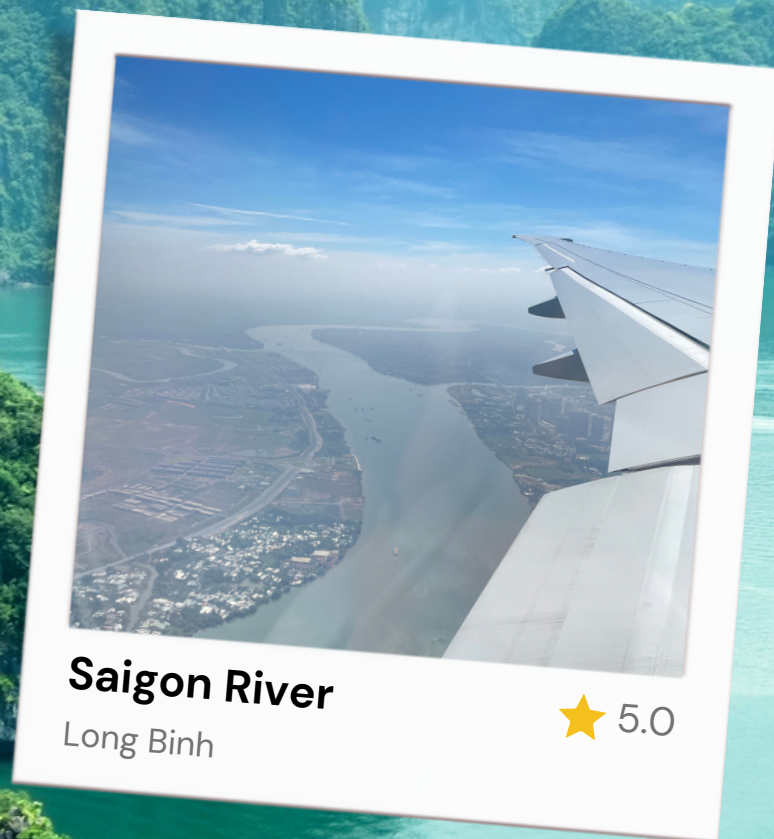


A trip of a lifetime

a personal blog by Heien Chang





Hi, my name is Heien.

I'm a Vietnamese born Asian American who moved to the states when I was three. My name doesn't sound so Vietnamese or American because my family is part of an ethnic majority of Cantonese-Chinese people in Vietnam and my name just so happens to be a rough translation of my Chinese given name.



Where in the world was Heien?

In order to attend a close family member's wedding, my family amongst many other relatives flew into Vietnam to attend the celebration. We spent about 2 weeks (Dec.26 - Jan9) in Vietnam and almost a full week (Jan10 - Jan14) in Taiwan to visit relatives there as well. During my journey to Vietnam, we departed from Houston, TX and took on a 16 hour connecting flight to Taipei, Taiwan before finally flying to our final destination (which took another 3 hours). On our way back, we departed from Taipei, Taiwan and connected in Incheon, South Korea after a 2.5 hour flight. Following a two hour layover, we then embarked on our last flight home to Atlanta.



Plans in Vietnam

After the wedding, I had plans to stay in Saigon for a couple days before flying up north to see the beautiful scenery of mountains, rivers, coconut boats, and wonderful food. While in Saigon, I was able to go to the famous market - Cho Ben Thanh known for being a main attraction for both tourists and locals. I would say it's a good location to introduce yourself to the Vietnamese culture as they sell things from tropical fruits to traditional meals. Good things never last forever, and an old Vietnamese saying follows this and goes, "người tính không bằng trời tính" which roughly translates to "one's personal plans cannot match up with what god has planned". Unfortunately and contrary to what I had planned, god did not want me going on that trip and gave me a stomach virus the day before my flight. Instead of packing, I was instead in the hospital getting labs tested and bloodwork done. The doctor finally decided that I had contracted H.Pylori, a common virus found in third world countries.

