

CSAGA- Center for Applied Sciences and Studies in Gender, Women, Families, and Adolescents  
**Describe a day in your life:**

Typically my week days are spent pretty much the same. I have given myself a schedule to feel less overwhelmed with living alone in a foreign city. Usually I wake up around 7:30am and walk to the bus stop by 8:00am. I take two buses and then walk about 5 minutes to work, taking about 30 minutes to get to the office. I really despise the heat in Ha Noi, so I often go to the Corner Coffee Shop that shares a building with my office for about 30 minutes before work and order something cold to drink. I start work at 9am everyday and do research until about 11:30am. At 11:30 I often will go to lunch with one of my coworkers until about 12:15. We then come back to the office where most people use the next hour to take a nap. I usually watch Netflix and relax during this time. At 1:30pm work begins again I do more research until 5pm. After 5pm, I take the bus home and try to find a place to eat. There is a restaurant below my apartment so I will often go there if I am tired or I will venture a little further to find something new. When it begins to get dark around 7pm, I usually start to walk back home. It's a guarantee that you will be covered in sweat from 20 minutes of walking, even at night so I will shower when I get home and then watch TV or read until about midnight when I go to sleep. My weekdays have been pretty focused on work and relaxing after. I am often tired from the heat and it gets dark only an hour after I get home, so I have confined my adventures to the areas I am comfortable with. I feel keeping a schedule and giving myself time to relax has been important in balancing work/life.

**Housing: What is your living situation like?**

I did not know where or what conditions I was going to be living in, until I actually pulled up to my apartment the first night in Viet Nam. Luckily my living situation has been good. I am living alone in a one-bedroom apartment. It is off an alleyway of a busy street, so it is

CSAGA- Center for Applied Sciences and Studies in Gender, Women, Families, and Adolescents a nice escape from the loud traffic. My landlord has been pretty great and the apartment itself is nice. I really appreciate having a place to myself to relax and escape the heat when I need it. The apartment is very close to my office and a bus stop as well, which is extremely convenient. I would recommend getting an apartment if you like your space and quiet, but it can also be pretty lonely when you first move to another country. I do not live in an area with many foreigners, so while I am getting the real Vietnamese experience, there are not many familiar foods or faces nearby. I know other interns that live near Old Quarter (the Western area) and have really enjoyed living there because there are always a lot of activities to do and expats to meet for support. Overall I would recommend an apartment, but location is important when choosing if you have that option.

**Finances: How is your budget working out for you?**

My financial situation has been good while I've been here, but I also made sure that I had a little more than expected in my bank account before coming, which has helped to relieve financial stress. I have spent a little more than I have expected as I have realized I have the money for small luxuries that can mean a lot in Viet Nam. I have spent a more money on air conditioning, drinks, and food than I expected. The drinks and more expensive food (expensive for Viet Nam—around \$5-15 a meal with two drinks) are things that I could go without, but they make the heat a little more bearable and have helped me explore new areas. I often feel like I am spending a lot because I constantly am taking money out of the ATM, but when I look at my bank statement I'm reminded how inflated the exchange rate is.

The food is so cheap here that I have not needed to cook in my apartment. I keep some snacks in my fridge, but always go out to eat. I'm sure it may be cheaper for someone on a tighter budget to buy food and cook it at home. I am spending around \$5-7 USD/day on food, on

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an average work day. There have been days that I have splurged and spent around \$10-15 USD on Western food and beer. Exploration here can be really cheap if you can navigate the hundreds of tourist traps out there. Bus rides to popular tourist destinations about 5-6 hours away can be \$8USD one-way. Once you're in another area hotels can be cheap as well if you can find good deals. I have found that cheap transportation and spending the difference on a nicer beach front hotel has been the best solution for me. If I am going out on the weekend Old Quarter with friends I am usually spending no more than \$5USD for food and a couple drinks, so the weekend in the city can also be cheap still. Financially traveling and living in Viet Nam is very doable, even if you are on a tighter budget. All of the food that is not in a nicer restaurant is around \$1.50 with cold drinks around \$2.00. The only thing that I would have done differently, would probably have been to let myself relax earlier on and just bought that really cold orange juice.

