Day 0: From Chicago to Vietnam

Chicago, Tokyo, Ho Chi Minh

Sunday Nov 17-18

This entry will be short and sweet.

It's time to start an adventure. Around 10:30am on Sunday Nov 9th, I departed O'hare International Airport in Chicago, USA on a flight to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with a two hour or so layover in Tokyo. That's about a 13 hr flight followed by another 5 hr. Pretty sweet.

Although it was a United Airlines flight, it was operated by Air Nippon Airways (ANA), a japanese airline. This flight really gave me the opportunity to see many of the things I take for granted being a smaller American. First off, I really appreciate all of the tall people in our country (thank you Wes!!). I also didn't realize that I appreciate the large population of overweight Americans. These two attributes have created a social norm for larger seats which has allowed me to have plenty of room to snuggle up on a flight and get some sleep... Asian airlines do not find the need for these luxuries. Generally, my feet don't even touch the floor because the seat is longer than my femur; however, on this flight, I think the seat ended mid thigh! Needless to say, it wasn't the most comfortable flight but they did supply plenty of wine and ice cream which was right up my alley. The layover in Tokyo was fine, it felt a little long since I couldn't speak or understand anything it seemed (#welcometoasia) but after an extra hr delay we finally loaded a bus and took a 15 min ride through a downpour to our plane. I'm pretty sure I didn't even make it to take off before falling asleep- the jet lag that I had been trying to prevent was inevitable.

Actually, to expand a little on that note- my goal was to stay up really late the few days before departing so that I could overcome the 11 hr time change with ease- Turns out, my beloved DBC did that for me! (The long 24/7 work that went in the week before for our final projects paid off in more ways than one!) On the flip side, that meant sleeping on the plane which really took away from the coding time I had hoped for... I created this blog but I was hoping to have built something a bit sweeter with all the time I saw in front of me(but I will do that down the road here, no worries)

Alright, enough of that, on to arrival! We arrive at the Ho Chi Minh Airport around 10:45 pm on Monday. I had zero issues with customs and found my bag no problem. The next step was to head out and find my ride to the hotel.

You know the saying what you don't know can't hurt you? It's a great one. I have been traveling/flying on my own since I was a pretty little kid- like 12 or something. I have never been even the slightest hesitant to find my ride upon arrival and I didn't have any reason to think differently on this trip- that is, until I started reading the fine print on the docs they sent us... There is a rather large section regarding locals falsely advertising themselves as G-Adventure affiliates. Rather than repeat the information stated, I'll just say, it planted a seed of hesitation in the back of my mind as I looked the large crowd of people waiting in a mob like formation outside of the airport doors.

Game on. As the doors opened, there was a confused feeling whether I was walking out on a red carpet or walking out like a criminal after court with cameras flashing everywhere and people shouting so many things at you your head begins to spin (No, I haven't experienced either and yes I am basing the thoughts completely off of movies etc... but you get the point). I saw a G Adventure sign with my name; however, I completely ignored it and kept walking just to make sure there wasn't another one in the sea of the welcoming committee. A few moments later I circled back to the smiling encouraging vietnamese man that without a word of English exchanged brought me safely to my hotel, Hoang Phu Gia in the center of Ho Chi Minh City.

Day 1: I don't think I'm in America Anymore

Tuesday Nov 19

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Hoang Phu Gia is a fine hotel to start with on this journey. It's location is pretty central and it's amenities are clean and have satisfactory space. I really enjoyed the fact that they have a Christmas tree already set up and ready to go for the holiday season. The front desk requested I be out of my room by 8:00 am only to move my stuff to a room down the hall. Whatever, fine. Into the new room I go where I find I already have a roommate who has gone out for the day. I'm on my own with an entire day to enjoy. Sounds great right? Except that I am not entirely sure what the heck I am supposed to do! Again, I cannot get enough of DBC and I loved every second I spent there in the weeks building up to this adventure; however, the team and mind building in regards to code tended to, ok it pretty much eliminated prep time for this trip. So, what to do- generally, when I arrive in a new place, I like to get a feel for my surroundings, where I am, what is around, what does the average local look to be interested in etc. With a map from the front desk in hand and my computer in my bag, I set out for a mini personal tour, lead by me. After about a half block, I turned around and went right back into the hotel. No, I'm not a total wimp, I just realized that I'm probably going to need some Dong (Vietnamese currency) and I haven't a clue where to get it. With a little advice I set out again. The map I was given had a few destinations highlighted that I thought I would seek out at some point today, the War Remnants Museum, the Notre Dame Cathedral, Independence Palace, and the Ben Thanh Market.