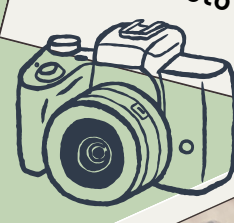
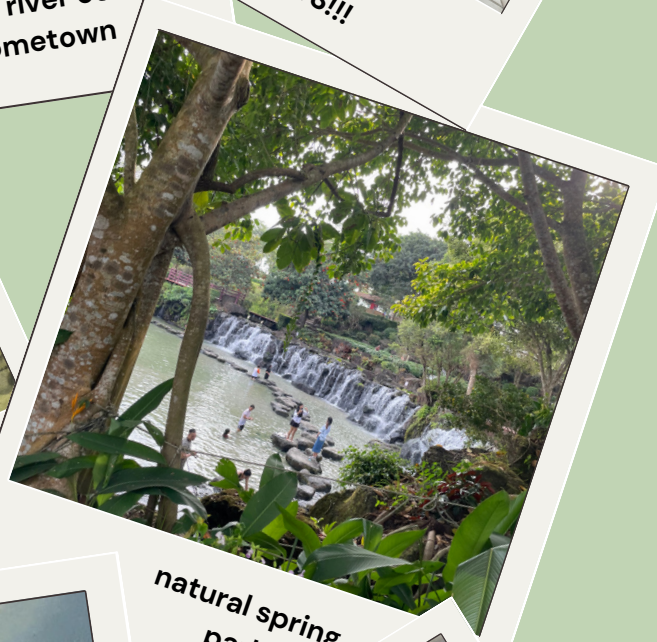
I don't mean to say this to scare you off from travelling to other countries or trying the wonderful, authentic foods, but this is just my experience. H.Pylori can be contracted anywhere in the world, even in the United States, and it also depends on your personal immune system and health!

With that being said, I was sent home and back to my hometown with three days worth of medication and an appointment for a checkup the following week. An uncomfortable three hour car ride back home teased me the following day as I tried my best to suppress the monster inside me that was itching to erupt. The next three days consisted of resting and sleeping, as advised by the doctor.

Though a very unfortunate turn of events, I was able to take this time to see more of the hometown I grew up in my earliest years. The town was bustling with traffic as our house was on a main road that needed to be taken to travel to and from Saigon. There were food stalls everywhere, all of which in a 5 minute radius in every direction possible. My favorite would have to be the Vietnamese coffee with its unique, rich, cacao like flavor. The day before my check up, we met up with a family friend in Binh Duong, a prosperous city of trade and business about 30 minutes away from Saigon and was able to stay the night at their house. The house was newly built and highlighted the beautiful architecture of modern homes. It was spacious with enough space for a four-wheeled car, two stories, and a sunroof (very normal for most houses in order to dry clothes).

In Vietnam, having such a large house along with a four-wheeled car is somewhat a sign of privilege as those two items are one of the most expensive assets. Cars are mainly imported in which the importation cost is on the high end and can sometimes cost more than the car itself. Land is also a very costly asset as the country continues to grow with industries and bustling cities. Residents nowadays struggle to buy land if it was not already passed down through generations. A small plot of land can cost about \$200,000 which does not including the cost of building the house from the ground up

In Binh Duong, I was able to go to one of the large Japanese Aeon Malls to eat, do some shopping, and explore. One of my favorite things to do in different countries is to explore shopping centers and convenient stores. The shopping culture is much different than in the states because before even stepping into the store the associates already have a smile on their face and immediately ask if you need any help. Afterwards, the associate will be four steps behind you in order to assist you in any way possible until you walk out the store. In a way, it made me feel a bit uncomfortable having someone follow me around the store and even more awkward when I don't end up buying anything. At the same time, it was also refreshing not having to track down an associate when you have a question like in the States. It really made me feel taken care of and boosted my shopping experience.



major takeaway #1

HEALTHCARE IS SOOOOO MUCH BETTER THERE... (IF YOU HAVE MONEY)

