

## Peg Thomas and Jerri Hirsch's Trip to Vietnam 2011

The following content was taken from the Bridges to Learning blog on Blogger.com.  
Thank you to Peg Thomas, former Executive Director of B2L, for sharing her journey and creating the posts.

# Tales from Vietnam

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### Getting Started

January 4, 2011

Hello Bridges to Learning supporters, friends, and family. In preview of Jerri & Peg's discussions and reflections during their time in Vietnam, we wanted to invoke some excitement through a few photos from former trips to Anh Linh School. Enjoy the journey.



## **Getting Ready for the Trip**

January 10, 2011

I just gulped down my second Typhoid prevention pill, so it looks like I am really going to Vietnam! Hi, my name is Peg Thomas. I am the new Executive Director of Bridges to Learning ([bridges2learning.org](http://bridges2learning.org)). Over the next few weeks I will be taking you on my journey over to Vietnam to see the children at Anh Linh School. Anh Linh was founded in 1990 and moved into a school building in 1998. In 2004 Bridges to Learning began to create a caring community to support Anh Linh School. Since 2004 the school has grown to where 283 children come every day to learn. They also get medical support, eye screenings, breakfast, lunch and play-time.

Jerilyn Fosdick Hirsch, the founder of Bridges to Learning, will be taking me to visit with Sr. Cam Thuy the principal of the school. Prior to that, there is much to do. We will be flying 14 hours to Tokyo, changing planes within one hour to go to Hanoi. We will stay in Hanoi for several days and then fly to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). From there we fly to Singapore to negotiate a partnership with the Singapore American School, and will then fly back to HCM (Saigon) to then head home to Minnesota.

So, follow along with me as together we view Vietnam through my musings, as a novice international traveler, and through Jerilyn who has logged millions of miles.

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## **Luggage and Gifts**

January 12, 2011

How do we possibly bring American gifts to hundreds of people with today's weight and luggage restrictions?

Selecting luggage for international flights has changed. Weight restrictions are now more important than protection. For our trip big duffel bags win over sturdy or stylish suitcases. Jerri and I are trying to figure out how to bring 283 Tet (Vietnam New Year's) gifts for the kids, 30 gifts for the teachers, gifts for the principal, and gifts for people we meet. We are settling on big duffel bags (and my daughter's hockey bag) filled with mini-beanie babies, chocolate, toothbrushes, tootsie rolls, puppets and Valentine's Day crafts. Let's hope the kids like this motley assortment of Americana. (We will see!)

I have met with a number of people about social customs in Vietnam, protocol, business dress, business casual, and an assortment of dos and don'ts. I've gotten great travel advice from friends and family. I was able to get some contacts in Hanoi, Saigon and Singapore and will be bringing chocolate to the Vo relatives in Saigon. The language tapes which I burned at the library are on my computer waiting for hours of listening.

This now must be the hardest part of the journey: the anticipation, the checking and rechecking, and the gathering and stuffing. The advice has been sound, the equipment and supplies are organized, the Visa and Passports safely stowed. Now I wait to see what a 23 hour plane ride feels like. I can't imagine!

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## **Made it to Hanoi**

January 15, 2011

Well 24 hours on a plane is actually doable. Who knew? We arrived at the Golden Wings II Hotel at night so it was difficult to see the city. I hear that the businesses and buildings were taxed for the amount of frontage space they occupied on the street. As a result, the buildings are skinny, long and tall. They remind me of the shot-gun houses in New Orleans, though they are much, much taller. I am anxious to get out and see the city tomorrow. (You will finally get to see photos then!) The myriad of gifts, beanie babies, and treats made the journey safely through our connecting flight in Tokyo.

The most astounding part of the flight was looking out over the Alaskan mountains and Bering Straits. The frozen mountains, glaciers, ocean and tundra below was a sight to behold. The speeches about grabbing your life jacket and learning how to inflate it are of little value when flying over this part of the world.

