenting pace. For a very short bloke not wearing walking boots he was incredibly fast and we struggled to keep up at times.

After descending out of the forest and over a dubious wobbly bridge we arrived in a random village somewhere and had MORE RICE!! As well as some spring rolls, that proved addictive for Owen and Bob who ate 6 each. We then refilled our water and continued onward to see a hemp sewing factory still accompanied by the same Vietnamese women who still wanted to sell us things but they weren't getting their hands on my dong! The sewing factory was ingenious with many water powered devices and dye presses to create intricate embroidered local clothing. They also grew cannabis but as we found out sniffing the bush does not have any effect.

We then set off again and after more hours of sweaty walking and drinking we arrived at our first home stay. It was a large wooden building with lines of mattresses for us to sleep on covered with mosquito nets.

We promptly dumped our stuff on our mattresses and headed to the local river for a swim to cool down and relax. I ended up being harassed by a naked local 7 year old who really creped me out.



First home stay

We returned to the lobby of our home stay to play cards and some crazy games of rock paper scissors. Dinner was assorted meat and onion dishes, some nice vegetables and I'M GETTING SICK OF RICE NOW. I then went to bed to the sound of the host family drinking "happy water" and encouraging the explorers to drink it too. Mercifully I fell asleep before the apparent traumatic experience of Joe snoring.

Day 5 – Wednesday 15th July

We woke up at 7am and ate pancakes, which is the most different breakfast yet. The pancakes were served with syrup, sugar and bananas. This was a nice surprise which didn't last long, we all had loads.

Before we set off from the home stay we did a few stretching exercises lead by Tim, they were very funny. We set off at 9am and started the long hill climb over paddy fields and through bamboo jungles. It was really hard going as it was very hot already and there was no shade as we climbed the hill but luckily this meant there weren't many local ladies walking with us today.

We came across a waterfall along the route and we were all really pleased as we cooled off by dipping heads and hands in the water, and in Greg's case a full body bath as he slipped. We walked down from the falls where we came across many mopeds carrying random things on the back. I think the best one was the man with the fridge freezer on the back.



Mopeds carrying goods



Nearly there

We continued trekking with difficult terrain and we arrived at a town and had lunch with the group. Here we had our first experience of a squat toilet which most of the group weren't very keen on. A few of the team were not feeling up to the 2nd part of the trek so got the truck to the home stay but the rest of us carried on.

We walked and the heat got to everyone as the sun was high. Mr Hai was determined to keep taking shortcuts and walking at a very fast pace. We all decided that his shortcuts were harder than the main route as they were over really rough terrain cutting off corners down a steep road.

We were all really pleased to arrive at the home stay in Ban Ho which would be our home for 5 days, again we would be sleeping on mattresses on the floor covered with mosquito nets.



We sat around relaxing and then all went for a swim in a local river. We were throwing balls and jumping off ledges. We then went and had a standard meal, we made a description of the day in 3 words and discussed politics with David.

Day 6 - Thursday 16th July

Today saw the first of 4 days working on our community project at the local school in Ban Ho.

However before one jumps into a long description of this tiring work a mention of Alfie's birthday should be made. The birthday cards were given and Alfred also received a couple of presents.

Most appropriate was a rice hat. Just as the cards presents and cake were a surprise for the birthday boy, so was the breakfast which included scrambled egg (it probably wasn't egg), given that my stomach was feeling much better than yesterday's struggle, my appetite has been restored and I was able to successfully craft a "mandwich". Despite this I was physically incapable of finishing my mighty creation and hence my masculinity was short lived.



Alfie and his Birthday Cards



Pile of Bricks - Ready to build

On the subject of the community project we were not entirely sure of what we'd be doing until we arrived but we were all ready for the challenge.

We were greeted by a huge pile of bricks and sand which we would be turning into an accommodation block for the teachers but, in true Vietnamese style, no one really seemed to know what was happening and today was our first experience of rain, and by gosh did it rain.

The teachers who lived in the wooden building we would be replacing had all gone home for the school holidays so our first job was to move all their belongings and store them in the school library, not an easy task in the rain especially as to us most of it looked like rubbish.



The teacher's accommodation we rebuilt



Once the building was empty we started taking down the wooden panels. To my disappointment my time consuming work in sorting out the reusable wooden planks was all in vain due to the fact that a local lady decided to help herself to all of the wood to use on her fire, carrying what almost looked like half a tree on her back. We were soon to learn that the locals would salvage anything possible if they thought they could re-use it in their homes.

Our other work included the draining of the playground, which appeared to be flooded by the constant downpour as well as beginning the construction of a new school building.

This was particularly sweaty and tiring and my skills in laying bricks and concrete were rather lacking in comparison to the other explorers and local builders.



Mixing cement

The changing weather from continuous baking sun to rainfall was a welcome difference. Indeed it felt much cooler than any of the previous days. This made things much easier (and bearable) when carrying out our work at the school.

Some of the group decided they would like to paint one of the classrooms to brighten it up but Duy said there wasn't any paint and it was very unlikely that we would be allowed any.

Day 7 – Friday 17th July

Today was the 2nd day of the community project at the school and thankfully it wasn't raining. After the foundations were finished we were able to begin to build up the walls. We moved the bricks closer to the building area by using a well organised brick train. As everyone began to enjoy the music that was playing out of the speaker the brick train began to move with the beat. Once we had moved enough bricks a couple of us made some cement.



Cleaning the building ready for paint

As we began to try to erect the walls we soon came to realise that the building area was too small for all of us to work in.

