

It's the end of the first term in the Salesian Community of Đông Thuận, South of Vietnam

Peter Hampshire, Vietnam, October 2017

I should mention before you start reading about my experience here that I'm still in a confused phase where I often have no idea what's going on – I have been in Vietnam for about five weeks! 75% of the boys and girls living in the Community speak only a few words English and I'm pretty sure they have absolutely no idea what language I'm using when I try to make conversation in Vietnamese. In contrast the Father, Brother's and Sister's English are very good but much more variable. I could not for the life of me explain how to play World Football Stars 2013/2014 Top Trumps to one of the senior Fathers, called Fr Nguyễn, during a long taxi ride. Communication is difficult. Đông Thuận is an incredible place, with incredible people, but I'm very aware some of the opinions I have written below might only be half the story, and they may change in the coming months of my placement.

I am an 18-year-old Salesian Volunteer, and have just finished my A Levels. I decided to apply for a placement with Bosco Volunteer Action for around 10 months in the year before going to University. I've found a lot of this first term really tough. Having said this, I have to say there have been many events and experiences here that I've thoroughly enjoyed and I'm very grateful to be here.



The community of Đông Thuận celebrating all September birthdays. I'm on the front row, fourth from the left.

The community

Đông Thuận is essentially a boarding community for poor children from all over Vietnam. The community provides a safe environment for around 200 boys and 25 girls aged generally from 14 to 19. The fees are at a "minimum level" and many types of scholarships exist in order that some of the poorest children can attend (about 30 every year). Some children are poor in a material sense, but others are orphans or have been excluded from other schools around Vietnam. Many have nowhere else to go for an education...

One particularly stark example of how poverty affects the lives of the children is during the sport events at the weekend. Every other Sunday, a team visits Đông Thuận for a game of football against our best 20 or so boys. There have been matches against nearby schools, other Salesian Communities and once the Police showed up for a game. I remember the first game I attended where it was absolutely pouring down with rain (its currently rainy season in South Vietnam), so to say our uneven, grass pitch was muddy would be a bit of an understatement. The local school turned up in full kits, shin-pads and boots with metal studs. In contrast, the boys playing for Đông Thuận played barefoot, and any kind of shirt that was white counted as their strip. Our boys were sliding all over the place and I can tell you that the strips were certainly not white at the end of the game. We lost 3-0 but it was a miracle that none of our barefoot players ended up with broken ankles. Recently in different games some of our players have worn boots (once one guy had one foot with a boot and one foot without a boot) but in general most players play barefoot.



Đông Thuận playing against a local school during the first time I watched (the rain had not started at this point)

The education the community provides for the children

For five days a week the children are educated at the attached school and vocational training center (Engineering, metalwork and mechanics for the boys. Sewing, hair and beauty for the

girls). There is additional compulsory education every day on other important aspects of life such as music, sport and prayer.

The students work hard at their academic studies for an important set of exams when they are aged 18-19. They are tested in Writing, Mathematics and either Geography and History or Physics and Chemistry. After attending some of the classes during the school day, I've seen the Physics they do involves more material than the A level Physics Course in the UK. There were problems they were solving in class that involved content that I have never looked at, despite taking Physics for my A levels last year at school. The Maths they do here incorporates almost all the core modules of our A level Maths course and some of the core modules of the Further Maths course as well. But only 1 or 2 children every year from Đông Thuận are able to get into the Vietnamese Universities, so most have to focus on their vocational skills to get a job when they leave. The Prefect of Study in the community told me almost all the children get jobs or go onto colleges (for higher education in vocational skills) after leaving Đông Thuận. The system works because it is the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters who approach companies and find jobs for the students.



Two students working in a metalwork class

Although it appears from what I've seen that the students get a really good education, it comes at a price. The children work half the day on Saturday and often must do extra work on Sunday doing jobs to maintain the community, including farming food to eat, cleaning the buildings and feeding the animals. This is necessary to ensure the prices for living here are as low as possible. The community environment is generally very positive, but there are some tough aspects. The rules are extremely strict. For example if you are caught fighting, you are not allowed to do sport for one month and instead must do work similar to that done on Saturday and Sunday. There is also a very rigid timetable that all students must follow, such as Mass and rosary at the same time every day.

Expectations and preparation for teaching before arriving

One of the main reasons that I wanted to take a year out after Secondary School before going to University was to help the poor. Part of my 'job' description for my placement in Vietnam was

to teach English in a “mainstream education context”. To be truthful, I had very little preparation for this. I don’t have a teaching English as a foreign language qualification, nor did I bring with me any resources besides two textbooks recommended to me by my Uncle. I imagined that I would encounter something along the lines of the school having their own syllabus and English-Vietnamese textbooks that I could use to plan lessons.

Realities regarding my teaching

On my first full day at Đông Thuận, I was told I was to start teaching the children the next day. I would teach as I saw fit, in a school classroom and with Fr Nguyễn as my translator.

Unfortunately the timetable was so tight that my lessons with the boys were (and still are) scheduled at the same time as their sport on the afternoon, rather than in the school day. This meant many boys have to choose between learning English and playing a sport– not a difficult choice for most! Attendance at my classes is low and I miss out on the sport myself during the weekdays.