### **Travel and Transportation:**

On the weekdays I take the bus to and from work. I do not usually travel alone after work far from my apartment, so I will usually walk the 5-30 minutes to find food. On the weekends I have tried to get out of Ha Noi as much as possible so I am often not in the city. I still have not figured out the bus system here, so there are only a few routes that I will take, but when I can I will take the bus.

When I do want to go somewhere further than 1.5 miles, I usually take a taxi. The heat here is intense and motorbikes ride wherever they want, so walking on sidewalks can be dangerous even. The taxis have been pretty good for the most part. I have only ripped off once and made the driver let me out the car immediately when I realized that the meter was charging me way more than it should be. The buses are less convenient than the taxis, but I do feel safer getting around in them just because there are more people around you at all times. Within Ha

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Noi find a Vietnamese friend to take you to all of the cool spots. I have been lucky enough to go to ancient coffee shops in tiny attics and hangout in a Vietnamese university dorm room. There are a lot of things to do in Ha Noi, but you will notice many Vietnamese do not go out alone, so it can be intimidating to navigate the busy city without a friend to share a table with or help order food.

I have had a lot of interesting experiences trying to travel outside of the city. You honestly never really know how the experience is going to be. It is really hard to independently travel in Viet Nam, so most people book with tours. I have done both and they both have had their pros and cons. Traveling with a tour company does feel a bit safer than randomly hopping on someone's boat and hoping they get you to where you need to go, but it's all about you and the adventure you choose. My biggest advice is to do research, look at Trip Advisor reviews, stop worrying over every detail, and hold on for the bumpy ride. Viet Nam never disappoints with interesting experiences, even if methods seem a little crazy to you.

**What is the most frustrating aspect of your host culture? What is the most rewarding aspect?**

I think the most frustrating thing about Vietnamese culture is a result of the historical context of the country, mixed with the geographical location of Viet Nam. Ha Noi is occupied with millions of people; therefore, many people live in very close quarters and have no sense of personal space. The city itself is full of people, shops, livestock, and material goods. As the population continues to grow, the ancient city is beginning to feel the effects of overpopulation. The streets are constantly filled with motorbikes, buses, cars, and people rushing through to get to the next place. Smog fills the air and the low-hanging clouds keep both the moisture and smog

CSAGA- Center for Applied Sciences and Studies in Gender, Women, Families, and Adolescents at a suffocating level in the city. While the culture itself is laid back, watching people go to and from a place you realize that they are much more busy than it looks.

The most frustrating thing for me living in Viet Nam has mostly been the actual environment. I do not enjoy the crazy driving tactics. The fact that I am not even safe from a motorbike running me over while on the sidewalk drives me crazy, especially in the heat. The other part that has been hard for me has been personal space. The city has so many people that in general people have to share a lot more space than usual. The buses are filled with people on top of each other and every inch of the city is being utilized. Coming from the U.S. this can be hard to get used to, especially when the heat is already a huge factor. The other part that I have not gotten used to is the cultural communist context. The Vietnamese people have grown up in a culture where they are used to sharing everything, but they have also gone through a long history of their possessions (land, food, etc.) being taken from them by different governments and militaries. This has left a really interesting dichotomy, where people have no problem grabbing your drink off the table and drinking it for their own, but when it comes to getting on the bus will physically push you to make sure he or she gets a seat. Vietnamese people have this sense of competitiveness in them, but also would not question sharing their food with you. Trying to navigate these different spaces has been frustrating at times, but also rewarding as I have learned so much about the Vietnamese culture.

