



**Volunteer Handbook  
for  
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam**

Like all big cities around the world, Ho Chi Minh City is a mixture of the good, the bad and the ugly.

You will experience unbearable heat, polluted air, crazy traffic, non-stop horns, packs of street dogs, occasional beggars and touts, and see the poverty and struggle of many locals.

But you will also find incredibly friendly people, an endlessly fascinating culture, warm and supportive coordinators, worthwhile volunteer projects, delicious food, beautiful landscapes, museums and temples to visit, the arts, classes for yoga and meditation – the list goes on and on!

Vietnam is one of my favorite places on earth. I've been there three times and will return in 2012. Even before you leave Vietnam, I'm sure you'll already be making plans to return!

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scott D. Burke".

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## **BEFORE YOU GO**

### **Prepare to be Unprepared!**

This phrase was told to me in Delhi by a 19 year-old volunteer in April 2011. Before she left her parents' home in the UK for India, she felt she had consumed as much info as possible in preparation for her trip abroad. Then she arrived in India – and it was like she hadn't prepared at all! But after a week or so in Delhi, she truly started to feel like an insider who could actually give tours of the place – and she was right.

So please try not to be too concerned about perhaps not knowing enough about Vietnam. That's why you're going there, to volunteer or work in Vietnam and learn about the country – as an intern and an insider!

The good news is that you have our coordinators in Vietnam, as well as Scott Burke back in the US, who will prepare you and guide you both before and during your trip to Vietnam.

### **This Handbook**

We have spent years revising this Handbook, based on the experiences of our volunteers and staff who have spent significant time in Vietnam. They have all contributed their unique insights and advice to the information in this Handbook.

Our main focus in the Handbook to Vietnam is on travel information that is specifically relevant to a volunteer like yourself who will serve others in Vietnam and become a member of the local community.

We encourage you to share the Handbook to Vietnam with your family and friends and anyone else interested in your trip to Vietnam. We also strongly recommend taking a copy with you on your trip.

### **Some Basics about Vietnam**

- Vietnam's Prime Minister is Nguyễn Tấn Dũng (2006 – )
- Population is 90+ million
- Life expectancy is 70 years
- Vietnam gained independence from France in 1945.
- The Vietnam War (called the “American War” by the Vietnamese) took place between 1959-1975 between North Vietnam and US-supported South Vietnam.
- The “Đổi Mới” economic reforms of 1986 led to free-market practices which started Vietnam's path to becoming one of the strongest economies in the world today.
- Vietnam is a “socialist” (communist) state – although it's not very obvious at first.

## **Packing List**

In terms of what to bring from home, there are three things that I would highly recommend:

- Your laptop (for WIFI but also to backup photos and keep notes)
- Bug spray with DEET
- Small lock(s) (lock valuables in your suitcase during the day)

Suggested packing list:

### Carry-On Bag

- Passport
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of Vietnam Coordinator, Scott Burke, Family/friends
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Cash (at least \$100 USD or equivalent)
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Any prescription medicine
- Any electronic equipment (laptops, mobile phone, camera, mp3 player)
- Toiletries (Toothbrush/paste, contact lens solution/case)
- Reading materials
- Pen(s)

### Checked Baggage

- 4-6 pair of long pants (a pair of jeans is OK but can be hot)
- 4-5 dresses (for both volunteer work and free-time)
- 3-4 pairs shorts
- 7-10 short-sleeved tops/t-shirts
- 1-2 long-sleeve shirts
- 4-6 pair of socks
- Closed-toe sneakers / shoes
- Sandals / flip-flops
- Sleepwear: long-sleeved shirt(s) and long bottoms (avoid mosquitoes)
- Sun screen
- Bug spray with DEET (I use Jungle Juice)
- Hat (for sun)
- Paper journal / pens
- Eye re-wetting drops (whether you wear contacts or not) because Vietnam is very dusty.
- Hand sanitizer
- Over-the-counter medications for pain relief, fever, diarrhea
- Toiletries (soap, shampoo etc)
- Notebooks, pens, paper
- Small travel pack/day pack
- Lightweight, quick-dry towel for bathing

### **Other Packing Tips**

- > There is no need to bring bedding, pillows etc.
- > Theft can be a problem on flights to destinations like Vietnam, so do not pack anything valuable in your checked luggage. Pack valuables in a carry-on bag such as a laptop, camera, cash, jewelry, gifts etc.
- > Do not over-pack. Except for some prescription medicine, you can buy anything in Vietnam that you forget or leave home on purpose, including toiletries, clothes, electronics, etc.