A harsh reality of the placement is that the children often simply have more important things to do than learn English with me - there is no final public examination in English. I only teach about 20% of the boys. After my first week of teaching, I received a letter from my Fr Nguyễn informing me that my lesson time with the children was to be cut in half so they have more time for sport and play. Of course, this letter was terribly disheartening at the time. I currently have 1 hour contact time with the children each day for five days a week and I teach three separate groups (each group gets two or three 30 minute lessons per week). I also have one-to-one sessions with the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters which I am enjoying.

I’ve asked the children why they want to learn English, but unfortunately only very few know enough English to answer that question. I’ve had the interesting responses: because I want to travel the World, because I want to become a DJ and the most unusual, because I want to become a YouTube Star. However, Fr Nguyễn has let me know that my lessons are important, because the children are likely to work in factories in the future where some of the machinery has parts with English names. He’s said that anything that helps improve the pronunciation and listening ability of the children is worthwhile. I really appreciated him saying this to me.

How is the teaching going?

I was lucky to have brought the two English textbooks with me to Đông Thuận (from the Side by Side Plus Series) that my Uncle recommended. Without them, I would have had absolutely no idea how to structure my classes. Initially, teaching was painfully difficult, and my first couple of lessons were simply terrible. However with the help of others back home, I’ve been convinced that helping the children learn about the English culture is just as important as learning about the language itself. Therefore by teaching English songs such as “The Rainbow Song” and “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” I can make my lessons more enjoyable and they are definitely much better now. I’ve also played a lot of the game “twenty-one” and I plan to have a few games of “heads down, thumb up” in the future.



My 3rd lesson - teaching a group 25 boys in the classroom.

The response to my teaching these days seems to be either be quite good or a bit of a calamity, with no middle ground. My two most recent lessons probably sum this up quite nicely. The first was with a class of 25 boys. We were playing a game where teams of about four had to predict the weather around the world on that day using vocabulary I'd just taught them. I had researched the weather and whichever team got the most correct answers won a big bar of chocolate (I have stooped to bribing the children with sweets in an attempt to try to boost attendance). The students were really enthusiastic and I got a round of applause at the end of the lesson, which made my day.

However the next day I was teaching a class of 6 boys. I arrived at the classroom in the school and found no one was there, which was pretty awkward when Fr Nguyễn showed up. When I went out looking for them I discovered that one of the other Fathers was giving out free, delicious cake next to the basketball court for people doing sport. Naturally all my students were in the queue for the cake or enjoying it already nearby. After rounding up the boys and shepherding them back to the classroom, we ended up starting 12 minutes late for a 30 minute lesson. There was not enough time to fit in the work I planned so we ended up just revising previous vocabulary. At least they enjoyed the Milka chocolate I gave out at the end of the lesson...

Despite some of the catastrophes in class I've found myself really enjoying teaching when lessons go well. I have realized how much I love performing, and some of the students in my class can be so witty that they really make me laugh. I get on well and have fun with Fr Nguyễn and we are becoming more effective as a team. From the beginning he has been willing to help me with anything at a moment's notice. I am extremely grateful for the support he provides.

What else can I do in Đông Thuận?

What I can provide is my presence and commitment to Đông Thuận. With the children I'm trying to pull my weight when it comes to the chores; I attend Vietnamese Mass every day with them and show up for their meals and parties. My favorite memories have come from cheering the children on in their art festivals where they perform in singing, dancing and music. They are very talented. I'm also learning to play the bamboo flute with them, join them for sport on the weekend and can now challenge them in Chinese Chess, having learnt the rules on YouTube

(I've just recently had a legitimate victory too, which ended a five game loss streak). I'm having fun with the boys by challenging them to arm wrestle contests and chin up competitions.



Table football on the weekend with some of the boys from Đông Thuận



The incredible dancing Dragons from the Mid-Autumn festival

I can also join in with the Father's, Brother's and Sister's in some of their daily activities and I currently support four of them with one to one English sessions. On my second week of being in Vietnam, one of Brothers flew to Ireland for placement in a parish. I had only had 1 hour one to one session with him and it probably only made the tiniest bit of difference in terms of improving his English, but at least it's something. There are still many ways to be active here and I'm thankful for the rich environment Đông Thuận provides.

But I don't want to mislead you and give the impression that I'm joining in with activities all the time. The children go to school during the days and the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters are very

busy so occasionally cancel their one to one sessions. I'm afraid that sometimes the result is me finding myself in my room watching "Friends" episodes on my phone and eating Milka chocolate. But often the work here is very intensive, so I do believe this kind of down-time is important.

Also it's not as simple as equating 'being active' to 'doing good work'. For example, I once snuck in for one of the girls' dance classes without realizing they had quite an important upcoming performance. Since I have so little dancing experience, I spent the whole time getting in the way and annoying everybody. They were far too polite and shy to tell me to just go away. At the end of the lesson, one of the dancers made clear that she did not want to sit next to me that lunchtime.

