EVS in Vietnam

My trip began on the 5th of December 2014. I went to Sofia airport early in the morning. It was super cold. I got on a flight to Paris, where I had a few hours until my next flight to Hanoi that lasted around 11 hours. When we started descending and we got under the clouds I was very surprised. I saw so many lakes and rivers, they were all over the place. Another thing that made a very strong impression on me was the fact that there were only a few cars on the highway and hundreds of motorcycles.

I was super excited when we landed and I got out of the plane, because I was not cold at all. As a matter of fact, I was even feeling a little hot with my sweatshirt on.

I knew that Mr. Lam, the guy from the local organization, and Kristina, another volunteer that had already been there for a month, were going to meet me upon arrival. And so they did. We got into a normal black car with no signs on it, and later on I figured it was actually a taxi. As soon as we got in the cab I told Mr. Lam that I need to exchange money and go to a mobile operator’s office to get a SIM card with 3G. I knew that I was going to need it, because one day before my departure I was informed, that I will be taken directly to an ancient village, 60 kilometers away from Hanoi. I had also been told, that there might be a computer club with Internet, but of course, I could not rely on a “maybe” for something as important as Internet.

On our way to the city I could not stop smiling. Everything was so super different than all the things I had seen in my life so far. It was a different reality. I was looking at all the people that were riding their motorcycles. I was looking at the signs written in Vietnamese. It was impossible not to notice how dirty it was. Also, the air was super polluted and almost everyone was wearing a mask. But I was enjoying absolutely every single little thing. I was noticing so many details, I felt like a kid again. It was a great experience.

Several days before the beginning of my trip, I had a video conversation on Skype with Kristina. She told me this and that about her stay. She mentioned some things that she thought were weird and strange, and one of them was how people only sell one type of things on each street. As we were on our way to the ancient village, apparently we were passing through the dog street, where they were only selling cooked dog. I will always keep that memory in my mind. Unfortunately I was too slow and I could not take my phone out of my pocket quick enough to snap a shot of it.

The whole trip to the village was quite overwhelming. But I was not shocked. I left from home with no expectations whatsoever, and I was just living the moment the whole time. I loved the banana palm trees on the side of the road, the cattle, the flooded rice fields, the extremely narrow buildings that were everywhere, the completely opposite ratio of cars to motorbikes compared to Bulgaria, the warm weather, the conversation in Vietnamese between the driver and Mr. Lam… it’s hard to put an end to this list. Yes, I was tired from the flight, but I was also so super happy and excited that I was there.

When we got to the village we passed through a giant gate with the car. I think that was the official entrance. I was surprised to see that next to a house down the block there was a flooded yard. And then, next door – another house again. Also, the nature was so beautiful, most of the trees were green, there were so many green plants, and I was coming from a place where all the trees and flowers had been dead for a few months, so this situation was making me feel the exact opposite of depressed, I just can’t find the word to describe it better.

So the taxi stopped and Lam said that we have arrived. Me and Kristina took our suitcases out of the trunk and started dragging them through the narrow pavement streets between the high brick walls that were surrounding everybody’s front yards. We got to the place and we met “Colan”, or at least that’s what we used to call her, because it resembles a lot the Bulgarian word for a belt. She was the owner of the place. Lam told us that she’s a widow and her son had also passed away. There was also a one year old baby. I still have no clue whose baby that was, but I didn’t really care, because I don’t like babies anyway. They invited us inside the house. We had to jump over through the windows, because there were no doors. There were also no glass parts at all, just some wooden covers. The whole house was made of wood. Maybe except for the tiles on the roof. We sat on the wooden sofa and they offered us some green tea. I love tea. When I tried it I was surprised, because I expected to get the usual taste of green tea, but this one had a very strong smell and it was very bitter. We continued with a short presentation on Lam’s laptop about the culture in Vietnam. I learned that I should not stick the chopsticks vertically in the rice, because it means something about dead people or something. Also, three people should never take a photo together, because the one in the middle will die, only two or four people in a photo allowed. There were lots of other crazy superstitious stuff that unfortunately I can’t remember right now.

Next on the list was a visit of the room where I was going to live. I. Can’t. Even. I do not mean to sound pretentious, even though I maybe am to a certain degree, but anyway. First thing, I had to jump through the window every time I wanted to go inside or out of the room, because there were no doors. The window covers were not symmetrical and whenever I was closing “the door”, wind would still go through the gap. Once I entered the room I was like “Are these people serious?”. The whole room was buried. Junk everywhere. Except for on the bed, apparently that was the only thing they had prepared for me. Everything else was under tons of dust, the floor looked no different than the yard outside of the house, or maybe I am wrong, because it was probably even dirtier. There was a table that had big plastic bags all over it, three chairs, a safe (god knows what she was keeping in there), a wardrobe stuffed to the limit with clothes, that I could not use because it was locked later that day, and a small square table with some bottles and jars filled with greenish liquid and something that looked like eyes floating in it. I knew that if I was going to live there I would need to spend the whole next day cleaning everything. For some reason, I don’t know why, but I felt uncomfortable to complain, now that I think about it, maybe I should have, but whatever.

