

Fred Vint

## Fred Vint (BH 2011 – 2016) Year abroad report

I spent a month at the British Institute in Florence studying the origins of the Renaissance. The British Institute is great because the lecturers go off Italian time which means long lunches and plenty of free time in between lectures and visits to galleries. Living in Florence is such a privilege (the last time I use this word in this report, I promise) and getting to know its secrets like the Benedictine Chanting at the crypt chapel at San Miniato felt very Da-Vinci-code-esque. I then had a week to quickly visit some of the major cities of the Emilia-Romagna and Veneto regions; the Scrovegni chapel in Padua and the Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna were easily highlights. I met my family for a couple of days in Rome before flying home to spend two fruitless weeks at the Korean embassy trying to get a visa. I learned a valuable lesson which is have as little to do with people who work in immigration as possible, there's a special circle of the inferno waiting for them... I didn't get a visa.

I flew to Seoul in the beginning of March and had about three days to acclimatise to jet lag and getting used to the sheer vastness of the city. Most of the days I spent teaching at EtonHouse were split between the EAL department (helping kids struggling with English) and PE. The advantage of the school as an international school is that all the teaching is in English and the curriculum is relatable. Seoul is an extraordinary city, it's difficult to emphasise just how manic the city. There's a constant buzz around in the daytime it is full of events and shows while most shops don't close all night and the nightlife around Hongdae is incredible (in spite of the K-Pop). One of the more difficult things to do was meeting Koreans of a similar age mainly due to the language which is relatively easy to read but a nightmare to speak. I resorted to hanging out with Korean Americans and people I met through Nowon-Gu Church football team, captained by the most lethal sixty year old striker I have ever seen. I managed to move from my guest house to a job as a full time nanny with one of the boys at the school. As much as I tried to style myself as a Victorian governess the exhausting of Korean life meant that after a couple of weeks I was powerless to stop his ice cream raids or midnight minecraft sessions.

At weekends and during the half term break I tried to travel around Korea as much as possible. One of the most moving visits was a tour of the DMZ that marks the boundary between the North and South. It is unbelievably depressing place but essential to understanding Korea and Koreans quite contradictory view of themselves. Other places I would recommend are Busan which is Korea's second city which has two great beaches and a more relaxed pace to Seoul, lots of people also go to the island in the south Jeju-do but I didn't get a chance. There is also a program run by a company called Templestay which offers weekend long retreats at Buddhist monasteries around Korea I stayed Geumsunsa which is in the national park just north of Seoul which is incredibly beautiful and less pretentious sounding than others. The other real joy of Korean life is the food. Korean BBQs are beginning to get more popular in the UK but the Korean attitude to food as almost a pass time makes it a lot of fun, particularly as drinking without food simply isn't done so most Koreans will take you to eat four or five meals so that you can drink enough soju to go out.

After a couple of months in Seoul I went to Tokyo and from there I went to stay with Gabriella Gormley (MM 2011 – 2016) in a beautiful town called Nikko which is about two hours from Tokyo by train. I then returned to Tokyo and had a couple of days sight-seeing including a trip to Mt Fuji, I recommend camping beside the lake made famous in Hokusai's Great Wave. I then met up with Calum Evans (SU 2011 – 2016), Christian Hollingberry (SU 2011 – 2016) and his friend Max. We all bought Japan Rail Passes which although expensive are definitely worth it as the easiest way to get

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around and circumvent Japan's reluctance to speak English. We travelled to most of the major cities in the Honshu prefecture with Kyoto proving to be a universal favourite. Takayama and Okinawa had great food and I challenge anyone to not be moved to tears by the Hiroshima memorial museum. After three weeks Calum had to fly home and Christian and Max went on to Vietnam so I had a week to kill. I went to the south via Fukuoka, Nagasaki (surprisingly picturesque) and Kagoshima (its nickname the 'Naples of the East' is unearned). From there I got a ferry to Okinawa, definitely fly as thirty hours on a tatami mat is agony. If you can escape Naha (the capital) the rest of Okinawa is stunning and when the weather is good there is diving off the Kerama islands but even in late May it is fairly erratic.