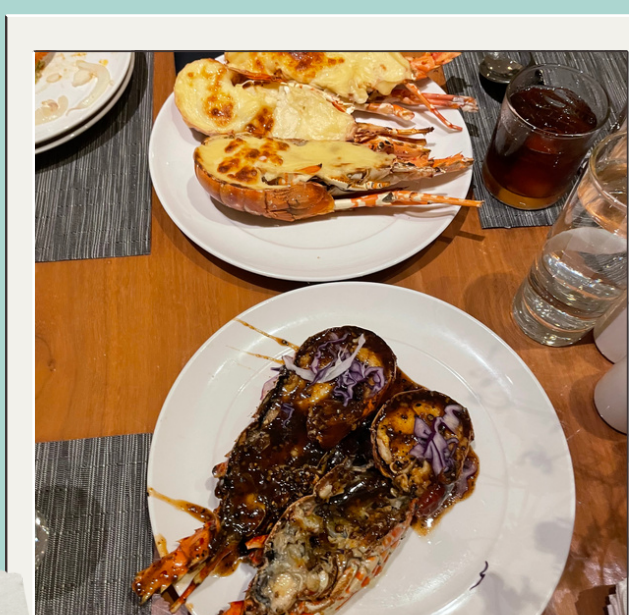
The clinic I went to was a privately owned international clinic with class-two certification and specialization. These private international clinics are very common in Vietnam as most hospitals are government owned and are not of the highest quality in terms of service. They do not prioritize you as much as the private institutions would. With just a couple hundred thousand more Vietnamese dollars (~\$15USD) you get a much more comfortable visit which includes more caring doctors, air-conditioned building, eight floors with a different department on each, an elevator, and friendly staff who don't yell at you. During my two visits, I was uninsured and payed a total of \$5.5 Million-VND which is about \$200USD. This entailed an initial consultation, a check up consultation, five types of medication, two rounds of labs and blood work, and an endoscopy. I would assume residents who are insured would have a lighter bill than mine which is even better. In the United States, an endoscopy alone would cost from \$1,250-\$4,800USD for someone uninsured and about \$800 if insured. This cost does not cover the bloodwork, labs, or medication. Nor does it account for the time that results are received. In Vietnam, results were almost immediate as they were able to analyze my blood work and labs, as well as diagnose me within two hours, versus here in the US, you would typically have to wait at least a whole day. Not only this, my endoscopy results were immediate and were sent to my doctor downstairs for examination and diagnosis. I did not need to wait three days or a whole week to know what was wrong with me. This way, I didn't need to be put on more medication to stabilize my condition while they processed my results, nor did I have to be sent home and need to come back another day. This all goes to say that though the healthcare services are much better in Vietnam, you most importantly have to have money to be taken care of. A big percent of the Vietnamese population is still in poverty or are still middle class and don't have the extra funds to always go to a high priority-private hospital. When we, Americans look at the price, it doesn't seem that much, but to a regular, middle class Vietnamese citizen, that could have been two whole months' salary.

Heien 2.0

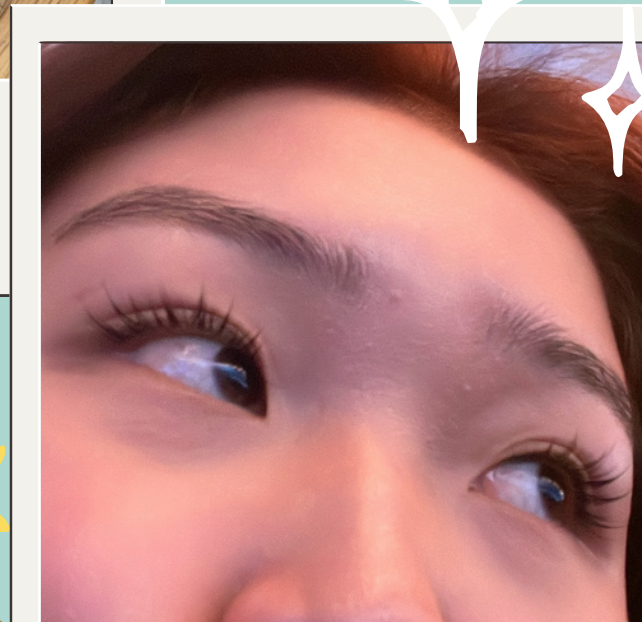
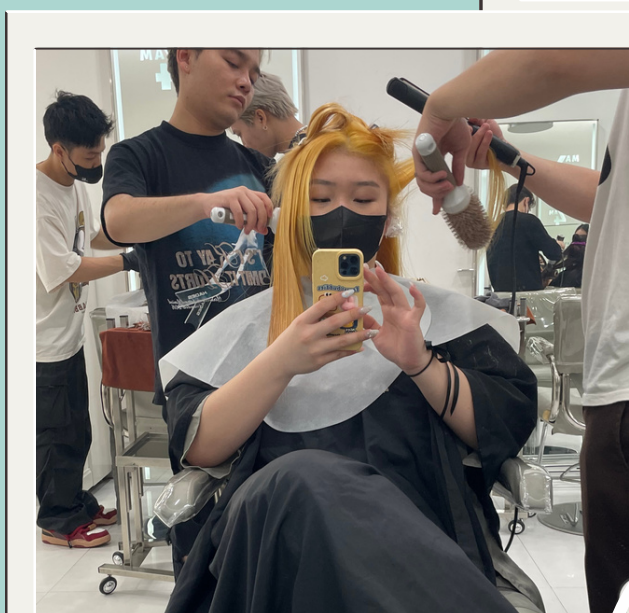
My last week in Vietnam was spent in Saigon doing some self care. This started off with staying at one of the best rates 5-star hotel, eating at their famous \$85/person buffet, getting my hair and lashes done, and eating out (a lot). The best thing was, the hotel was only about \$100/night for a premium room and included great service where they greet you at the door, give you a free drink voucher at the lounge while they check you in, haul all luggage to your room for you, and always open the front door for you.

