

Four Nights in Ba Ria

I have just returned from a 3-week trip to Vietnam with my friend Michele. We met last year on a package tour of Vietnam, and both now sponsor children - Michele a boy in HCMC, and me a girl in Ba Ria. This trip was to be part holiday, and part visit to the children.

We spent the first week in HCMC, then planned to spend a weekend in Vung Tau, followed by a week in Ba Ria. Most of the information we received about Ba Ria, was not very encouraging. "there is only one place to stay", "take a mosquito net", "the town is full of dogs", "there will not be enough to do for more than a couple of days", etc. etc.

Kathryn Gow was also visiting Ba Ria to carry out some project work, and assured us she would find some things for us to do. Mick O'Malley emailed a contact address in Vung Tau, (KJ at Café 626) for us to get further advice and support.

On Saturday morning we caught the hydrofoil from HCMC to Vung Tau, and then a taxi to our hotel. The taxi driver spoke good English, so we took his business card. After lunch we tracked down KJ at Cafe 626, and learned that most of the children from the orphanage had gone to Da Lat, with Madam Huong and some of the staff. He was not sure when they expected to return. We phoned our English-speaking taxi driver and headed for Ba Ria to get our bearings and find Kathryn Gow. First stop was the orphanage to see if they could give us a return date for the Da Lat group. Some gardeners and two staff, who were caring for 9 babies plus a few children, who did not go on the holiday, warmly welcomed us. The others were expected back on Tuesday so we arranged to revisit on Wednesday. After playing with the babies and chatting (via the taxi driver) with the carers, we headed for Ba Ria town.



Photos: Ba Ria, Vietnam - June 2001

Our initial impression of Ba Ria was just as it had been described, and when we searched for the Bach Dang hotel, nobody seemed to know of it, so we had to resort to the 'grapevine' and ask where the foreign lady was staying - that had a much quicker result. Kathryn assured us she had some students of English who would keep us busy for a few days, doing conversation practice.

We went back to Vung Tau for our planned weekend, and arranged with our taxi driver for a Sunday tour, then transport, via Long Hai, to Ba Ria on Monday. We also booked to go to Da Lat the following weekend, as could not imagine spending much time in Ba Ria.

We called into Café 626 on Monday morning to let KJ know our plans, and he arranged for his wife, Vinh, to meet us at the Orphanage on Wednesday, to be our translator. The rest of the day was filled up touring the Long Hai area - the beach, some pagodas, monks who have a friendly (!) boa constrictor, caves previously used by the Viet Cong, and some spectacular views. At about 4.30 that afternoon we arrived in Ba Ria. Our taxi driver found a new, family run, mini hotel (My Nga) across the street from the new market. Two double beds, air conditioner and a fan, bathroom, and TV. Things were looking up. We left a message for Kathryn to let her know our whereabouts, and then had dinner at a restaurant on Bach Dang Road. On return to our hotel, the owner's young daughter brought a tray to our room - cups, soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste, a thermos of boiling water, as well as brand new towels and blankets (the latter was a bit unusual as the temperature was over 30°C).



Photo: New buildings in Ba Ria – My Nga (Mini Hotel) is in the middle.

Tuesday morning we met up with Kathryn for breakfast at the nearby Com (rice) shop - omelette, cooked and served in the same hot pan, accompanied by a loaf of Vietnamese bread. Kathryn gave us the business cards of Dai Loc (the watch-repairer) and Dr Tan - both people who spoke English and who would arrange for us to meet other potential students for our "classes". As soon as we arrived at Dai Loc's shop, he phoned some of his friends, and we had an instant English class, held in the Market Tea Shop. We met the wives of three of the men, as well as two of their children. After spending the morning in English conversation practice we arranged to meet in the evening for more English, then had some lunch before visiting Dr Tan. The afternoon was filled up looking at his photos and listening to his stories. Apart from his

medical career, he is very interested in photography, and has taken some great photos each with it's own tale.

Later we found an Internet Cafe and sent some emails. It was slow going, the power went off before we finished, and the generator was then plugged in so we could carry on.

That evening our students treated us to a “special surprise dinner” - frog meat with vegetables, followed by pigeon soup. It was actually quite delicious. The rule at the table was only English was to be spoken, and I don't think anyone broke the rule, though we all had some laughs trying to negotiate some of the conversation. On return to the hotel, there was a note from Kathryn saying she was presenting at the Long Dat Vocational School on Thursday (Psychology of Teaching), and she'd arranged that I would talk to staff about 1st Aid and Safe Work Practices. Not much time to prepare!



Photo: Special Dinner with English Students.

