

Katelynn Yates

Vietnam & Laos Trip (7/8-7/14)

Day One

On the first day of travel, we flew from Bangkok to Nakhon Phanom and then drove from the airport to the border of Thailand and Lao PDR. When we were all crossing the border, myself and the other exchange students had to go to the side and fill out paperwork to receive a Laos visa. When we went to pay with US dollars, they wouldn't accept our cash, because the bills had creases and were not new enough for their liking. This was so interesting and almost a little funny to me, because the appearance of the bills do not change the monetary value. I am still a bit curious as to the reasoning of this instance. After finally crossing the border, we visited the Savan-Seno Special Economic Zone in Laos. This zone is the first SEZ that was established in Laos and is aiming to become a central hub for investment, trade, and services within its region. It is also located along the East-West Corridor which links multiple countries together. There are essentially several reasons to invest in Laos and more specifically SEZA, such as the political stability, the abundance of natural resources, tax incentives, and so on. They also try to combat the economic problems of being land-locked and having a small working population by establishing dry ports and advancing the skills of their workers. By the end of the day, we were welcomed by the Royal Thai Consulate-General and were able to explore a little bit of Laos as well as its food and people.

Day Two

As we traveled from Savannakhet to Lao Bao, I was able to truly see a lot of the rural and less developed areas of the countryside. I saw an abundance of vegetation and not many properly

built buildings. I witnessed two men on the side of the road eating lunch with a big leaf as their plate. I glimpsed a bit of inequality with an older woman fixing a wood gate with some string while next door two men were using more advanced tools and welding a gate of their own. When we stopped to use the bathroom, I was told that the bathroom we were using was the only bathroom in town. Traveling across Laos as we did was an extremely eye-opening experience for me. As we crossed the border from Laos to Vietnam, I was privy to corruption and bribery. The individuals at the border that were also trying to cross were a bit ill-mannered in their treatment to myself and others by cutting us in line and shoving us out of the way. I witnessed as they put their passport with money inside on the counter and as the man behind the counter took the bribe. It was a pretty chilling experience to witness that kind of corruption right in front of my eyes. Vietnam, on the other hand, was extremely stunning in its geographical features and it was interesting to see the change in the advancement of infrastructure and development between Laos and Vietnam. The Vinh Moc Tunnels and demilitarized zone were awe-inspiring in their creation and their purpose. Ultimately, this day led to a huge revelation in how I view the world and the people within it.

Day Three

On Wednesday, we visited CP Vietnam, which is a Thai conglomerate that invests in various countries worldwide in industries including food, retail, and telecommunications. This particular one that we visited farms shrimp and then exports it to other countries. As a vegetarian, this experience of watching the video of CP farming various animals, such as pigs and shrimps, was particularly difficult due to their inhumane treatment to them. It also felt a little unethical walking through the assembly line and watching as the workers did their job. We were

told that the workers receive the proper benefits, but I think that I would be more convinced if it was one of the workers that told me so, especially considering CP's slavery allegations. After tasting some of the shrimp, we went sightseeing to various places in Hue, including Thien Mu Pagoda and the Royal Tomb of Khai Dinh King. The Thien Mu Pagoda had an incredible story which involved a burning man and his motor vehicle, in which the man burned himself to protest the plight of Buddhists at a time of religious upheaval and suppression. His courageous actions are still remembered as honorable in protecting the practice of Buddhism on the international realm. Another interesting fact that I learned about at the Royal Tomb came from a peer in which she told me that the artist who painted the ceiling of the tomb had to paint with his feet in order to not disrespect the emperor and be murdered. The end of the day ended in a thirty-minute spa, a pizza party, and a night that will always be known as memorable. As they say, what happens in Vietnam, stays in Vietnam. ;)

Day Four

The beginning of the day started out with a lot of bus ride naps and a more genuine relationship with one another, especially after a night out like Wednesday. We visited one of the malls in Da Nang to try to analyze and understand consumer behavior and the trends that appeal to Vietnamese people. I, for instance, noticed that several stores sold suitcases and luggage bags, which I found out was due to the proximity of the mall to the airport. I also recognized that there was an abundance of health awareness; it appeared as if the Vietnamese are appealed by enhancing their well-being through organic products. Nonetheless, it seems as if food and beverages are still dominating the Vietnamese market in their consumption trends based off the various cafes and food places that were observed and visited. After watching for consumer

behavior, we then became the consumers as a group and were given money to buy something to describe Vietnam and our experience in Vietnam. This activity was a bunch of fun, because we were able to bargain with the vendors and interact with them on a more personal level. The locality of the market allowed for a genuine comprehension of the Vietnamese in the market setting. One of the items we bought were the traditional, conical hats that Vietnamese are often portrayed as wearing. As we walked around in our hats, I was able to truly absorb and enjoy every moment of where I was, the people I was with, and what I was doing there. This course and this trip has and continues to be an experience of a lifetime.