This led to us beginning other smaller projects, these jobs included cleaning the moss off the walls, cleaning out the classrooms and fixing the volleyball net that was in the playground. The net did not take long to fix but the cleaning of the classrooms and the cleaning of the wall took most of the day.

At lunchtime we all walked back up to the home stay for our lunch and to rest during the main heat of the day for a couple of hours. April got us all washing our clothes during our lunch break. This wasn't easy in cold water and I'm not really sure they were that clean afterwards.



Diluting paint with petrol



Washing clothes

In the afternoon the building continued and we were really surprised to see Duy turn up with paint for the classrooms even though he was sure the authorities would not let us paint them.

We were given powder paint which we had to mix up for the outside walls but more surprisingly we were only given 2 tins of gloss paint to paint inside the classroom. Duy explained the gloss paint would be 'watered down' with petrol so we had enough to paint the entire room.

As more people finished jobs we decided to buy a hacky sack (foot shuttlecock). We began to attempt to play. As the day got cooler and later some of the local kids came to the school and began to play football and Frisbee with us which was really good fun. Sadly at the end of the day we had to leave the school and returned to the home stay for dinner and showers. Tonight's dinner was very good, we all really like the spring rolls.

Day 8 – Saturday 18th July



Playing with the local children

Today I awoke at the ripe time of 6.20, just in time for me to fulfil my morning needs. As unexpected as my early start was so was the surprise of breakfast “spam”, cucumber, laughing cow and bread. As before we left for the school at 9 (we were late and left at 9:15) to continue with our project. There are a lot more of the kids at the primary school today so in the breaks from the infamous petrol paint we could have a bit of nostalgic childish fun.

In the morning it was mainly a game of cards (of Chinese origin called Sum). After finishing about half of our petrol painting we played one more game of cards before heading back to the home stay. We squeezed in a small rest before we all sat down for lunch, the highlight of this was the

sweetcorn soup, which was just like sweetcorn but without the inconvenience or disappointment. Lunch was followed by a slightly longer but still small rest.

Again we paraded down to the primary school (late again) where we began to finish our mornings work.

This afternoon we were treated to some frozen jelly in small pots which were a refreshing change. The little boy I'd become friendly with had dropped his beloved pot of frozen jelly and was very upset so Jacob and I headed into the village to see if we could buy him another one. After a while hunting for the right product and after communication barriers we found exactly what we were looking for: 3 pots of frozen jelly. I snuck back into the building site with the frozen delights behind my back then the moment of truth came, I whipped out the cold snack and handed it to Chau, which was instantly appreciated. We were all enjoying our refreshments when suddenly Chau does a sweet roll, by mid roll the frozen jelly slipped out of the pot and onto the floor. I looked at Chau and Chau looked at me, a moment of silence overtook us and then he was gone. I was overwhelmed with grief after this but as soon as Chau returned I knew something good had finally happened. In his hand was another treat, and his eyes were a glimmer, as bright as a moon on a gloomy English night. After the Chau escapade I finished any loose ends of work I'd started, I got myself an update on the building work (going well), I looked at the painting on the outside (the children had taken over).

I had one more lark about with the hoard of children then came home to shower and eat our evening meal. For tea we had some leaf wrapped spring rolls, chicken, squid and heaps more rice. In the evening we were discussing books, food and the trip in general. At one point during the meal Mr Hai put some chilli peppers on the table. After a bit more relaxing and reading some of the other group members went out to the karaoke, and that brings me to hear writing the diary, ready for bed.



Laying bricks

Day 9 – Sunday 19th July



Finished floor

The first thing I heard as I opened my eyes was “I woke up at 6 to a phatty drop, I had to screenshot”. Who listens to dubstep in their sleep other than Philo? There were a few of us that were a bit worse for wear from our late night out at karaoke, I couldn’t get Stevo singing “It wasn’t me” out my head. Even in our struggling condition we were still ready when Bob gave us the 10 minute warning. We were ready and then had to wait for him in the toilet. Today we were to finish the work at the school. We knew the roof couldn’t be done because the walls needed time to be set, but there was still painting and making cement for the floors to be done.



Climbing a ladder

We played a lot of volleyball and hacky sack with the local children. The fish at lunch was very tasty and I enjoyed filling my belly again. On the walk back down to the school Mr Hai told me and Greg that his children were called Hai and Huit. This was a laughing point for the rest of the day. There wasn’t much to do when we got down to the school so we had to entertain ourselves. This included Bob falling off a ladder not leaning on anything.

Me and Brad played catch with a spade with cement on it and had a dance with the children (sort of). Me and my Vietnamese builder friend had some banter. We gave one of the teachers all the things we bought with us for the children before leaving the school for the final time.



Group Photo

After 2 days of waiting to swim the river had finally dropped enough for us to be able to go swimming, it was colder today but very refreshing.

