



## SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

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Ainsley Woolridge is a Senior Finance major with a minor in International Business. She studied in Vietnam in the Fall of 2011 and has a great perspective on her experience. Ainsley hopes to work in a position that will allow her to work abroad sometime in the near future.

I didn't choose to study in Vietnam because I particularly adored pho, or because of my extensive knowledge of the Vietnam War, or because of my finesse with chopsticks. To be clear, before I had traveled abroad I had eaten pho only once, I couldn't place a date on American involvement in the Vietnam War and I typically opted for a fork at Panda Express. I was looking for something dramatically different from my life at home; I wanted a place where I would feel upside-down, inside-out and surprised at the turn of every corner.

I had never been to the opposite side of the world before, and I currently attend college in the same town where I was born. As a person who prides herself on adaptability and a love of travel, the geographical distance from my preschool to 100 Thomas is none too impressive. So I thought a challenge was in order; I truly wanted to see the world.



Children at a Vietnamese school in the Củ Chi province

Upon arriving in Vietnam my stomach wrenched with anticipation of the unknown in the people, the culture and the food. But I was prepared for an adventure and was greeted with one. My group assembled at the airport, hopped in several cabs and headed for the center of the city, District

One, "Quần một", which would become our new home for the next 15 weeks.



Traffic in Ho Chi Minh City

The ride to our guesthouse was a 20-minute blur of countless motorbikes, neon signs and innumerable personalities. Motorbikes darting by were sometimes stacked with five-person families, fresh food for dinner and the family dog perched perilously on top. Neon and fluorescent lights lit the sidewalks and dangled from the trees so that the entire city felt alive; while on the streets it wasn't uncommon to see elderly women donning the iconic rice hat and serving *bánh mì* from her street food cart to a young, hip lady sporting haute couture that would put New York's socialites of the Upper East Side to fashion shame. I loved the diverse spectrum of people, the new Westernization of the city and the liveliness of the streets.

### International Study Scholarship

<http://ugstudents.smeal.psu.edu/academics-advising/scholarships-and-awards>

As I became more familiar with the city I fell deeper in love with the culture. Vietnam is a place where cranes are an unusually prominent part of the skyline because of the astronomical growth of the city. Every inch of the sidewalk and the streets are used for people to serve food, fix motorbikes or squat on plastic chairs and relax. I even came to terms with the horrifying traffic and the daunting task of crossing the street.

At any time of day there are hundreds of motorbikes racing through the wide but crowded streets of Ho Chi Minh City. Because of the traffic, I had every intention of not crossing any streets in Vietnam at all. Unfortunately one very busy street, *Đinh Tiên Hoàng*, stood between my university, *Đại học Khoa học xã hội và Nhân văn*, and me. On my second day of class a very charitable Vietnamese student saw me standing nervously on the side of the street waiting for a break in the relentless traffic. She took my hand and said “they will not stop coming,” as she pulled me across the street. Ridiculous though it may sound, she was right. Motorbikes, cars, and busses did not stop coming so it was necessary to walk with confidence while the traffic sped toward you.

Crossing the street for the first time I felt like Simba in the ravine with thousands of wildebeests stampeding around me. Eventually I learned that crossing the street in the city is really more like a game of Frogger. You must throw away all survival instincts you have and step directly and boldly into oncoming traffic. Motorbikes melt around you as you walk steadily forward, although I was warned that bus drivers would have few reservations about hitting you if you weren't careful. Until I gained complete confidence crossing the street, Vietnamese strangers often grabbed my hand and helped me across, only to turn around and go back to their lives on the other side of the road.



*Lunch at the "Lunch Lady" - a street vendor made famous by Anthony Bourdain - complete with an avocado smoothie*

Saigon – and I say Saigon because the older generation of the South will correct you for calling the city Ho Chi Minh – is a place where Western civilization has become a veneer over the deep-rooted Vietnamese culture. I could shop at Louis Vuitton or Chanel as easily as at the local market where I could buy a shirt for 1 USD (20,000 VND), or at the stall next-door where a live duck would cost 5 USD (100,000 VND). A testament to the deep-rooted traditional culture is that the drinking age is the day your parents say it is okay for you to drink. Most Vietnamese people place a very high value on family, and many of my Vietnamese friends have never set foot into a bar or



*A typical cafe at nighttime where families and friends meet to chat and drink tea, fruit smoothies, whole coconuts or bia 333, the local beer.*

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With questions or comments.

