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Why American expat, teacher, and entrepreneur Kevin enjoys living in Vietnam

The nice people, the low cost of living, the beautiful sights: these are only some of the things that American expat Kevin enjoys about living in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Here he discusses his business, the positive outlook for information technology in Vietnam, and gives sound advice on topics such as finding a job and accepting the local way of life.



Kevin Miller Jr.

-Where were you born?

Mountain View, California, USA

-In which country and city are you living now?

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam

-Are you living alone or with your family?

I live alone with my puppy (Lucky) and cat (Smokey).

-How long have you been living in Vietnam?

Over three years

-What is your age?

I am 35 years old.

-When did you come up with the idea of living in Vietnam?

Back in December, 2003, I formed the Amerasian Foundation to help develop an "Amerasian Voice" for those of us who identify themselves as Amerasians. At that time, I was planning to obtain a PhD in Communication at the University of Washington but the Communications Department wanted me to spend a couple years with my organization before applying to their program. In April, 2004, two American Vietnam Vets convinced me to do some volunteer work with Vietnamese Amerasians in Vietnam. Less than a month later, I arrived in Saigon to volunteer with a nonprofit organization that serves Vietnamese Amerasians. In short, that's how I got to Vietnam.



-Was it hard to get a visa or a working permit?

Getting a 6 month B3 Multiple Entry Visa is quite easy. You can go to any travel agency around the Backpacker Area (Pham Ngu Lao) and they will process your 6 month business visa in one week for around \$100-130. You have to negotiate the price with the travel agency beforehand but if they have known you for awhile, you will get a discount. B3 visas can be renewed at a much lower fee with the same travel agency.

My last visa renewal I went through my friend. Got it back in about 4 days for about \$110. In the past, I have had my employers take care of the visa process for me, but sometimes it is easier just to do it yourself.

To this day, I have never had a work permit here in Vietnam. I have not known a single American who has successfully gone through the process. Most employers just ask you to sign their company contract and another labor contract for the Ministry of Labor and Invalids (blue form). You also have to submit copies of your certificates, degrees, and CV. Some universities will then submit all these documents to the local police and the process stops there. Tomorrow I need to submit new documents with one of the schools I currently teach at, again...

-How do you make your living in Vietnam? Do you have any type of income generated?

When I first came to Vietnam, I volunteered with a nonprofit organization. Within a month, I was also teaching English at SEAMEO RETRAC. A year later I was the IT Manager at the American Pacific University International School. I left APU to rest for a couple of months before taking university positions at both the Center for International Education (Vietnam National University - Hochiminh), and the Saigon Institute of Technology (SaigonTech). During this time, I was also hired as a consultant with Indochina Capital for about 14 months. Now I just spend my time working at SaigonTech. I am currently forming a Linux-based IT company here in Saigon with several other expats and Vietnamese Linux users.

If you want a job in Vietnam, you will need to start networking once you get into the country. Networking is probably the best way to get a good well-paying job here. All the jobs that I have ever had in Vietnam have been referred to me. A person just needs some time, patience and good networking skills.

And most importantly, do not forget to thank the person who helped you get a job. Just take them out for coffee or lunch and that should be enough. Many expats here tend to forget to do this.



-Do you speak Vietnamese and do you think it's important to speak the local language?

Vietnam is kind of a strange country in that everywhere you go, you will always find an English speaker. When I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kazakhstan back in 1997, I had no choice but to learn Kazakh or Russian. The same thing in the Kyrgyz Republic back in 1999, I had to learn Kyrgyz and Uzbek, as well as speak Russian, if I wanted to do my job effectively. When I lived in Istanbul, Turkey, back in the summer of 2002, I had to learn Turkish.

I can communicate in 7 different languages (English, Japanese, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Turkish, Uzbek, and Russian). Normally I pride myself on being able to speak the local language within a couple months of moving to a new country. The Vietnamese language, unfortunately for me, kicked my butt. The six tones killed me. After 3 years of living in Vietnam, I can speak enough to get around town, do a little shopping, etc.