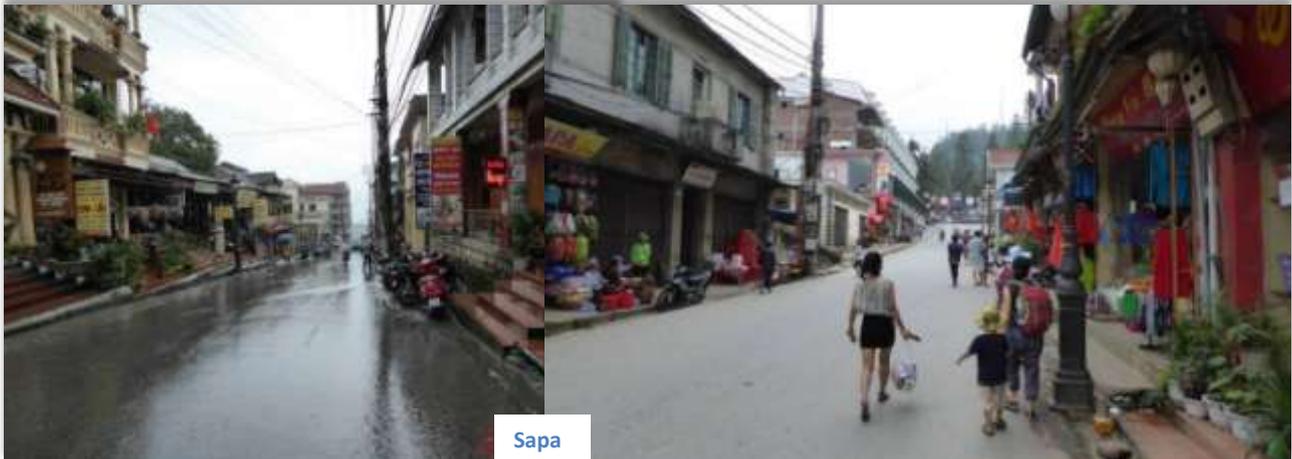
Our last dinner at the home stay was really good, we had chips and pumpkin soup for starter, then the usual rice, veg and beef but with some very nice prawns and grilled chicken. After dinner we did lots of toasts. This included toasts to Mr Hai and the host family. Then we had circle time, the focus of today’s circle time was thoughts on the project. I thought we did very well to achieve what we had over 4 days and worked well as a team. Some

local ladies then did some traditional dancing for us to say thank you and goodbye. We sang some English songs including heads shoulders knees and toes which the ladies and family thought was really funny but they still joined in. Before going to bed we packed all our stuff ready to leave in the morning.

Day 10 – Monday 20th July

Today was our last morning at the home stay, we had a breakfast of pancakes, honey sugar pineapple and banana at 7:30 as we were supposed to be leaving early.

We then waited until 9:30 for the coaches to arrive to take us to Sapa which were significantly late. After the hour coach journey to Sapa we freshened up in the hotel rooms and had a small walk around the town before lunch.



Sapa

Lots of the group spent the time in the café next to the hotel eating pizza but we looked around the town.

At lunch we had pumpkin soup and rice (again) pork and other regular Vietnamese foods we have come to know and love. After lunch we then had the option to walk around Sapa/chill out in our hotel room or climb up Dragon Jaw Mountain. I being lazy chose to walk around Sapa. We bought a few snacks and we tried to do a bit of bartering to get things cheap but we didn't actually buy anything in the end. Once we finished walking around Sapa we chilled out in our hotel room and watched a film before getting ready for the coach and the sleeper train.

Arriving in Lao Cai we stopped by the Vietnamese/Chinese border for photos.

We then had a dinner which again had many familiar dishes.

After dinner we got boarded the sleeper train ending the night playing cards and talking about our time at the school.



Chinese Border

Day 11 – Tuesday 21st July



Hanoi early morning

Today we woke up at 4.30am as the train arrived in Hanoi after a cold nights sleep. We then headed straight to the hotel and sorted out our overnight bags for our Halong Bay cruise as we weren't able to take our big bags with us, they would be stored at the hotel. When we were all sorted we all walked to the lake in Hanoi. It was only 6:30am but the place was packed with people as everyone comes out very early in the morning to do exercise while it's cooler. We split into smaller groups and did a circuit of the lake, experiencing the Vietnamese exercising.

There we people running, cycling, doing yoga and Pilates but the best we saw has to be the group practising with swords.

We then headed back to the hotel for breakfast which involved rice, stale bread, processed pork and orange juice.

At 9:00am we set off on the coach to Halong Bay. For the first 2 ½ hours most of us slept or made coloured bracelets with string that Lewis had brought. We stopped at a factory where disabled people were employed as painters, embroiderers and stone carvers. It was very expensive but good quality. The most expensive thing I saw was a set of table and chairs for 138000000 VND – just under £5000! We hopped back onto the coach for the last leg of our journey which was about 1 ½ hours, people either slept or made bracelets.



Tai Chi in Hanoi

First lunch on the boat



Finally we arrived at Ha Long Bay, we boarded the boats almost instantly splitting ourselves into 2 groups as the boats were not big enough for all 25 of us.

Straight away we had lunch it consisted of chips for an appetiser although I only got 6! We then got crab and prawns which were very tasty then king prawns that we were taught to peel and a sea bass that we had to pick our meat off of the fish. For dessert we had our usual watermelon.

The food was really good.

During lunch the boat had moved amongst the beautiful islands of Halong Bay so we headed up to the deck to admire, take pictures and sunbathe, it was great to have time to relax after working at the school. We headed down to check out our rooms which were very nice, little twin cabins with shower rooms.



Halong Bay



In the Caves

Duy announced that we were going to visit 25m high caves this afternoon with a surprise in the third chamber which was widely recognised as the surprise room.

The caves were indeed beautiful and the surprise in the third room was a giant rock in a very rude shape!

