

## Lessons Learned—Seasoned Travellers Make Mistakes, Too!

By Anne Hamilton

I went on vacation to Vietnam in January 2017 with two very good friends from my college days. This was the fourth international trip we'd taken together in the last five years, but the first to a country where none of us spoke the language. That did not deter us – we had a number of resources upon which to draw in planning the trip and were not in the least bit apprehensive about our stay there.

We started the trip in Hanoi and then travelled north, to Sapa and the rice fields, by overnight train. We returned to Hanoi four days later, again by overnight train. The arrival time was 5:30 am, and we had a mid-morning plane scheduled from Hanoi to Danang, in central Vietnam. Our plan was to spend three days in Hoi An. We departed the train and decided to exit the train station to look for a cab to the airport; we found one with no problem. But, once we got to the airport, the cab driver tried to add additional charges to the meter and the haggling began. I was in the backseat with one of my friends; the other friend was in the front, arguing with the taxi driver. I took my wallet out of my bag to find some cash to offer to help settle the dispute. In the end, my friend in the front settled it and we left the cab.

It was still dark out and there were few people at the airport, although the traffic was picking up.

We quickly realized that we were at the wrong terminal and needed to take a bus to the domestic terminal. Once there, we got in line to try and change our tickets for an earlier flight. It was then that I started searching for my wallet and realized that it must have fallen on the floor in the taxi when I thought I was returning it to my tote bag. I was panicked and stunned as the reality set in—ALL my IDs, including my passport, and ALL my financial assets for the trip, including cash and credit cards, were in the large wallet that I'd lost. I did not have any money whatsoever with me and no identification.

It was 6:30 on a Monday morning – better than a weekend, I thought – at least I could visit the Embassy and get an emergency passport. Also, I still had my i-phone, which meant that I would be able to communicate with whomever could help me – and I had a copy of my (now lost) passport on my phone.

This was the beginning of a long saga, which turned out okay, and from which I took many lessons. I never felt unsafe during the nine days it took to sort all of the problems out, but there was a lot of uncertainty (and angst) along the way.

Fortunately, I was with friends. And, one of the friends was US Foreign Service Officer, then serving as a Consular officer at the US Embassy in Yaounde, Cameroon. She was up-to-date on the procedures for obtaining an emergency passport at the US Embassy. And, my friends had access to funds that they were willing to lend me to get me through this ordeal. After talking to the airport police, who told us that they could not take a police report at the airport, we were

able to change my plane reservation to Danang to 8:30 in the evening. My friends lent me sufficient dollars to cover the cost of an emergency passport, transportation to and from the airport in Hanoi, and a few dollars to buy food during the day. My friends had decided to proceed to Danang, so I said a somewhat tearful good-bye to them and boarded the local bus from the airport (\$1 or so into downtown Hanoi) to look for a police station near the train station to report my loss. As I sat on the bus I told myself that I was going to see a very different side of Vietnam than I'd expected. I also told myself that I would have to keep my wits about me and remain upbeat. There was no guarantee that things would go smoothly.

Vietnamese police wear green uniforms that are quite bright, not a drab green that I associated with security-related uniforms. I had noticed this earlier in the trip; as a result, I was able to easily spot the police station across from the train station. I dragged my bags out onto the crowded street and negotiated the two blocks to the police station, and up the dozen or so steps inside. There were two desks there, only one attended at the time.

The first stroke of luck was that the policeman attending one of the desks spoke sufficient English for me to explain my dilemma. I wanted to get a police report to document the loss of my passport, so there would be an official record. I did not report this as a theft, as the incident involved me dropping my wallet on the floor of a taxicab, and I did not want this to become a criminal investigation. It was not a theft; I was tired and did not notice, in the darkness, that the wallet did not make it back into my tote. I did not mention that I had \$500 in cash and two credit cards in the wallet.

While I was thrilled that the policeman spoke English, he did not have confidence in his English skills and tried to get me to go to the hotel where we'd stayed in Hanoi (prior to our trip to the north) to get a translator who could help fill out the report. I insisted that his English was much better than the English of the hotel staff (which was minimal) and that he could be a very big help to me.

After some haggling over whether or not the police station across from the train station was the appropriate venue at which to file the report, the policeman agreed to let me fill out a form. Once I'd completed it, he disappeared. Some 10 minutes later he came back empty handed and told me I could leave. But, I needed a copy of the report to take to the US Embassy. For this to happen, his superior would have to sign it, and his superior was not on the premises. He told me that I might have to wait for up to two hours. So, I hunkered down in the lobby of the police station. It was very clean, and no one else was there, except for a female officer who had taken the second desk and engaged in phone conversations and exchanges with a handful of officers who entered the lobby and proceeded to places beyond. No one paid much attention to me. Given the anticipated length of my wait, I sheepishly asked if there was internet available. The response was a stern admonition to put away my cell phone. I knew it had been somewhat foolhardy to take it out. Still, I was wishing that there was a way that I could take a photo of the lobby. I'd studied Soviet and Russian bureaucracy and written about it in my Ph.D. dissertation, so I was fascinated by the goings-on there. And, I understood that there would not necessarily be any logic to them.

