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Vijay Kannan Tells About Scary Night in Vietnam



Editor's note: "When Theory Meets Practice - Stories From the Workplace" is a new feature in the Huntsman Post where we invite professionals to share stories of challenging events that tested them with the unexpected.

By Vijay Kannan, executive director of International Programs, professor of operations management

Even experienced overseas travelers can slip up, and this can lead to interesting adventures. Yet, when I found myself in a police station in rural Vietnam late one night, I wasn't sure how much I would enjoy that one particular "adventure" I had.

Several years ago, I worked as a consultant for a business school in Hanoi, Vietnam. On the weekends, however, I played tourist, and one particular trip I made was to Sapa in a mountainous area in the northwest part of the country, 25 miles from the border with China. Traveling to Sapa required an overnight train journey followed by several hours traveling by road away from Hanoi or any other major city. While it is a major tourist venue, it is isolated, and I almost discovered exactly how isolated.

Hotels in Vietnam are required to register guests with local authorities. However, when I reached the hotel in Sapa, I discovered that while I had the copy of the personal information from my passport with me, I had left the copy of the visa in my passport which was safe back at the hotel in Hanoi. Reassured by my tour guide that all would be OK, I ventured out to explore the town.

Late that night, the guide announced that he had been trying to find me all evening and that we had to go to the police station. Being summoned by the police in a developing country is one thing. Being summoned late on a Saturday night in a small rural town far from resources that can be of assistance is quite another. We waited for what seemed an interminably long time before the local inspector finally called for us.

He began by berating the tour guide for bringing someone without proper documentation. This went on for a while before the inspector turned his attention to me. He proceeded to admonish me – I assume this was the case as the monologue was entirely in Vietnamese – before turning his wrath back on the tour guide. I had no idea what the outcome would be, whether I would be a "guest" of the authorities for the night, leaving with little more than the clothes on my back, or staying until assistance came from Hanoi on Monday at the earliest.

Finally we were allowed to leave. Only then did the guide explain that earlier in the evening he had spoken to his uncle, a police inspector in a neighboring province, and that everything had been resolved. The local inspector, however, had to show that he was in charge, and that no one came to his house and broke the rules. The guide was nonetheless surprised by the inspector's power play.

The lesson is that not only is every travel experience unique bringing with it learning opportunities, but that one should be ready for the unexpected and be thankful for knowing the right people. While there are things that can be done to prepare for overseas adventures, never underestimate the value of staying calm when things do not go as planned.

If you have such a story to share, please send it to Steve Eaton at steve.eaton@usu.edu.