#### > Luggage:

Luggage seems to get really roughed up on these international trips (on the way home from my last trip to Vietnam, my suitcase come off the carousel with a wheel missing). Instead of new / nice luggage, I suggest buying a cheap suitcase at a thrift store, especially a hard-shell suitcase that will protect your stuff. Duffel bags are too soft and things tend to get broken inside. I am not a fan of huge backpacks in lieu of a larger suitcase, as they seem very hard on one's back. For a carry-on, a small backpack is a good idea (for laptop, any electronics, a few toiletries).

#### > What NOT to bring:

- 1) Plug adapter for electrical appliances. But them in Vietnam, as they cost only \$1 USD there and will definitely work. Some hotels even have extras.
- 2) Any items for donation – to, say, an orphanage or clinic ([click here for why](#))

### **Passport**

- When flying, always carry your passport on your person and not your bags. Cargo pants with deep/secure pockets are a good place to hold the passport.
- Consider keeping your passport in a Ziploc baggie at all times, to protect it from sweat, dirt, humidity, and spilled drinks – both when flying and when in Vietnam.
- You do not need to carry your passport to your volunteer job each day.
- If you travel outside HCMC, carry your passport with you (on your person).
- Some hotels in Vietnam require you to surrender your passport to them at check-in; you get it back when you check-out.
- Lock your passport, cash, camera and other valuables inside your luggage when you are out during the day from your host family or hotel. It is usually best to bring small locks from home.

## TRAVELING TO VIETNAM

### Getaway Day

- **Before you leave home, make sure you have your passport!**
- Make sure to bring any prescription medicines.
- Everything else can be replaced easily: clothes, toiletries, etc.

### Check-in at airport

- Arrive at the airport at least 3 hours before your flight.
- Assume the airline will be strict with luggage weight rules.

### Keep Away Germs on the Flight(s)

The air circulating on airplanes is actually very clean and sanitary (despite public perception). But you still must take steps to avoid germs that might lead to cold or flu. The reasons? The dry air plus the germs from fellow passengers. This is what I do on all of my flights:

- Drink lots of water (nasal membranes need to be moist to work well)
- Use saline nasal spray (ditto)
- Use hand sanitizer
- Wipe down trays and seat handles (with hand sanitizer or anti-bacterial wipes)
- Increase the ventilation at your seat (to avoid saliva droplets from sneezing, coughing and conversation from passengers).

### Passing Time on the Flight

- The obvious: sleeping, reading, movies, music, writing, drawing.
- Stay awake and sleep according to the time zone in Vietnam, in order to adjust more quickly to the time zone there.
- Walk around and exercise every hour – prevent [Deep Vein Thrombosis](#).
- Talk to fellow passengers. Perhaps you'll make a new friend, and maybe learn about Vietnam – especially if they are a local returning home.
- Look out the window! You are 30+k feet above the earth! Isn't it amazing to see the clouds, stars, the moon, even other planes from this perspective? You're traveling perhaps half-way around the world in less than 24 hours. These things were unfathomable to humans not even a century ago. Consider yourself very fortunate.
- Take photos – some of you, some out the window, maybe even a new friend. You might not realize it now, but in 5, 10, 20+ years these photos will become part of your memories of this special trip.

### Afraid of Flying?

I was deathly afraid of flying until 2005. My two fears? I thought turbulence would cause a crash AND I thought the wings flexing meant they might crack from stress. I got “cured” when I educated myself. I read [articles about turbulence](#) – it (almost) never causes jetliners to crash. I also found videos of wing stress tests ([like this one](#)) that show just how strong they are. My favorite author on air-travel is Patrick Smith, who writes a popular [blog on Salon.com](#), published a book, and has his own [website](#).

