

# Vietnam Visit - June/July 2002

By Jill Manuel

Michele and I travelled with Vietnam Airlines, leaving Aust. on Tuesday, June 18th, arriving in HCMC that same afternoon. The plane was packed with Vietnamese people going back for family visits. We spent a few days in HCMC - caught up with Rod Burgess, Mick O'Mallon and Peter Michelson, and received an invitation to the opening of the Phong Phu Nui Dat Kindergarten for the following Monday. Did a trip to the Zoo and Botanic Gardens, some shopping (got measured for a new jacket), visited the sister of a Vietnamese friend from work, and with other volunteers and staff from the Christina Noble Foundation took 12 children on an outing.

On Sunday morning we took the hydrofoil to Vung Tau, and visited Mr Cao, his wife and new baby, a family we'd made friends with on the last trip. We stayed overnight at Cap St Jaques hotel, then Monday headed for Ba Ria to find a place to stay for the rest of the week. Great changes in Ba Ria. Many new buildings especially around the new market area and along Bach Dang Road. (Regular Aussie visitors to Ba Ria usually had breakfast at a shop next to the Bach Dang Mini Hotel - both buildings are currently under renovation. The owners of our breakfast shop have a lovely new place, "Hiep Phat", opposite the Food Market.).

We found a room at "My Nga" mini hotel - two double beds, air-conditioning, fan, TV, own bathroom with hot and cold, a fridge and a regular supply of boiled water for tea and coffee, @ us\$10 per night. There were several other mini hotels in the same area.

The students were waiting so we arranged a meeting for that afternoon then headed for the opening of the new kindergarten. (leave that for Rod to report). That afternoon we returned to Ba Ria and met with last years regular students at the market tea shop. Unfortunately Kar-e-oke has found it's way to Ba Ria so conversation was difficult. We arranged with one of the students to meet at her home for 'formal' English classes in the evenings, but met during the day for conversation at various tea/coffee shops. I'd taken along some lesson plans from my 'English as a second language' course, as well as some lessons from my brother who is a primary school head master. In Vietnam, classes are quite formal - the teacher presents and the students listen. It took some time for the students to interact, but by the end of the first evening they really started to participate very well.

On Tuesday we did a trip to Binh Chao hot springs with our friend Mr Cao and Mr Nguyen, one of the English students. We boiled eggs in the hot springs, had lunch at a beach resort, and did some sight seeing along the coast. The area is becoming quite developed and is very popular with the locals on holiday. That evening we had another English class, and the number of students had increased to eight.

On Wednesday morning, with Mr Nguyen to translate, I visited the orphanage and was made very welcome by Madam Hong. I took along some new clothes and other gifts for Hieu, my sponsor child. We spent some time talking with Madam Hong, and playing a card matching game with Hieu, then Madam Hong and Hieu took me on a tour of the orphanage. We arranged an outing with Hieu for Saturday, then it was back for more English class.

Unfortunately Michele was feeling unwell, so went to Vung Tau to see a doctor. She was advised to stay there and rest, so we arranged to travel back to HCMC separately the following Sunday, and I stayed on alone in Ba Ria. Alone?? Not a chance. The English students wanted to make the most of every available minute to talk with a 'native English speaker'.

Thursday Michele and I had been invited to lunch at the home of Mr Cao and his family, in Vung Tau. His wife had gone to the market early in the morning, and we were confronted with a feast - soup, two different rice dishes, fish, chicken, various vegetable dishes and fruit. A neighbour and his family were also invited, so it was quite a party.

On return to Ba Ria, my students were waiting for more lessons - by now interaction in the class was not a problem, and there was much discussion based on my lesson plans and also their current studies. This varied considerably as there was such a range of English among the class - there was a teacher of English, a University Student, several adult students and some teenagers who were still at school. The common ground was their enthusiasm. By the last class session on Saturday evening, each student in turn was confident enough to stand in front of the group and be the teacher, for a lesson about 'giving directions around town', using a map of a pretend town drawn on a white board. Each evening there had been the regular group of eight, with an occasional extra turning up for one or two lessons. I also met up with a number of other people around town who had learned some English or were currently learning.

Saturday morning I went with Mr Nguyen and another student (Miss Kim) by taxi, to collect my sponsor child for an outing to the Ba Ria Cultural Park. We took along another child from the orphanage so Hieu had someone familiar with her. There is some playground equipment at the park, a small lake with paddle boats, and a kiosk/tea shop, but the fairground rides only operate at night so after using the swings and having some ice cream we headed for nearby shops to buy Hieu a pair of shoes, then sat on the steps of the church in the shade before taking our taxi back to the orphanage. Next time I visit we hope to do a trip to the beach.

On Saturday afternoon I'd planned to take some photos around Ba Ria, but met up with Dr Tan and his wife and after spending some time chatting and looking at his latest photos, it was getting too dark, so will have to do that next time.

While in Ba Ria, each morning I had breakfast sitting on a small stool on the footpath around the corner from My Nga and met many locals, and a couple

of Chinese engineers who were working on a joint project to build a new pier for ships to deliver wheat. Lunch was usually at "Hiep Phat" with some of the students, and dinner was again with some of the students, but at a different place each evening. There are numerous places in Ba Ria to eat, with a great variety of menus. I had Bahn Xio (a type of pancake wrapped in rice paper with bean sprouts, and dipped in sauce - my favourite), grilled fish wrapped in rice paper with cucumber and noodles, various stir-fry dishes, Pho (noodle soup), roasted pork, spring rolls, and plenty of rice and noodles. There was also BBQ mouse on one menu, but I drew the line there.

Sunday morning I caught the bus back to HCMC. My student friends helped me to buy a ticket and find a seat and the driver seemed to get instructions on how to look after me. I shared my seat with a mother and small child, and the aisle of the bus was filled with people sitting on tiny plastic stools. On arrival in HCMC, the driver directed me and my case to a taxi, and I was back at my hotel two hours after leaving Ba Ria. Michele arrived on the hydrofoil later that afternoon.

On Monday we'd arranged a two day trip to Chau Doc, near the border of Cambodia. A real frontier town and quite an experience. We visited Nui Sam (Sam Mountain), a Muslim village and mosque, a floating fish breeding village, some temples, and did a boat trip towards the border where we observed smugglers scrambling across the fields with their loads. After a few more days in HCMC we flew home on Friday night, again with Vietnam Airlines, but this time with room to spread out and sleep all the way.

I'll continue to keep in touch with some of the students, and plan to make another trip next year and probably stay a little longer in Ba Ria for more English classes.