



▲ George Hamilton Main (back, center) with members of the Intel Vietnam Toastmasters in March 2011.

XIN CHÀO!

Say ‘hello’ to club members in Vietnam.

By George Hamilton Main, ACS, ALB

Visiting a Toastmasters club in Vietnam is an exotic experience. All over the world, people join Toastmasters to become better speakers and leaders — the same reason you joined your club; however, during my trip to Vietnam from my home in San Francisco,

prospective employers. At that time, Vietnam had only these two clubs.

Trinity Nguyen, then-president of Intel Vietnam Toastmasters, replied that she would be happy to host me at a club meeting. She not only did that, but before the meeting she also showed me around the Intel

nearly 50 smiling and engaged faces. The guest speaker was Joe Ruelle, a well-known Canadian blogger who lives in Hanoi. He spoke in perfect Vietnamese about the varying cultural perspectives of public speaking etiquette. In Vietnam the custom is to acknowledge everyone before beginning your speech. Ruelle told the club members that doing so to a Western audience will exhaust their patience and time, and he suggested they get to the point quickly when talking to Westerners.

Nguyen led the Table Topics session by projecting “East Meets West” illustrations by artist Yang Liu that portray opposing attitudes on work, leisure, relationships and social order. Each speaker defended or opposed Ms. Liu’s point of view. I was intrigued listening to these Toastmasters share their diverse opinions.

California, I visited clubs that have a cultural and social feeling like nothing I have ever experienced.

I traveled to Vietnam in March 2011 for business and pleasure. Preparing for my trip, I contacted the Intel Vietnam Toastmasters and the Saigon Toastmasters clubs, both located in Ho Chi Minh City, where I would attend trade shows and meet

production plant in the Saigon Hi-tech Park District and introduced me to Intel employees throughout the plant. I even had the opportunity to talk with the head of the public relations department about Intel’s commitment to the local community.

The club meeting started on time and featured a fitting theme: culture. I looked around the room and saw

“A stranger evaluating a young woman beginning her career is serious business in Vietnam.”

Finding a Club in the Crowd

A week later, I visited Saigon Toastmasters at the International Development Company (IDC) school. Ho Chi Minh City is dotted with new stores and schools, so finding the meeting location along a street festooned with signs was a challenge.

Chartered in October 2010, Saigon Toastmasters was the first community club in Vietnam. Then-Club President Annie Nguyen emailed me the agenda for the meeting well before I visited, which immediately made me feel more comfortable. I was also asked to fill in as an evaluator for a member's Ice Breaker speech.

Before the meeting started, club mentor Douglas Foster took me aside to talk about the person whose speech I would evaluate. She was a new member: young, female, in transition to a new life in Ho Chi Minh City and very sensitive to criticism from her elders. A stranger evaluating a young woman beginning her career is serious business in Vietnam. The culture is influenced by Confucianism, a system of ethical and philosophical teachings, and places great importance on respecting relationships, station in life and social decorum. I knew the speaker would receive my evaluation framed by my age, gender, professional status, behavior and dress (a well-dressed male attorney in his late 50s). What I may regard as a simple observation, she might receive as severe criticism.

As it happened, the young woman blanked out during her speech that day. She had memorized the words of her speech and, in a moment of anxiety, forgot them. Standing erect in embarrassed but determined silence, she struggled to regain her composure and words. Then, the audience members amazed me: They spontaneously began applauding loudly. The clapping revived the downcast speaker, and she continued with a wonderful speech.

When the time came to evaluate her, I spoke about the three strengths

of her speech and left out comments for improvement. She learned on her own how to improve.

Intel Vietnam Toastmasters and Saigon Toastmasters honored me by letting me attend and participate in their meetings. I learned that, in Vietnam, communicating with my hosts before the meeting was important to acknowledge their position and express my intentions. Arriving early to the meeting gave me time to connect socially and gave the members time to learn about me. We created relationships and shared stories before the meeting began. Everyone relaxed as we took on our roles as speakers and evaluators. Despite me being the foreigner in the room, I saw the same meeting organization and Toastmasters materials that we use in my home club.

My strongest impression of Toastmasters in Vietnam was of the members' enthusiasm. Given the chance to speak publicly and be evaluated without the fear of failure, the members spoke with vigor and used the body language of advanced Toastmasters. They were natural storytellers.

Intel Vietnam Toastmasters and Saigon Toastmasters each had its own flavor. Yet both clubs shared the universal Toastmasters philosophy of self-improvement in public speaking and leadership through positive practice. I enjoyed my visits and benefited from networking with the members, and I will continue to make new connections for business and fun in our global Toastmasters community. Please do the same. Wherever you go, Toastmasters are there to welcome you. **T**

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WANT TO VISIT A CLUB WHILE TRAVELING?

By George Hamilton Main, ACS, ALB



▲ The author with Saigon Toastmasters' then-club president Annie Nguyen.

A Toastmasters club can provide local knowledge about the countries you visit. Use this advice to ensure that you and your hosts have a great experience.

- ▶ **Contact your host(s)** weeks before the meeting. Find club information at www.toastmasters.org/findaclub.
- ▶ **Share information** about yourself with your host(s) to warm the relationship and express your intentions. Ask how you can help with the meeting.
- ▶ **Keep in touch** while planning your trip. Your itinerary or the club's circumstances could change and you will be happy you kept an open line of communication.
- ▶ **Prepare to speak** about your own club, offer evaluations at the meeting or comment on your experiences while traveling.
- ▶ **Follow up** with a thank-you note or email to the club you visited, and renew your invitation for any members of the group to visit your home club.