



UCD School of Chemical & Bioprocess Engineering

Carthy Travel Award Report 2023

Recipient: William Zitzmann

Introduction

Growing up in Egypt, I found it challenging to associate myself with a specific national identity due to my mixed German and Vietnamese heritage. Despite my parents' attempts to teach me multiple languages including English, German, Vietnamese, French, and Arabic, I only became fluent in English and felt disconnected from my cultural roots. I have lived the longest in Egypt, yet I could not identify with the Egyptians as I was seen as an outsider. I had grown up in a very multicultural tourist town where everyone spoke English, and I was never exposed to or experienced the Egyptian culture or partook in any national traditions. I had attended a school under the British curriculum with mainly international students; none I could identify as being like me. I was never truly immersed in the country that I grew up in.

My past experiences visiting Germany have also contributed to my feelings of not belonging, as my limited German language skills and appearance have led to challenges and confusion when dealing with authorities, including border control. I don't look or feel German despite my dad being the most Germanic-looking man possible. Once when I had gone to renew my German passport at the embassy in Egypt with him, the staff didn't believe I was German. They had the police called on us as they thought he was trying to smuggle an Egyptian boy out of Egypt. I have no ties to Germany; my dad is old and has not lived in Germany since he was about 20 and has limited family ties there.

When I was 14, there was trouble in Egypt, and all the British teachers were afraid to come back, so the school had no staff. My parents decided to send me abroad to a boarding school to get a better education than what would be possible in Egypt. Two months before the start of the academic year, we applied to dozens of schools in England and Ireland as I was only fluent in English and there was nowhere else for me to go. Only one school in Ireland had replied with a last-minute opening. Ever since then, I have been living on my own and attended an international boarding school, which felt far removed from Irish culture. I was rarely exposed to Irish traditions and after living here for almost eight years, I am unable to identify as Irish, although I am eligible for naturalization.

I have Vietnamese citizenship yet know very little about the place. The only sense of national identity I feel close to is when I worked in my mom's Vietnamese restaurant growing up. There, I would interact with the Vietnamese staff. I learned Vietnamese second-hand and had brought it to a level where I could understand a decent bit and speak it, although with very poor grammar. I can process the language fluently; however, I lack grammar and vocabulary.

My goal is to reconnect with my heritage and distant relatives and explore what the beautiful country has to offer, from gorgeous landscapes to delicious food, and rich troublesome history. I want to see if I can connect with the people there and immerse myself in the culture. I have been developing my Vietnamese speaking skills from the basics I grew up with and hopefully will be able to bring it up to the standard where I can purely rely on it in Vietnam without the use of any translators or aids while travelling throughout the country.

Saigon



I started my journey flying into Ho Chi Minh City in the south, also known as Saigon. It's the largest city in Vietnam and is where my mother's side of the family are from. I stayed here for 10 days reconnecting with my family from my cousins to my great grandmother who I haven't seen since I was last here over 10 years ago. It was a thrilling dive into Vietnam's vibrant urban life. I also spent a lot of time exploring the city through museums and mix of old colonial buildings and modern architecture such as the War Remnants Museum and the iconic Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica. What surprised me the most was how I was still able to communicate with strangers in Vietnamese and I was able to understand what they were saying. I spent most of my time here constantly being fed by my great grandmother all the dishes I remember loved having as a kid.

