

# Why take a summer trip to Vietnam?

“It is such a beautiful country,” they say.

Only five years old when the U.S. armed forces left Vietnam in 1973, **Stella Evans** didn’t lose high school and college friends during the “Unpopular War.”

And **Jill Szymanski** wasn’t born yet.

They didn’t grow numb following night after night of black and white TV news spilling bloody rice paddies into our living rooms; showing mountains made evil because they sheltered Viet Cong guerrillas.

For many of that generation, traveling to Southeast Asia would mean confronting the horrors of that war.

## We live in the world, not just a state or a country

For Jill Szymanski and Stella Evans, the rice paddies and mountains of a now-united Vietnam are beautiful. It’s a place they want to experience for themselves – not just read about in books – and that’s reason enough to go there.

It is true that, since 1986, Vietnam has been part of the world economy. By 2000, it had established diplomatic relations with most nations, and its economic growth has been among the highest in the world, according to many economists.

The country still suffers from relatively high levels of poverty, disparities in availability of health care, and limited opportunities for many women. Nonetheless, it is no longer the Vietnam of 1973.

Jill tries to travel outside of the United States every summer. When she first flew, it was to study in London as a student with the University of Delaware. Hooked on travel since then, “I’ve been to all seven continents now,” she says. “I love the adventure, seeing how other people live, how they view

their children, how they survive,” she adds. “Your perspective changes.”

For example, Stella says, “Americans would probably be horrified at how the Vietnamese treat their children. For them, it’s all about teaching their children how to survive because there, it’s ‘survival of the fittest.’” So, she says, children hike from village to village or herd giant water buffalo, with no adult in sight. In many situations, children are unattended. “We would look around and wonder, ‘Where’s the adult?’ and then realize, there is no adult. Children also walk many miles – again, unattended – to go to school in Vietnam.”

In Vietnam, she explains, education is worth many sacrifices. We might consider how they treat their children harsh, but to them, it isn’t harsh. “They want them to not only survive, but to have a better life,” says Stella.



Jill Szymanski (left) and Stella Evans (center) pose with Christine Serio, external communications specialist for the Blood Bank of Delaware. They are in Catcat Village in Sapa, Vietnam, in front of the beautiful mountains which drew them to that country.

Unlike Jill, Stella has travelled most of her life. “My family is from Greece, so we visit there and other European countries often,” she explains, adding that she has traveled to four continents.

The two couldn’t turn down the chance to ride a camel in Mongolia’s Gobi Desert. Jill is in the foreground and Stella, wearing the pink hat, is next to her.

Their Vietnam trip was through GEEO (Global Exploration for Educators Organization), an organization that tries to provide affordable trips of interest to educators. The two visited two schools while there. “The most striking difference had to be their respect for teachers. Parents teach their children, ‘Before you can become a learner, you must respect your teacher.’ We saw classrooms with kids being loud and boisterous until the teacher walked into the room. That’s all she had to do: walk into the room.”

They met when they were both teaching at Forest Oak E.S. in Red Clay. Jill now teaches 5th grade students at Brandywine Springs E.S. and Stella is a technology instructor at Highlands E.S. “I also did a study tour in South Africa, and was intrigued. When Jill asked me if I’d be interested in going with her this summer, I said yes. My kids are grown, and I can do this now. There is so much more out there than we have here,” she says.

She asked some of her students at Highlands to do some Internet research about Vietnam and Mongolia to help prepare her for last summer’s trip.

## Mongolia?

After Vietnam, they joined another group through REI Adventures on a trip through parts of Mongolia, including the Gobi Desert. They met nomadic families and learned that in Mongolia, too, education is valued. “Nomads will send their children to live in the cities during the school year so they can get an education, which is difficult for the kids as well as their families, being separated that long,” says Stella.

The two laugh together as they share unique memories. They both took advantage of every optional side trip, every opportunity, including climbing one of the “whistling” sand dunes of the Gobi Desert, known as Khongoryn Els. The sand sings or whistles when people walk or slide on it.

“We may never get back to these places,” adds Jill, “so we try to do everything we can.” That included shopping for jade bracelets, conical hats, boots, sweaters, and knuckle bones from sheep. “Kids play games with them, like we might do with dice,” explains Jill.

## Tying their adventures to the classroom

Jill’s fifth graders catch her enthusiasm for travel. “I hope it does inspire them to travel, too, to open their eyes and see that there is more than one way to live, to see the value of many cultures as well as what we all share and have in common.”

They both say that what makes a good traveler includes: adaptability, leaving your judgments behind, and bringing a big dose of acceptance along. “Being able to sleep on trains, live in tents and go for long periods of time not eating helps, too,” Jill laughs.

Along the way, they say, we grow in our understanding of the world and what is really important.

*Vietnam today?* Jill and Stella know that it is indeed a beautiful country.

For more information on GEEO’s Tours for Educators, go to [www.geeo.org](http://www.geeo.org).

To explore REI Adventure opportunities, go to [www.rei.com/adventures](http://www.rei.com/adventures).