After the caves we boarded the boat again and headed to an island with a beach where we could go swimming. Everyone went straight into the water and eventually we tried to make the highest shoulder towers we could. The highest was 4 people Tim, Ben R, Ezra and me. After this we played a few games of shoulder wars, Tim and Ben R came first and Owen and I came second, unfortunately they toppled us! When we got out of the sea a football match between England and Vietnam started between the Explorers and some Vietnamese people it was a 6 vs 6 and the score was 1:0 to the Explorers, the goal being scored by a Vietnamese guy on our side, it was a pretty intense game. We then headed back to the boat for a shower to wash off the brown algae and salt ready for dinner.

Before dinner we all wrote postcards to the people that donated money towards our project.

Tea again was very fishy, it started off with a vegetable soup with egg then we got spring rolls and king prawns again also oysters which were served with lots of garlic. Then we got deep fried squids which tasted amazing and for pudding we had watermelon. After tea we were able to chill, relax and fish (someone caught a jellyfish) for the rest of the evening I lay on a sun bed and listened to the still water, not having to worry about mosquitoes and listening to faint music and relaxing until 10pm when I went to bed.



Halong Bay

Day 12 - Wednesday 22nd July



Halong Bay

On the cruise back I played 2 games of Chinese Chess with Kate, we are both still learning the rules. The first game was a stale mate but the second I won. Most people were on the top deck on the sun beds relaxing and enjoying the scenery where I joined them but in the shade. As we got closer to land the boat stopped and we had to get on a smaller boat to get to the shore.



Relaxing on the boat



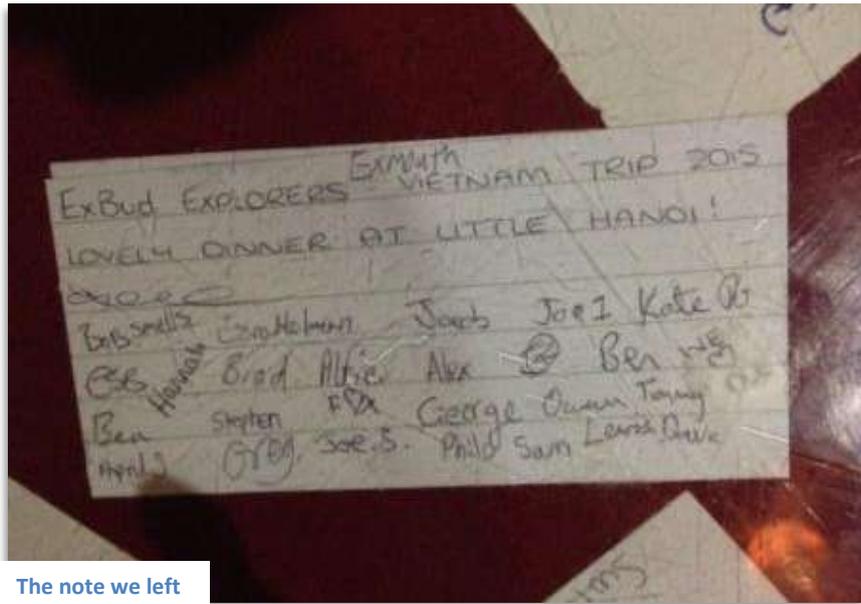
Sending the Postcards

This morning we all got a lie in, after what in my opinion was the best night sleep so far. We got up at 7.30 for breakfast, today we had omelette and fried egg along with the usual bread. After we had all finished breakfast we started to cruise back towards land past all of the amazing scenery that is Halong Bay.

Duy had everything organised really well, as soon as we stepped off the small boat the coach we were on yesterday pulled up and we all got on. Halfway through our coach ride back to Hanoi we stopped at the place with the handmade goods again for lunch. Here we posted all the postcards we had written last night.

We arrived back in Hanoi at around 3pm so we collected our bags from the store and went to dayrooms where we all had showers. We were allowed to go and shop around the city I went with Alex, Jake and Alfie to buy another pair of shorts for Alex.

At 6.45 we started walking to dinner which was a lovely little restaurant. All of the tables had glass on top of them and people had written notes and slipped them underneath so we did one as well.



The note we left

After dinner it was time to get another sleeper train that left at 8pm, they aren't very comfortable but I went to sleep at 11pm.

Day 13 – Thursday 23rd July

We got off the train at Dong Ha and went to the hotel for breakfast. I had cake, fried dough balls and a pork pie.



Khe Sanh Combat Base

We then picked up our guide for the next couple of days, Mr Duy, and we made our way down Highway 9 with Mr Duy telling us interesting facts along the way.

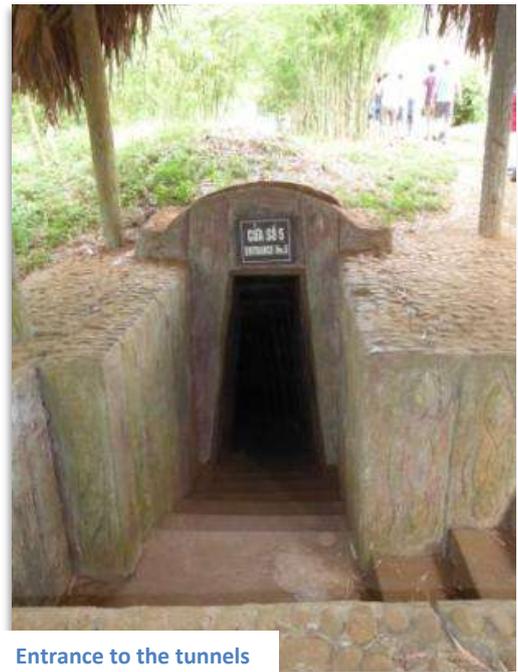
We saw Hamburger Hill and the Ho Chi Minh trail to the seventeenth parallel to Khe Sanh Combat Base which was an American base during the Vietnam War which was overrun during the start of the Tet Offensive. At the base there were bunkers and some planes and tanks which have all been left behind when the war finished.