I loved it there. They even had a bidet which was a plus. This hotel in particular was famous for their high end buffet with fresh seafood and pasta/noodle bars where they made your food in front of you and served fresh as well. We also ate at a Michelin guide Chinese restaurant where they had caviar dumplings and such. Aside from these fancy places, we ate a lot of street food (not pictured because I was too busy eating first).

Eating was only 70% of what I did that week. The other 30% of the time was spent doing self care things such as getting my lashes done at a famous spot that is currently blowing up on TikTok (validly so). They were able to take me as a walk in and did my lashes just the way I've always wanted my lashes to be but was never able to get done in the States. This made me really happy. On my last day in Saigon before flying out to Taiwan, I had no plans after breakfast and was just going to go back to my hotel room until I got the crazy idea to get my hair done. The hair salon I always wanted to go to was only six minutes away so I decided to be spontaneous and go for fun. Once i got there, they sat me in the chair and told me that the previous person who did my hair did a pretty bad job and there was a lot that had to be done to fix it (i didn't even know it was that bad). Nonetheless, they gave me a package with different levels and quality of treatment along with their pricing. I spent the next six hours with the two guys that did my hair and got to know them. It felt nice to be able to make friends with people more my age and people who talked more like me. We still text each other every week to catch up and they were truly fun to hang out with. I also went to the spa where they washed my hair with a scalp treatment alongside a shoulder massage. The customer service was great and the atmosphere was very welcoming. At the end, they gave a complimentary tray of herbal tea, nuts, and a handwritten card that i felt was very touching.



yum!



