

TWO WEEKS IN AUSTRALIA: A LIFE-TIME OF MEMORIES

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It has been two weeks of unforgettable significance, the culmination of two years of preparation for the Organizing Committee of the Fifth International Convention of Vietnamese Physicians, Dentists and Pharmacists in the Free World to occur in Sydney, Australia from December 28 to 30, 2004.

For members living in the United States traveling to the Land Down Under for the first time, the trip provided a lore of wonders for all to enjoy, as well as the sense of urgency and fragility of existence. So many colleagues and family members have escaped the tsunami tragedy by a hair when shortening or canceling their vacation in Phuket, Thailand.

AN EVENTFUL START

We left San Diego on Sunday December 26, 2004, to board the overnight United Airlines flight to Sydney in company of our son Tony, his wife Trang and son Thi Lan. The flight was reasonably smooth; the crew was serving breakfast one hour before landing, so that the passengers are fully awake. Suddenly, we began to experience turbulences. We were holding on to our trays when the plane dipped suddenly. All breakfast trays in the cabin were catapulted high in front of our bewildered eyes, and landed upside down, spattering food and beverages all over. Someone's food was on our trays. I quickly retrieved the binder for the Pharmaceutical Care talk that I just assembled before the flight. Luckily, the coffee spills could be wiped out from the plastic cover, but the tainted pages inside will serve as a memento of this historic flight years after.

Later on, our little grandson said: "I thought two planes were colliding".

SYDNEY, FABULOUS CITY AND CONVENTION SITE

After getting to Sydney, our first visit was to the Opera House, a stunning architecture with the shape of shells. During the tour of the facilities, we attended a rehearsal of the musical West Side Story, just before the real performance. Late in the evening, we attended the Opening ceremony, a well organized event from start to end. Co-masters of ceremony were Dr. Cuong Bui from Brisbane, Queensland, and Dr. Katherine Lieu, daughter of Dr. Binh Lieu and Xuyen Tran from Sydney, and core members of the Organizing committee. The Vietnamese Physicians Association of the Free World (VPAFW) sponsored the Literary Awards for the year 2004 in several categories. Author Hoang N. Tuan from Australia won an award for his book on "Contemporary and post contemporary Vietnamese Literature"

Dr. Thuy D. Tran, President of the VPAFW, and Dr. Tuong Anh Nguyen, Vice-President of the Federation of Vietnamese Pharmacists Association in the Free World declared the Opening of the Convention.

The evening was continued with a cruise on the harbor aboard the Lady Rose boat.

The next day was spent on CE activities. Attendees went to three separate room areas to listen to the Medical, Dental or Pharmacy presentations. There were two topics during the morning session: Challenges and Rewards in Pharmaceutical Care presented by Binh Nhung Tran, and Home medicines review by Dr. Tim Chen, Professor at the Sydney University School of Pharmacy. After the meeting of the International Federation of Vietnamese Pharmacists in the Free World (see report in this book), in the afternoon, Dr. Phi Huynh-Do spoke on Clinical Assessment and early detection of HIV diseases in the Vietnamese Australian Community.

In the evening, we attended a reunion dinner for all promotion classes of physicians. The two MC were pharmacist Quang X. Nguyen, who recently went through an eye operation, but still attended to the final touches for the program, and Dr. Xuyen Tran, a multi-talented physician. Both excelled in a variety of skits and entertaining talks for the audience. Mrs. Tam Thuong, who injured her ankle during a pre-Convention trip, was present on stage in spite of the pain.

On the last day, I attended the Youth Forum discussion, and saw many young members full of enthusiasm. Topics discussed were: *Volunteer work in Vietnam: what does it involve?*; *Research and publications by young Australians*; and a most lively debate on the theme: *That having a Vietnamese background need not be relevant to my practice as a Health Officer in a country outside Vietnam*. Three young members were in each team, debating the pro and con aspect. Since both sides presented powerful statements and illustrated their points with brilliant examples, the result was a tie.

