

Lessons Learned Abroad

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I BELONG TO generation of people commonly referred to as *Generation Emigration*; a generation that has come to have been most prominently defined not by their achievements but by their absence. Add to the mix that as a county, Leitrim scores pretty high in terms of third level progression and a pretty clear picture emerges as to how few of my school friends remain at home, or indeed have been living at home permanently since our Leaving Cert days.

My own decision to emigrate last year was not spurred by necessity; I had a job—granted the pay for a graduate was by no means excellent. In my case, however, it was mostly the feeling that the greater majority of my friends were already out there experiencing the world that motivated me to follow their lead. Last August I accepted a teaching job at a private school in Muscat, Oman. This strange, distant country was a place I would have struggled to point out on a map prior to this, but after consulting as many online resources as I could find in the little time available to me, I felt it a place I could safely work and live for a short time.



Sophie on the beach in Thailand

Now I could harp on about what a delightful job I had over there, but that would just be dishonest. Ironically enough however, it was while teaching in Oman, that I myself learnt a lot of lessons. For one thing, the Irish education system is a lot better than we tend to give it credit for, despite an onslaught of cutbacks. Aside from my difficulties with some of the aspects of the job, life in Muscat certainly wasn't all bad. I met some really lovely people; enjoyed a good quality of life over there; and on the back of my time there was able to put a little money away for my masters, and fund a three month trip around South East Asia, where I visited Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Each of the countries I visited opened my eyes to shades of reality I had not yet seen or experienced. Thailand had an unrivalled vibrancy and warmth—found in both its lush landscape and its people. For less than a euro, a street vendor will sell you a meal so good your head will almost implode! Thailand also presented an opportunity to meet with friends from home I had not seen in over a year. In Vietnam, I had my first true culture shock. This happened while swimming at a mountain spring in Vietnam, when a little old lady's inquisitiveness very nearly killed her, as she ventured out into the depths of the water to inquire how this curious pale specimen had come to arrive there, and while doing so



Students in Oman

nearly drowned. After pulling my curious compatriot onto a rock in the shallower part of the pool, we exchanged a few friendly words. Old and young alike seemed to marvel at my brilliant white skin and yellow hair. To feel for the first time in one's life that they are an extraterrestrial being beamed in from afar is a strange feeling. Cambodia summed up for me mankind's boundless potential. The insurmountable achievements of past dynasties, who conquered land and stone to leave behind temples of such rare beauty it takes one's breath away. Yet Cambodia (like parts of Vietnam) also revealed the more cruel aspects of man's limitless potential. The tragedies of the past can still be

felt in the streets of Phnom Penh like a ghostly presence; survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime are still seen missing limbs and often begging, yet somehow, almost impossibly, smiling.

The past twelve months have taught me that it's not just teaching that teaches you things, indeed travelling the wider world does too; things about yourself, about these mysterious new places, and of course about home. It was strange to find that in some cases I was more likely to meet with friends in Da Nang, Vietnam or in Koh Phangan, Thailand, than in the village I grew up in at home. Thought of in another way, this reveals the enduring nature of people—to adapt to multitudi-

nous environments, and to explore. Yet of all the lessons I learnt, the one that has been the most influential on my outlook of things was after seeing the unquelled spirit of some people who lived in total poverty in these places, I came to the opinion that if we are to think of happiness as relative to our economy, then we are forever doomed to bitterness (surely millionaires are prone to occasional melancholy too). Despite the incessant barrage of bad news regarding our economic performance, tea still tastes just as good, family and friends still have the ability to make me laugh, and a visit home is still the only antidote to all the worries and woes one feels as an adult.