

Florence Nguyen (front) and her sister, Valerie, in Hoi An. Bottom right: Florence (front centre) is surrounded by her family in Ho Chi Minh (formerly known as Saigon).



VIETNAM, MY LAND OF A THOUSAND SMILES

Florence Nguyen left Vietnam at a young age, under extremely difficult circumstances. Almost 30 years later, she returned to her native land to find a country and a people changed. Both of these experiences continue to influence her work at DFAIT.

I had always imagined that I would once again walk on the soil of Vietnam, the land where I was born and that had nourished my ancestors. Such a trip, albeit much desired and hoped for, was repeatedly postponed for fear of being confronted with segments of my childhood that the war had stigmatized in my mind. One day, tired of listening to my sister's litany of pleas to accompany her on her organized trip to Vietnam, I finally gave in.

So, I would return to the land of a thousand smiles for a mere three weeks, after a long absence of nearly 30 years. The trip was planned for the end of January 2008. The itinerary consisted mainly of stops in the three best-known cities: Hanoi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City.

On the plane, I quickly devoured a guide on Vietnam, especially the section on the history of this sublime and sumptuous country, known as the land of the dragon. Musing about the remnants of the country I once called home, and the struggles of the Vietnamese in the face of foreign occupations, I felt a certain pride in my native people who stoically and resolutely went about their quest for independence. I have never really lost my patriotism.

My family's past is itself a reflection of Vietnam's history between the North and South—my father being from Hanoi and my mother from the South. My

ancestors' history and the memories of my parents, my sister and I are all pieces of the same puzzle, helping me to better understand Vietnam, my family and myself.

I did not close my eyes at all during our overnight flight. I thought again about my postwar childhood in Vietnam. I recalled images of my mother telling me, solemn-faced, that my parents could have continued their life in Vietnam, but chose instead to leave everything behind to give us a better quality of life. My parents' quiet sacrifices for a promised land rose above their own plans in Vietnam. They showed unparalleled stoicism. Virtually empty handed on an improvised vessel, we left Vietnam as boat people. Fate led us to settle in a land dominated by space and cold, where, for a child, the unknown was as fascinating as it was terrifying.

As the plane landed, my thoughts once again turned to my parents. I wanted them to somehow see Vietnam again through my eyes.

Once I was back in Vietnam, I was astounded to realize that everything seemed incredibly familiar: the smells, the dishes, the drinks, the noises, and the behaviours too, like that unique habit the Vietnamese have of kissing children while taking in a lungful of air through the nose. This is a

