

EXPAT TALES

A backpacking trip to Vietnam proved to be life-changing for Karen Leonard and the local families she now helps

What brought you to Vietnam? I came here backpacking in 2001 and had an immediate connection with the place. In particular, I was struck by the plight of the street kids. So when I returned home, I couldn't forget them.

What are you doing there? Each Christmas Eve, we'd have a party in our backyard in Melbourne. In 2003, I said, "Let's not do gifts. Let's give the money to a family in Vietnam." They said, "Yipee," so I took the money and started Lifestart Foundation (www.lifestartfoundation.org.au). We've helped 56 families now, with things like education, housing, job training and setting up micro-businesses.

What is your proudest achievement to date? In March this year we opened a free school for neglected and abused children.

Where is home now? I live about half the year in Hoi An in a little attic room in a hotel; the rest of the year I live in Melbourne. I have to come back to Australia to earn money to fund my work here.

What is Hoi An like? Gorgeous. It was one of the few towns not bombed in the war, so it's full of stunning lime-washed heritage buildings and cobblestone streets. But just across the river, where

I do a lot of work, there are families living on tiny boats. They wash, defecate and live on the river. **Where is your office?** On the back of a motorbike, in a noodle shop or on a boat. I carry all my files with me everywhere in a backpack.

How do you spend your days off? There's no downtime; I work seven days a week. But I have my little rituals. There's a guy who cooks pork chops with garlic and lemon at a little stall. It costs 50 cents and I have them every second day.

Have you eaten anything strange? A guy tried to talk me into eating rat, but I couldn't go there.

What do you miss about Australia? My dog. You can email people, but not your dog.

What don't you miss? I like not being attached to possessions. I like that I can live simply.

What's the latest fad there? They're not into fads and fashion, they're lucky to have any clothes at all. And they're still listening to "Hotel California". At every party, they'll play the Eagles.

How have you had to change to fit in? You need lots of patience; nothing is straightforward. I also have to be mindful that it's not about giving them a western life, it's about improving their life.

How long will you keep doing it? Until they won't let me on a plane any more! My dream would be to set up some grant or funding that would allow me to stay here rather than coming back and forth. I'm needed here. JANE HUTCHINSON



NAME: Karen Leonard, 49
JOB: founder, Lifestart Foundation
LOCATION: Hoi An, Vietnam
TIMELINE: overseas three years



(from top) The Long Tuyen Pagoda in the Quang Nam-Danang province; Karen at the "office"; Cua Dai beach, east of Hoi An.