**ARRIVAL IN VIETNAM**

- > The Tan Son Nhat International Airport (SGN) is a modern, western-style airport with a new international terminal opened in 2007.
- > After leaving the plane, you will head to Immigration to get your passport stamped.
- > If you have a visa-upon-arrival, please make sure you have the visa letter with you to present to Immigration. This is the letter we emailed to you, from our coordinator in Vietnam. Also make sure you have 2 passport photos with you (although they do not always ask for them).
- > Because you are entering on a "tourist" visa, there should be no issues – provided you are entering within the dates stated on your visa inside your passport. However, if there are any issues, please call our Coordinator's cell phone so she can help in any way possible.
- > After passing through Immigration, you will then go to baggage claim downstairs to collect your bags. After you do so, I recommend that you go to one of the money exchange counters and exchange at least \$100 USD (or equivalent) for Vietnam Dong. The exchange rate is about \$1 USD = 20,000 Dong. It is always a good idea to have local currency on you in any country when you exit the airport.
- > Next, you will walk through Customs (go through the "green" line) where they will likely x-ray your bags.
- > Finally, you will walk toward the airport's exit doors on your way to the (outdoor) arrivals hall. Look for our Coordinator who will be holding a sign with "Cosmic Volunteers" on it.
- > Note that the scene in the arrivals hall can look like absolute mayhem, with 100's of people waiting for passengers. Even before you meet up with our Coordinator, you might be approached by taxi drivers asking if you need a ride. Simply smile and tell them no thanks and they won't bother you further.
- > Our Coordinator will then take you in a taxi away from the airport to check you in to your hotel in District 1, about a 30 minute ride. our Coordinator should also remind you at this time that we want you to call back home to let a family member/friend know you arrived safely and met up with our Coordinator. She will gladly let you use her cell phone for the call.
- > If your flight arrives after dark, our Coordinator will take you to dinner and/or a walk around your neighborhood before you go to bed. Then she will meet you early the next morning for a full day of sightseeing and orientation.
- > If your flight arrives during the day, our Coordinator will start your sightseeing and orientation in HCMC and see how much you can get in before bed time.

## WHILE IN VIETNAM

### **Jet Lag**

Flying across multiple time zones disrupts your body's circadian rhythm, leading to sleep problems and other symptoms which fall under the condition known as "jet lag."

Symptoms often include insomnia, waking early, excessive sleepiness, headaches, irritability, digestive problems like constipation or diarrhea, muscle aches, and difficulty concentrating. Younger travelers and female travelers are more susceptible to jet lag, while some travelers are not affected much.

As a general guideline, the recovery rate from jet lag is one day per time zone traveled. So if you live in New York (approx 12 hours behind Vietnam), it can take you over a week to recover from the jet lag.

To recover from jet lag:

- Drink plenty of water before, during and after your flight
- Try to sleep on the plane if it's nighttime in Vietnam
- Adjust to the local day/night schedule immediately
- Try not to sleep until nighttime in Vietnam, no matter how tired you are
- Exercise daily (during daylight hours, especially early morning)
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol

### **Biggest Safety Tips Now that You're in Vietnam**

- Only drink water that is bottled or boiled
- Be very careful crossing the street
- Do not go swimming under any circumstances
- Wash your hands frequently (bring hand sanitizer)
- Don't be flashy with cash, cameras, jewelry etc.

### **District 1**

Most of our participants (and all visitors) stay in District 1 of HCMC, about 30 minutes from the airport. There are a dizzying number of hotels, restaurants, markets (indoor and outdoor) and shops that cater to foreigners and locals alike. The presence of tourists has created a small army of pushy vendors walking around selling their goods or others simply begging for money. You'll quickly become familiar with the sunglasses guys, motorbike taxi guys (blue shirts mostly), girls carrying books to sell, and the bars and restaurants that have staff permanently on the sidewalk to lure you in. The good part of District 1 is that it is so vibrant and you will find many shops and hotels who speak decent English. The bad part is that many visitors – especially volunteers – find the tourist area a bit tiresome after a while.

## **Culture Shock**

You have probably heard the term “culture shock”, but what is it exactly? Webster’s Dictionary defines it as “a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.” Compared to our other host countries, Vietnam has a high level of culture shock for our volunteers.

Some examples of culture shock in Vietnam:

- There is traffic 24 hours a day, usually fast and aggressive
- Hardly anyone speaks English (includes menus too)
- Some older folks will simply stare at you, without trying to interact at all
- Motorbikes driving on the sidewalk
- Walking among throngs of Vietnamese pedestrians across the street
- Choking air pollution
- Vehicles honk horns constantly and loudly
- The heat and humidity are often unbearable

Please understand: You are in a different country now, one that has cultural practices, life experiences, needs, infrastructure (lack of), and a worldview that can be very different to the ones you are used to. You can either fight this type of reality or learn to adapt to it. We strongly suggest the latter. You have to accept the responsibility that comes with being a stranger in a strange land.

How can you handle culture shock?