International travel is so much like backpacking. Once I started packing my carry on bag I realized I was an old hand at trying to bring only what you need in the smallest amount possible. I am amazed that I am sitting in this hotel in Hanoi writing to you in this blog.

The world is a very small place.

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## **Lessons Learned in Hanoi**

January 17, 2011

Jerilyn Hirsch was brilliant in bringing me here to Hanoi for a few days before going to Ho Chi Minh City to visit the school. This way, I get to try out international travel, equipment and supplies before I have to put the tire to the road. She knew she was traveling with a newbie.

So, here are some lessons learned:

**It's cold in Hanoi:** Thanks to Rodney Hiel for the heads up I threw in a pair of long underwear, a fleece muff and gloves. The long underwear has been glued to my body since I got here. The locals are wearing their winter coats all day long, and yesterday while rowing down the Perfume River all that gear came in very handy. The funniest thing has been this snuggly. Jerri told me

that I might not score a blanket on the International flight, so last minute I packed a snuggly that we got as a gift from Wells Fargo for opening an account. It's the perfect full length airplane blanket (with arms to read books etc) and it has become my blanket here in Hanoi. I have it under this little quilt. My room has a king size bed with sheets and a twin bed quilt over part of it. Seeing that arrangement and the window near the bed, I have opted for the single bed in the corner. The covers fit the bed, and for the most part it is quite cozy.

**Motor Scooter Driving:** They tell me that the traffic is worse in Ho Chi Minh City but it is hard to believe that could be true. I feel like the grandmother in Mulan who holds the cricket, closes her eyes and just walks across the street. The narrow streets are packed with zooming vehicles of all sorts; mostly motor scooters. However, there are buses, trucks, bikes, rickshaws and they are all zooming around. No street lights or stop signs. If you want to cross, you just figure out how to do it. It's like living in a video game.

**Hanoi streets:** The old city where we are staying is organized by the type of merchandise sold on the street, a clever urban planning design from centuries ago that is still used today. The streets are also named accordingly so it is true that on hardware street there is indeed hardware. The streets are about 16 feet wide at the most, the sidewalks are packed with parked motor scooters, and the vendors are sitting on the sidewalks cooking food, conducting business, chopping chickens, bending tin, welding or just about anything else. So, you walk along the "side" of the street. It's a wonderful and very noisy cacophony of sounds, sights and smells. I can't describe it!

**Hanoi of Today:** My image of Hanoi was never like this. Long Vo says that Vietnam is positioning itself to become the lead developing country by 2020 and I don't doubt it! Move over New York City, this one is a lot busier! The juxtapositioning of communism and capitalism is mind boggling. Merchants are everywhere and people seem very busy all the time. This is definitely a city on the move up; you can feel it. As a result, there are many tourists here and people passing through on their way into and out of other Asian cities. Our hotel, Golden Wings II, is a bit more like a hostel than a hotel. It's relatively inexpensive (about \$30 dollars a day) with private rooms with bathrooms, hotel water, breakfast and very accommodating and knowledgeable staff. You might want to check this out.

**Walking through the Alleys:** One of the tour books said for the true Hanoi experience walk through the alleys. What crazy advice. Would I have done this at all before coming here? Not on your life, I barely do that at home. However, the advice is true, the walk is safe, and this has led us to some very fun experiences. Following a comment in the Lonely Planet Hanoi guide, we found an unmarked cafe where you walk through a silk shop through a long walkway back to an open courtyard and proceed up three flights to the sky top roof overlooking the central lake. It's fun.

**Being compulsive about where you put things:** Finally, getting ready for Ho Chi Minh City here has allowed me to realize that I have to be compulsive about knowing exactly where is my money, my Vietnamese phrase book and my tissue paper (for the toilets) etc so that I don't have

to search everywhere. It takes a bit of getting used to , but reminds me of backpacking. Pulling out the exact amount of money needed helps finalize a purchase. Looking all over for it or pulling out 20 times the amount can set you up for a price increase. (The exchange rate here is 19,600 dong to \$1.00, so it's important to know the difference between 5,000, 50,000 and 100,000 dong on the spot and to know how to access the right amount smoothly. (100,000 is roughly \$20).