We were not done for the day. We still had to go meet the principal of the school, where we were going to teach English language during our stay there. We got back in the taxi and we went to her house. The floor was dirty and cold, but they made us take our shoes off and did not offer slippers. I had some green tea in a dirty cup, again, sitting on a cold wooden sofa while Lam was talking with the lady in Vietnamese. She did not smile at all. When they were speaking it even sounded like they were fighting at some point. The meeting lasted no more than 20 minutes and then we headed back home for lunch.

We sat on a wooden podium outside of the house, under a wooden shed, covered with dried palm leaves. It was the same as if we were sitting on the floor, just 30 cm. off the ground. The food was served in big plates and everybody had their own little bowl, where they could put whatever they want and mix it with some rice. I liked that a lot actually. I was also very happy, because I love to eat with chopsticks. Lam was even a bit surprised when he saw how agile I actually was. We had some rice, fried tofu, fried meat, “nem”(local fried spring roll with meat) and something else that was also deep-fried. Usually I do not eat fried food, but still, I wanted to try everything.

The toilet was outside of the house. There was a spider web all over the wooden doors, ants were walking on the sink. The toilet itself was super disgusting, there was no hot water because the boiler was broken, but luckily for us, they fixed it later that same day. There were some days when the hot water won’t just run at all and I would need to wait until the next morning to take a shower. Colan also had a washing machine next to the door of the toilet, but on the outside, under the stars. She showed us how every time we want to use it we should just put the hose for the dirty water on the floor of the bathroom, but at that point I already did not seem to be so surprised. I was learning how to live according to her rules and lifestyle, but I also had some ideas for improvements, because there were some stuff concerning my personal hygiene and health, that I could not agree with.

I was so tired. The flights were quite exhausting, because the seats were not super comfortable and I could not sleep so well. I went to bed early that night. I heard a strange noise in my sleep and I woke up. It was not hard to locate its source. It turned out to be something right next to my head. There was a broom made of hay, lying on the safe next to my bed. I thought there was a rat but I was not sure, so I went back to sleep. There was not so much that I could do about it anyway.

The next morning we went downtown to look for some cleaning materials. We found a small shop for household supplies and the owner turned out to be a very kind local old man who had lived in Bulgaria for several years in the 80s. He said his Bulgarian name was Stancho and his Bulgarian language was very rusty, but good enough for the simple conversation that we had. After we got a pair of rubber gloves, disinfectant and other necessities we went to get some fruits. I was so super excited because I am very interested in healthy lifestyle and I love fruits and vegetables and we were at a place where I could try so many kinds of fruits that I had never tried before. We got a few bags with all sorts of tropical fruits and headed back to the accommodation.

When we got home I started cleaning up my room. We spent the whole day scrubbing the floor and cleaning everything in my room and in the bathroom. It took us quite a while, because we also had to organize or get rid of everything I would not need that was inside the room, but we got the job done. That night I woke up again from the same noise, this time I had my phone nearby and I turned the flashlight on, and it really turned out to be a rat. I love rodents, but this one kept on coming every night and I could not leave any food on my table, because it was dragging stuff under my bed and eating them there. I was not always able to scare him away, because he had a great place to hide behind the wardrobe, and I could not reach there. A few days later I had another uninvited guest. A giant hairy spider was waiting for me on the floor after I came back home from grocery shopping. I have arachnophobia and it was incredibly hard for me to deal with it. I tried to kill it with my flip-flop, but I missed and he ran under my bed. When I checked with the flashlight of my phone to see if it was still there I saw the green reflection of his eyes and that freaked me out. It was very hard to fall asleep knowing that there was a huge spider under my bed. The next night it crawled up on the wall next to my bed as I was lying in it. I managed to take Kristina’s DSLR camera and snap a shot of it before I smashed it dead on the wall. Parts of him were still stuck on the wall and I was shaking for a few minutes after this happened. That was the worst night of my stay. I also had few more encounters with big spiders. One morning I noticed that there was one in my helmet. Good thing I saw it. I dropped the helmet on the ground and Colan came, picked it up and started laughing. She took the spider with her bare hands and she squished it with her fingers while laughing as if it was no big deal. That was so wicked.

On Monday we were supposed to start working in the school. We went there around 9 o’clock and we were told by one of the teachers in broken English, that we should go next week, because they are too busy now and they could not accept us. For us that were not such bad news, because it was my first week and I needed some time to get used to the local atmosphere, and we got a motorbike from Colan that we used to explore the area. We visited nearby villages, we rode down the road and we saw the amazing nature, pineapple fields, flooded rice fields, cattle, and many other things. This experience was very useful for me because I had a much clearer picture in my head about what life in the countryside of Vietnam actually looks like. I was enjoying every little detail, and this is something that I do not always do when I am in Europe, because everything here is already so familiar. All these new impressions were making me feel alive. I remember riding the bike and smiling for no reason, just because I was so happy that this whole thing was happening to me and I was feeling lucky.