- Be humble and respectful
- Observe & Listen
- Be Inquisitive
- Ask Questions
- Do not judge
- Do not act offended by comments or questions
- Offer your help
- See yourself in others
- Smile

## **Money Matters**

- Again, I recommend bringing at least \$100 USD (or equivalent) in cash in your pocket onto the plane, then exchanging all of it at the airport in HCMC for Vietnam Cedis.
- Vietnam is a cash-based society, so expect to pay cash for everything.
- Credit cards are seldom accepted, except at higher-end hotels and travel companies. Even where credit / debit cards are accepted, I still recommend cash because of the security risk.
- There are ATM's available everywhere in HCMC and other towns in Vietnam.
- **Only use ATM's during the day time.**

## **Health**

If you feel ill during your trip, please seek immediate treatment at the nearest medical clinic. When you are able, please immediately inform your coordinator, who will in turn call Scott Burke who will then call your family back home.

Symptoms which you should NOT ignore include fever, stuffy nose, cough, chills, persistent headache, muscle aches, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea (especially if symptoms last more than two days).

If you visit a hospital or clinic: **Insist on having blood tests done** to determine what illness(es) you might have. **Patients in Vietnam are required to pay for their treatment up-front AND in cash**, then you would collect the paperwork and get reimbursed by your insurance company back home.

The most common illness reported by travelers to Vietnam is travelers diarrhea, caused by bacteria-laden fecal matter that makes its way into food and water (Typhoid and cholera are also dangers).

Hospitals and Clinics in Ho Chi Minh City:

### **CENTRE MEDICAL INTERNATIONAL**

Address: 1 Han Thuyen Street, District 1

Tel (24 hr): (08) 3827-2366

Fax: (08) 3827-2365

Website: [www.cmi-vietnam.com](http://www.cmi-vietnam.com)

### **CHO RAY HOSPITAL**

Address: 201 B Nguyen Chi Thanh St., District 5

Tel (24 hr): (848) 3855-4137

Fax: (848) 3855-7267

E-mail: [bvchoray@hcm.vnn.vn](mailto:bvchoray@hcm.vnn.vn)

Website: [www.choray.org.vn/trangchu\\_eng.asp](http://www.choray.org.vn/trangchu_eng.asp)

Cho Ray Hospital is the largest hospital in Ho Chi Minh City.

### **COLUMBIA ASIA INTERNATIONAL CLINIC**

Address: 08 Alexandre de Rhodes, Dist.1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Tel (24 hr): 848 3 8238455 / Fax: 848 3 8238454

E-mail : [saigonclinic@columbiaasia.com](mailto:saigonclinic@columbiaasia.com)

Website: [www.columbiaasia.com](http://www.columbiaasia.com)

### **Safety**

Ho Chi Minh City is overall a safe city if you use common sense. Even female volunteers have never had any serious issues with security in Ho Chi Minh City and throughout Vietnam. I encourage you to walk around with our coordinators and other trusted locals to see the place on ground level and get to know the place intimately.

Safety precautions:

- Lock your passport, cash, camera and other valuables inside your luggage when you are not in your room. It is usually best to bring small locks from home.
- Beggars and touts are usually only a problem at tourist monuments and backpacker areas.
- Be careful about street dogs at night! Don't run though – just stop and act unafraid.
- Do not walk alone at night - say after 8pm (hire a vehicle).
- Watch for pickpockets on crowded streets, markets, bus stations, and tourist venues.
- Never admit to strangers to being alone; tell them your friend / parents will join you soon.
- Do not go swimming at all (see below)

### **Do Not Swim in Vietnam**

Drowning and road accidents are the leading causes of injury and death for travelers abroad, although the western media tends to focus on terrorism, political strife, and infectious diseases as the most likely dangers for travelers abroad.

### **The Heat**

Vietnam might not be the hottest and most humid place on earth, but it certainly feels like it most days! You will get your first blast of it as you walk through the airport's exit doors. During your stay you will likely sweat more than you ever have in your life. The heat and humidity will cling to you, annoy you, and make you look forward to your air conditioned room at the end of the day. Do not forget the sun either. We are closer to the equator here, so the sunburns can be severe. Even if you do not want to use a heavy SPF, at the very least use a face lotion that has 15+ SPF.

### **The Traffic**

Along with the heat, you will likely never forget the traffic in Vietnam. Specifically, the hundreds of thousands of motorbikes on the roads daily. They are noisy and smelly, clogging up every inch of the road and sometimes even riding on the sidewalks. Throw in the taxis, trucks, passenger cars and pedestrians, and you will see why the congested roads of Ho Chi Minh City have become legendary.

