

The Real Vietnam - Oxfam

Year:

Project:

Work:

Yolanda Narain, a scientist at healthcare company Roche in Welwyn Garden City and a part time volunteer at the Welwyn Garden City Oxfam shop, shares her experiences of her trip-of-a-lifetime to Vietnam.

After securing a place on the Oxfam Communication and Exposure Tour, Yolanda Narain and her fellow travellers headed out to Vietnam on the 6th of March this year for a two-week tour of this fascinating country.

Starting in the capital Hanoi, her group headed first to Lao Cai province in the north of the country. In Bao Yen, Yolanda visited an area which had been badly hit by typhoon Kammuri in August 2008. Oxfam has been running a humanitarian programme here, in collaboration with the People Committee, to help the local communities in the wake of the disaster.

Yolanda said that the impact of the typhoon is still very apparent, but that improvements are also visible. She said, "The people told us that they had lost everything in the typhoon, that their land, houses and livelihoods were destroyed. But now they are seeing improvements – they are recovering their land, producing rice again and also improving their roads."

The tour then visited other areas in the Lao Cai province, including Ban Lien in the Bac Ha district and Muong Hum in the Bat Xat district, where Oxfam are working in conjunction with the department of education on a programme aimed at enhancing attitudes to teaching and education. Yolanda observed some morning lessons and brought small gifts for the children. She said that several girls told her that they wanted to be teachers when they grow up, and that "when we asked whether they preferred going to school or helping their parents after school or during weekends, they all said they preferred going to school." One thing that she noticed was the respect the children had for their elders: "respect for the older generation was still very much in fashion here", she said.

Yolanda was struck by just how welcoming everyone was to her group. She said, "Even though their living standards were less than basic, their generosity was amazing – they gave us their time, their stories, their laughter as well as their gratitude for the things that Oxfam had helped them achieve."

After a weekend of reflection and recuperation back in Hanoi, the tour headed to the south of Vietnam, to Ninh Thuan. Yolanda noticed a marked change in the landscape and climate from what she had experienced in the north, but the same friendly and welcoming attitude.

In Ninh Thuan, Oxfam has been working with the government on several programmes including a community forest, water management and livelihood project and a project called Right To Be Heard, aimed at enhancing local people's participation in decision making. The group participated in the women's monthly meeting, where a very well attended group discussed a variety of topics, played games, sang songs and exchanged experiences and ideas. Yolanda said, "As I was thinking about how challenging their lives must be, I was pleasantly surprised to see fun, laughter and commitment, an immense commitment to make things better for their families and those around them."

At the meeting, the group met Pināng Thi Phuóc, a 30 year old single mother of two, who told Yolanda, "This meeting is a friendly speaking place... It releases the stress and it makes me more confident." Ten years ago, after two years studying land management, Pināng Thi Phuóc was forced to drop out as she did not have enough money to complete the course. Yolanda was shocked to discover that a mere £70 - equivalent to approximately one hour's takings in an Oxfam shop - would have covered the cost and made a difference to this family for life.

In the same village, Yolanda was delighted to see an Oxfam water tank built close to the houses and being used by the local women to wash dishes. She was told that before this tank had been built, the women had had to walk for an hour, twice each day, to get water from the local stream, carrying 20 litres of water on each return journey. One woman told her that the new tank not only afforded the village clean and safe water, but its close proximity also gave the villagers more time to spend in the fields.

After a whirlwind two weeks in Vietnam, Yolanda is now back in Welwyn Garden City, but agrees that this is not a trip that she will forget in a hurry. She reflected, "Visiting the real Vietnam outside the busy tourist route was such a treat, and seeing first-hand the impact that Oxfam projects are having on people's lives was fantastic. When Oxfam first told me that they were sending me to Vietnam, I was not aware of how lucky I was. I am now!"

About the Author

Yolanda Narain, Spanish, 43 years old

Working in the Health Care industry, in the Uk. On Saturdays pm, I volunteer at Oxfam's shop in Welwyn Garden City.

Source: <http://www.volunteer-guide.com>