Wednesday morning we headed out to the orphanage to meet up with our interpreter, but no-one came (have since found out that Vinh was really ill with a bad flu). There was nobody at the orphanage that spoke English, and we were really having a difficult time. Finally, it was decided (through sign, mime and gesture), that one of the workmen would take me back into Ba Ria town market, on his motorbike, to locate one of our "students".

I found Mr Nguyen, the locksmith, who willingly shut up his shop and came back to the orphanage with us. He did a fantastic job - his first experience at interpreting. We were able to spend some time with the children, I met my sponsor child and gave her some gifts, and Madam Huong told us about the recent trip to Da Lat. She also gave me a list of the children's names, highlighting those who do not yet have a sponsor, and a copy of the half-yearly orphanage report. (I'll pass these to Colin Twelftree, sponsorship coordinator and send a copy to AVVRG).

Sponsorship are still available – To be involved in the Sponsorship program, Please contact Colin during normal business hours (Adelaide) on 08-82967910 or Jan Maskall (AVVRG Secretary) on 07-54942169.



Photo: Children at the AVVRG Orphanage – Ba Ria

Madam Huong then phoned Madam Suong from the Centre for Deaf Children, who invited us to visit there. As it was school holiday time, all the children were away with their families, but Madam Suong and her secretary made us very welcome, and gave us a tour of the school. She said they are badly in need of sewing machines, as they only have three old treadle machines used by 40 students. She is also after some pictures and calendars to decorate the classroom walls, which are really bare. I gave Madam Suong a Makaton (signing vocabulary) package, which should be useful for children who may not be able to master conventional sign language. They also want more information about teaching the deaf, and general information about deafness and hearing impairments.



Photo: Madam Suong and Jim Manuel at the Centre for Deaf Children.

On return to Ba Ria town, we found the power was off again, so headed for the market to meet up with our English class. We presented Mr Nguyen with

the Golden Interpreter Award (two souvenir books on Australia). This gave us even more to discuss - the morning's work, and all the pictures in the books. Met Kathryn for dinner and had a very tasty fish dish, then spent the evening chatting in a candle lit coffee shop, as the power was still off.

Thursday morning we were collected by the Principle and Deputy Principle of the Vocational School and taken to Long Dat to do our presentations. The 'students' were all teachers at the school. Kathryn presented first, which luckily gave me some time to go through my hastily made notes, with Minh, who was to interpret for me. It was rather odd talking about Safe Work Practices in a place that is surrounded by ground that Kathryn thought may not be entirely clear of mines.

After our presentations, the Principle gave us each a gift, and then took us to a restaurant for lunch. During lunch, Kathryn suggested Michele and I should visit Long Son, an old fishing village and Buddhist temple about 30 minutes drive from Ba Ria. The deputy and his driver offered to take us that afternoon. The village is very Chinese in character, with a Sacred Boat revered by the local fishermen. The temple has beautiful carvings, mother of pearl inlay furniture and painted screens, and a huge meeting hall where we had tea. We were escorted around by a monk and an elderly lady - the men separate from the women, as is their tradition. Mr Cao, the deputy, had never been to Long Son before, and we all really enjoyed the afternoon. On the way back, the sky turned black and extremely heavy rain fell, so it was difficult to see where we were going. It was a relief to arrive safely back in Ba Ria. The power was off again, so we found our 'students' in the market and spent some more time practising English conversation, until going for dinner in the dark. Thankfully the cafes and restaurants use gas.



Photo: Jill Manuel presenting Safe Work Practices at Long Dat Vocational School – Interpreter Miss Minh on right.

Friday morning we took some photos around Ba Ria, and did some shopping in the market, before having a last English class. Everyone is very

enthusiastic about improving his or her English. They all attend regular classes but get very little opportunity to converse with native English speaking people. Our group come from various business and career backgrounds - watch repairer, locksmith, optician, motorbike mechanic, and university student (Humanities) plus one night, an English teacher.

At 3.00pm our taxi arrived to take us back to Vung Tau in time for our trip to Da Lat. We were very sad to leave Ba Ria, having made so many friends, and certainly had plenty to do. Our 'English Class' gave Michele and I a gift of a lacquer ware wall hanging each, and we exchanged addresses before saying goodbye. Michele and I plan to go back to Vietnam again next year and will spend more time in Ba Ria.

Mr Nguyen collects proverbs and sayings, and we certainly found one to suit our week - ***'You can't judge a book by its cover'***.

Jill Manuel
June, 2001

NB The mosquitoes can be controlled by personnel insect repellent and mosquito coils, and the dogs are really too tired and lazy to do any more than look at you.



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