Ho Chi Minh's streets are very dangerous in terms of traffic safety, due to the sometimes careless driving combined with lack of enforcement of traffic laws. You will get your first glimpse as soon as you exit the airport with our Coordinator in a taxi. YouTube has lots of videos posted of the traffic, so take a look.

There is almost constant horn-blowing here by vehicles. However unlike back home, people here are not honking out of anger/aggression but are merely giving courtesy honks so that others are aware of them and do not get injured.

### **How to Cross the Street in Vietnam**

To a first-time visitor to Vietnam, crossing the street can be an intimidating and frightful endeavor. There are traffic lights at major intersections, however even with the lights, drivers often ignore the signals and will even drive motorbikes on sidewalks as mentioned above. The good news is that most vehicles travel slowly, and vehicles and pedestrians all move together in a seemingly synchronized flow. Everyone displays typical Vietnamese courtesy with very few displays of anger or any confrontations.

Important thing to keep in mind when crossing the street in Vietnam:

- Walk slowly and do not make any sudden movements!
- Never run across the street or dart through traffic.
- Start walking slowly and maintain your pace – vehicles will weave around you.
- Even if there is a traffic light, you will rarely find a “perfect time” to cross.
- You will sometimes only be able to cross one half of the street, then have to wait in the middle of the street before you have an opening to finish your crossing.
- Try to maintain eye contact with vehicle drivers, to make sure they see you.
- Spend a few minutes watching how locals cross the street, to see how it is done.

There are “tourist police” in green uniforms and blue caps who assist tourists with crossing the street, getting directions etc. Large hotels have the same service.

Keep in mind too when walking that there are uneven and pot-holed surfaces everywhere, from sidewalks to roads to shop entrances – so be very careful.

### **Toilets**

Hotels, restaurants and most homes have western “sit” toilets. But the tricky part happens after you do your business. Many places (even hotels) do not have toilet tissue – so buy a small roll upon arrival in Vietnam and carry it with you everywhere. Next, the used toilet tissue actually gets placed in the trash can, not in the toilet bowl. Gross yes, but that's the way it's done here, because the pipes cannot handle it. Alternatively, if you really want to be a local, you will forgo the toilet tissue altogether and use water to clean up – from the spigot/hose located next to the toilet. Finally, if you are in a rural area or stop at a petrol station, expect a to find a squat toilet that has the worst smell imaginable.

### **Water**

Drink only bottled water, never tap water. You can find bottled water everywhere. A 1.5 liter bottle is about 8,000 Dong (\$.50). A good idea is to buy a large 5+ liter jug of water for your room, then fill smaller bottles to take with you during the day. You can buy the large jugs for about 10,000 Dong (\$.60). It saves you money and you'll use fewer plastic bottles.

## Hotels

- All hotels hold guests' passports during their entire stay.
- Ask for a room as high as possible – to get quiet from traffic below.
- Ask for a room away from the main street – again for quiet.
- Bring a laptop – even the cheapest hotels have free WIFI.
- The front desk can always help you arrange day/weekend tours.
- Small family-run hotels are great places to get to know locals.

## Cell phones

I strongly encourage you to have a mobile phone in Vietnam. Either bring a phone from home or buy one in Vietnam (I recommend the latter).

### Phone from home

If your phone from home is "locked," you can take the phone to shops in Vietnam who will "unlock" the phone for a small fee. With an unlocked phone, you just need to buy a SIM card in Vietnam (approx \$5 USD). The SIM card will have a local Vietnam telephone number.

### Phone bought in Vietnam

**New phones in Vietnam start at \$25 USD.** Mobile phone usage in Vietnam is mostly pay-as-you-go. You buy "talk time" credits from phone shops or street vendors. Incoming calls and texts are free – including international ones. The phone infrastructure in Vietnam is spotty and unreliable, with regular dropped calls or no connectivity. **Do not rely on text messages as a means of communicating, whether local or international, because they often do not go through.** Voice calls are the most reliable way to communicate by phone both in Vietnam and back home.

The best ways for people back home to call your cell phone are 1) calling from their phone using a phone card like at [www.nobelcom.com](http://www.nobelcom.com), or 2) calling from Skype to your phone (they need to buy credit on Skype).

## Internet

- Internet access is relatively good in Vietnam these days.
- **Almost all hotels have free wireless Internet.**
- Many hotels have a computer in the lobby for free Internet.
- There are also Internet cafes in every town/neighborhood in the country (\$.50/hour).
- Strongly consider creating a new email address (like Yahoo or Gmail) to be used only during your trip. Before you leave home, forward all emails from your regular email account to this one. The reason is security – because you will be using public computers and networks.
- **Do not expect broadband speed like at home!**

## Laptops

It's also a good idea to bring a laptop to use as a storage and backup device for your photos, or to keep a trip journal.

