

Six days into the trip, and I finally have a working laptop...

First impressions of Vietnam: Hanoi. Walloping heat, near-100% humidity and crazy motorbikes. Cars overtake and undertake, and bikes do the same and try and squeeze through the gaps. Not content to drive directly into oncoming traffic, bikes (and sometimes cars) also sometimes ride at 90 degrees or diagonally across roads. I've seen up to five people on one bike: baby on driver's lap, two little children behind, sandwiched on by a larger person at the back. Modest ladies sometimes ride sidesaddle behind the driver. Helmets seem entirely optional... Walking is hazardous, because even if there is a pavement, it's often blocked by a street kitchen or (surprise) parked-up motorbikes. Oh, and I forgot, indicators are ignored in favour of horns, so it's very very noisy all the time.

The day after arriving it took all my energy to climb the stairs up to the roof garden (to admire the torrential monsoon downpour) or down to the kitchen. Otherwise I stayed in bed to succumb to exhaustion and jet-lag. I'm in one of the Volunteer Houses instead of a room of [hotels in Hanoi](#), where we have our meals cooked for us fortunately: very nice thank you! and I'm getting used to chopsticks. I heard the screams of some housemates who came across some large cockroaches in the passage outside one night - as long as they stay outside that's fine with me.

After the weekend I was recovered enough to attend Induction Day before travelling for 2 hours and 60k (taxi, public bus, taxi) from Hanoi to a large rehabilitation unit for around 200 disabled children where I will be spending most of my time. The vibes so far are good - it's like a green oasis here. It's quiet, well-tended, no... I feel incredibly lucky to have the opportunity to volunteer abroad at Vietnam Friendship Village, near Ha Noi. It's been an incredible experience so far.

Volunteering Abroad offers an opportunity for cultural exchange, where both you and the host country you work in, share culture, experiences, knowledge, skills, language, and much more through communication and interaction with each other. It's a chance to learn about each other, and provides insight into how things are done (for example, work, education, cooking, social, recreation, transport etc.). You learn to see things differently compared to your home country, and take away a new understanding, respect and empathy for the culture and people of the country.

I have really enjoyed being here in Vietnam and on placement at the Vietnam Friendship Village. Five weeks into my placement, I have gotten used to the routine and rhythm of life at Friendship Village. I love the fact that when I turn up at the start of the day, that the children will run and greet you before you even have had a chance to get out of the taxis. Their smiles and eagerness to spend time with you is gold! I love how the children, no matter their age or ability, manage to teach you something new or open your eyes to a new perspective on life, every day.

Over the past two weeks, we've had a couple of events happen at school. We've had volunteers from Quebec, Canada come to help tidy the gardens, paint and restore play equipment, and play with children. We've had another assembly with a local company donating money to the school and putting on a karaoke performance for the children. We've also had a Christmas concert with local children performing Christmas carols in both English and Vietnamese, and ...

I've explored the local area near home a couple of times. The district where I live is one of the most populated in Hanoi, with 352,000 residents. It is densely populated, with many alleys, narrow streets, parks, a few lakes and many shops. It is interesting walking in the streets near home because you come across much activity, noise, and a few similar shops located in same street. For example, I've spotted 4 hairdressers in the one street near home, 3 newsagencies/ stationery/ book stores in a nearby street, and 6 bakeries on one of the main roads near home. It is quite a noisy place, with motorcycles, construction and outdoor work happening at all hours of the day. We have lots of street vendors here, often setting up shop on the footpaths or near parks, leaving little space for pedestrians to walk along, and motorcycles taking up the remaining footpath space for parking. Often pedestrians have to walk on road, where motorcycles and cars squeeze by each other in narrow streets.

I have walked to nearby lakes such as Dong Da Lake and Lake Ho Bay Mau. Parks and sidewalks surrounding lakes are lively places, and quite busy. People sit and enjoy the lake, go to coffee shops, have a nap, play games, meet friends and relax. It is quite packed on weekends but very lively, definitely resembles community. On some walks in my local district, I've managed to get myself lost several times wondering down different alleys and exploring different streets, however it's part of the adventure and experience of living in Hanoi. Some walks can be chaotic, due to narrow...

It's about time I shared with you the adventures I've had outside of volunteer placement in Hanoi! On my first weekend in Hanoi, I assisted Projects Abroad with the Vietnam International Volunteer Day on [Vietnam visa on arrival](#) service. This is an annual event where many volunteer organisations come together and share achievements for peace and sustainable development in Hanoi. Many youth volunteer organisations were in attendance, which was a huge encouragement.

The theme of this year's International Volunteer Day was making change happen. Our Projects Abroad theme was cultural exchange. We set up a stall and invited people who walked by to participate in activities from our home countries. In attendance were volunteers from Australia, England, France and Switzerland. For the Australian activity, I showed participants how to do Aboriginal Dot painting, which many ended up participating in. It was a huge success, and continued for most of the day. As a result, we displayed over 60 dot paintings in our stall, for people to see. Switzerland, England and France did cooking demonstrations, of foods from their countries, which participants helped out with. On the menu, was potato gratin, French toast and fruit salad. Overall, the day was a huge success.

I also had the opportunity to chat to some of the Vietnamese youth and find out about their volunteering stories and life experiences. It was really lovely to chat to Ha Noi local youth. They were all very welcoming and friendly, eager to learn about our respective countries. Some even wanted a photo with me. The following day (Sunday 6 Dec) was my first day since arriving in Ha Noi. Two of my housemates invited me to join them on a day out to Bat Trang Ceramic Village. Bat Trang is on the other side of the ...