In the museum there were many maps of other bases and pictures of equipment and soldiers. Mr Duy told us that most of the battle fields are now coffee plantations. We then went to lunch which was the worst lunch we had, everyone was excited because there were plates of chips but they were cold and had ants crawling everywhere. The rest of the food was the same.

We drove to the DMZ and saw the house where the VM met to unify the country. We then drove to a set of tunnels which were near the sea, they were called Vinh Moc.

They were light but not as cramped as I thought. We saw the maternity area where 17 babies had been born and the meeting room.

We then headed back to the hotel and along the way we got fed at a very dodgy restaurant where they served us deep fried chicken bits, even the head. The food was awful and we went back to the hotel.



Entrance to the tunnels

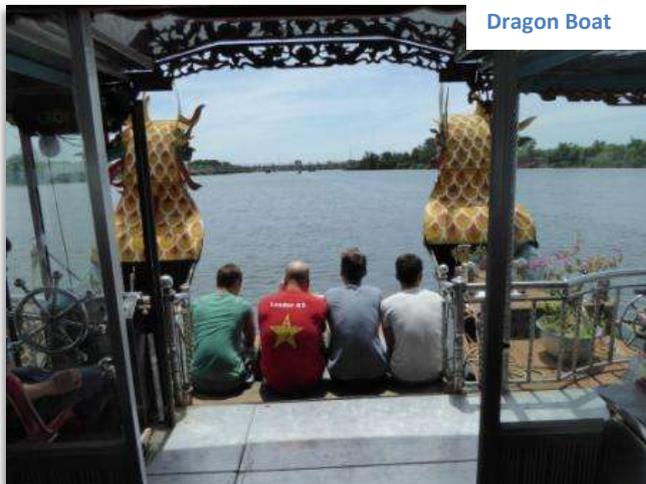
Day 14 – Friday 24th July

We got up early to have breakfast in the hotel where most of us had cake. We also tried lychee which I thought were very nice. After breakfast we left at 07.45 for the 2 hour coach journey to Hue.



Thien Mu Pagoda

When we arrived in Hue we went to the Thien Mu Pagoda which included a temple and gardens which were very nice.



Dragon Boat

We then went on a dragon boat ride on the perfume river which was very different to what most of us expected it would be because the boat was more like a floating shop than a dragon boat.

We then changed to a smaller bus as our coach was too big for the citadel and we had a walking tour of the inner part of the Citadel which included the Kings temple.



Inside the Citadel



While in the Citadel we lost Stevo and George as they wandered off so Esther bought us all an ice cream whilst Bob searched for them.

After the Citadel we had what I think was the nicest meal so far. The lunch included soup, spring rolls which were served in a peacock made from a pineapple and green bean paste shaped into various fruits for pudding. Most people didn't like the fruits but enjoyed the rest of the meal.



Lunch – Springs Rolls and Fruit

Music Performance



After lunch we visited the Tomb of Emperor Tu Duc which was made up of a lake, hills and a temple. After walking around the garden we watched a traditional music show which was very good.

We then went back to the hotel and had some free time. Me, Owen, Alex and Alfie crossed over the iron bridge to a supermarket which was very cheap. We bought some cans of sting for around 7000VND and it was like syrup.

In the evening we all dressed up in our smart clothes and went for a meal at another nice restaurant we had similar food to what we had been eating including rice and vegetables but we also had some different things including mince and noodles.



In the hotel before heading out for a meal

After dinner we all went to a bar to experience Vietnamese night life. Most of us only stayed for a very short time and then we went back to the hotel. There had been a wedding at the hotel during the day and when we got back we were invited to go in to the reception where we danced with the wedding guests. It was great fun.

Day 15 – Saturday 25th July

This morning Ben and I arose from our not so comfy beds at 6am to the sound of our alarm clocks that we hear every morning. We didn't realise this trip would involve so many early mornings when we signed up but today is the day we get to go and be measured for our suits, something we are all very excited about having had Greg telling us all about what happens and having watched the Top Gear Special.

We headed down to breakfast at 06.45 and we were the first out of our group down there. Breakfast was made even better due to the arrival of our old friend, BACON. We were able to have a bacon sandwich with stale bread but at least we were able to avoid rice for one meal.

After breakfast we departed the hotel for a lovely 5 ½ hour coach journey. I was sure to carefully choose my seat as some of the group weren't feeling very well. I chose to sit at the back of the coach with Esther, Hannah and Brad. We gave ourselves a crew name for the back seat. The first hour of the journey went very quickly but we soon got very bored. I suggested we put on some tunes so I asked to borrow Lewis' speaker. Esther insisted we listen to her iPod today, first of all the tunes were pretty bad but as time went on they got progressively better and we were dancing away on the back seats and everyone else started to join in if they weren't asleep.



Top of the Hai Van Pass

Hai Van Pass



We took a short stop at the top of the Hai Van Pass which had taken 45 minutes to drive up in the coach, during which the crazy bus driver had turned off the air conditioning which meant it was very hot in the back of the bus. All of the torture was worth the view at the top it was absolutely stunning with Da Nang in the background.

Esther & Bob were very happy as there was a geocache at the viewing point so they went off to find it.