During the presentation, I was sitting next to pharmacist Ngoc Anh Nguyen, a resident of Melbourne, and member of the Vietnamese Pharmacy Forum and the Vietnamese Medical Forum, and so was glad to get the addresses of some colleagues in Melbourne and other areas.

The Gala dinner was very entertaining. More than 500 members, relatives and friends were present. I met pharmacist Minh Nguyet Pham, and her husband, relatives of Dr. Toan Tran of the VPhF.

The White Choir of Southern California performed very well. Several reports have been done on their program.

A distinctive gift of appreciation was presented to special members. For the promotion and dissemination of Convention news in the United States, and participation as speakers in the various programs, Dr. Duc van Nguyen and Binh Nhung received posters imprinted with the distinctive logo of the Convention: a koala bear perched on a branch of eucalyptus, with the signatures of 17 members of the Organization Committee. There was nothing more meaningful than the symbol of Australia, delivered by a group of most dedicated professionals in a superb program for the enjoyment of all attendees.

On the last day in Sydney, we visited the Blue Mountains, a wonderland trek, besides other sites. New Year's eve was spent watching the famous fireworks shot from the Sydney Harbour Bridge, a spectacular view for all. This was the first time we welcomed

the new year Down Under, and were ahead of most friends and family living many time zones behind.

MELBOURNE WITH THE FAMILY

On January 1st, 2005, we flew to Melbourne, and for five days, reconnected with family members whom we have not seen for almost a quarter century. We stayed at their house while they were vacationing in Thailand and Vietnam. MyNgoc Vo, a niece and member of the VPhF was supposed to go to Phuket resort during the Christmas holidays, but had breathing problems, so did not go. This was how she and other members escaped the Tsunami tragedy, as Dr. Minh Ho and his family did.

A whole program of sight seeing was orchestrated by Peter and his family, who are of the same age range as our son Tony's.

The following morning, we toured the city by car and train, visiting the National Gallery of Victoria (free entry), St Paul Cathedral where the children lit candles to the victims of the Tsunami earthquake and disaster. We had lunch at the Arts Centre, strolled down the Botanical Gardens, and enjoyed the nice scenery by the Yarra River bank. Dinner at the Daikyo Korean Restaurant was superb with sashimi and beef and seafood barbecue.

On Monday 1/3, we went to Lorne Beach, a bustling seaside resort about 1 and 1/2 hours from Melbourne. We packed lunch and ate on the beach. Most enjoyed going in the water, while Binh sat under the eucalyptus trees, reading. Back in the city, we visited the Royal Botanical Gardens, renowned for its fine landscaped gardens. We strolled amid the beautiful lawns, watching eels and other fishes swimming in the tranquil lakes.

We ended by visiting Footscray, the Vietnamese section of town, came by pharmacy Le Thi, and stopped for a quick dinner at Ha Long Restaurant.

On Jan 4, we drove West, and rode on the Australia's favourite steam train Puffing Billy through the magnificent Dandenong Ranges from Belgrave to Emerald Lake Park. Some people took a one-way trip, with part of the family driving to the end of the train ride, and picking up their family there. We had the opportunity to feed parrots with our hands. The children were very delighted.

The next day, we went to Phillip Island. At Wildlife Wonderland, we saw kangaroos in the natural habitat, fed them, and watched koalas perched high in the eucalyptus trees. On the windy cliffs at the southern most part of Australia, we saw the penguin holes with part of their tails showing. Much to our regrets, we could not stay overnight to watch the nightly procession of the small penguins coming from the ocean to rejoin their families onshore, and then go back to the water at dawn. According to friends who witnessed the scene, the night march was a unique spectacle. After a picnic near the beach, the children

flew kites. During the drive back, we discussed on Kim van Kieu's epic masterpiece by Nguyen Du, other literary works and folkloric verses.