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club because they shudder to think what their fathers' would say.

On the other hand, many Vietnamese families do drink alcohol and especially appreciate a case of Heineken or the local beer, 333 (*Ba Ba Ba*), as a token of gratitude for a family meal. The street food culture in Vietnam is one of the most unique aspects of a country with a rich culinary tradition. Around every corner one can find spicy, delicious, fresh street food. Iced tea--*tra đá*, fish sauce--*nước mắm*, rice--*cơm* and spring rolls--*chả giò*, are essential to Vietnamese cuisine. In fact, the food is one of the things I miss most about Vietnam.



*Releasing a bird outside of a pagoda for good karma. It costs 20,000 VND (\$1 USD) to release a bird from its cage, but critics of the practice argue that paying encourages the continued caging of wild birds.*

This was the perfect study abroad opportunity for me. I felt both out of my element and at home in Southeast Asia, and I learned about one hundred new things a day. I found adventures around every corner on trips to Hanoi, Ha Long Bay, Phu Quoc Island, Singapore, Laos and living in Phnom Penh, Cambodia for five weeks. I spent my birthday in Siem Reap, where we bribed guards at Angkor Wat to take us to the top of the temple in the middle of the night. I ate a tarantula. I made friends with a National Liberation Front war veteran (in American slang, Viet Cong) who spent five years in an American war prison. I saw the fatigues that John McCain was wearing when his fighter jet crashed into a lake in Hanoi during the war. I learned Vietnamese. I met

with friends over a night at karaoke. What I didn't know when I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City was that the real challenge wasn't going to be getting to know and appreciate the culture, it was going to be leaving Asia.



*Diem Tran and Ainsley Woolridge, both Penn State Finance students, at he Angkor Thom Bayon temple*

See “My Meeting with Ong” on page 4.

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## MY MEETING WITH ONG

Speaking of the forgiveness of the people, it is important to mention the Vietnam War. I had heard that Vietnamese people loved Americans and I had nothing to worry about in terms of bad blood left over from the war.

Visiting the *Củ Chi* tunnels - where Vietnamese used underground tunnels to live, hide, and transport supplies in guerrilla warfare – was the only time I felt uncomfortable about the war. Government propaganda videos showed footage of the war with a voiceover listing American war atrocities and honoring specific soldiers for the number of Americans that person killed. However disturbing this was, the government propaganda did not match the opinion of the general public in northern or southern Vietnam.

I took a trip to Gia Lai in central Vietnam with my friend Vu to visit his coffee farms. There I met his grandfather, a war veteran for the National Liberation Front, or in American slang, a “Viet Cong”. Vu’s grandfather welcomed me into his home, gave me a tour of his coffee fields and didn’t spare me one ounce of Vietnamese hospitality. He asked us to call him ông, the Vietnamese word for grandfather, an affectionate request from a Vietnamese person.

Ong’s hospitality toward me was surprising when I learned that he had been a prisoner of war for 4 years. He told the story of the day he was pulled from an underground tunnel by American soldiers and taken to the island of Phú Quốc. He explained the torture techniques used, showed us the tattoo he gave himself while in the prison, and he told us about the day the Americans let him go at the end of the war. Ong was also quick to mention that war atrocities occurred on both sides of the war, and that all of that was “in the past”. True to Buddhist values, he said that it was important to look forward rather than back and he was excited to meet a new generation of Americans. Although he was a man that I knew for little over an hour, “Ong” was a man that I will never forget.



*My friend's grandfather, Ong, at Sunday lunch in his farmhouse. He is a Vietnam War veteran, and spent four years in an American war prison on Phú Quốc Island. The certificate hanging on the wall behind him was awarded to him by the Vietnamese government for his participation in the war.*