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Soaking in Vietnam's past and present

Developer plays host to contest winner and son



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ASK anyone his first impression of Ho Chi Minh City, and the answer will likely include the hordes of motorcycles that crowd the streets, quaint and narrow buildings and the broad-rimmed conical Vietnamese hats.

Chieng Hui Choo, winner of SP Setia's Jet Set with Setia prize of a four-day trip to Vietnam, however, finds a sense of connection to all these and above all, registers the warm hospitality of the hosts.

"I'm familiar with Vietnamese culture as I have acquaintances from this country.

"Ho Chi Minh City is really scenic and has much greenery, something you don't really expect in such a bustling city," said Chieng, a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner from Johor.

She brought her eight-year-old son, Chang Yun Fan along for the trip. Apart from Malaysian representatives, SP Setia Bhd Group sales and marketing senior executives Rachel Ong Lee Kun and Chloe Chin Suk Sim, her hosts were SP Setia Vietnam sales and marketing manager Pham Thi Hong Cam and assistant manager Le Thi Thanh Hang.

"I don't usually follow tours when I travel because I find them to be quite restrictive, but this is different. It's very relaxed, and the hosts are

amiable and easygoing," said Chieng.

"My son and I were well-fed throughout the trip!" she said, adding that Vietnamese rice rolls, stir-fried pumpkin flower and mango salad were some of the local dishes she loved.

Off to a great start

Having settled into Sheraton Hotel Saigon and Tower on the first day, the mother-and-son pair was then whisked off for a lavish nine-course dinner at Mandarin Restaurant, joined by SP Setia Vietnam general director Leong Swee Chow.

The fine-dining restaurant is known for having served international leaders such as the late former French president Francois Mitterrand and former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice.

The next morning, the group took an hour-and-a-half's car ride to the Cu Chi tunnels for a glimpse into Ho Chi Minh City's (still popularly known as Saigon) history.

The complex tunnel systems, according to the tour guide, measure over 200km long in total with varying depths.

He took the group into the Ben Dinh Tunnel, the base of the Cu Chi District Party Committee during the resistance against American forces, and there among many relics, were remains of tankers, secret hideouts, and a display of living conditions in those times.

Chieng and her son took time to discover the tunnels, tracing the footsteps of history as she went.

"This is probably one of my favourite destinations in the trip,"

said Chieng.

"It is very sad, but I feel it is important to know the history of any country we visit and I believe my son can learn a thing or two."

The light drizzle that followed lunch at Con Ga Trong restaurant back in the city did not dampen plans for the afternoon as the group carried on with their city tour, visiting the War Remnants Museum, the Saigon Notre-Dame Basilica Cathedral and then the Ben Thanh market for some shopping.

In the evening, the guests were brought on board the Indochina Junk where they had dinner as the boat cruised along the Saigon River.

Developments in Vietnam

The Jet Set with Setia experience continued the next day when Chieng was given a tour of SP Setia's development projects in Vietnam - EcoXuan and EcoLakes.

EcoXuan (Xuan pronounced "swerng", which means spring in Vietnamese) is located in the Binh Duong province some 20km from the city.

The 11ha site will be home to landed properties, affordable and luxury apartments as well as shop-houses, connected by four gardens with a four-season theme.

Pham announced that the terrace houses were completed a year ahead of schedule, while the semi-detached houses were being built, adding that the units were almost sold out.

"Construction of the three-block, 740-unit Sky Residence will start in December. It is recognised as the