Lunch

Two hours later we arrived in Hoi An. The coach was unable to enter the old town so we had a short walk to the restaurant for lunch; it was a stunning lunch, one of the best so far. I hope all of the food in Hoi An is going to be this good.



Getting measured for Suits

After lunch we had some free time and Duy recommended 2 tailors where had the opportunity to get a custom made suit, a rare opportunity at such a cheap price. A group of about 9 of us went into the shop to decide on the fabric and style of the suit.

I went for a deep maroon shirt with a suit in a tweed type fabric in what appeared to be a dark brown colour with a dark grey lining. The ladies in the shop measured us all and made notes and sketched what we wanted, agreeing that the suits would be ready for us to try on the following afternoon.

We were then taken on an interesting city tour to see the main attractions that Hoi An had to offer. After this we returned back to our new hotel and were in amazement at how nice our rooms were. After this we were given time to do whatever we wanted, I chose to stick around the hotel and chill out as I was very tired. At 6.45 we met in the lobby before heading out tea in the old city, it was a very nice meal and I had the best seat in the restaurant as it had 3 huge fans pointing at me.

After dinner I was given the terrible news that both mine and Fox's fabric was out of stock and we had to go back to the shop to change them. It was a good job that they were out of stock as I was able to completely change my suit with the expert help of Hannah and April. I now have a nice light grey checked suit with a fabulous cyan shirt and lining. After this the crew that was me, Fox, April and Hannah got a taxi back to the hotel and I decided to go swimming because this hotel has a swimming pool – our first on this trip.

Day 16, Sunday 26th July



Market

I awoke to flashing lights and Greg standing at the foot of my bed in a dressing gown - pretty standard. For breakfast I made a delicious toasted bacon and egg sandwich the height of my cooking skills, today that would change. I wasn't really looking forward to the cooking lesson and we began by walking around a stinky food market (which didn't help!) but the range of fresh food was amazing.



\$1 Photo

We left the market and that's when an incident happened... Bob told me to pose with a Vietnamese woman for a photo, like a fool I went along with it. It was all smiles and good times until she held onto me with a kung fu grip until Bob paid \$1 for me. It was pretty much a hostage situation!

We then hopped onto a boat for our journey to the cookery school. We turned off the river into a narrower channel taking us to the red bridge cookery school. Greeted by free drinks we had a tour of the local produce growing around the restaurant. The lesson was interesting and I am definitely going to try some of the recipes (sorry family) which included Hoi An pancakes and eggplant in a clay pot.



Learning to cook Vietnamese



We had loads of banter with the teacher who showed up Bob when he got stitched up to help make salad (karma).

After our DIY lunch we headed back to shore to try on our tailor made suits. I was really happy with my shirt and it can't wait for it to be finished.

We then had the afternoon to ourselves, most of us decided to relax at the hotel as it has a swimming pool so we spent most of the afternoon swimming or watching movies.

We had dinner in the old town, it was beautiful in the day but at night the streets were alive with noise and bright lights, such a good experience walking around and seeing what everyone was selling. Another amazing day!



Day 17, Monday 27th July

Today was the day of suits and a cycle. We had a little bit of a lie in this morning – breakfast wasn't until 07.45.

Waiting for helmets



After a quick morning meeting we were told that there weren't enough helmets for all of us, this meant that half of us would cycle to the beach whilst the others went in a taxi and the reverse on the way back, however Duy was not going to let this happen so wacked out his phone and began to search for the extra helmets. Five minutes of shouting in Vietnamese and Duy tells us we have enough helmets so everyone can cycle.

As soon as the helmets arrived we began an extremely competitive 1hr cycle to Tan Mia beach with Duy leading the way. Despite the crazy people on motorbikes and the dangerous bike racing we managed to make it safely to the beach. As soon as we arrived we jumped into the water to cool off (unaware of the jellyfish) after a quick dip and successfully achieving a 4 man shoulder tower we headed to the beach bar for a bevvy.



Tan Mia beach

Next we raced back via a much shorter route, David managed to fall off his bike but was luckily ok, just a few cuts and bruises.

We stopped for lunch at a street café where the food was endless and delicious, we had meat skewers and pancakes, salad and spring rolls then chocolate mousse for dessert.



Lunch



Trying on our new suits

Then we went back to the hotel where we had a quick shower to prepare to try on our suits. When we arrived at the shop the ladies had prepared our suits to try on, we all had to say if there was anything we wanted changing, luckily all was good and after a photo with the shop owners we were on our way. It was amazing how quickly they had made the suits for us.

For the rest of the afternoon we shopped for presents for our family as this would be our last chance. Several of us also bought Vietnamese hats.



Hat shopping

For dinner we went to restaurant called green chilli with a chef called Nandos, this was brilliant but probably not the best food we've had. Then with our bellies full we walked back to the hotel and went to bed happy.

Day 18, Tuesday 28th July

The morning was to be for packing and preparing for the next stage of our journey. I chose to sleep in and skip breakfast as the night before had been a late one. I watched TV, mainly CNN and the Spanish language channel until 09.30am whilst Stevo was packing. I then headed towards the shower after Kate had dumped her reading rejects (Stephen King) at our room. After having a long shower until 09.50 I started packing.

Bob appeared a few minutes later saying check out was 10am, luckily I had shoved everything in my bag just seconds before. I headed downstairs after taking my anti-malaria tablets to find everyone in reception. They seemed annoyed by my unapologetic nature we had already started driving out of Hoi An by 10.30.