### **Volunteering at Children's Shelters**

In a typical shelter in Ho Chi Minh City, there are 20+ girls (or boys, as they try to separate by gender), ranging in age from 4-17. Some are truly orphans, while some have been abused by parents and/or have parents who are so poor that they cannot even feed them. The children go to regular schools during the day outside the shelters, but at varying intervals so there are always girls at the shelter.

There are also shelters located inside maternity hospitals in HCMC that have 100+ children. Both within and outside Ho Chi Minh, there are also huge orphanages run by Buddhist monks that house nearly 200 children.

The volunteer work at each shelter varies a bit but basically involves helping them with homework, practicing their verbal English, playing games, arts and crafts, sharing any special talents/skills you have, and generally giving them as much caring and love as you can.

Some advice when you are at the shelters:

- If you want to donate items such as crayons, notebooks etc, please ask us first so we can let you know the needs of your specific shelter.
- When in doubt about your volunteer work: Smile and say hello to the first kids you see!!
- Do not talk about the childrens' background unless they do so first.
- Be patient as the older children practice their English.
- Many of the younger children have limited spoken English ability.
- Always take off your shoes when entering the buildings.
- Many of the shelter buildings are surprisingly in very good shape.
- Many of the shelters are run by the government, so understand that the staff might get offended about any political criticism.

### **Volunteering with Buddhist Monks**

Many of the monks you'll meet are in their 20s-30s and are students at the "Vietnam Buddhist University" in HCMC. The monks can choose to study Buddhism in different languages, such as English and Chinese. For English, they focus on Buddhist terminology and conversational English. Many aspire to get masters degrees so they can then travel to countries where they can live at temples and practice Buddhism where English is spoken, such as in India and Nepal. But they cannot go anywhere unless they pass their very difficult written and oral English exams that take place each fall.

As a volunteer, your job is simple: have everyday conversation with the monks in English. You will learn much about their daily lives, Buddhism, and any other topic that comes up. They do not often have the opportunity to speak to native speakers like you, so this is very special to them.

Background on the Monks:

- Monks and nuns don't shake hands -- they put their hands up in a prayer-like gesture.
- Take your shoes off before entering the temple inside the pagoda (ask if you're not sure).
- Ask before taking any photos (they always say yes).
- They are very mainstream – they ride motorcycles, have cell phones, and Internet.
- They are open to most any topic of conversation and have great senses of humor.
- The monks often invite neighbors and volunteers to their daily evening chant session.
- The monks are vegetarians, and usually will likely invite you to at least one big meal.

### **Dress Code at the Volunteer Job**

- Dresses are always fine for women.
- Otherwise, for men and women:
  - For bottoms: I recommend khaki pants, capris or shorts.
  - For tops: short-sleeve shirts are best
  - For footwear: flip-flops or any informal shoes (sneakers, clogs etc).
- Women: no cleavage, short-shorts, or form-fitting clothes (disrespectful to locals).
- You will see tourists, locals and perhaps even fellow volunteers breaking these rules, but we feel the rules are different for you (so be respectful!).
- It's highly unlikely anyone would say something to you about inappropriate dress.

### **Hot Climate**

Ho Chi Minh is very hot and humid year-round. Temperatures average about 90 F (30 C) in HCMC. You must take care on a daily basis to stay hydrated and avoid the sun as much as possible. If you become severely dehydrated, you might need to take oral re-hydration salts. You will normally find air-conditioning in Vietnam at your hotel.

Tips on handling the heat:

- Stay hydrated daily with water
- Wear a hat outside
- Wear loose-fitting clothes made from breathable fabrics
- If you exercise, do so at sunrise
- Do not sunbathe
- Use sun block if you will be outside for long periods

Symptoms of dehydration:

- Restlessness and irritability
- Sunken eyes
- Dry mouth and tongue
- Increased thirst
- Skin goes back slowly when pinched

### **Taxis**

You will likely take taxis a lot in HCMC. Taxis here all use meters and are air-conditioned. Our favorite taxi company is Vinasun but they are all mostly the same. Just put your hand out and you'll have a taxi pull up in moments. Many of the taxi drivers speak limited English. So, a great tip is to collect business cards of the places you go often, such as your hotel and the shelter, and show them to the driver. Alternatively, use your smart-phone to snap a photo of the building's name / address and show those photos to the drivers.