From Naha airport it is a short flight to Taipei where Freddie Macpherson (BH 2011 – 2016) and I travelled down the east coast of Taiwan which receives little tourism and has some great beaches. Taiwan was one of the most surprising parts of the trip. Taipei is less pristine and ordered than most other Asian cities and has a more chaotic atmosphere which is good fun. The night markets are cheap and boast some of the best Chinese food you can eat while the Taiwanese are probably the most liberal society in the Far East. One of the few tourism spots is the Taroko Gorge which is an extraordinary canyon which if you can hire a scooter in nearby Hualien is even better. Most of the east coast of Taiwan is rural but accessible by train but if you move in land from the coast the landscape becomes mountainous. Among the mountains are rice plains such as Chishang where you can hire a bike a cycle through a desert of rice fields. Taiwan is a small island and even doing a loop back up through the cities on the west coast, which manufacture all the small plastic things you neither want nor need, it wouldn't take more than a month. In hindsight, I would have loved to have travelled on a scooter or motor bike but the only problem is that Taiwan is susceptible to monsoons which erupt from nowhere and take days to disappear.

After three weeks on the east coast and a quick visit to the cities of Tainan and Kaohsiung we decided to get a cheap flight to the Philippines. Unfortunately, our visit coincided with a terrorist attack in Manila, piracy on the coast of Palawan and an invasion of ISIS in the south which limited our options. In the end we decided as we only had a week to go to stay on Luzon island and go to the surfing resort of Baler which despite amazing weather was deserted. It was a blissful time just lazing in hammocks and trying to tune out the incessant late night karaoke. On our last night we stayed in Manila which I really, really don't recommend, it's a shit hole. Crushing poverty and a sense of violence makes it a place with almost no redeeming qualities. Having said that, I would love to see more of the Philippines, parts of which sound incredibly beautiful like El Nido in Palawan and the Visayas. I said goodbye to Freddie after a couple of days in Hong Kong, our last night was spent at the Wednesday night races which is fun as the Chinese seem to love a flutter.

There's really only one route for backpackers in Vietnam either up or down the coast. I started in Ho Chi Minh and went on the typical trail which can be done either on motorbike or night buses. I personally preferred the north of Vietnam to the south with the exception of Da Lat, a beautiful town in the mountains, the rest tends to get very overcrowded. As you pass further up you reach the two old imperial cities; Hoi An is where you can get tailored suits and leather shoes very cheaply while Hue has some interesting tourist sites and an abandoned water park. I recommend going further north to Phong Nha which is surrounded by national park and has a huge complex of caves to discover. I paid about fifty quid (which is a huge amount relatively in Vietnam) to have a tour of the Paradise cave which was definitely worth it. I then stayed with a couple of people I had met along the way and while using Hanoi as a base went to Ha Long bay, Cat Ba island and a homestay and trekking in Sapa.

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Vientam, I think, is increasingly trying to emulate South Thailand in being the new party place in South East Asia which although fun for a bit gets pretty boring and is a shame because there are so many interesting things to do there. I was ready to go after three weeks. I got an overnight bus to Luang Prabang in Laos. It's a very beautiful French colonial town though its 10 PM curfew is quite a contrast to Vietnam. Nearby is the Kuang Si waterfalls which are enormous and worth spending a day at. One of the better things to do there is going to help kids practice English in a programme called big brother mouse. It's good because unlike other volunteering you don't have to commit to any time you just drop in. The kids there were very impressive, one boy had taught himself French and English from just two text books he had at home! I then went north to some of the small villages along the Mekong. My favourite was Nong Khiaw which is beautiful and had a good balance between having tourist infrastructure i.e a bus stop and also being pretty untouched, I've heard that if you can get to the south around Pakse the same is true for there. After a couple of days doing rafting and trekking there I went to Vang Vieng which has an amazing reputation as you can go in tubes to all the bars down the river. Sadly most of these have shut down and the rest of the town is past its best which was a bit underwhelming. I only spent one day in Vientiane before getting a flight to Kuala Lumpur.

I was staying with family friends in KL and really enjoyed the experience. I ended up doing a bit of work experience over there, it felt pretty surreal to be in a suit and I'm not sure I was really in the right mind-set for it. It's probably best to hire a car in KL because it so spread out but I was sad to leave Malaysia as both Melaka and Penang sound brilliant. My final stop was Sumatra the largest island in Indonesia. It's a nightmare to get around because the roads are terrible but consequently it gets little tourism so most of the places are very chilled. I really enjoyed staying on an island in Lake Toba which is a massive volcanic island. The people who go there tend to be older and fairly eccentric and always seem to have an interesting story to tell. In general the Indonesians I met were the friendliest people I met, it's always a clichéd thing to mention but it makes a significant difference to the general experience. Another great place is Bukit Lawang where you can go on jungle treks among semi-wild Orangutan which means you're guaranteed to see one. The final place I visited was Berstagi from there you can hike up a volcano and in the distance an active one is still simmering away. I flew back to Seoul for a couple of days before returning home in late August.