-Do you miss home and family sometimes?

Yeah, I do miss home, family and friends sometimes. Being away from home now is normal for me but it would be nice to play with my nephews and nieces while they are still young. That is probably the thing I miss most while being in Vietnam.

In Saigon, I tend to hang out a lot at coffee shops with my friends and students. My favorite coffee shop is at Highlands Coffee in the Saigon Center building. Highlands reminds me of Seattle's Best Coffee in the design and architecture including the logo.

You also get to eat out more often than you would back in the US. Sometimes I can eat 3 meals out a day without having to worry about cooking. Food here is good and inexpensive.

When I do not feel like leaving my house, I tend to stay in my room watching DVDs on my laptop or reading a nice book.

-Do you have other plans for the future?

Last April I formed the Saigon Linux Group [<http://www.saigonlinux.com/>] with a couple of expat and Vietnamese Linux geeks. We plan to focus on doing some consulting with small to medium companies focusing on implementing Linux and Open Source Technology as an enterprise solution. Linux and Open Source Technology has a big future in Vietnam and we help promote it from the bottom-up.

-What about housing, have you bought, or are you renting a home? How much do you pay for it?

I rent my house. I have to pay for electricity, garbage, water, telephone and the Internet. My five-story house has four bedrooms, one sitting-room, a living-room, kitchen, terrace, and an upper room with a jacuzzi and sauna. The house I live in averages for around \$500-800 in this area. My rent is lower now due to all the construction but once the alleyway is widened and repaved, rent for the houses around me will all go up.

-What is the cost of living in Vietnam?

Since I eat out a lot, my budget tends to be a little higher than in the US. I remember it being cheaper for me to live in Seattle but here I get more bang for my money. Instead of an apartment, I get a whole house. Most utilities bills are more expensive than in the US but that is because I tend to keep my air conditioner on all day. It is cheaper to raise pets here as well which is really nice since I got a fat cat who can't stop eating.

-What do you think about the Vietnamese?

The Vietnamese are very nice to foreigners. You hear a lot of complaints by expats about the Vietnamese but do not pay them any heed. These expats tend to think the Backpacker Area is Vietnam. IT IS NOT! Move outside of the city towards the airport where I live and begin to enjoy life. The Vietnamese are some of the nicest people in the world.

-What are the positive and negative aspects of living in Vietnam?

My biggest complaint here is the traffic. Since there are more cars now, it takes longer to get anywhere in Saigon on the main roads even on motorbike. The increase of cars has also led to an increase of pollution so on most days, you have no choice but to wear a mask.

Despite the horrible traffic, being able to go out every night if I want is probably the most positive aspect here in Vietnam. There is an assortment of cuisines here besides Vietnamese. Clubs are plentiful and the coffee shops are amazing. My favorite spots are the beer houses for a light beer and sausages. You can't do this in America every night...

-Do you have any tips for our readers about living in Vietnam?

Patience, number 1. Also, come to accept that the 'Vietnamese-way' may actually be the right way. Stop rationalizing everything and please do not give the Vietnamese tips on how to run their business, raise their child, etc. That just annoys them and who made you an expert anyway? This is Vietnam so either live with it or get out! That's all :-)

-Do you have any favorite Web sites or blogs about Vietnam?

1. SaigonNezumi.com [<http://www.saigonnezumi.com/>] (My personal blog.)
2. charvey [http://chrisfharvey.typepad.com/charvey_in_vietnam/] (Chris Harvey's Blog - The guy who runs VietnamWorks.com [<http://www.vietnamworks.com/>] now.)
3. Antidote to Burnout [<http://layered.typepad.com/>] (Mel's Blog - Excellent blog on the architecture of Vietnam)
4. The Final Word in Saigon [<http://www.itsthefinalword.blogspot.com/>] (Interesting blog by Jon Hoff, a Brit here - "God Save the Queen!")
5. SaigonBlogs.com [<http://www.saigonblogs.com/>] (Got to give a plug for the Linux geeks here in Saigon as well.)