Nearly two hours after my arrival at the police station, the policeman emerged with a signed copy. He even helped me down the stairs with my luggage and helped me get a cab to the US Embassy! Step 1 accomplished!

Unfortunately, when I arrived at the Embassy, I discovered that the consulate was a daunting roundabout (given the traffic) away, in a separate building. Then, the guards told me the Consulate was closed for lunch. I decided to try and use the time to get passport photos, but the guard at the consulate could not tell me where a photo shop was. He did, however, offer to get me a cab to a photographer, and flagged one down, put my luggage in the trunk, and gave the cabbie instructions. It did not take me long to realize that the cabbie had no idea where he was going. Eventually we pulled up at a building with a wide stairway entrance and an illuminated neon green cross in the archway. When we got inside, I saw that it was a clinic—with three nurses sitting at a desk at the entryway. To this day I'm not sure what happened. Perhaps the cabbie was just asking for directions to a photographer, perhaps he thought I needed to have X-rays taken. I don't know. But, I had a card with directions back to the Consulate and I asked him to return me there. At this point, the Consulate had re-opened and I could enter and explain my needs there.

The rest of the day proceeded as well as could have been expected. The Embassy processed my emergency passport application. I was not sure until late in the afternoon that they would have it ready that day, but I was optimistic. I had to race (on foot) to a photographer – about ¾ mile – in very hot, humid weather – and back to maximize my time, but I negotiated the process as well as could be expected. One of the interviewers at the Consulate raised a red flag when she told me that I would need to secure an exit visa in order to leave the country. She also told me that the Immigration offices would be closed by the time I got my emergency passport and that the time and fees to process exit visas were variable. In other words, I had no idea how long it would take me or how much I would have to pay.

I ended up talking to three consular employees involved in processing requests for emergency passports; two were Vietnamese employees and the other was an American Foreign Service Officer (FSO). When I spoke to the American, I asked him about the exit visa. I told him that I had been an FSO and knew that he could not speak for the Vietnamese government. I also told him that my friends had already left Hanoi and gone to Danang, that I had no immediate access to funds except through them, and that I had a reservation for a plane to join them in Danang later that evening. I asked him for his advice—would he stay in Hanoi and try to get an exit visa or proceed to Danang? He told me that he'd never heard of anyone having problems leaving the country, that he thought I'd be okay with the police report and the emergency passport. I e-mailed my friend in Danang—the US consular officer—and she agreed that I should follow his advice. So, even though the last consular employee I saw reiterated the need for an exit visa and gave me a letter to hand to the immigration officials, I left the US Consulate and headed for the airport. I was quite relieved—even felt like celebrating!!

We proceeded with the rest of our trip – three lovely days in Hoi An and two in Halong Bay – before heading back to Hanoi and our flights home. I was the first to leave—at least, that was the plan. But, when I got to the airport, the Vietnamese immigration authorities blocked my departure. They were able to find a record of my entrance and exit visa on their computers, but that was not enough. I had not followed the instructions provided to me by the embassy, and I needed a paper copy of the visa. Of course, I'd been warned, but I'd chosen to take a risk. Fortunately, I was with a Vietnamese woman (friend of my friend who works for the State Department) who accompanied me to the airport. She told me that the immigration officials had indicated that “only the president of Vietnam could let her out now!”

Back to the hotel and another day of wrangling. In the end, I was fortunate to find (with the help of my Vietnamese contact) a travel agent who could facilitate the issuance of exit visas – for a mere \$150. Instead of leaving on a Saturday night at midnight, I left on a Monday night at midnight. In the end, the loss cost me around \$1200--\$500 in lost cash, expenses for phone calls, the flight change, and two extra hotel nights.

After some reflection, here are the lessons I learned:

1. Interpersonal skills and intercultural skills are very important. Flattery helps. I realized that the interactions I would engage in could make all the difference, as no one was under any obligation to help me solve these problems in a timely matter. This could be resolved in one, two, or 10 days.
2. No matter how much you've travelled, do NOT let your guard down. On previous trips, I'd always carried money in various places, some in one shoe, some in a wallet, some in an inside pocket, etc. I'd also always separated my credit/debit cards so that I was less likely to lose all access to cash. For some reason, I let my guard down that day.
3. Make sure you have copies not only of your passport, but also of your visas!
4. If you find yourself without any access to cash, you can have money wired to you through Western Union outlets in the US. This can be costly and may not work on weekends when offices (either in the US) or recipient offices (outside) are closed.
5. You may have to be bold! What would I have done if I had not had friends there to bail me out? I have thought about this possibility many times. I had no money on me whatsoever, so I'm not sure how I would have even left the airport. One of my options would have been to approach people at the airport – look for Americans, perhaps, to whom I could have told my story and ask for a loan. A UW-Whitewater student from Peru actually used this approach when she found herself stranded in Cuba without the funds for the exit tax. Eventually she found a Peruvian family at the beach who was willing to lend her the funds. If you can make it to the American Embassy or Consulate, the officers there can help get access to funds. US Embassies always have “duty officers” on call, so a call there may be a first step!

