

Taught a lesson

A quest for meaningful travel leads to a classroom in Vietnam and unexpected results

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MY MELBOURNE FAMILY and I were headed to Vietnam for three months, but I wanted more than beaches, *banh mi* and a tailor-made suit. I wanted the immersive experience. To make connections with locals. To lose myself in another way of life. To understand somewhere else, not just visit.

I wanted to feel Vietnamese.

So, when the tenuous connection came along of a colleague's Vietnamese hairdresser's niece who ran an English language school on the Mekong River, I fired an email off straight away. What better way, I thought, to experience life in Vietnam, than by becoming a local teacher for a while?

And it wasn't as if I hadn't taught English before. Although never formally qualified, I've taught in a German high school (my unruly year 7/8 classes soon devolved into back-to-back episodes of *The Simpsons*) and, a few years back, I provided lunchtime English conversation to a young Singaporean web designer (who I thoroughly confused by presenting lessons on Australian cultural institutions, such as the Big Prawn and test cricket).

What could possibly go wrong?

After a night's acclimatisation in a budget hotel in Can Tho, Vietnam's fourth-largest city, I was let loose on my first class: a room full of respectful (if perhaps a bit shy) 18 to 30-year-olds. It went well.

Feeling cocky after my first



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successful day on the job I was completely unprepared for what was to follow: a class of children aged between 11 and 14. In hindsight, I should have known what to expect. Don't get me wrong, the kids were great – curious souls and (mostly) all excited to be there – but after two hours of spontaneous dancing, laughter, paper-plane flying, back-seat lolly eating, misunderstandings and other hijinks, I was completely exhausted.

The week wore on and the pattern continued. I resorted to using my

own children as props in an effort to distract my students and eat up some class time. One day, my son brought in an AFL football and conducted some indoor kicking drills. Out of sheer desperation we later sang 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' followed by all three verses of 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat'.

By the time my six days of teaching were over I was a dribbling mess. At the first opportunity, we booked a flight to a beach resort on the central coast, ordered a *banh mi* and made a date with a local suit maker. ✈