We had a fairly short journey to Da Nang where we stopped at a restaurant there was some traditional Vietnamese architecture outside with the pungent smell of incense. Our family style brunch included broth and squid. I ate a few pieces but wasn't a fan. Stevo seemed keen on trying some squid however he did so with caution despite picking the most tentacled purple piece.

We headed to Da Nang train station where we waited for ages for our delayed train to Hoi Chi Minh City. Ezra made a dash for the toilet but unfortunately was sick all over the passenger lounge.

Once on the train we settled down for a kip, despite Joe making some noise I managed an hour or two. I was relieved to have a cheese and salad baguette at 6pm with a dodgy banana and a strange cake before chatting and then sleeping.



Sleeper Train

Day 19 Wednesday 29th July

I awoke not long before we pulled into the train station in Ho Chi Minh City or Saigon as it is still referred to. Quickly getting all of my stuff together I got ready to leave the train with everyone else. Although we were all tired from the journey I was excited to see what Saigon had to offer. Leaving the train station was nowhere near as busy as I was expecting, Duy lead us out into the car park to find our bus that would be our local transport for the time we were in Saigon.



Traffic in Ho Chi Minh City

We were soon on our way to the hotel for a quick wash, change of clothes and breakfast. The first thing I noticed was how much busier the traffic was compared to all the other places we had been. It all seemed like organised chaos with cars and bikes going in every direction but everyone seemed to know what to do, I was not looking forward to having to cross the road!

On the way to the hotel Duy pointed out a few of the local sites including a park close the hotel where in the morning you could go see and listen to lots of different birds whilst having a coffee. Upon arriving at the hotel we were organised into rooms and given time to shower and grab some breakfast, the breakfast was really good and the hotel had a roof top restaurant that allowed to look out over Ho Chi Minh City and see more of where we were, we also noticed that there was a Starbucks opposite and it had a swimming pool!

After breakfast we all piled back onto the coach and headed to the Cu Chi tunnels, it was quite a drive out of the city into the countryside, I slept a lot of the way.

We arrived at the tunnels and were taken through to watch a film about the tunnels, I think the film was quite old and more like propoganda film but was still very interesting.

After the film had finished we were given a talk about the tunnels and learnt all about how they were used in the war. We were shown a map of the tunnels so we could see



At the Cu Chi Tunnels

how vast they were, I found it quite amusing the Americans had actually built a base on top of the tunnels not knowing they were there, this allowed the Vietnamese to get in and out of the base undetected! It was also explained to us how the tunnels were built over multiple levels that allowed protection against being flooded and gassed proving how effective the tunnels were in defending the south of Vietnam during the war. It was also interesting to hear it referred to as the "American War" rather than the Vietnam War.

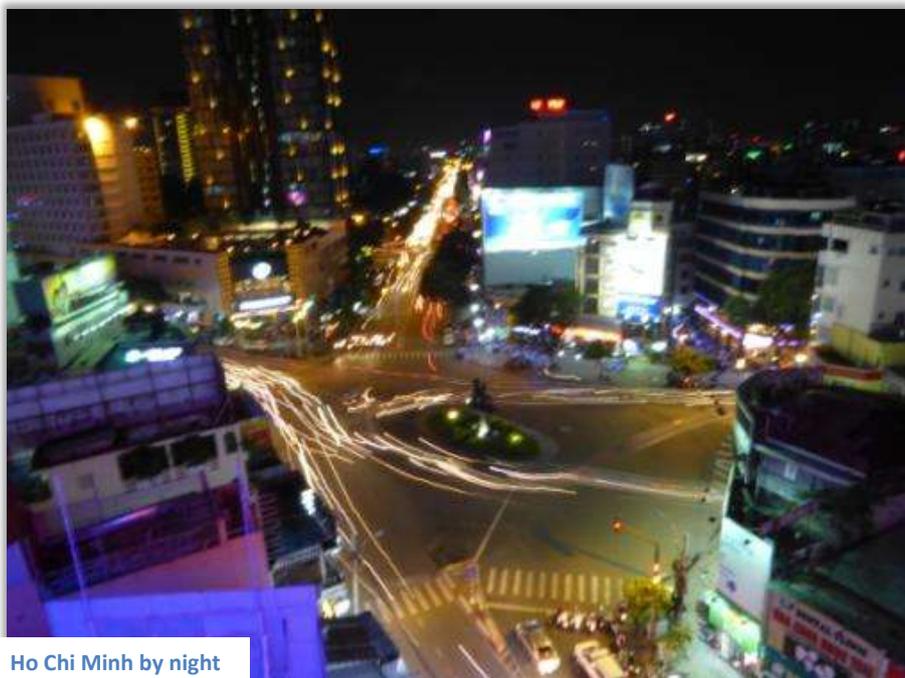
After learning all about the tunnels it was time to have a look around and learn more about the different types of traps used within the tunnels, these were all quite horrific with one that was a false piece of floor that would spin dropping a person into pit full of very sharp spikes, not very nice at all.



Bob trying the tunnel entrance

Lastly we were shown an original entrance into the tunnels, it was tiny but several of the Explorers and Bob had a go at getting in and out before we finally had chance to get into part of the tunnel system through a large "tourist" entrance. The tunnels themselves were very narrow, low and hot, I struggled to make it round them all as we went deeper underground exploring the different levels that had been explained to us earlier. I really enjoyed it but was glad to make it back into the open. We had a final look around site before heading back to the coach through several souvenir shops.