### **Adapters**

For plug adapters for your cell phones / laptops / cameras etc: We strongly recommend that you wait until you get to Vietnam to buy them. They cost around \$1 USD and you're assured that it will work with US / European / Australian plugs.

### **Saving the World**

It is admirable that you want to have a positive impact on people's lives in Vietnam. After all, that should be why you signed up to volunteer in Vietnam, and that is why Cosmic sends volunteers there. But please understand: You will not "save the world" during your trip to Vietnam. Or on any trip abroad, for that matter. If you even have the phrase "save the world" in your vocabulary, you are in for a rude awakening in Vietnam and your stay will be filled with major disappointment and disillusionment.

A typical pattern of some foreign volunteers is to show up in the local community, see an endless number of problems to be solved, start to make elaborate plans to solve those problems, work feverishly on executing those plans – then, ultimately experience a great deal of frustration when they realize that they have taken on too much, too quickly. Neophytes to traveling abroad can feel this even more intensely.

Our advice for you is to "work small." As Chinese Buddhism says, "The sage does not attempt anything big." Focus your efforts in Vietnam on one person, one project at a time, because those small successes lead to big accomplishments over time. For example, if you are at an orphanage, simply focus on giving the children your time, your caring, and love. Yes the orphanage might need a new roof, or more books, or even medicines for the children – and you can help out with those projects if you wish; but focus first on the kids and making them feel loved.

### **Personal Greetings**

Greetings in Vietnam are an important aspect of life there. People mostly shake hands both when greeting and saying goodbye. They shake with both hands and usually bow their head slightly as a sign of respect. For the elderly, if they do not extend their hand, then bow slightly to them instead. Vietnamese women are more inclined to bow their head slightly than to shake hands.

To say "hello" in Vietnamese, the word is "xin chao" (seen chow), followed by the other person's name then title. Chances are that you will pronounce the word incorrectly, but the Vietnamese person(s) will be thrilled that you gave it a try.

### **Face**

As a visitor to Vietnam (and any other Asian country), you should be familiar with the concept of "face" which is extremely important in their culture. "Face" refers to a person (or company) maintaining a good image, via their reputation, prestige, and dignity. A person can lose face, save face or give face to another person. As a short-term visitor to Vietnam, you will not become an expert on face, but you can successfully handle the concept simply by treating all people with respect and courtesy and not causing public embarrassment of anyone.

Examples of face:

- Arguing loudly with an airline ticketing agent will cause them to lose face
- Complimenting your dinner host will give the host face
- Visiting a children's shelter wearing provocative attire will lose face for you

## **Food**

Vietnamese cuisine is not nearly as well-known abroad as, say Thai or Indian food. However don't let that fool you, as Vietnam has some of the tastiest food in the world.

The main dish here is rice noodle soup called “Pho”. Pho comes in a large soup bowl and has either beef (“Bo”), chicken (“Ga”) or Trung (eggs) in clear beef broth. The shop will give you a plate of leafy vegetables and spices to add to the soup.

Vietnamese cuisine uses chile peppers a lot so is quite spicy. It also uses lots of fish sauce, rice, fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables. Vietnamese recipes use many vegetables, herbs and spices, including lemon grass, lime, and kaffir lime leaves.

Besides the soups, a typical meal consists of:

- Individual bowls of rice
- A roasted meat or fish dish
- A stir-fried vegetable dish
- A Vietnamese-style soup
- Prepared fish sauce and/or soy sauce for dipping

Also, do not be shocked if your Vietnamese dining partner orders live seafood, such as shellfish, which waiters bring to the table to be cooked by the diners themselves on the small roaster in the middle of the table. In general, all dishes are communal and to be shared apart from the individual bowls of rice.

We do actually recommend that volunteers try street food, both for salty snacks as well as sweets. You will likely encounter new foods and dishes at every turn.

For drinks, bottled water can be found in shops and restaurants all over Vietnam. For soft drinks, you will find Coke, Fanta Orange and Sprite everywhere. You normally have to drink the soft drink at the shop because the shop returns the bottles to the bottler.

Do not be surprised if you lose weight in Vietnam. A variety of factors can contribute to this, like decreased appetite in the hot climate, lots of walking, lack of western fast food, and the fact that you might find Vietnamese food unappealing.

## **Religion**

Most Vietnamese do not classify themselves as religious. While they often visit religious temples during the year, Vietnamese peoples’ outlook and behavior are related to the philosophies and practices of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Vietnamese also have a tradition of worshiping their ancestors and national heroes. There are also small groups of dedicated followers of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam in Vietnam.