Da Nang



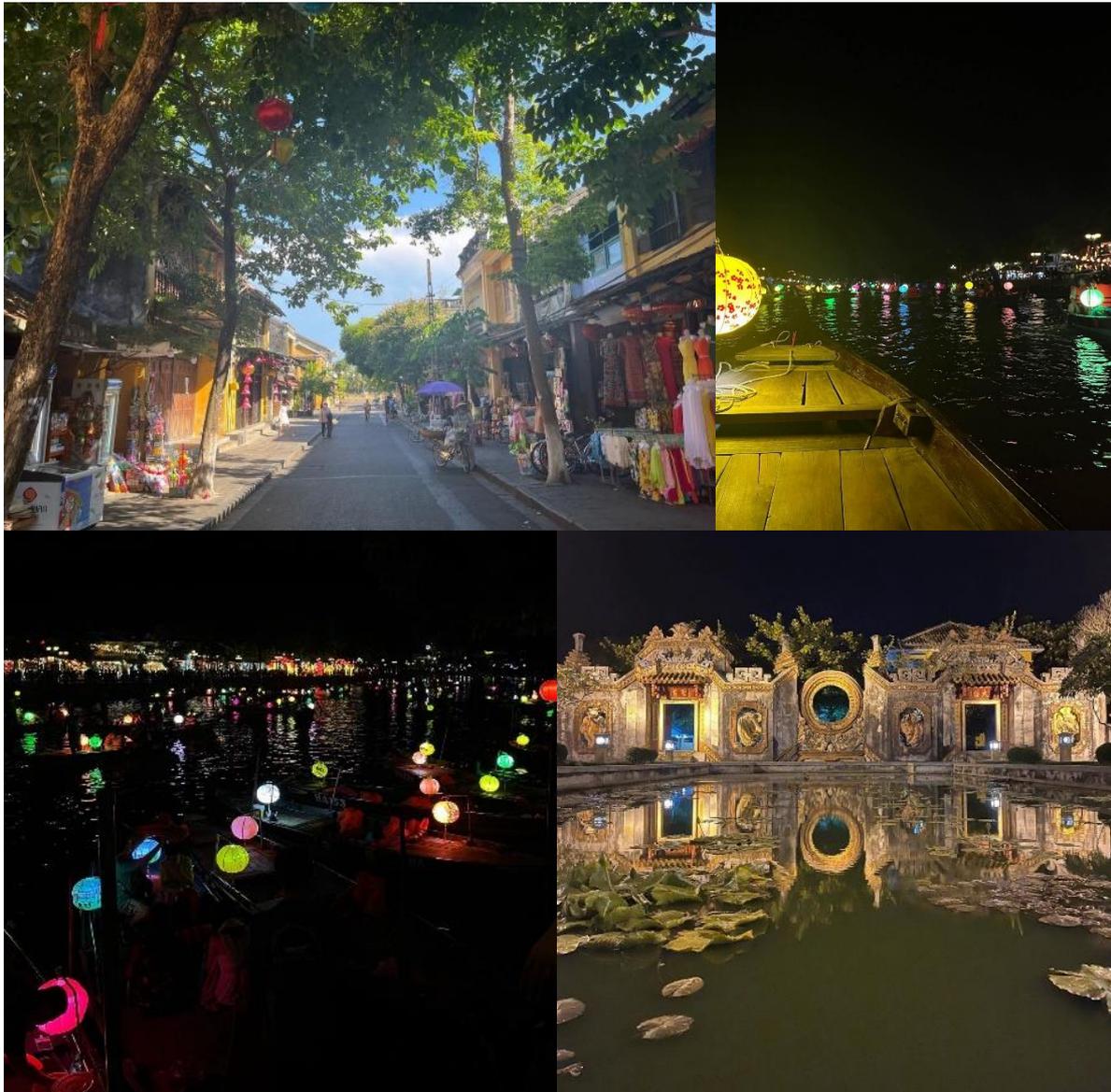
I then flew to Da Nang which is the largest city in central Vietnam which I also used as a hub for trips to the surrounding areas such as Hoi An and Hue. This was one of the oldest cities and is older than Vietnam itself. In Da Nang, I visited marble mountains which was a beautiful and massive mountain on the edge of the city. There was a trail to hike to the top where there was an active Buddhist community with beautiful temples. There were also many caves in the mountain, many were sculpted and decorated. I also visited lady Budha which was the largest monument of her. The Dragon Bridge was another memorable sight, especially when it breathed fire and water at night. I also indulged in delicious local cuisine, with the seafood being some of the freshest I've ever tasted.

Hue



Hue, Vietnam, is a city rich in history and culture, known for its imperial past as the former capital of the Nguyen Dynasty up until 1945. Along the way we stopped at pagodas and temples dating back the Champa Empire as well as the last emperor's tomb. The city is home to the Hue Imperial City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, featuring ancient palaces, temples, and gardens. Hue is also famous for its vibrant culinary scene, offering unique dishes like Bun Bo Hue and royal cuisine. I took a peaceful boat ride along the Perfume River, which offered stunning views of the city and its surroundings. I also explored the vibrant Dong Ba Market which was filled with delicious local dishes.

Hoi An



Visiting Hoi An was an unforgettable experience; the town's ancient architecture and lantern-lit streets felt like stepping back in time. Hoi An is another UNESCO world heritage site that used to be a famous trading port. The local markets were bustling with vibrant colours and the aroma of fresh street food, making it a paradise for food lovers. I enjoyed a serene boat ride on the Thu Bon River, which offered stunning views of the town's unique blend of Japanese, Chinese, French, and Vietnamese influences. The town is now known for the dozens of tailors popular for getting custom clothing made. The highlight was the Hoi An Lantern Festival, where the town was illuminated with countless lanterns, creating a magical atmosphere.