**What were your greatest challenges and rewards on this internship in each of your three development areas?**

My greatest challenge personally on this trip was learning to live independently. I had to depend on myself for food, comfort, basic items, transportation, and recreation; this was something completely new to me. I also had to learn how to create new friendships in a foreign

CSAGA- Center for Applied Sciences and Studies in Gender, Women, Families, and Adolescents city and manage the transportation system so that I would be able to explore more. While this was a challenge because it was so new to me and isolating at times, it also became my biggest personal reward. I am now able to say that I lived by myself in a foreign country for three months and made countless new friends and memories. This a life experience that has made a better and stronger person.

Professionally, my greatest challenge here was working in the environment of CSAGA. I really enjoy the agency and I believe in what they do, but before working with them, I had never worked in an office for 8 hours a day. Back home, I am constantly moving around and socializing with clients that work for whether it is with students or their parents. This internship was very hands-off and forced me to be creative through at a desk through a computer. I had learn how to produce important information for an organization by simply using the Internet. Not having access to hands-on projects was really difficult for me to get used too, but I learned through the experience that in my future career, I need to be working a more active environment.

My biggest reward in this area has been my ability to learn new approaches when working with clients from a SE Asian perspective. The way that human service workers approach issues in the U.S. is very different than the way that we approach it in CSAGA. I have had to think critically about the most effective interventions and adapt past models to fit with this new culture. I think that being able to critically analyze situations and problem solve creatively, will greatly help me in my professional future.

Cross-culturally my biggest challenge has been to learn how to fit into a culture that is different than my own. The way that people interact socially or professionally is different. For example, in Oregon we are used to the rain and will still go out to do many activities. In Viet Nam if it begins to rain, everyone tends to cancel their plans. There is a priority on rest and

CSAGA- Center for Applied Sciences and Studies in Gender, Women, Families, and Adolescents wellness here, so people are often concerned about you getting enough rest and going home early to sleep. Little social cues, along with larger cultural differences can be hard to figure out.

Learning these interactions are important if you want to create meaningful relationships here, but it takes time to learn all of the little differences. Each day I learned more about how to assimilate into the culture, but it took time and a lot of patience.

**What words of advice do you have for future interns:**

Viet Nam is a beautiful country with so many diverse experiences to offer. My first piece of advice would be to go outside the city if that is where you are living. Explore the country and all of the different ways that people live in Viet Nam. From mountains, to lakes, through jungles, you will always find something new and beautiful if you travel. I have always felt safe in Viet Nam, but be aware of the people that will take advantage of foreigners, whether it is in a taxi or buying fruit from a local market. Say “yes” to new opportunities; you never know where you will end up. Try to live like a local-- take the public transportation system, learn how to walk across the street through rush hour traffic, eat every kind of food on plastic stools in a dark alleyway, and just explore. The culture of Viet Nam is extremely different from American culture, even Western culture, so see the experiences as just different even if you do not agree with some of the values. Build friendships by smiling at someone, or sitting with them when they want to practice English with you. My experience here has been a long list of adventures, with both difficulties and a lot of laughter. Letting go of the expectation of what your trip will be like in your head, will be the most helpful piece of advice that I can give. Be able to laugh at yourself when you do something culturally awkward. Things will not always go as planned (I would say they almost never go as you had originally planned) , but you will learn to enjoy the unexpected

CSAGA- Center for Applied Sciences and Studies in Gender, Women, Families, and Adolescents moments of living in Viet Nam. As so many people in the social services would say, lean into the discomfort.

If you are working in CSAGA, get to know your coworkers. Ask them to go to lunch with you, or order in your lunch and sit in the office talking with them. Keep asking questions when you don't understand things, as communication can be difficult when it comes to concepts in social work. Ask for more work if you feel like you are not getting enough and don't feel afraid to propose your own ideas. CSAGA's staff is eager to learn from you as an intern and as a person. Your diverse perspective on issues in the agency is the most important thing that they want from you.