### **Women Travelers**

As a female visitor in Vietnam, you most likely will not experience unwanted attention from men. However, keep in mind that you are not at home and that different rules apply. Women generally play a submissive role to men in Vietnam. A woman who acts like a man will not be respected. Men you meet may misinterpret your appearance, body language, or simple presence as invitations to approach you. Even a smile to a stranger may be misunderstood. You will need to modify your behavior in order to avoid unwanted attention.

Here are some tips suggested by former female volunteers on avoiding unwanted attention:

- Do not wear skimpy clothes
- Wear a “wedding ring” and say you are married
- Never admit that you’re traveling alone. Tell people that your boyfriend or husband will be along shortly to join you
- Steer romance-type conversation in another direction by asking questions – about local culture, food, etc
- Use humor to diffuse the situation
- If the man persists, be very direct and firmly tell him to stop, and be specific
- Walk in a group at night
- If you go to nightclubs, go with a group of friends
- Do not go to a secluded area or hotel/apartment with a man you do not know well

### **General Etiquette**

- Vietnamese are very conservative and prefer order and politeness
- Modesty and humility are emphasized in the culture
- Many customs are rooted in Confucian respect for education, family and elders
- Never lose your temper in public
- Evasion and inaccuracy are preferred in order to keep appearances pleasant
- Breaking a promise is a very serious matter
- Avoid public displays of affection with a member of the opposite sex.
- Only the elderly normally touch a child’s head.
- White skin is considered beautiful; a sun tan identifies you as a peasant.
- Pass and receive items with both hands (i.e. business cards, plates)
- Do not point with your finger - use your hand.
- Do not stand with your hands on your hips.
- Do not cross your arms on your chest.
- Do not pass anything over someone's head.
- Do not touch anyone on the shoulder.
- Do not touch a member of the opposite sex.

### **Table Manners**

- Everyone eats with chopsticks (and you should too!)
- Wait to be shown where to sit.
- Older people are usually seated first.
- Pass dishes with both hands.
- The most common utensils are chopsticks and a flat spoon.
- People hold bowls close to their faces.
- Hold the spoon in your left hand while eating soup.
- Meals are typically served family-style.
- Try to finish everything on your plate.
- Do not refuse an offer of tea.
- Cover your mouth when using a toothpick.
- If you are invited to a Vietnamese home:
  - Always bring a gift: fruit, sweets, flowers, fruit, or incense.
  - Gifts should be wrapped in colorful paper.
  - Do not give handkerchiefs, anything black, yellow flowers or chrysanthemums.

### **Chopsticks Etiquette**

Learn how to use chopsticks before you arrive in Vietnam!!

- Use chopsticks to push rice into your mouth, holding the rice bowl to your mouth
- Use chopsticks to pick up rice in plates, such as fried rice
- Always use two chopsticks at once, even when using them for stirring
- Do not eat directly from the community bowl
- Place food into your own bowl, then into your mouth
- Do not use chopsticks to point
- Do not spear food with chopsticks
- Do not play with chopsticks (i.e. putting them in your mouth when not eating)
- When not using chopsticks, place them on the table or a chopstick rest
- When you are finished eating, rest your chopsticks on top of your rice bowl.
- Never place chopsticks in a "V" shape when done eating (it's a bad omen.)
- Do not leave chopsticks standing vertically in a bowl of rice or other food – this is done only at funerals!

### **Photos, Video, and Electronics**

- Always ask before taking a photo or video of someone.
- Vendors at outdoor markets are especially sensitive to camera-wielding foreigners (Over the years, photos of locals from many countries (including Vietnam) have appeared in travel publications and electronic media without permission from or payment to the subjects; so they're touchy about it.).
- Be very careful when wielding your cameras in public because of theft. The worst place for a camera abroad is usually around your neck, as it's visible and easy to snatch.
- When flying or in a vehicle: always keep your electronic equipment (laptop, cameras, mp3 player etc) in your carry-on bag / in-sight. (A volunteer in Vietnam in March 2010 arrived home to find that her camera was stolen from her checked luggage.)
- Always-Always back-up your photos and videos regularly – even on a daily basis if possible! Transfer them to a laptop, smart phone, pen drive – anything so that you have backups in case your camera is lost/stolen/damaged. (Another Vietnam story: in 2010 a volunteer let the kids at the orphanage play with her camera, and they deleted 2 months of photos – and she had no backups).