Markets are often an easy place to start a new cultural experience because they offer a little local tasting with the comfort of many other tourists in the same situation. Thus, Ben Thanh Market would be my first destination. About 10 min into my tour, I began to understand that maps and street signs are all a bit of an ish. The streets are all on a bit of a different angle, intersections don't really meet up, and sometimes the street doesn't exist as shown altogether! Also, the amount of traffic, holy traffic! There are a million mopeds on every block and they live by their own rules. Stop lights are just suggestions, sidewalks vs streets are only separate if it is convenient for them, and people trying to cross the streets are really just objects they will dodge if the being continues to walk at a consistently steady pace. #overwhelming

With nothing being where the map said it would be, people beeping at each other every stinking second (we all know that I really do not care for beeping), and the town having a scent that I have never encountered before, I had to pause for a second to give myself a reality check/pep talk. I have been traveling for over a day, I'm all messed up sleep wise, I haven't eaten anything substantial, and I'm in a country that is very different from home. To make sure I can actually enjoy this day as opposed for force it, I need to take a brief timeout and get on top of things. In order to do this, I am going to need something familiar, I need to code, I need something clean, I need to talk to Wes, even one of these things will suffice- plan made now time to execute. With a forced smile from within, I blazed onwards to find a coffee shop or restaurant. Low and behold, around the very next corner, the skies parted on this cloudy day and a ray of sunlight appeared- Starbucks.

I don't really drink coffee, but the coffee I was about to enjoy was going to be epic. I walked in to holiday music, english words on the board, and a sign that read "Free Wifi". Wow. I set my alarm for 40 min- 40 min of solid code time- Go. #heaven

Slowly, I could feel my power bar filling up with positive energy and encouragement. After my set time expired (awesome time-boxing, Emily), I briefly talked to a few family members, took a few minutes to figure out why the map was so creative, and then I was ready to hit the pavement to the market.

The market took place inside of a large old building that spanned an entire block. There were your traditional stands- trinkets and apparel, many shoe/sandal stands, knockoff stands with Rolex or Prada purses, tailor stands where you could get clothing made, scarf stands, jewerly stands, and luggage stands, just to name a few. These were all on one side of the market. On the opposite end, it was a farmer's market which included fruits, vegetables, fish, raw meat being butchered right there in front of you (hence the new scents surrounding the area), and flowers- so many amazing arrangements of flowers I wanted to buy them all!.

I looked around for quite sometime but really didn't find anything I couldn't live without; well, except a new pair or sunglasses because you can always use a new pair or sunglasses.

Anyways, next I decided to checkout the Independence Palace. We are in Asia, palaces are cool right? So on I went following my interesting map. On the way I stopped to watch what seems to be a New Years celebration being built. In the middle of the city square, they are building a little village that includes a little shop or something like it to represent countries around the world. For America they had a huge representation of the New York ball drop. It looks like they are going to have quite the party! -I tired to ask a question or two but they looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language... I should have worked on my Vietnamese before arriving.

After walking for a ways, I arrived at the Independence Palace- a big yellow mansion. Yep, that was it.

Moving on, I wanted to go to see the Notre Dame Cathedral. The story behind it is that the French had given it to them to symbolize unity among the countries. Clearly people from Vietnam hadn't been to Paris to see the real thing because they would have been pretty ticked off... The door were locked so people couldn't go inside of it but the outside is subpar to St. Monica's by a long shot.