**Well, more later. We hit a bit of a snafu:** The Tiger Airlines which we are taking to Ho Chi Minh City has luggage and weight restrictions which we are kilos over. So, we might be paying more for bringing these supplies and gifts to the kids. We will see if we can get over that hurdle. Meanwhile, it's almost 6:00 am, time to get dressed and get set for another day of bustling Hanoi!

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### **Perfume River**

January 20, 2011

To take a break from the hustle of Hanoi, we took a trip to see the Huong Tich Pagoda in the Dai Bihn cave on the Perfume River. We boarded a small bus and headed north for more than an hour and drove through a number of villages. One seemed to be the shoemaking capital of the world; every store had rows and rows of shoes. It was an odd sight out here on dirt roads. Our bus ride ended, we jumped into small Viet Nam river boats and headed upriver for another hour passing rice paddies and very small hamlets.



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### **January 18th Visiting Ho Chi Minh--Really!**

January 27, 2011

Odd that I am getting my regular emails from the high school,

the hockey club, chamber orchestra changing their rehearsal times. I guess I really can be anywhere in the world and still conduct business, or sign-up for teacher appreciation dinner, or get a joke email from my mother.



However, I haven't been able to make many connections with my family. I think part of it is that we used to have schedules that gently collided and now they are totally out of sync. The times I can easily get them are around 6-7:30 at night. They could get the calls just before they left for school or work. (Ethan is already at school so that won't work). The other time is between 6-8 in the morning, and that isn't working either. My frustration is the limited contact I have had with my family. My joy is in discovery and becoming a competent international traveler.

The book Hanoi & Halong Bay Encounter is an excellent guide to Hanoi. It is very small and comes with a discreet map. The author Tom Downs has a wry sense of humor and an updated understanding about his hometown. It was invaluable as a guide and source of translated information.

Today we toured Hanoi with a group yesterday which is the fastest and cheapest way to do it. While these tours can be long, you are able to traverse the city and get in and out of the attractions without having to continuously hail a ride. The total cost, and the amount of time spent on the tour makes this an efficient and effective way to catch the sights. We went to see Ho Chi Minh in repose which was an eye opening trip back in time to what communism might have felt like even Fifteen years ago. We arrived and waited in line and were continuously repositioned so that we would be two by two. We entered and exited the screening area which was similar to that used in airports. The standing in lines got more rigid after that as we just about marched into the mausoleum. The guards in white uniforms were tasked with keeping us erect, silent and respectful. My hands were at my back and I had to put them to my side. Once in the mausoleum, even though there was signage everywhere, I was completely unprepared to actually see Mr. Ho Chi Minh lying in an open casket surrounded by four guards. We walked around the perimeter of the room under the watchful and continuous gaze of the armed guards, and we watched the changing of the guard. Like Buckingham Palace, the changing of the guards is one of those must see events. The men changed positions with amazing precision and extraordinary peripheral vision.

I go into a description of this mausoleum at length because it is the crown jewel of the communist party here in Viet Nam, and sets the tone for what I thought I would see here. However, I am wrong and confused. It's hard for an American to fully understand today's Viet Nam communist party, and I believe I will be discovering that it is hard for others as well. (P.S. Notice we are completely bundled up for this trip to Hanoi, although I hear its -23 back home so I won't be getting much sympathy!

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## **Where the Kids Live**

January 22, 2011

The kids at Anh Linh have had tough lives, I met a 20 year old yesterday who is turning gray. His father was put into prison, he was taken to a relocation camp and managed to get back to Anh Linh through the intervention of Cam Thuy. Other kids are living in squalor with relatives because one or both of their parents have abandoned them. Others live with parents who are just scraping by selling noodles in the street, working construction, or selling lottery tickets.



Anh Linh school provides a safe haven where these kids can have an education, a haircut, medical care, breakfast and lunch, and play safely with friends. The difference between their lives at school and their lives at home is quite striking as you can see.











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**The adventure continues in Part 2.**