

Report of my time spent with the National Institute of Nutrition Vietnam

This three-week Travelling Scholarship was sponsored by the Australian Nutrition Trust Fund

When I left Melbourne for Vietnam, I did not know what to expect and had only a little idea of what I was about to experience. But of course I was excited for the weeks to come, and for what I would learn at the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN). My first day in Vietnam I was free to discover Hanoi, so I spent the day wandering around the Old Quarter, eating delicious food and exploring. My first impression of Hanoi was that it was crazily busy and noisy, but full of life and very exciting. Everywhere I went was bustling, and full of delicious and interesting smells from the street food.

On my first day at NIN I meet four of the lovely ladies that I was going to be spending time with over the next three weeks: Phuong, Van Anh, Hai and Trang. They were all part of the Food and Nutrition Training Centre department, and made me feel very welcome at NIN. Phuong gave me an introduction to NIN, explained my itinerary, and gave me some background information about the baseline data collection that we would be undertaking over the coming weeks.

The following day around 10 of us left Hanoi for our first field trip to Lai Chau and Lao Cai. The drive took around 7-8 hours, which was quite tiring. On the first night of the field trip I was confronted with horse meat at dinner, which I have to say was quite alarming, as I had not been expecting it. However, the Vietnamese, being the lovely gracious people that they are, cooked me an omelette when they realised that I was a bit apprehensive about eating the meat.

This generous hospitality continued throughout my time in Vietnam, with people never hesitating to offer me more food, ask me questions and make me feel welcome. Every day whilst on the field trip we would have lunch together with the local healthcare workers who were helping us to interview the participants. Even though most of them had limited English speaking skills, they would still love to try to include me in the lunchtime chatter. Everyone made such an effort to talk to me, no matter what his or her level of English was, which was lovely and made me feel included.

During my time spent in the field I was helping with the anthropometric testing of babies <24 months and their mothers. This involved taking the mothers' body fat percentage using bioelectrical impedance analysis (BIA), as well as height and weight. We then measured the babies' weight, height and mid upper arm circumference. I absolutely loved doing this, as I got to hold so many adorable babies and actually take part in, and contribute to, the data collection. In addition to the anthropometric data we collected, questionnaires were also conducted by trained interviewers and a randomised selection of babies underwent a blood test for haemoglobin levels.

I was surprised that the anthropometric measurements were almost always conducted outside at the local healthcare centres, rather than inside the rooms like the interviews were. However I realised that this was most likely due to a lack of space, and that the anthropometric data was probably the easiest part to do outside. I also found that some older style measurement tools were used, such as weight scales that were not digital and therefore not quite as accurate. It made me realise that we are very lucky with the great resources and facilities we have available here in Australia.

At the end of the nine days of baseline data collection, we had successfully gathered information from over 700 mother and baby pairs. The data collected was the baseline for an intervention that will be implemented over the coming year in three mountain provinces in the north of Vietnam: Lai Chau, Lao Cai and Ha Giang. This intervention will involve teaching and helping the women farmers

to grow rice. This rice will then be bought from the farmers and made into a savoury rice porridge product that is fortified with iron and zinc. This product will be sold back to the mountain regions at a reduced rate and is also going to be served as an afternoon snack for the two year olds at certain kindergartens. The ultimate goal of the intervention is to enhance the food security of rural women and to increase iron and zinc in the diets of children to improve their nutrition status. Whilst in Lao Cai, I attended a sensory testing session at a kindergarten, during which the porridge product was tested on parents and teachers.

We encountered a few hurdles such as the weather (rain) and roadwork issues that prevented some participants from coming to the healthcare centres, however we still managed to get the required quota of participants. It was thought that the rain would be a particular hindrance to the data collection, as the majority of participants travelled by motorbike. I was constantly amazed at how a whole family could fit onto one motorbike. It would not be unusual for two adults and two children to turn up to the healthcare centre on one bike - a definite contrast to Australia. Whilst in Lai Chau, I got to ride on the back of a motorbike for the first time. I was a bit hesitant at first, but after getting up the courage to do it I absolutely loved it, and eagerly took every opportunity I received thereafter.

During the field trips we mainly ate share style food, which involved many dishes of different vegetables, meats, soups and rice. Several of the dishes often had ingredients like intestines and blood pudding, which I was too reluctant to try. However, I really like how every part of the animal is used in Vietnamese cooking and nothing is wasted - it is very resourceful.

For dessert we almost always had fruit, which was great because I got to try lots of fruits that aren't common in Australia, such as dragon fruit, star fruit and many others that I did not know the name of. One thing was for sure, we always had so much food and I never left the table hungry. I feel like I was exposed to the "real" Vietnamese cuisine and the dishes that the locals eat on a daily basis, not just the foods that are popular with tourists. I especially loved getting to sit on tiny stools and eat pho for breakfast every morning with everyone from NIN. It was on the field trip too that I was first introduced to Vietnamese coffee with condensed milk, which I immediately loved. Vietnam definitely converted me to being a coffee drinker.