Why were the realities of my placement tough?

I can hear many of you thinking that I'm living a life of Riley and I must be having a fabulous time. I mean, who wouldn't want to live in a beautiful and interesting country, with extremely friendly and kind people, all at the cost of just around 2 hours teaching every day.

Truthfully there have been some experiences I've had here on some days that I've enjoyed so much and I know I couldn't have had anywhere else in the world. The Fathers, Brothers and Sisters here are so kind and complimentary that they can also very easily make my day. However, if I'm honest there have been some days that I haven't enjoyed at all, and it's not easy to articulate why.

It might partly be guilt. I received a ridiculously wonderful welcome when I arrived, with people cheering and applauding me. I've been given my own en-suite room, whereas all the children sleep in huge halls containing about 50 bunk beds. The Fathers, Brothers and Sisters are keen to show me around the city by motorbike and give me a taste of the delicious local food. Again this may sound great (and often it is), but it made me feel just ashamed in the first couple of weeks when my lessons were not going well. It still makes me feel guilty sometimes when I spend too much time relaxing in my room or I make mistakes whilst spending time the children.



The bedroom for the boys

Maybe it's also just my ego taking a hit - I really had to rethink my expectations about how much impact I could make whilst on placement. In particular when it came to my contribution as a teacher but also as an influence to the poor children living in the community. The work I do is very different to the Fathers, Brothers and Sisters. They speak Vietnamese so can talk to the children about their problems and really build such strong relationships with them. This is not possible for me. I remember several occasions where children have said to me "I miss my family", which is maddening when they don't understand when I try to talk to them about it. I came to Vietnam with the intention to try and do many good things for the poor here, but my placement is by no means a shortcut or pass towards this sort of thing.

I'm embarrassed to admit that I did not know how to use the washing machine when I first came to Vietnam. The result was 1 hour hand washing clothes every day for the first 3 weeks which was a nightmare. Thankfully I finally realized the obvious and asked for help, so it's no longer a problem.

With the benefit of hindsight, reducing my contact time with the children was sensible. I'm only 18 with very little teaching experience behind me so my lessons need a lot more work. I currently have the opinion that spending time in the presence of the children is more valuable than the English they pick up during my lessons. Life here is certainly getting a little bit easier for me every day which means I'm having more fun. My lessons are improving and my relationships with the people are getting stronger. I've definitely developed a healthier perspective on my role in Đông Thuận.

What else encourages me in Đông Thuận

Probably like most places which cater for large groups of young people, one of the most hilarious and also impressive aspects about them are the children themselves.

One particularly impressive character in Đông Thuận is a boy named Hùng. He's such a talented musician and specializes in shuffling and singing pop songs - so naturally his English is pretty good. He can play his favorite song, Luis Fonsi's Despacito, on the box drums, the bamboo flute, and melodica (which is basically a piano attached to the side of a flute). He's also on the basketball team and recently I went to watch the team play another Salesian community called Cai Lậy. On the bus to the game, Hùng was making me laugh because whilst other players were getting some sleep or psyching themselves up, he was taking pictures of himself on his iPhone. I jumped in on one of his photos and was interested to see his reaction. He told me it was a "beautiful photo" and that I was not to worry that he would "put on Facebook", and to him that's a big compliment. I think he's known to be a very kind person.

Another impressive person I've met here is called Cam. She's the first girl in the history of the school to be doing technical skills (mechanics I think) with the boys. On the day I arrived at Đông Thuận she sung an entire English song in front of me and all the girls. She's from one of the poorest backgrounds in the Community so is benefitting from one of the scholarship schemes. When I asked why she studies mechanics, she said that she would use her skills to

help her family back home. Her English is amongst the best of the children, so I'm afraid she spends most of my lessons doing work for other subjects !

Maybe only 10 children here speak enough English for me to have a conversation with- including the two I've just mentioned. What is sometimes trying is that I can't find out very much about any of the children who don't speak good English. I really hope in the coming months communication will get a little easier and I'll be able to find out a bit more about them.



Đông Thuận's basketball team and the supporters at the game against Cai Lậy Community. Hùng is on the back row, fourth from the left.

Conclusion?

I must apologize to anyone who skipped the massive overload of information for some sort of conclusion because I'm afraid I haven't got one. This experience has been crazy for me! Right now though I am glad I have got through the very tough bit at the beginning and have kept going. I am excited about the coming months where I can hopefully tell you about some nail biting games of World Football Stars Top Trumps.

Thanks so much to everyone for all the support,
Peter Hampshire

p.s. You are very welcome to make a donation of 'Tet Cake' for everyone in our 300 people, strong community (including me)!

Receiving account Holder:

Name of payee: Le Tran Thanh Huynh.

1st line of address: [03 Hoang Thai Hieu](#) (ACB Vinh Long Branch).

Town/City: Vinh Long City. County/State: Vinh Long Province. Country: Viet Nam

Bank:

Name: Asia Commercial Joint Stock Bank (ACB).

BIC/Swift Code: ASCBVNVX

IBAN/Account Number: 202873549

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