Day Five

On Friday, we visited the Lady Buddha, which is the tallest Buddha statue in Vietnam. This location was so beautiful and unique, but it was also so hot that I could barely function as a human being and appreciate the Buddha and the surrounding architecture and geographical beauty. After a quick stop at the grocery market to observe more consumer behavior in a more food-like setting, we visited the SCG Cement Building Materials Vietnam, LLC. This company is an extremely large company in Thailand that has expanded its market reach by investing in other countries. Reasons for Thailand's investment in Vietnam is the size of the Vietnamese construction sector and the non-aging society. SCG Cement building materials business, in particular, works to localize their company by acquiring materials from locations close-by. This localization I find to be extremely compelling especially when it comes to our ever-increasing globalized world, because it is important in gaining a mutual understanding between the consumers and the producers for an increase in benefits for both groups. One of the more entertaining moments, however, was when a couple of my peers went to the front of the room

and performed their faculty's cheer. It was another aspect of the university culture that I was not yet privy to and it was fun to see them all participate in it. In the evening, we arrived in Hoi An, which was one of my favorite places to visit in Vietnam due to its petiteness and intimacy. I probably had my favorite meal since arriving in Vietnam as well - a banh mi sandwich - which was so delicious that I purchased two.

Day Six

Then, for the entirety of Saturday, we visited Ba Na Hills! Ba Na Hills was literally the best day and that was mostly due to the fact that there was a nice breeze and temperature. The cable car ride was such a serene experience, especially in comparison to the crazy hectic week we had; it allowed for a peaceful moment away from the hustle to really enjoy the company of my peers. The views of the ride were absolutely stunning and the fact that it is the longest non-stop track cable car in the world made it a more exciting experience. Once we got to the top, I noticed that Ba Na Hills has a very European vibe due to the French colonists who founded the park for other French tourists. Throughout the day, we got lost a lot, we walked a lot, we talked a lot, and we laughed a lot. We had so much fun that we even considering just walking all the way down to the bottom - which is not true but it was a suggestion that is still making me laugh even days later. A couple of us even took the cable car down and then back up and down again, just for the giggles. After leaving Ba Na Hills and traveling back to Da Nang, we went and got Korean BBQ, which was so brutal because it was so incredibly hot, the power kept turning off, and BBQ is not entirely vegetarian friendly. Since we missed the bus by actual seconds after dinner, we had to walk back to the hotel and then literally tried every tea place on the way back,

which was several different places. That being said, the end of the day ended with the beginning of the next morning, in which I will continue to describe within day seven.

Day Seven

Essentially, we stayed up all night long until nearly seven-thirty in the morning. We spent the whole night and morning talking, drinking, laughing, and a couple of people were even sleeping. As we sat on the balcony, we were able to watch the sunrise with one another as we continued to learn about each other and where we each come from and who we are as people. If put simply, then I would say that: it was a great night. We stayed up so late that we were able to eat breakfast in the morning when it opened, which, by the way, was absolutely delicious. Even with the limited amount of sleep, we were still on the move that morning to various different locations, such as the Museum of Cham Sculpture. It was really hard to appreciate the sculptures due to the extreme temperatures, but even still the experience was made worth it due to my peers and their ghost stories. Nonetheless, I noticed that the Cham sculptures resembled or aligned with the Indian culture and religion, including various Hindu-influenced pieces. This day was a little harder to get through, because I did not want the trip to end (but also because of the so little sleep I had the previous night). Each day was an experience in itself; every single day, I learned about the people I was with, the culture we were surrounded by, and the places that we visited. The entirety of the trip held lessons and memories that I will remember and continue to learn about for the rest of my life.

Trip Reflection

In regards to the whole trip, it was the experience of a lifetime, and it presented me with new memories, friendships, and lessons that I will hold dear for the rest of my life. I suppose the most disappointing part for me was that I would have liked to learn more and understand more about the places we visited and toured, which I was not able to know because the histories and information were presented in Thai. Nonetheless, the most surprising aspect of the trip was how much of an impact it made on myself as an individual. I learned a lot, not only in regards to economics but also about myself and other cultures and people as well. As an international politics and economics major, I could always tell you the what and the how, but never why I wanted to be those majors specifically; this experience has taught me exactly that. In a sense, I was surprised to have had this revelation while on the trip but never ungrateful for the knowledge and experience it has granted me.

With respect to the economic aspect of the trip, I feel as if the East-West economic route as a means of connectivity in the region is extremely fundamental in elevating trade and collaboration amongst ASEAN countries. I think this connectivity has a lot of potential and by improving the road connections and the border processes, the strength of ASEAN's economies will only intensify. As I was privy to the corruption and bribery that took place at the border, I feel as if that would be one component that could be improved for an overall better regulated trade route. The differences in customs requirements make for an inefficient and difficult transition to maneuver the trade routes. An enhancement of this as well as the road conditions and road-side services, such as bathrooms, would ultimately strengthen ASEAN's economic integration due to the higher efficiency of the trade route. That being said, if Vietnam's and Laos' economy keep maintaining a strong growth rate, I believe that, as countries, they will

continue to development with more infrastructure, higher standards of living, and increased sustainability. That would mean that the East-West economic route and its potential should not be overlooked by countries like Thailand due to the very potential of the expanding markets that Vietnam and Laos have to offer. As for myself, I do not think that I would see myself living or working in Laos and Vietnam but not because of the economic potential and job opportunities. I simply cannot imagine it based off my personal preference in location; Vietnam and Laos are just a little too far from home for me. Also the temperatures are too hot for my preference. Ultimately, I found this trip to be quite enlightening, because it expanded what we learn in the classroom setting to the actual reality of what it was like to, for instance, cross the border and travel along the East-West Economic Corridor. I was literally able to glimpse the potential that Laos and Vietnam will one day offer in the future rather than just conceptualize and discuss it in a classroom, which was pretty inspiring for when it comes to my studies.