

Hanoi: Friendly, Laidback City Life For \$1,400 a Month

Wendy Justice

In 2010, when Adelaide native Diane Lee first visited Vietnam, she was inspired by what she discovered. Diane, now 55, says, “I was a single mother in Australia. When my daughter left school, I said, ‘My job is done. Now I’m going to go and travel!’ I wanted to go somewhere really different, so I chose Vietnam.”

While staying in Hanoi, she visited KOTO, a social enterprise that has been providing vocational training to disadvantaged and at-risk youth for almost 20 years. Diane says, “I was so impressed with the work they did, I thought ‘one day, I’m going to come back and volunteer.’”

In 2016, she made her move to Vietnam and became a volunteer with KOTO. “It was a life-changing experience,” she says. “I’d never lived overseas before, let alone worked overseas for an international organisation. All the kids came from disadvantaged backgrounds, but they had such a positive attitude. It made me take stock of what I had.” She worked with KOTO for a year, first as a volunteer, then as paid staff. KOTO gave her many opportunities to meet people and provided support in adjusting to her newly adopted country.

“I found that Hanoi was incredibly rewarding and enjoyable. I was originally going to be here for three months, but now, I’m here indefinitely. I even brought my cat from Australia! It’s been such an adventure. I made friends very quickly and there was enough English spoken that I didn’t feel isolated and lonely,” she says.

“I have some very good Vietnamese friends and when I get together with expat friends, it’s like the League of Nations—they come from Germany, the U.S., U.K., South Africa, Australia, everywhere. Some are in their 20s and others are in their 70s, but we all have similar values.”

Although Diane initially moved to Hanoi because she wanted to live somewhere challenging, once she settled in, she discovered that the city was surprisingly uncomplicated. “I found that living in Hanoi is so easy. It’s easy to get yourself set up with an apartment and you can find

anything you want here, including work if that’s what you want to do. The lifestyle is very easy for me and my money goes a long way here.”

Diane doesn’t drive but getting around is easy. “I have a bicycle but have no need for anything more than that. I’ll take taxis if it’s raining or motorbike taxis if I want to travel longer distances; it’s safer for Vietnam if I don’t drive,” she says. “I don’t have to worry about petrol or parking, or if I’ve had a few drinks. It’s nice not having the responsibility of a vehicle. Life for me is a lot simpler here.”

Diane keeps herself busy with freelance writing, teaching English part-time and writing web content for local Vietnamese businesses, but she still finds time to get out and enjoy the area. “I went to Phu Quoc island in July,” she says. “There’s so much to do in Hanoi, though. I enjoy photography and trying different cafés and new places to eat. I love riding around West Lake on my bicycle. I do a lot of socialising over food and coffee. I



The energy of Hanoi’s neighbourhoods make it an exciting city to explore.

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also enjoy visiting the Fine Arts Museum and the Museum of Ethnology; I’m still discovering the museums in Hanoi.”

Hanoi is in northern Vietnam and has a four distinct seasons. Diane says, “I love the weather here except for summer, when I complain that it’s too hot. The temperature is about the same as Adelaide but it’s more humid here. Winter, too, is similar in temperature but again, more humid. I love the spring and autumn.”

Diane found that learning Vietnamese wasn’t essential, but it has vastly improved her experience here. “I’d never formally learned a language before, so I surprised myself that I was able to pick it up. I took lessons for 18 months with a private tutor. Now, I can converse in Vietnamese. It’s empowering,” she says.

Diane found her one-bedroom apartment in the expat-favoured Tay Ho District with the assistance of [West Lake Housing](#). “I pay \$624 per month, which includes twice-weekly housecleaning, Pay TV and internet. It’s fully-furnished, even down to the bedsheets. It’s relatively quiet here and my windows overlook trees. My cat likes the view,” she says.

Diane says that she’s living well on a monthly budget of about \$1,400. “My transportation costs around \$41 per month. I have a membership with Olympia Gym, which costs \$17 per month. I’ll spend between \$100 and \$160 eating out and the same amount on groceries. In the summer when I’m running the air conditioner, my electricity bill is between \$70 and \$100 per month; I pay about half that during the winter months.”

Diane has discovered that she can get practically everything delivered to her door. “I usually shop at the little minimart that’s convenient to my place and they’ll deliver—I can even text them with my order. My drinking water is delivered, too, and almost every restaurant delivers,” she says.

Diane says that Hanoi is home for the time being; she has no desire to return to Australia. “The Vietnamese people are friendly, helpful and kind,” she says. “They are happy to help you out. And no one says to you, ‘Watch out for your bag.’ Hanoi is an amazingly safe city.” ■