World Challenge to Vietnam –
Phase 1: Journeying to Ho Chi Minh City

Well what an amazing experience we’ve all had. At times words were not enough. The country manifested itself in our souls and seeped through our veins making the Vietnam trip one incredibly sensuous adventure.

Eighteen months ago a small group of students committed themselves to undertaking a journey into the unknown. Brittany Crocker, Charlotte Aiberti, Emma Goodfellow, David Elliott and Matthew Price (together with three pupils from McClelland School in Melbourne) were enticed by the opportunity to travel in South East Asia and immerse themselves totally in the history, politics and culture of the Orient. For the students it was to be, “The road less travelled.” Not the packaged tour of Cook & Co. but a chance to step off the beaten track and go boldly where the average holidaymaker rarely ventures.

At times throughout the year and a half’s preparation the cerebral journey became arduous. It was difficult to stay focused as none of us really had a good idea of what the challenge would entail. We’d all read the blurb, watched the documentaries and talked to the more adventurous but until one set foot ‘in country’ the exercise remained largely academic. Academic that was until we landed in Ho Chi Minh City and were hit square-on with the heat & humidity after the deepening wintery misery of Perth.

The students had been briefed to expect the unexpected and now here it was, starring us in the face, reaching into our souls and daring us to enter and participate in the life of a seemingly alternate universe.

Here, taxi drivers didn’t wait to be hailed. No - they competed with one another to whisk away our worldly goods, to relieve us of our only link to civilisation as we knew it. We grasped tightly our rucksacks and looked longingly to our World Challenge leader for protection, to mother us, to wave away the heinous hordes. She merely giggled, what seemed to us, a demonic all-knowing laugh of assuredness. Not for her the fear of the unknown!

Motorcycles, mopeds and bicycles swarmed the streets like an anarchic attack of ravenous locusts, hell bent on consuming our very essence of being. We shrank back, searching for a comforting sign of reality, our reality, but none was forthcoming. Yet within a blink of an eye and before anyone could utter the homely comforting words, “Vegemite sandwich,” our bags had been packed into the back of an ancient charabanc and the group had, as one, become a mere platelet of that gushing Asian artery being transported irrefutably to the throbbing heart of modern day Saigon.

And so began our days of acclimatisation with World Challenge on our adventure to Vietnam. The programme, developed over many years of leading ventures to remote areas, was structured in a manner which afforded us the opportunities to engage with the country and communities throughout our month overseas. The acclimatisation period introduced us to the country; allowed us a couple of days to experience Ho Chi Minh City and to take in some of the local sites; which for us included a river tour through the Mekong Delta and a visit to the Cu Chi Tunnels used by the Vietcong during the ‘American’ War.