major takeaway #2

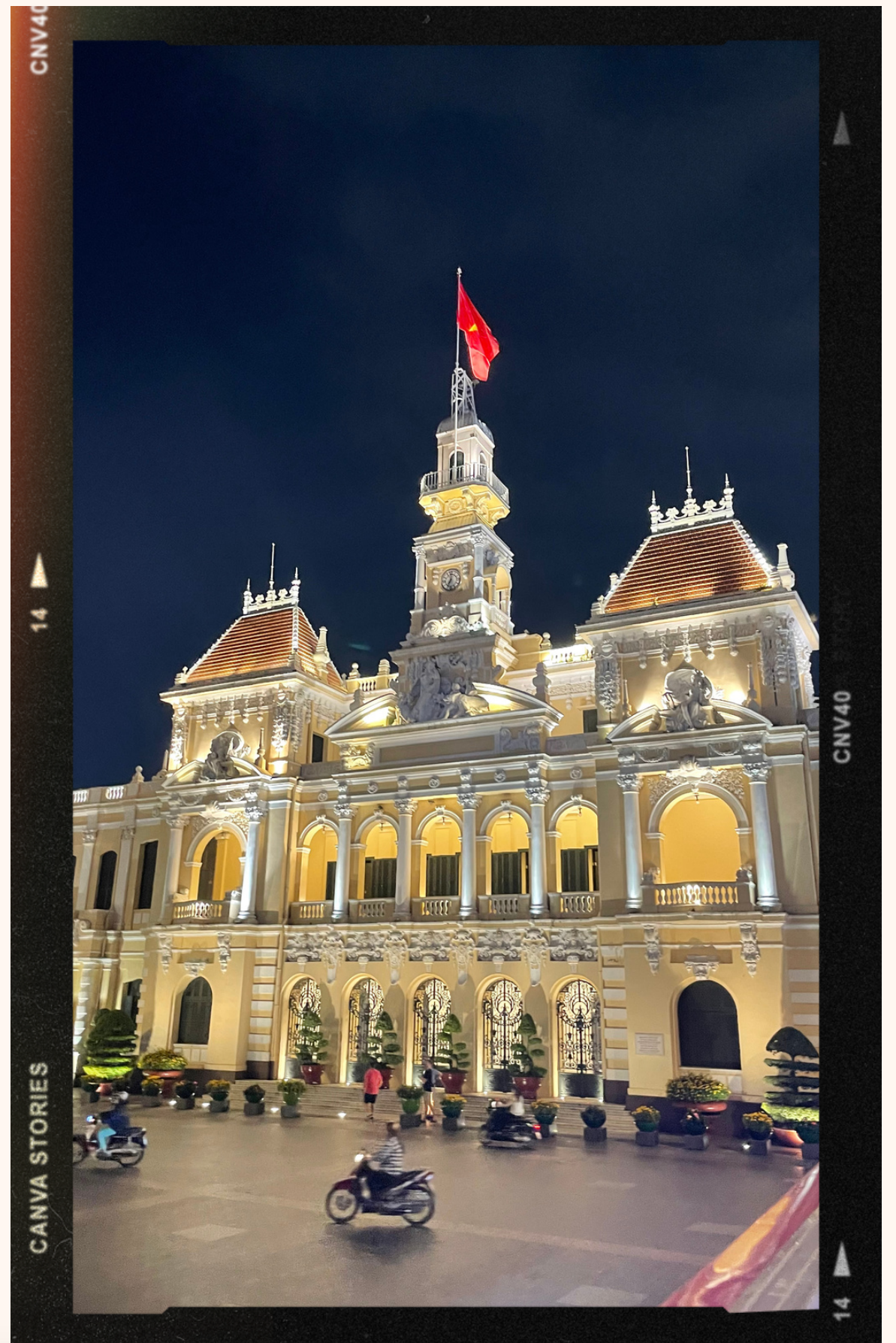
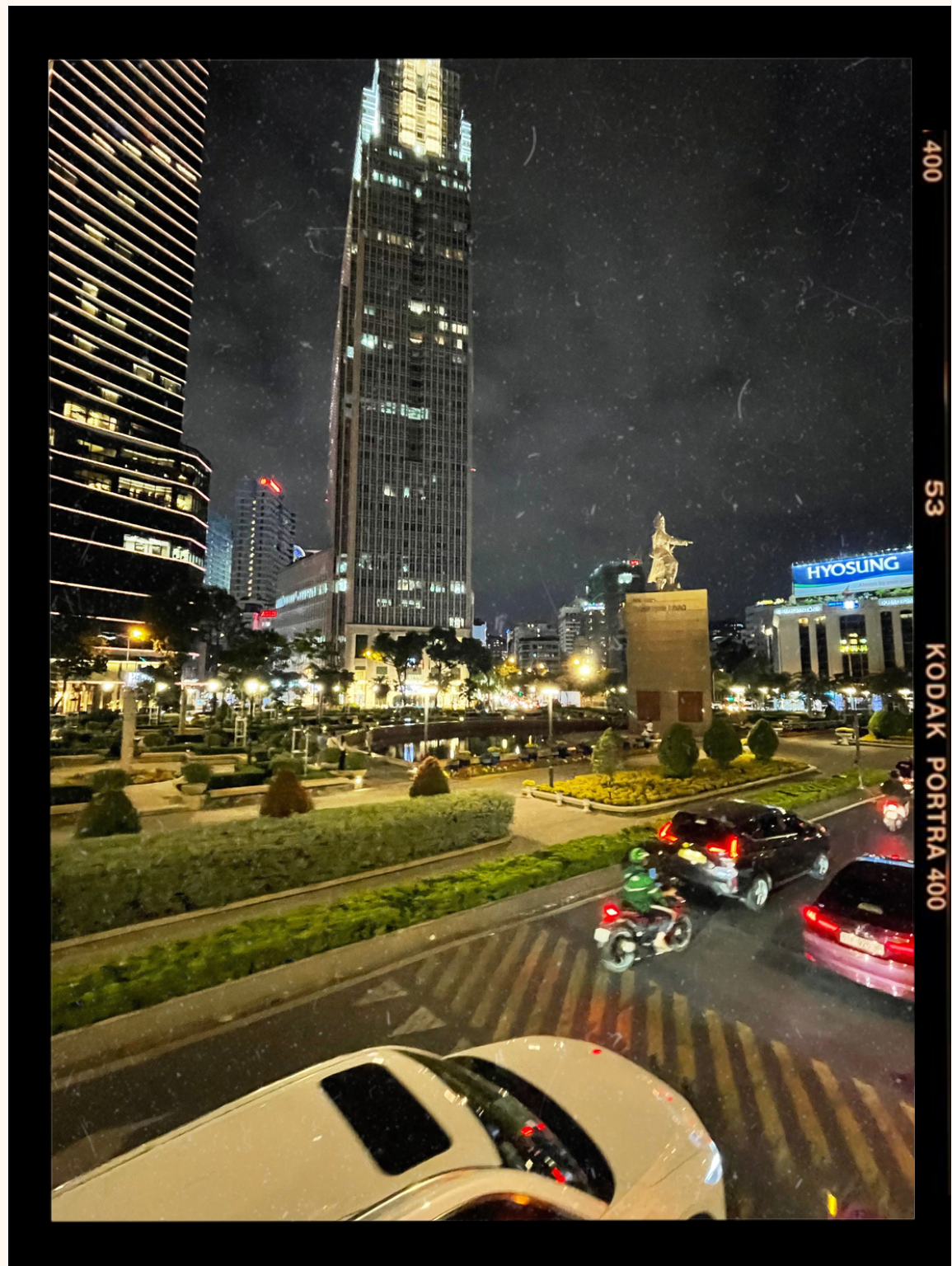
HEALTH