So, I said screw this, I'm going to just walk until I find something that I find to be interesting... I walked until out of nowhere, I stumbled upon a huge wonderful park. Here, the overload of bikes and chaos seemed to freeze and tranquility set in. There were ceramic sculptures everywhere and little park benches surrounded by a sea of flowers and gorgeous plants and a man walking around the garden paths playing a vietnamese wooden flute for all to enjoy. It was a little eden in the middle of a crazy city. Across the street was a park nearly double the size. It is called Puppet Show Park. In the middle there is a traditional pavilion where occasionally events are put on for the public. Unfortunately, there are not any today or tomorrow but the concept is still pretty cool. There are many people in the park today, mostly students it seems. There is an elementary class playing badminton along the pathways, a small group of boys in a gazebo playing some old school rap on a 1990's boom box learning some new moves, a group of middle school girls being taught a choreographed routine, and then there are your stereotypical gardeners wearing traditional clothing and conicals on their heads planting a myriad of brilliant pink flowers.

I'm bored of this page so I'm going to stop.

Around 7 I had a meet and greet with the crew and then we all went out to dinner. Everybody seems lovely. I am the only American which was not expected but I think that is going to be fun- I'm going to learn a whole lot about a whole lot of different cultures and places. Wahooooo

Day 2: Tunnels and War

Wednesday Nov 20

Today I was up bright and early. After hearing previous stories from the vetreans in the group, it seems like our days are going to to be pretty full so if I want to get a coding fix, I'll have to get up a bit earlier than the others. Unfortunately due to some slow internet and not quite functional outlets, I didn't get as much done as I would have liked... but at least this blog can take comments now and doesn't look like a total joke :)

We all met downstairs at 8:00 for 1.5 hr van ride to the Chi Tunnels. (Note: The Chi Tunnels were built during the Vietnam War. They are underground tunnels that proved to be quite a problem for the Americans because of their vast size and capabilities) We had a local guide in the van with us that provided us with an overview of the Vietnamese views on the war- interesting time to be the only American on the trip... It was interesting to hear about the war from a local perspective.

I have a whole lot of more stuff written in my notebook that I will fill in here later but for a summery:

We went to see how the tunnels were built, how small the vietnamese were and thus how they could live in these small tunnels for years- popping up during the night to surprise American troops and then div back down into the depths where they could not be traced. We were able to try out these tunnels and let me tell you, they get pretty small!

Later in the afternoon we went to the War Remnants Museum. It was pretty cool. Wow do they blame Americans there- like wo. They have rooms and rooms of how awful Americans are and look what they did to us etc.

War sucks in pretty much every way imaginable.

Again, so much more to state later.

That night we had our first overnight train to Nha Trang...

Peace out

Day 3: Beaches of Nha Trang

Thursday Nov 21

We arrived in Nha Trang at 4:30am. Surprisingly, we didn't have any train delays or issues (Pa says that happens a lot) so that was a plus. We took a 20 min van to our hotel, Dong Phuong. The hotel is eh, the lobby is nice and the rooms are a box with two beds, but pretty clean so it's all good. Originally we were all going to go to the beach and watch the sunrise, but it was raining so everyone just went back to bed for a bit. -Lame... I couldn't fall back to sleep so I talked to Wes for a little bit :) and had a chance to respond to some emails and upload some pictures.

Around 8:00, our guide took us to a semi private beach for a day of fun! There was to be surfing, beach volley-ball, a clam bake, and some suntanning. Sweet! There was only one small bump in the road, (Actually there were like a million bumps on the actual road. Apparently they do not report pot holes over here... ) the real kicker issue was RAIN- and not just any rain. I mean like total downpour for hrs at a time. But as they say, when God give you rain, make... a glass of water?? I'm not sure where I was going with that one...

Anyways, we made the best of it. Between the 'showers' we got in some intensely bruising volleyball action (see pics), played in the waves, ate some clams, and had a good couple of laughs. We even learned a new Vietnamese game- Ashes. Basically, it is exactly the same as Spoons expect rather than the loser being eliminated, the winner gets to make a mark with ashes on the loser's face! (see pics)

Beach day was a success in a bit of a different way than we had planned but sometimes those days make for the best days. That night we went out to dinner at a local restaurant, Chopsticks. It was pretty good. I had a shrimp and veggie thing in a spicy sauce with a glass of wine. Note: wine here is not good. I recommend something- anything else.

