

Dear Family and Friends,

I have just left the beautiful country of Vietnam. I came to Vietnam flooded with knowledge of only the war and little about the people and culture of Vietnam. I was worried the Vietnamese would feel resentment towards the American people. However, I encountered the exact opposite. The Vietnamese people were some of the most kind and joyful people I have ever met. After going to the War Remnants museum and the Cu Chi tunnels (the small tunnels the soldiers lived in and hid in that were 3x2 feet) I now have a better understanding of the war and the horrendous affects it had on the Vietnamese people.

Besides learning about the war I also had the opportunity to take a bike ride through the small villages along the Mekong Delta 2.5 hours outside of Saigon. During our ride we passed houses made out of bamboo and leaves with dirt floors to sleep on. In the USA we would consider this to be extreme poverty but in the eyes of the people living in the delta this was considered normal and the people seemed to be very content with their lives. They smiled and waved as we passed and ate fruit from the various fruit trees that grew in their front yard. Trash lined the dirt path and hung in the bushes along the way. Vietnam does not have a proper trash collection system in place. Even in the city the ground was littered with trash. Besides the apparent littering and pollution issues in the country, the landscape was beautiful. I was only able to see a small part of the country but some of my friends we able to go more North where they saw vast mountain ranges and breathtaking bays with tall islands jutting out of the water. Some even spent the entire week swimming and hiking through large caves in the mountains.

In the city I was able to take a cooking class learning how to make fresh and fried spring rolls as well as fried rice and mango chicken salad (I have the recipes if anyone wants them). My class begun with a trip to the local market to buy ingredients needed for our meal. I had fun learning how to negotiate and bargain for the price of different vegetables and spices. After the market we went back to the cooking school for instruction on how to prepare the food we had just bought. During my time in Vietnam I was lucky enough to take two cooking classes. The second was at the resort we stayed at in the Mekong Delta. While there we learned how to make wontons, spring rolls, and sweet and sour pork with vegetables. All the food seemed to be relatively healthy and very fresh. I was served a lot fruit for dessert and for breakfast.

In the Mekong Delta I also got to visit floating markets, which are family owned boats that carry different goods. People with smaller boats can then row up near them and buy or trade their goods. Some of the families lived on their small boats with living space smaller then most of our bathrooms in the USA. We also visited a place where they make different rice products (paper, candy, popped rice). The last place we visited was a local market where live fish, eels, and birds lined the walkway. Every part of cows, pigs, and other mammals lay in the open air unrefrigerated. As I walked through the market crouched down because the tarps that lay above the tables were too short for even my 5'7" height, I was filled with so many different emotions. I felt sorrow for the apparent animal cruelty before me but I also realized that we do the same in the USA, we just don't display it in markets for the public to see. I learned from our tour guide that the Vietnamese keep all parts of the animal (head, fins, tail) visible when they serve their food so that one can be reminded of the animal that was sacrificed for their meal instead of just forgetting that something died for their enjoyment.

Many of the customs I have encountered on my trip seem strange to my American mentality but as I spend more time in Vietnam and other countries I am beginning to see how every culture is different for a reason. Customs have been perfected over hundreds of years. I am learning to become very open minded to everything I see and experience. I have already learned so much and I have only seen three counties.

Gabriella



Spring rolls and fried rice I made in my cooking class



Rice bags at the market



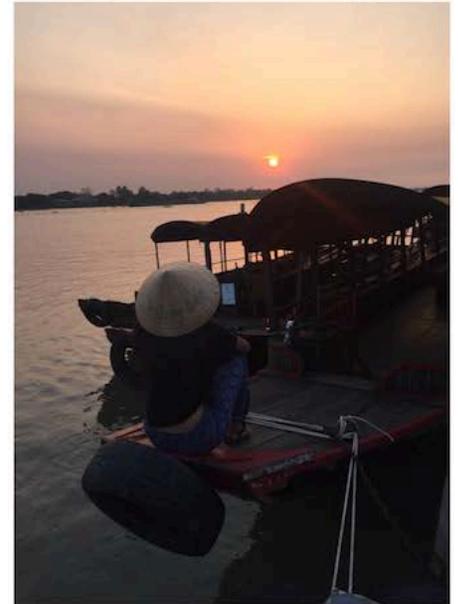
Monkey at nature reserve (also saw crocodiles & pigs)



Hanging meat at market



Bike ride through jungle



Daniela watching sunset on riverboat



Our Beautiful Resort in the Delta (A lot of people come to Vietnam for vacation)



Mother & child in market



Live chickens in market



Sami holding a huge snake



Elephant ear fish. We had this twice for lunch in spring rolls.



A family's home along the delta.