All of this self care really rejuvenated me from the inside and out. Reflecting back, it was a very much needed trip to fix my deteriorating, fast lifestyle. This part of the trip taught me to value my physical and mental health more than I thought. My hair turned out great and I was in love with it. Even coming back, I had many compliments on my hair even though it was just a simple light brown. Many people commented that I looked “more alive” and I think I credit that to the blazing sun alongside my peace of mind. Despite eating so much, I was able to lose weight there because the food was actually balanced and did not have as many trans fats and preservatives like the food I would usually eat here. Food was again, pretty affordable with the bill at the Michelin restaurant being around \$100USD and my hair being around \$200 USD - which was cheaper (and better) than what I got done in the US. I got my whole head re-bleached, keratin press, and the premium level hair dye for my color. The scalp massage was about \$20USD with a \$20 tip - which is a bit more on the expensive side but the experience was pleasant. My lashes came out to be about \$33USD and my nails \$9. I felt a lot better after it all. I think everyone needs themselves a selfcare session like that because you really come back a different person. I feel like this contributes to the general wellbeing of the younger people of Vietnam. Self care is relatively accessible (of course if you have the funds for it) so Gen-Z really enjoy not only dolling themselves up but also having a healthy lifestyle. My mind is in a much better place now and I prioritize myself a lot more than I used to.

final thoughts

AFTER COMING BACK

This trip was indeed, a trip of a lifetime as I came back a much different person than i left. All the people and experiences that had past shaped me into the person I am now. Being able to see such a different cultural landscape opened my eyes to how big the world really is outside of Macon, Ga and the United States as a whole. My mindset shifted and I find myself worrying less about things I used to stress so much about before. After such a traumatic visit to the hospital, I now value my health more and have adjusted my lifestyle to prioritize my wellbeing over everything else. Before, I used to go to sleep around 1:00-3:00am either doing schoolwork or just scrolling on social media, but now, I find myself asleep by 11:00pm at the latest. It's funny to think I dreaded going and almost refunded my flight tickets the week before. I'm very glad I didn't. I now have a bit of insight and hopes for what I'd like to do in the future - perhaps do a year of studying abroad or finding an internship/job overseas. Either way, I know I want to travel and see more of the world. I'm sure a lot of others do to and I encourage those people to go out and explore the world despite their fears. Schools should offer more exchange programs or studying abroad opportunities like many other schools do. Though this trip was a personal trip, it was also enriching and academically enlightening as I learned more about the different cultures and walks of life. I encourage Bibb County to look into these opportunities as I know we have previously offered something like it before. All in all, this trip was a great experience in which I was able to reconnect with myself while also creating connections with others. Thank you Vietnam for such a wonderful time, and see you again next year!



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