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Chùa Hoa Nghiêm

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attended Chùa Hoa Nghiêm a Buddhist
temple, on Sunday September 20, 2015 at
around 11 a.m. This pagoda is located in Fort
Belvoir, Virginia. The address is 9105 Backlick
Rd., Fort Belvoir, Virginia 22060. The presiding
official is named Thây Thích Kiến Khai.

The pagoda, which is a Buddhist temple or
sacred building, was an off-white color. A
typical pagoda is a many-tiered tower, but this
building was not as tall as most are. It’s more
of a mock of a traditional pagoda; similar to
a large home with roofing that curls on the
outer corners. Lots of greenery, many trees
had been planted in the front of the building.
There are also statues of Buddha near the
front entrance. Once you walked up the few
steps leading to the front door, you had to
remove your shoes, which made me uncom-
fortable, although I always remove my shoes
before walking around my home. Removing
your shoes and leaving them in the front of a
strange place, where many others’ left their
shoes was just a little weird to me. The inside
was spotless, bright red fluffy carpet covered
the floor. The inside colors were red and gold,
which represents good luck.

I went on a Sunday, which I believe is one of
their busiest days. The majority of the visitors
were Vietnamese, many of which were older. I
saw a lot of families; there were about 30 peo-
ple there during the 45 minutes I was there.
Many of the elderly packed together, seemed
like they all saw each other every weekend. A
few people greeted me, a lot of people were a
little standoffish because they weren’t sure if I
was Vietnamese or not. Once they knew I was
Vietnamese they began greeting me. I’m sure
I was more comfortable than any other raced
person would be, since I’m Vietnamese and
basically everyone there was Vietnamese as
well. I still felt a little uncomfortable because
I can understand conversational Vietnamese,
but I can’t speak it very well. It was also actu-
ally very difficult to understand the monk.

Let’s start off with the standard etiquette:
Hats and shoes should always be removed,
voices lowered, no smoking, phones on silent
and Buddha statues must be respected. One
removes his or her shoes before entering the
temple as a sign of respect. Temples are used
for either, private prayers and meditation, or
for formal teachings. In a formal teaching one
will engage in practices such as prostrating to
the teacher, chanting prayers and making of-
ferings. It is customary to stand as the teacher
enters the room and to remain standing until
he or she is seated. We also stand as the
teacher leaves the room. Overall, everything
was pretty casual, after listening to the chant-
ing of the monk, you grab an incense stick and
pray. After that everyone tours the pagoda and
mingles quietly. Then before you leave, there’s
a room near the entrance and exit that you
can go into to donate money.

Attending a Buddhist temple was a nice ex-
perience. My parents are actually practicing
Buddhists, but never pushed me onto any type of religion. So usually they go without us, or we wait in the car while they go inside. They were definitely surprised when I asked if I could join them this time.

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