Originally I was only going to participate in the first two field trips, however after greatly enjoying my week spent in the mountains with the team from NIN, I felt like I wanted to be part of the final trip to Ha Giang the following week to complete the data collection. Luckily, Phuong was able to rearrange my schedule without too much hassle to fit my meetings at NIN into fewer days and allow me to go on this trip. Admittedly the drive to the mountains was quite long, but the scenery along the way was beautiful and the destination made the time spent in the mini bus worth it.

Back in Hanoi, I had meetings with NIN staff from variety of departments, including the Heads of the Non-Communicable Disease Department, Community Nutrition Department and the School Nutrition and Occupation Department. These meetings gave me great insight into the roles and responsibilities of the different departments, as well as the health related problems and respective strategies in place to address them. This trip has really opened my eyes to the differences between developing and developed nations, and inspired me to further my knowledge regarding public health nutrition.

Overall, this was such an invaluable experience. I got to travel and eat with the locals, and go to places in rural Vietnam that were largely untravelled by tourists, not to mention getting to hold a

few hundred gorgeous Vietnamese babies. This really was an experience of a lifetime which I would recommend without hesitation to any nutrition students looking to apply in the future.

Why nutrition scientists should visit Vietnam

I believe that it is very important to experience the public health nutrition practices of another country, to gain an international perspective on health and have a greater awareness of the nutrition problems faced by other parts of the world. Travelling to Vietnam facilitates a better understanding of the nutrition transition and the double burden of disease (under and over nutrition co-existing) which we don't see to such an extent here in Australia. It also allows for the comparison of resources available, and government initiatives that are run in order to combat these nutrition issues.



Sensory testing of the rice porridge



Holding a baby whilst his mother is being weighed



Measuring the weight of a baby



Measuring the length of a baby

How to prepare and what to expect

For future students

Health and safety:

Obviously see a doctor before you travel to get proper advice on what you'll need. But this is what I found that I needed:

- Rehydration tablets (such as hydralyte/gastrolyte): Because of the heat/humidity/occasional sickness I got a bit dehydrated a few times, and used these a bit just to help with rehydration
- Diarrhoea tablets: I got the basic over-the-counter one from the chemist, as well as the more heavy duty ones that my doctor prescribed just in case. (I only needed to use the basic over-the-counter ones once, when I needed to travel 6 hours by bus to the mountains).
- Vaccinations: (I needed malaria tablets for one of the mountain regions, and also a few other general shots such as typhoid)

I did get sick a couple of times over the 4 weeks I was in Vietnam, but nothing major. Also, I never felt unsafe in Vietnam. Just use common sense and you'll be fine.

Weather:

I spent time in both Hanoi and the northern mountain regions, and the weather ranged from hot to cool. But it wasn't too extreme either way - I survived with either jeans and a light shirt, or jeans and a jumper.

Food and drink:

- Expect to eat a lot of delicious food. But also be prepared to be confronted with different foods (such as horse, intestines, blood pudding). Sadly I wasn't brave enough to try these things, but found that they were easy enough to avoid when eating.
- Drink bottled water
- Make the most of eating pho for breakfast every morning. It's delicious! Also, drink the coffee. If you don't love it before Vietnam, you will by the end (at least with condensed milk anyway ☺).
- As for the street food in Hanoi, it's amazing. But you just have to be careful. I did a street food tour on my first night in Hanoi which was fantastic, because I then knew which places were good to go back to. Also I was lucky enough to make friends with some lovely girls from NIN who also took me to eat street food (locals know the BEST places!).
- I used the Tripadvisor website quite a bit to find good places to eat in Hanoi. There is also a cool website called "travelfish.org" that has good recommendations and dishes to try.

What to take:

- Sunscreen and mosquito repellent are musts! Mosquitoes seemed to love me compared to everyone else on the field trip (then someone told me that they prefer pale people? Not sure if that's true though)
- Comfortable shoes (if you have ones that are easy to take on and off that's a bonus. Mine took a bit to lace up, and it was more time consuming when going in/out of houses or some restaurants)

Getting around:

- Taxis are generally very cheap. I used taxis when going anywhere that wasn't within walking distance
- Motorbike taxis are very common, although I didn't use them
- Walking is a great way of seeing lots of things, especially in the Old Quarter of Hanoi. However crossing the road is crazy! The trick is to walk predictably and don't stop.

Staying in Hanoi:

I stayed at a hotel in the Old Quarter of Hanoi, which was great. There is heaps going on and lots of places to eat and shop. It usually took me about 15-20 minutes by taxi to get to NIN (and usually only cost me around \$2).

Phone:

I just turned on international roaming on my Iphone, which was super easy (but expensive if you need to call/text/use data). This was ok for me, as I mainly used the wifi in hotels and cafes. Apparently local sims are cheap and easy to get though.

Money:

- There are loads of ATMs in Hanoi. I used a travel card from my bank, as well as getting a few hundred in cash (Vietnamese Dong) before I left Australia
- Approximately 17000 dong = 1 Aussie dollar (when I went anyway). So everything seems expensive, but it's not. It takes a while to get used to the different currency.

Be prepared to...:

- ...not understand the conversations going on around you (just smile and go with it haha)
- ...have photos taken of you (especially in the mountain areas)
- ...try motorbikes! It's super fun!