After dinner we call gathered in a single room and just hung out (since it was again absolutely pouring- our plan of going to have beers on the beach would have to be put on hold).

It was very fun to get to know everyone a bit better. I'm not going to go through and write down things about each and every person but as an overview,

we have the German Girls x2, Austrian Girls x2, English Girls x3, Norwegian Boys x2, Australian Guy, Canada Guy, Irish Girl, Turkish Girl, and Me! All a great mix and all a lot of fun.

Around midnight or so, a few ventured out to the clubs and town and others retired to our rooms. Pretty cool Day 3.

Day 4: Spa Day

Friday Nov 22

Nha Trang

So, today was meant to be for a waterpark or some sort of boating adventure; however, again, ridiculous downpour! So, change of plans. We decided to head over to the mud bath spa to get our relaxation on. It was a beautiful little outdoor spa. There were these bathtub like mud pools that sat up to 4 and you can choose if you want them to be hot or cold. Since the rain was a bit chilling, we went for the warm one - good decision because even that turned out to be a little chilly. Fegin, Bernadette, Charlotte and I all had matching swimsuits so we shared a tub ;) After 20 minutes or so in the tub, we made a dash to a hot springs waterfall pool. We relaxed in there for almost an hr before hopping out to get our toes done and our shoulders rubbed. However, no such luck. The massages were backed up for the next few hours (even though 20 min ago they said they were open and no appointments needed) and the nail salon wasn't open today... like what? So, instead we packed up and headed back to find a salon in town.

Before we could do anything else, we decided we needed to have a snack at a little Vietnamese restaurant down the street from our hotel. We had some interesting spring rolls and and some delicious soup before requesting some massage suggestions from the owner. She sent us down an alley to a really unique inexpensive spa for some massages. There were fantastic! They found every little knot in my back and cracked every out of sorts joint and on top of that, it was under $4 for over an hr. Although amazing, I should clarify what I mean by 'unique'. So, these massages were bind massages- they were done by blind men and women. To be honest, I think that was part of what made them so good. When you lose one sense, other ones heighten right? Well their sense of touch in regards to muscle aches etc. was spot on so I'm going to say yay to that aspect. The other aspect was a bit funky- they sit on you while they give you your message, and stand, and maybe do some handstands! The three of us, Fegin, Charlotte, and I were all in the same room so although we couldn't understand, it was funny to listen to the three masseuses talk to each other at various points- I'm pretty sure they had a convo about our booties for a minute or two! Charlotte's was the only one that spoke any English. He was clearly trying to practice it because he talked to her constantly. It was funny. He was very honest and friendly as well unknowingly insulting sometimes too. Overall, it was a fun and new experience for us all.

After that we did our best to stay dry while we walked around a few shops (or a million shops if we count all of the pearl shops Fegin went into) and then we found a place to get a pedicure! Check, check, check.

With our lists accomplished, we set off to the train station for our next overnight train to Hoi An. Considering it was raining so hard the streets were flooding all day, I think we did a pretty good job making this rainy beach town a fun place to remember.

Day 5: Time to Shop, Hoi An style

Saturday Nov 23th

Arrival in Danang

Our second overnight train arrived in Danang around 7:30am. What an experience. Hm, how do I explain the accommodations situation on the trains... So, on a flight, there are a variety of classes on each flight, first, economy plus, coach etc; on Vietnamese trains, there is only one class per train so various trains have a particular class level. For example, our first train was economy plus- tall enough to sit up in your bunk, relatively clean sheets on the bed, minimal bugs, and regulated air conditioning. Pretty satisfactory. Our train to Danang was coach level, a bit less satisfactory than the previous and a bit of an experience. For example, the bathroom was a metal basin shaped hole in the floor with some handicap like rails on either side and there was a lovely cockroach family having a party under one of the beds when we arrived. (I think you get the picture without me listing the other fascinating attributes.) Luckily, I came prepared. I had read about this interesting level transportation and thus brought along a handy can of Raid and my own sheets to make the experience a bit more enjoyable for my roommates and myself. #livingthedream