Next Monday we went back to the school and we actually started working. I was not expecting for things to happen this quick, but from the first lesson we attended we were given a study book and the teacher just told us: “This lesson.” After this she sat on her chair and she just let us teach. We were in first grade, so the lesson was very easy, and I already had some experience teaching, because I study Russian philology and we had a small internship in high school, but still, we did not expect that, since we were told that the first several days will be more like orientation and just attending the classes to see what they do and how they do it. This was Kris’ first time ever teaching, but I think we both did a very good job. We were teaching for a couple of weeks, almost every day. The children loved us so much, they were hysterical and every time they saw us they were surrounding us and asking for autographs and asking random questions. The ambiance in the school was very positive and we were going there with a smile and leaving with double the amount of happiness, because the kids were also super nice and friendly.

Christmas was behind the corner and we asked for a couple of weeks off, so that we can go visit the south part of the country. The students were going to have several days for holidays anyway, so the moment was perfect for a short trip around the country. We spoke with Lam he said that out plan is okay, so I also invited my brother to join us. He flew in from China where he lives and we spent the Christmas holidays together exploring different cities on the south coast. The weather was perfect and we even went to the beach and swam in the ocean. We tried lots of traditional meals, we saw a great amount of temples and landmarks and we had a great time together. This was my first meeting with my brother in more than a year.

When we came back we went directly to Hanoi, where I worked with a local English club. The members were students from a local university who wanted to practice and improve their English. We had sessions around the city in different coffee shops, in one of the girls’ place, sometimes even in the park. We had discussions on different topics, I was teaching them some new words, we were exchanging information about our cultures, so the learning process was mutual. There were also lessons for me from them, they were teaching me Vietnamese, which was quite useful for me, because it was a lot easier to get around after I knew how to ask some basic questions and tell what I want. There were some of the students that were very open and we became very close friends. We were meeting not only for our lessons, but sometimes just to hang out, which was also great for me. I even became friends with some of the people who were working in the restaurants where I was a regular customer, and when I had to leave they were so sad.

Five minutes walking from where I live was Hoan Kiem Lake. It is not so big, but very beautiful and popular attraction not only for foreigners, but for locals as well. I was walking around that lake almost every night before I would go back to my hostel. There were several occasions when a group of local students would come to me and ask me to just chat with them for some time, because for them this is a great way to improve their English. I noticed that most of the youngsters were very sociable and they were willing to learn something new, which made a very good impression on me. Unfortunately, I did not communicate so much with older people, except for sales assistants and people who were preparing my food. All they were trying to rip me off, sometimes asking for more than five times the original price. This was not so nice for me, because I do not like to bargain and negotiate over the price of anything, that is not the way I am used to make purchases. I felt bad after doing it and sometimes it was taking more than five minutes, so for me it was not only discomfort, but also time consuming, and that was one of the reasons I was avoiding shopping as much as possible, but of course, there were some exceptions. I also did not enjoy the lack of trash cans all around the country. Everybody was just throwing their rubbish on the street and there were piles of garbage in the evenings that smelled awful sometimes. But not a nice view at all. One more thing that I won’t forget is the ratio of motorbikes to cars. Never in my life had I seen so many people riding bikes. The air was quite polluted, it was super noisy not only because of the engines, but also because honking was a bad habit that everybody had. One time I even decided to make a test and see how much time I will not hear a honk for. After more than a dozen of tries I had a record, it was three seconds.

I had lots of free time, which was great, because I had the chance to get more familiar with the local culture. But I was not spending all my time on the streets. There were some more events with students in primary school that I helped with while I was in Hanoi. I spent a great one-day trip with pupils to the house in Duong Lam where I lived during the first few weeks of my stay. It was obviously a tourist destination where people could immerse themselves in the local atmosphere and learn more about the way people used to live before. We took the students there to play some games and show them how to make the traditional rice cake and visit some of the local temples. Another thing that I helped with was the organizing of an event before the holidays for the Vietnamese New year in a private school in a fancy neighborhood. There were multiple workshops and outdoor activities for the children to choose from, some of which included cooking, crafting, playing sport games and different competitions.

All in all, this was definitely an unforgettable experience. I am really grateful because I met so many people from all around the world who made me think about different aspects of my life. Some of the conversations I had were really inspiring not only for me, but also for some of the locals. It was a mutual learning process. I also visited a great amount of breathtaking places, I tried some food I had never even seen before and I made new friends. These are few of the reasons why I will always treasure the time spent in Vietnam forever in my heart.