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Seattle to Vietnam: Traveling with a purpose

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HANOI — Don and Diana Holmlund's packing list for their first trip to Vietnam included a case of toothpaste, six dozen toothbrushes and 18 pounds of Beanie Babies. Dawn Sanders will spend part of her vacation budget shopping for handicrafts made by disadvantaged Vietnamese children. She'll sell them at the Sammamish farmers market next summer, and donate the money to programs set up to train the junior entrepreneurs. Jen Weaver, a recent graduate of Lewis & Clark University's Southeast Asian studies program, plans to spend a month volunteering at an orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon).

With Son Michael Pham, a Vietnam War refugee now a successful Seattle businessman, they and a group of 12 others from the Seattle area were in Hanoi last week for the start of a two-week, 10,000-mile "HumaniTour" across Vietnam.

They'll do the usual sightseeing, but they'll also take time out to visit schools, orphanages and hospitals, delivering clothes, medical supplies and toys they spent the past few months collecting. It's called traveling with a purpose, a chance to not only explore another part of the world, but to make a difference in people's lives. Making this kind of travel happen for people in Seattle is Son Michael, 50, who fled South Vietnam at age 18 with his parents and four siblings at the end of the war in April, 1975. The family went to the Philippines, Guam, then to the United States where he lived in Arkansas and Chicago before moving to Seattle with a hotel development company.

Six years ago he formed a Bellevue organization called Kids Without Borders. What started out as a school service project for students to sort clothes and donated items for children in other countries quickly evolved. The organization works in 24 countries, developing schools and vocational training centers for street children and orphans and collecting donations for basics such as cribs, wheelchairs and bikes.

For Son Michael, founder and board president of the Seattle Viet Nam Association, the humanitarian tours were the logical next step. "It's not a Habitat for Humanity type of tour," he explained over lunch in Seattle before leaving for Vietnam. Tour members aren't expected to build houses or dig trenches. "It's a chance to engage face-to-face with the people with the goal to get involved in some way once they get back."

Like the Holmlunds, retired educators living in Allyn, Washington, everyone brought two suitcases each, one for clothes and the other filled with donations. A local dentist sent the toothbrushes and toothpaste. A mortgage broker donated 200 pens. Diana Holmlund found the Beanie Babies on eBay. In Hanoi, the group visited the Thanh Xuan Peace Village, a school and medical center set up to care for children with mental or physical defects attributed to dioxin (agent orange) used during the war. With good nutrition, medical care, education and skills training, many can move on to lead normal lives, but the Hanoi facility lacks some of the basics such as adequate filtering systems for clean water.

Over tea and bananas, the group met with the director, then began unpacking boxes of bandages and medical supplies. "This is gold for them," Son Michael said. The next hour was spent going from classroom to classroom handing out Beanie Babies and candy, and admiring the children's handicrafts — key chains strung with colored beads and detailed embroidery work.

Dinner that evening was at the Hoa Sua Training Restaurant, culinary boot camp for street kids and orphans who go on to work at jobs in the hospitality industry. Son Michael introduced three young women whom Kids Without Borders mentors as part of a program called "Teach Me to Fish." The idea is to find ways for children to

transition out of the orphanages, so by the time they turn 18 and have to leave, they can see a future beyond working in a sewing factory or turning to prostitution. Two of the girls at the table were training to be bartenders. The other's career was still up in the air, but as Vietnam's tourist industry expands, it looks like she'll have some options, thanks to the man they call Chu Son, Uncle Son.

The wind ambassador

"The people are the best part," Diana Holmlund told me when I asked her what she liked the most about combining vacation time with a humanitarian mission. That thought has been with me too during much of the past three weeks my husband, Tom, and I have been traveling in Southeast Asia.

This is our last night in Hanoi, and thanks to a delightful young Vietnamese woman I met through a Web site called www.hospitalityclub.org, I'm more convinced than ever about the way Southeast Asia is blossoming for travelers. Le Phuong Loan, a 22-year-old medical student who calls herself Loannie, was surfing through postings on Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree bulletin board a few months ago when she across one titled "Hanoi Hell." It was posted by a traveler whose cellphone was stolen, and he had nothing good to say about traveling in Hanoi. "It made me cry," she told me when we met for dinner. "Every city has two sides, good and bad."

Loannie describes herself as a shy person, but she resolved to do something to help visitors discover "the real life" in Hanoi. She joined the hospitality club and signed on with couchsurfing.com, then began volunteering her services as a guide to foreign travelers who e-mailed her. Loannie explained that she can't offer people a real couch. She lives in suburban Hanoi with her parents, both police officers; her twin brother and a younger brother. What she can offer is the chance to meet up for a few hours, and show visitors a little of the Hanoi "just the locals know."

Her nickname is the Wind Ambassador "because the wind comes and goes, just like people do in the world." Loannie rode her bicycle a half an hour in the rain to meet us at a cafe tucked in an alley behind an art gallery in Hanoi's old quarter. In her backpack was a packet of sticky rice and green beans wrapped in a banana leaf. "It's a symbol of the earth," she explained. The Vietnamese eat this around the lunar new year. Loannie plans to become a dietitian. She's a vegetarian, and spends most of her time studying. She hasn't yet been able to make time to learn to drive a motorbike, but she receives many e-mails from foreigners, and tries to meet them two or three times a week.

She asked what we wanted to do, and we offered to take her to dinner. She suggested Quan An Ngon, probably the best place to sample authentic Vietnamese street food in Hanoi without actually eating on the street. The concept is genius: Set up a spacious and clean garden restaurant to seat hundreds, then hire some of the city's best street cooks and install them in outdoor kitchens where customers can watch the show. We feasted on spring rolls with crab, sticky rice with coconut, salad, bun ca or fish soup with noodles and beer, for about \$6 for the three of us.

Loannie explained that most of her friends think it's a little odd that she volunteers as a guide to foreigners, but she likes to practice her English, and she wants to help visitors avoid what she calls "duck travel," just following the guidebooks and experiencing only the tourist spots.

After dinner, we cabbled over to where she parked her bike. It was a five-minute walk to our hotel and an hour's ride home in the dark for her. She unlocked her bike and the parking attendant some money. Then she pulled a hat and plastic poncho from her backpack, and just like the wind, she was gone.

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