Ok, back to the arrival. From the station we took a 40 min minibus to Hoi An. The tailor made picturesque shopping town. We stayed at the Golf Hotel (however, I think they forgot to include the golf course) which was pretty nice- big rooms, fairly new bathrooms, a nice breakfast in the morning, and only a few blocks from all of the fun shops and the river walk. We all decided to go to breakfast together so upon arrival we set off as a team of 12 to find an ATM and a restaurant on the river. Funny thing though, so apparently Hoi An likes to find random ways to taxes tourists- for example. at a particular street corner, if you are walking in a group larger than four, you have to pay a temple ticket tax- how that works, I don't know... all I know is that when Pa said scatter, we did and then had to find our way to the Banana Leaf Breakfast Location- I'm making it sounds more dramatic than it really felt but when you put it on paper, it is what it is!

Breakfast was fine. I was entertained by Ausi, Canada, and Ash (another Ausi that joined us that morning). After that it was time to shop. Many people found tailors to design suits and dresses for them, others went for the fun knockoffs, and some just went to a variety of fun restaurants. I went browsing with a few girls. I bought a fun painting for our dining room of some vietnamese river homes on stilts, pretty cute. Around 3:00 or so, i was shopped out, so I joined a few others on a bike ride to the beach! No rain here baby- just more bruising volley ball and some fun in the sun.

Later that night we went to this make your own spring roll very very local restaurant. There was SO MUCH food! It was really fun to make our own wraps, but I'm not sure I would call them really tasty...

After that, we went to the night market and a rooftop bar for a night cap. Success.

Day 6: Biking and Cooking in Hoi An

Sunday Nov 24

Today it's time to see Hoi An via bicycle. But first- let's learn how to cook. Fegin, Bernadette, Charlotte, and I decided it would be fun to take a cooking class at some point in Vietnam and today was the day. At 8:30 we began with a market tour. We had a private guide that explained all of the various ingredients that are grown locally and used in central Vietnamese cooking. Cooking here is a bit spicier than other regions in the country. The south requires more sugar and salt due to the amount of work they do in the rice fields and the north- well she couldn't say that many positive aspects about the northern cuisine- but here it is spicy to keep it healthy- to digest all of the grains consumed due to the lack of refrigeration available.

The class was wonderful. The owner of the restaurant explained how owning a restaurant is often the woman's job because they are around the house more, they learn to cook at a younger age, and they are the ones that go to the market during the day while the man is working- and picking out good ingredients is what make for good food. We make 4 dishes (#atetoomuch). A shrimp mousse soup (sounds way different than it is- it is amazing and supposedly the key to impressing your mother-in-law), a vietnamese pancake spring roll, fish skewers, and a mango mint salad. We brought home the recipes and I cannot wait to make them!

After we were extremely full and educated, we met up with the rest of the group for an afternoon biking tour through Hoi An. We saw beautiful countrysides, watered vegetable fields vietnamese style with buckets hanging from our shoulders, rode a water-buffalo (yes, rode it and did tricks with it), visited an old school sweet cemetery, and then wrapped things up with a boat ride down the mucky river. It was wonderful. The paths we rode on were beautiful yet challenging and saying hello to all of the children we passed was pretty cute as well. After we arrived back to the hotel, many of us went for a final dress fitting (I last minute had two of them made :) and then we all went to a fun group dinner at the Mango Tree. I had an amazing very spicy soup with a milkshake and it was delicious. For some late night fun we went our on the river walk for a fun glass of wine and people watching and then around midnight we called it a day to prepare for our 5 hour drive in the morning to Hue.