We left the tunnels and headed back into the city where it was time for a shower and a change of clothes before heading out for another "family style" meal. After dinner we went back to the hotel and went to the roof top terrace to admire Saigon at night, totally different from what we had seen during the day. After taking a few photos I went to bed looking forward to day ahead tomorrow.



Ho Chi Minh by night

Day 20, Thursday 30th July

Had a bit of a switch around regarding the agenda for today. It was decided that we wouldn't be staying overnight in the Mekong Delta but would return to Saigon. Due to this switch it was certainly a fully packed day. We began with breakfast on the 9th floor of the hotel. We had done this yesterday but I had been too tired to fully appreciate the full 360 view that was available.

We then had a 3 hour coach ride to the Mekong Delta (there has been a lot of travelling in a coach on this trip) When we arrived we stocked up on water before heading up the river in a boat which was very pleasant.



Elephant Ear Fish

Our first stop was a brick factory which was situated on the river all of the bricks are made by hand and the process takes a full month to complete! They use rice husks as fuel to heat the bricks which can reach temperatures on up to 100 degrees.

We then continued up the river to stop for lunch where we had fish and rice (unsurprisingly as we were sat literally above the river) I have to say the elephant fish's presentation was surprising but it tasted good in a spring roll.

After lunch we were taken around one of the islands by river in small rowing boats, this was nice as we didn't have to listen to the engine and could enjoy the Mekong in the same way as some of the locals do.

We then stopped off in one of the small villages to see how they made coconut candy, rice bread and a manner of other things, one of which was popcorn esque rice crispies. Some people also had the

opportunity to hold a locals pet python but I stayed out of the way with Greg because he's scared of snakes. After that it was time to head back to Saigon, luckily I was asleep for most of the 3 hour journey.



Boat ride on the Mekong Delta

Dinner had to be one of my personal trip highlights as we had the opportunity to try quite a few bizarre dishes. These included barbequing our own beef and ostrich, crickets (which in my opinion tasted a bit like mud) scorpions which were incredibly crunchy and soup containing chickens heads.



Trying the local food

After dinner we went to another Fanny's ice cream parlour where we spoke about highlights from our trip as well as having ice cream of course.



Ice Cream

At this point most of the Explorers went to bed but a few of us decided to check out Saigon's night life. After walking in the wrong direction for 30 minutes ending up walking past our hotel again we finally managed to find a bar. We started in a place called 'le pub' which was very impressive, we then moved to another pub where we watched a fire breather and eat razor blades before playing a few games of pool and heading home to the hotel.

Day 21, Friday 31st July



Birds in the local park

Today we awoke with the strange feeling that it would be our last day in Vietnam. Three weeks had flown by and it was time to crack on with the dreaded packing (made all the more difficult by the fact Myself, Esther and Bob had all decided to make ridiculous purchases in Hoi An!) April, Ess and I decided to ignore the impending packing and took a stroll down to the park for breakfast at the Bird Café. Yet another indescribable sight...The local bird loving population all gathered in the park with their pet birds hanging in beautiful cages from the trees whilst they sat around admiring and eating breakfast, Bonkers!

For our first activity, Duy took us all on the coach to China Town and the massive market. I can honestly say I've never seen anything like it, produce of all varieties in bulk! There was a bag zone, bra area, fabric, food, kitchen ware, hats, I could go on... all piled literally to the ceiling!

Next stop was the Reunification Palace which was an immaculate shrine to mid-century architecture, history is that in April 1975 the North Vietnamese Army crashed through the gates and it was the end of the war. Inside was pretty much abandoned after this.



In the market



The Reunification Palace

Lunch



We then headed off for lunch, as requested Duy had found us somewhere that we could choose what to eat rather than having a set menu, this brought both joy and utter chaos as none of us really knew what to order! It turned out to be a delicious if not slightly random feast with dish after dish

being bought out to our tables. Our last experience of Vietnam was to be a cyclo tour around the city, I was very much looking forward to this and it didn't disappoint. All 25 of us in a line of cyclo's were weaving through the crazy Saigon traffic through backstreets and past the sights. It was such a special way to see the city and a really lovely end to the trip.



Cyclo tour of Ho Chi Minh

Back to our hotel for a free couple of hours (and change as the downside to the cyclo tour was the heavy sweating and dust). Ess and I decided to wander to find a cafe with a view, it took us a while and a rejection (probably too scruffy) before settling on a destination. We were beaten to the café by a group of the Explorers (they get everywhere and fast). The drinks were pricey but the view was amazing, 360degree view of Saigon including being able to see the airport runway!

Eventually we decided to face the dreaded packing, then it was off for dinner which was sadly a disappointment and to the airport where poor Brad and Ben R, who were feeling less than 100%, were labelled as the "Poo Crew" (Unfortunately I was sat with them on the plane).

One last group photo was taken outside of the airport with Duy then it was off to check in and wait for our plane home.



Last group photo in Vietnam



Bob & Matt's trousers

It seemed like an eternity to wait as everyone was really tired but we did have some fun while waiting because Matt and Bob had bought silly trousers at the market to surprise us.

Eventually we boarded the plane to head home, I was sat between Ess and Ben who were both asleep before we even took off. Back in the UK we collected our bags and went through customs to meet Rob from Schools World Wide and then find our coach home.

While waiting for the coach we had a couple of final group photos.

The coach journey home took so long because there was lots traffic on the motorway. Joe had a massive nosebleed while we were on the coach which eventually stopped as we stopped for a break. We were all really tired and just wanted to be home after having spent the most amazing 3 weeks in Vietnam.



Final Group Photos after landing at Heathrow