These intercalating days of long and short trips were made possible by renting a 12 seat bus, with coordinated team work and nice cooperation from the weatherman. As the saying goes: "If you do not like the Melbourne weather, just wait 15 minutes". You may see the complete opposite!

On Jan 6, we went to Victoria Market, a popular spot for all purpose shopping. Lunch was dim sum in Richmond, the Asian district of Melbourne. Afterwards, we strolled to Park Fitzroy to watch the fountains and luscious flowers in the Conservatory. A wedding party was taking pictures there, with the bridesmaids in a symphony of hydrangea pink hues. Naturally, we took lots of pictures, framed by the multi-colored hanging fuchsia baskets. A stop by the St Patrick's Church, driving on St Kilda Street busy with bars and coffee shops ends up at the beach right in town at Portabello, where Peter used to work at the Commonwealth Bank many years ago.

Dinner was a wonderful experience at Oanh's Kitchen in Kew, a suburb of Melbourne. The family renovated the place three years ago into a stunningly elegant restaurant suitable for state dinner guests. We were treated to a 7 course dinner with a superb array of oysters, an assorted fresh and fried rolls, salmon sashimi, salad with *cigales de mer* – *sea bug- to^m vo?*", fish with dill Thang Long style, grilled scallops and shitake mushrooms..., duck fillet in five-spice olive sauce, and finishing with goat curry.

Dessert, as with all the dishes, was artistically decorated as masterpieces.

The host and hostess took turn visiting with all the guests, who at times have been refused service because they did not book ahead in the 30 seats restaurant.

The atmosphere was also superb. Flowers were arranged in tall glass containers grouped by the entrance. A dozen more crystal and ceramic vases and ceramic were displayed on shelves on the opposite wall. An impressionist sea scape oil painting was the main decoration on another wall.

On Friday, Jan 7, Binh Nhung joined pharmacist Le Thi and Ngoc Anh for lunch at the same place where we had most of our meals – Ha Long restaurant. What a nice surprise when Drs. Le Thanh Canh and Nghiem Xuan Tuan and their spouses came along.

Conversation sprang lively as the spouses also knew each other.

After lunch, we visited Dr and Mrs Canh Le at their house in Toorak, one of the most prestigious areas of town, where sweet mangoes were served. As a surprise, Mrs. Le Thi brought an elegant tiramisu cake for all to enjoy while listening to four hand piano playing by Mrs. Canh and Binh Nhung, amid celebrity photo snapshots.

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

We cannot thank enough family and friends who have opened their houses and hearts in Sydney and Melbourne. At the Convention entrance hall on the first day, Dr. Binh Lieu and the registration committee welcomed every one of us. Dr. Bao Quy Nguyen Phuoc greeted me like a family member. Dr. Dong Quoc Tran, brother of pharmacist Thuy Lan Tran, has come from Melbourne to meet the guests who just came to the Convention site. Later, in Melbourne, Dr. Dong has invited us for dinner, but we could not accept because of constant sightseeing. Pharmacist Phuc Pham, a member of the VPhForum and professional reporter for the Nhan Quyen weekly newspaper and other publications, was a dynamic member, always trying to put colleagues in contact with classmates and friends. Dr. Binh Lieu, editor of the Medicine and Modern Life bi-monthly Vietnamese Health magazine, gave me all the year's issues in a bound book. Dr Phuoc Vo ensured that all the presentations were run smoothly.

Thank you to all the Organizing Committee members for their untiring efforts to prepare for this most memorable 5th Convention in Australia.

We would also like to thank all family members for a wonderful stay in Melbourne, for their hospitality, resourcefulness as guides and coordinators of all the outings, for wonderful sharing of dining experience, conversation, and to the children for their ingenuous and enlightening talks during the car trips.

You are all invited to come to San Diego any time.

Binh Nhung Tran
San Diego, 01/10/05