Day 7: Biking in the Rain

Hue, Vietnam

Monday Nov 25

From Hoi An to Hue, Vietnam

Monday, Nov 25

This morning we all met around 8:30am and loaded into the van for a nice 5 hr ride to Hue. The drive went by in a flash. I spent most of if on my computer typing out this journal from the paper version I have been keeping. The rest of the time it was just fun to chat with everyone about the new clothes they had made or what they planned to do in Hue for the next few days. When we arrived, we checked into the Tigon Hotel and then ventured out for some lunch. Hue is a pretty large and busy town without a whole lot of character in the center. The best way to experience the various aspects of the new town seemed to be on a motorbike; so, after lunch, out of nowhere, and entire motorbike crew pulled up to the restaurant ready to take us for a ride. Awesome. Generally, I do not care for motor cycles but here, they seem to be the only way to get around efficiently so game on.

The tour started with a visit to a rice museum, sounds really interesting, right? Turns out it was! This 75 year old charismatic lady lead us around somewhat of a shed that included all of the traditional ways rice is grown, watered, gathered, husked, and make into flour etc. (see pics) She was pretty impressive. Next it was time to visit Their Tri Tomb- previous emperors' graves sites. But instead of Sid handing me my helmet, he held out a rain poncho instead- the monsoon rains were back. One stinky poncho later and we were off on a long journey through a few local towns to the remembrance grave stones. I say that in such a confusing manor because they aren't actually burred there. When they were buried, a deserving prisoner that had already been sentenced to death would dig out long confusing tunnels

citadel

pagoda

tombs

insence

Day 8: Wandering in Hue

Tuesday Nov 26

After the extremely late night for many yesterday, today held zero plans until 1:30pm so it was a great day to just chill and explore as much as we chose. My roommate, Charlotte, left around 8:30 with Craig to visit the Citadel since she decided the rain was a bit much for the motor bike tour so I decided to finally take some time and phone the family at a decent hour and take some time to CODE and stop being so jealous of my fellow coyotes. I was able to talk to Wes for almost an hour! I miss that husband of mine quite a bit so it was needed and great. Turns out it snowed yesterday and stuck which means ski season has arrived. I also was able to talk to my mom for the first time since I left via skype - so proud she operates that well - yay mom! And then, I got to talk to Betsy.

SISTER LOVE! oh and she told me SHE IS HAVING A BABY!!!!!!!!!!!!!! ow ow congrats Bets and Jeremy!!! (I meant THEY are having a baby. wow. so freaking cool). 9 months prego due date: July 3rd. DUDE YOU'RE HAVING A BABY! I'M GOING TO BE AN AUNT!! ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh this is so cool! I plan to purchase a large amount of baby items from here on out.

So then of course I had to talk to Wes again to tell him the news :) Those two can talk more about it tomorrow when they take the Wahoo out of the water tomorrow without me (thank you guys and I wish i could be there with you!)

After everyone was caught up it was around 11:00 so I didn't have much time to explore on my own, so I just decided to start walking. I was so excited for B&J i didn't really care or think about where I was going. I ended up a mile or two away at some market, an extremely local market where it was clear that tourists/westerns do not visit often. Lots of pointing and giggling in my direction- and I don't think my skirt was tucked in my underwear... so I'm pretty sure they knew that I had no idea why I was there... Regardless, it was pretty cool. Everything there was fresh- it was provincial and real. The fish were flapping in the bowls, there were like a million little crabs running around in a pot as the lady dished them into a bag (not sure if that will hold long but that's not my expertise), there were ducks, chickens, and various other animals being skinned and chopped all right on the table. It was beautiful in a strange way- reality check- this is how food is prepared all around the world it might be in a shop or restaurant or on this seemingly dirty surface but regardless, here is in a sense where it all started, no?

The experience was great. So then, I walked for an hr or two more (I had to buy a watch so I knew what time it was) until I circled back and ran into Charlotte. We we to pick up some togo food for the journey that afternoon upon which we ran into Mark(Canada boy) and Macca (Ausi Guy) and listened to their interesting stories from late last night. (I'm glad I wasn't present??? Or aren't I?)

Anyways together we picked up our food and headed back to the hotel, to hop in a van, to hop on a train, to take us to Halong Bay... Beautiful sites, here we come.