

# A Study Abroad in Vietnam

By Elizabeth Pacheco

I have to be honest, when I left home to study abroad in Vietnam this fall semester I really was not prepared. Of course I had gotten the necessary shots, packed way more than was necessary and made a half-hearted attempt to learn some Vietnamese, but looking back this was barely adequate. I understood the itinerary of the program and the assignments that would be required of me, yet I had no idea how much I would be challenged, my limits pushed and my comfort zone constantly ignored.



As what seems to be a popular choice for junior year college students, I decided that I wanted to spend the fall semester of this academic year studying abroad. Since I am an environmental studies major, I chose to participate in a Natural and Cultural Ecology program run by the School for International Training (S.I.T.). After meeting up in Los Angeles with seven other American students from all different universities, we flew over 20 hours to reach the country's capital, Ho Chi Minh City (previously known as Saigon). From there we traveled south to Can Tho, which is located in the heart of the Mekong Delta. This area, often referred to as the Vietnam's "rice basket," is the final destination of the 3,000 mile-long Mekong River that stretches from the Plateau of Tibet to the South China Sea. The largest city in the Delta, it is also home to Can Tho University where we took various classes, including an intensive beginning Vietnamese course. The program continued with a trip to Cambodia, through which the Mekong also flows, to do a comparative study followed by a trip to the Red River Delta in the northern city of Hanoi.

For the final month of the semester we were given a stipend to live anywhere in the country and conduct an independent study project. For that month I chose to remain in Hanoi where I researched environmental perspectives in the folklore of the Kinh and Muong ethnicities, two of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups. The opportunity to live on your own in a foreign country for a significant period of time was one of the driving reasons behind my choosing an S.I.T. program. Another reason was the opportunity to do a long-term homestay. During our time in Can Tho

(about five weeks), I stayed with a newly married couple and the wife's parents. The wife is an English teacher at a local high school and teaches additional English classes at the University on nights and weekends. Her husband is a businessman who primarily works from Ho Chi Minh City and her parents, neither of whom spoke English, have since retired and stayed at home. The hospitality I was extended during that time was incredible and I don't think I've ever been fed so much!

During the first days of our time in Vietnam, our academic director asked us the inevitable question, "Why did you choose Vietnam?" The response was almost unanimous, "why not?" If you can spend an entire semester anywhere in the world studying anything you want, why not choose a place completely different from our American universities? Asia certainly met the criteria. In the first two weeks of the semester I went through some significant culture shock. I was living in a city where the only other foreigners were the students on my program and being stared and pointed at was not considered rude. I can easily say that I have never eaten so much rice in my entire life nor have I had so many culinary adventures. These included everything from frog and snail to pig intestine and snake. I climbed through mud that was almost waist high for soil samples, went diving in rice paddies for plant roots and spent three days in a floating village in the middle of a lake in Cambodia in an effort to understand the flood cycle of the Mekong. I went hiking in Vietnam's first national park created under the urging of Ho Chi Minh during the 1960's and spent the night in another national park where I watched both the sunset and sunrise. Any worries I had about the relationship between Vietnam and the United States were quickly dismissed. Having to live with the effects of war every day, they have moved on, slowly rebuilding their lives and consequently were incredibly friendly and eager to welcome you into their country. Not everything that I saw and experienced was wonderful and there were many times I didn't

*(continued on back)*



have to remind myself I was spending the semester in a developing country run under Communism.

When people ask me about my semester in Vietnam, I've noticed that I can't help but smile. Words like "amazing" and "incredible" seem inadequate and the hundreds of photos I took aren't quite sufficient in giving an accurate description of the experience. Perhaps though the best response I can give is that in the near future I'm going back.

*Elizabeth Pacheco is currently a junior year environmental studies major at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, NY and is interested in pursuing a career in environmental journalism.*

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## Redeployment Ministry with St. Thomas'

By John Ward



Last summer I was downsized and became unemployed. While it was not a surprise since my field, financial services, was in a state of upheaval -- the shock was still real. The ensuing months were filled with a range of emotions, from being angry to feeling a sense of relief from the constant worry of my employment status.

In today's world it is reasonable to assume that many people may experience unemployment at some stage in their lives. When it does occur, two major problems generally materialize. One of these is financial - you need a job (for money) in order to support yourself and your family. The other is self-respect and self-esteem. Many who do not have a job and are searching, can lose focus in life, and can lack a sense of purpose.

One of the main things job seekers need is hope - the belief they can and will find another opportunity and that their careers are not over. I was fortunate in that my wife helped to lift me up emotionally with persistent words of encouragement. However, I soon realized that there was a larger pool of support that I was not tapping. I needed spiritual support as well. I called Marek and explained my situation. While I was not accustomed to asking for help, he was so receptive and non-judgmental that I became reassured. During our conversation he shared how St. Thomas' was embarking on developing

a **Redeployment Ministry** to help those seeking to re-enter the workforce.

I was somewhat skeptical at first but decided to attend the first meeting. I discovered that I was not alone. Others were hurting just as my family. The Ministry wasn't merely about finding employment. It became apparent that the Ministry's goal was mostly about offering support and a listening ear. As a Christian group, it followed two main commandments: *Love the Lord and Love your neighbor as yourself*. It offered a helping hand. It reinforced the notion that we all have a spiritual support family at St. Thomas'.

The emotional support I drew from the **Redeployment Ministry** was real and welcoming. I found that it helped to recharge my search and focus my efforts. This experience reaffirmed how fortunate my family was to be part of St. Thomas'. During trying times it is the support of those around us that will ultimately provide shelter in the storm.

I encourage anyone to seek out the **Redeployment Ministry**. It is important to remember that you have a family in St. Thomas' and that you are not alone. There are wonderful people that truly do want to help.

Pray and bring your worries and concerns to The Lord and to St. Thomas'.

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*In an effort to support parishioners and non-parishioners during these difficult economic times, St. Thomas' Church has formed a **Redeployment Ministry**. The ministry is composed of parishioners who have personal experience with unemployment and who are qualified to assist job seekers with networking. The ministry's most valuable service is that of providing a caring ear at a time when it is most needed. The ministry responds to all inquiries by telephone and email and meets, as demand requires it, on the Second Floor of the Parish Hall at St. Thomas'. To schedule a meeting, please call **Juan Colina** at (215) 203-4744 or email [juan.colina@cashconversioncycle.com](mailto:juan.colina@cashconversioncycle.com).*

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