Hanoi



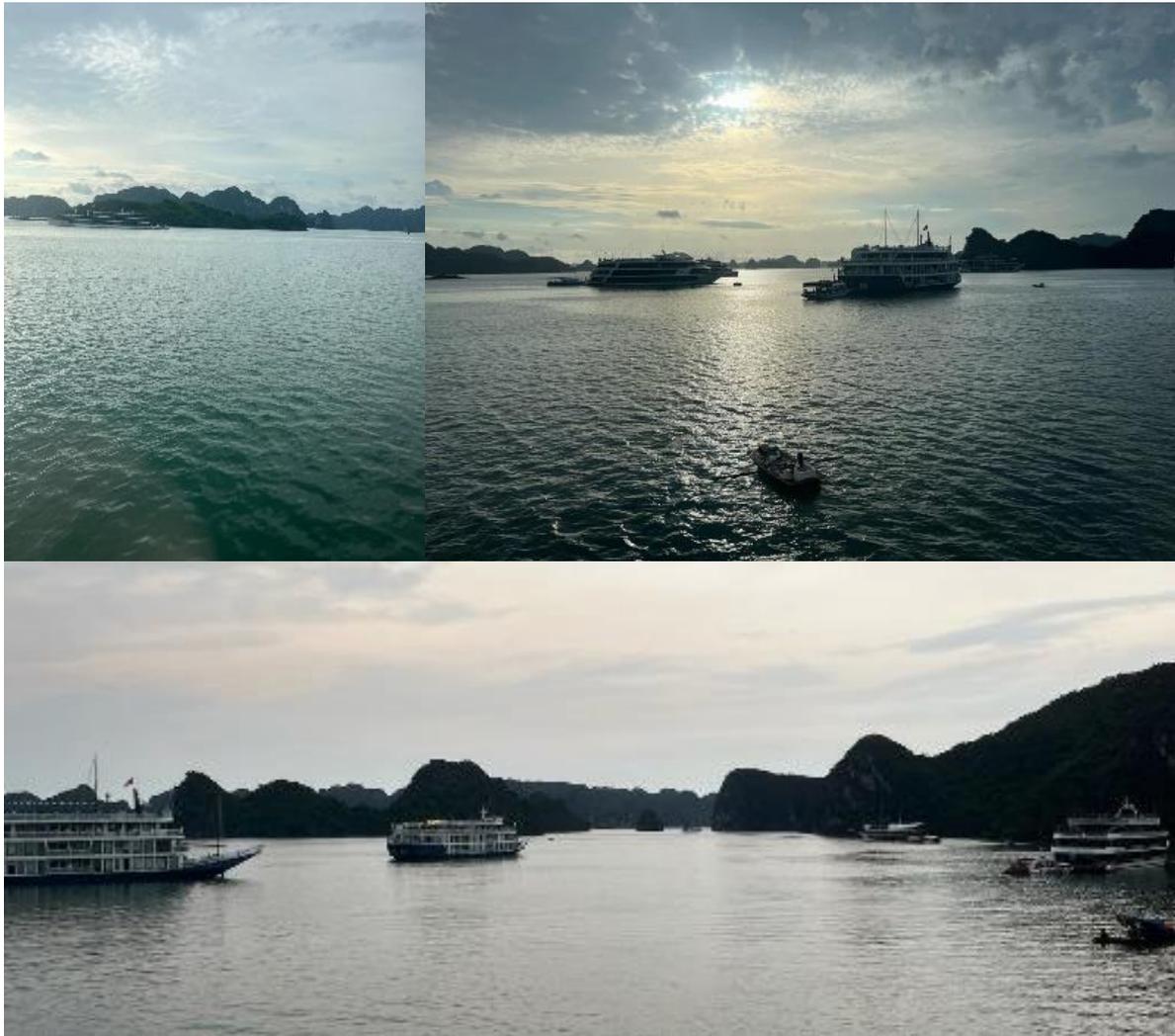
I then travelled north to Hanoi which was an incredible journey into the heart of Vietnam's culture and history. Once I reached the north, the dialect was completely foreign to me. I was no longer able to understand any of the locals. The Old Quarter captivated me with its narrow streets, bustling markets, and charming colonial architecture. I spent hours wandering around Hoan Kiem Lake in the Old Quarter where I stayed, enjoying the tranquil atmosphere and the legendary Turtle Tower. Visiting the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum was a moving experience, offering deep insights into the nation's revered leader. I visited the famous Train Street in Hanoi which was a narrow residential area where trains pass just inches away from homes. I also visited Hanoi Hilton, formally known as Hoa Lo Prison. It was a historic site that once housed Vietnamese revolutionaries and American POWs, providing a stark reminder of the country's tumultuous past. During my stay, I loved the vibrant street food scene, where I savoured pho, banh mi, and egg coffee. The city's unique blend of tradition and modernity, along with the warm hospitality of its people, made my visit truly memorable. From Hanoi, I took two day trips to Ninh Binh and Ha Long Bay.

Ninh Binh



Visiting Ninh Binh was like stepping into a natural paradise, with its stunning landscapes and serene atmosphere. The area was a national park with beautiful and unique landscapes. I took a boat ride through Tam Coc, gliding past towering limestone karsts and lush rice paddies. I then explored the ancient temples of Hoa Lu, the former capital of Vietnam. I then climbed to the top of Mua Cave, which was a challenging but rewarding experience, offering breathtaking panoramic views of the countryside. The tranquility and beauty of Ninh Binh was a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of city life in Hanoi.

Ha Long Bay



My last location was Ha Long Bay which was a surreal experience, with emerald like waters and thousands of towering limestone islands creating a breathtaking seascape. I embarked on an overnight cruise, which allowed me to explore hidden caves and grottoes, each with its own unique beauty. We went kayaking around the bay which gave us close-up views of the stunning rock formations and serene waters. I also enjoyed a visit to a floating fishing village, where I learned about the local way of life and tasted fresh seafood. At night, we also experienced some crab fishing. After Ha Long Bay, I flew back to Saigon and spent a few more days with my family before ending my trip flying back to Dublin.