

Savouring 'your chao kway' – in Vietnam

By **TAN LILING**

IN my freshman year at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), I chanced upon a discourse between my Vietnamese roommates.

As a student of linguistics, I was startled by the use of Hokkien-sounding words and the difference in their speech. This led to the discovery that they were speaking different dialects of the Vietnamese language.

I was intrigued by the language and spurred to pick it up. It was thus that, now in my third year at NTU, I had the opportunity to participate in my current immersion course in Vietnam through the university's Global Immersion Programme's (GIP) Work and Study scheme.

It gave me the chance to experience the special charms of the Vietnamese culture and further deepen my interest in the Vietnamese language.

In January, I left Singapore for Vietnam under the GIP. My foray into the country began with three weeks of intensive studies at the Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, where I learned about Vietnam's history, socio-economic landscape, culture and language.

With a thorough understanding of contemporary Vietnam, I next began a 22-week internship which allowed me to experience first-hand what it is like to live and work in the country.

I was attached to the Transinex Tours Vietnam Representative Office in Ho Chi Minh City – or Saigon, as the Vietnamese still call it.

According to Huynh Tinh Cua, a Vietnamese linguist, Sai refers to firewood and Gon is the name of the kapokier tree. In Khmer, however, Sai Gon means the "Forest Kingdom". This was an interesting start to my socio-linguistic exploration of the Vietnamese language.

My job as an intern allowed me to explore the breadth and depth of Vietnam. Participating in fairs by the Singapore Tourism Board, for instance, took me to Hanoi and Danang as well.

I interacted with Vietnamese from diverse backgrounds and stations of life, and saw how motivated they were to learn and to grow. I gained keen insights into how Vietnamese in different parts of the country worked and lived, acquiring a good sense of what makes the



In Vietnam and loving it: The writer (left) exploring the countryside with his friends. His trip helped him appreciate the language, the Vietnamese people and their lifestyle, as well as how the country conducts business, engages the world and is growing in economic stature.

Vietnamese tick.

Naturally, I also enjoyed applying what I had learnt in linguistics back at NTU and spent my time instinctively picking out differences in regional dialects as I travelled across this vast country.

Another avenue through which I began to learn more about Vietnam was through its culinary delights. As a food-loving Singaporean, I surmised that Vietnamese food falls into three lip-smacking categories – northern, central and southern – with northern food being distinctively salty, central food spicy and southern food sweet!

After each work-packed day, I

thoroughly enjoyed my food sojourns with my Vietnamese colleagues, visiting fancy restaurants and humble hole-in-the-wall establishments for the best of Vietnamese fare.

Interestingly, I came across fried fritters, which the Vietnamese call *your chao kway* – the same fritters we have in Singapore!

My work experience in Vietnam will soon come to an end but not my stay in the country, as I will soon begin a third chapter of my immersion: a community project made possible by the Temasek Foundation-NTU Leadership Enrichment and Regional Networking (TF-NTU

LEARN) award.

I am certainly looking forward to giving back to a country that has made me feel so welcome.

Looking back on my stay in Vietnam so far, it has been a worthwhile and enriching experience.

I will always value the network of friends I have made, and remember their warm hospitality. The people of Vietnam are truly charming, and I now consider Vietnam my second home.

The Global Immersion Programme has provided me with the opportunity to learn out-of-the-box. My time in Vietnam has helped me appreciate its language, the Viet-

namese people and their lifestyle, as well as how the country conducts business, engages the world and is growing in economic stature.

You could say that, like my favourite Pho Tai (Vietnamese beef noodle soup) served piping hot, my immersion in Vietnam – though simple in concept – delivered some exciting highlights that fully satisfied me. Pho Tai, anyone?

The writer – a 24-year-old, third-year undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University – is currently on a six-month work-and-study stint in Vietnam under NTU's Global Immersion Programme