



**Getting Around Vietnam:  
Where We Went and What We Did  
By: Héctor Montfort  
Edited by: Elda Cantú**

## **Day 1**

Our Voices of the Future APEC 2006 program started on a Monday, November the 13<sup>th</sup>, at Hanoi University. There, we were introduced to the different organizers, teachers and students from different parts of the world in the program. After having a short coffee break and a wonderful welcome by Vietnamese student Kim Chi and Professor Douglas Jardine, we left to the Temple of Literature on the two group buses. If it was their first visit to Vietnam, there wasn't a single person on the bus that wasn't amazed by the traffic in the city: hundreds of motorcycles going around in what looked like chaos but worked perfectly well.



On first impression, the temple looked more like a garden than an actual temple. Nobody could help but to gasp when taken by surprise by dozens of beautiful examples of bonsai trees that decorated the garden, together with a pond. As we walked on, we started to see why it's called temple. The architecture, dating from the time when Vietnam was part of the Chinese Empire, was the main feature of the shrines and the small park.





*By the time the sun started to come down, we were leaving the Temple of Literature towards Tran Quoc Pagoda, a religious site at the edge of the Westlake. Aside from the beauty of the place itself, we were lucky to be there at the time when a monk was praying in one of the shrines, singing and playing a percussion instrument, making the visit as complete as it could be.*

*Not very far away was the POTOMAC, a restaurant and the riverside, on top of a traditional Vietnamese boat. After some waiting, delicious dinner was served. By the end of the first day, we started to get to know Vietnam and its people, and the bonds between students and teachers from around the world were starting to take shape.*

## **Day 2**

*The second day started early in the morning, as by 6:00 AM we were on the bus leaving for Ha Long Bay, the World Natural Heritage Region on the northeast coast of Vietnam. A whole day was dedicated to this visit this place; and we would later realize why.*

*After a three hour trip on the bus, we got down by the seaside, divided the group in two, and got on tourist boats that took us to this place. Most of didn't know what to expect. As we sailed into the sea, women and children in small motorboats sailed besides us, and as authentic merchants of the sea, offered*







# Trip Notes

fruits exotic to many of us, exchanged them for an amount we decided of only a few thousand dong, and then sailed away with a smile on their face and a waving hand, her and her children. I'm sure that I'm not the only one that was deeply touched by the radiating glow and warmth of the Vietnamese people everywhere.





## Trip Notes

*When we left, we could see small silhouettes at the horizon, and by now, we started to recognize island that looked like mountain peaks that pierced the ocean surface. Most of them were completely full of vegetation, but apparently there was no pattern for the size or shape. Each of these islands was worthy of picture sessions, except there were hundreds of them at sight, every moment more.*

*We stopped at one of the biggest islands on sight, which was one of the main tourist stops, and actually world heritage site by UNESCO. After climbing a couple of hundred steps, we entered a huge cave that was the doorway to a cavern hundreds of thousands years old. Stalactites and stalagmites, high humidity and dark passageways characterized a world that was only steps away from the open ocean. Later on we had lunch on the boats, and as expected, seafood lovers were delighted with very fresh crab, shrimp, squid and other finger-licking plates. "Surreal" maybe an appropriate word to describe the Ha Long Bay experience.*







# Trip Notes



*Back in Hanoi (in a return trip that felt more like three minutes instead of three hours, everyone still being dazed and amazed by our day on the sea) we had dinner at a French restaurant, and afterwards some had the energy to go to a café near the hotel to share the best moments of the day.*





## Day 3

After two days of mainly tourist activities, it was time for the Voices of the Future Students to start the hard work. On our second visit to Hanoi University, we had a brief session in which we were explained what was the snapshot (a basic introductory article on a specific person after having an interview) and were divided into groups of five to six students and an educator. Later on, the Vietnamese representative of UN Habitat, Nguyen Quang, among other government officials, gave talks on their areas, and we had our first opportunity to interview them directly in order to get an idea on what the shape of our snapshots would look like.



From the university we left to Bac Thang Long and Tien Son Industrial Zones. The industrial park is enormous, (unfortunately, taking pictures was strictly prohibited) and we got the chance to see the production lines and the design process of DENSO, one of the world's biggest automotive motor parts maker. After two speeches by company personnel, we all were thinking "Wow, Vietnam's industry IS growing!"

Later on in the evening, we had half hour to dress up and get ready for the first gala dinner, the "Doing business with Vietnam Forum" formal dinner. This took place in the salon at the Meliá Hotel. It was obviously full of business people from all over the world, and some of us had the chance to part the table







and even have brief conversations with them, which would be continued on the next two days. For the rest of us, a great jazz band and yet another succulent dinner closed another super day.



## Day 4

The “Doing Business with Vietnam Forum” started this day, and we had the opportunity to be present at the conferences to learn and participate. The forum was held at the newly built National Convention Centre- a world-class center for events of this magnitude to be held. Talking, learning and even dining amongst the world’s economic leaders, we knew we had to make the most of this opportunity.





The introductory speech was given by, no less than the Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Dung. After welcoming the delegates and business people and giving us an idea of the progressive phase that Vietnam is going through, the sessions began. Creating the right business environment, strategies for industrial development and financial market development were among the topics covered. These discussions were held in a way that everyone was actively involved: a moderator with deep knowledge on the field headed the discussion of political and economic leaders from different APEC economies, so that an “open discussion” took place. After each speaker had the opportunity to state their views, a question and answer session followed, with inquiries and commentaries from specialized members in the audience.

As delegates we tried to learn as much as we could from each of the speakers, and outside the conference room, we engaged in conversations and casual interviews with delegates from different economies and backgrounds.







*After having lunch at the center, we headed to the university and worked on our snapshots with the information we had gathered throughout the day. At dinner time, and not before working for some hours, we had our Voices of the Future International Night. Here we listened to the Minister of Industry in Vietnam and the memorable speech by Mrs. Fulbright, among others. Later on, the choir and band from the Nguyen Dinh Chieu School for the Blind deeply touched anybody that has ever appreciated artistic expression and musical talent, with inspired interpretation of traditional Vietnamese and world music. After this, students from the university danced and sang other typical folkloric rhythms from the region, and the evening ended with the students from different economies sharing souvenirs and gifts brought from home. It was truly a special night, since we all had the opportunity to get even closer to each other.*





## *Day 5*

*Towards the end of the week, most of us were starting to feel tired, since the days were long and we were usually getting an average of 5-6 hours of sleep. However, a cold shower, an espresso and the motivation to be at the summit was enough to keep us alive during the day.*

*On our second visit to the National Convention Centre we were starting to learn how to get around the place and meeting the right people in a more confident and natural way. If you looked around, you could probably see one of the students from the Voices program talking to a Vietnamese economist, the chairman of an information technology corporation, or the general manager of an aircraft engine producer. If you had the courage to walk up, introduce yourself, and ask for a few minutes of conversation, chances were you were going to get them, since most of these heads of countries and companies were open and friendly.*







*The final gala dinner took place at one of Vietnam's biggest and prettiest hotels, the Daewoo Hotel, and for the last time we had an evening with live classical music and exquisite sitting with the world's leaders.*

