



THE FINAL SAY

# Baby Steps

Like a toddler first starting to walk, when you're learning the nuances of a foreign country with a family, taking it slow isn't a bad thing. Words by **Patricia-Anne Tom**.

Photo by **Aaron Joel Santos**

**P**aediatricians often advise mothers that children thrive when they follow a routine — when they eat at a regular time, go to sleep at the same time every night and have predictable activities. So it didn't go without pause when I announced to others that my family — including our two preschoolers — was moving to Hanoi from the US for a few years.

"I can barely take care of myself, I can't imagine trying to get acclimatized with two toddlers in a foreign country," said my 30-something-year-old friend.

Nevertheless, with my husband's Vietnam job offer in hand, we decided to take flight from our casual West Coast lifestyle for the thrill of living in a bustling country. We told ourselves abandoning our home and uprooting our family would be worthwhile.

"It will be a good learning experience for the children," we reassured ourselves.

Perhaps we welcomed the opportunity to journey abroad because we were trying to re-live our life without kids. About four years ago our plans to visit Asia abruptly came to a halt when we learned that I was unexpectedly pregnant.

So, despite the chaos that moving with two children with completely opposite personalities brings, my husband and I took the plunge. And after a long, agonizing series of plane rides where we tested the theory of how many times you can watch *Cars 2* in an airplane before your children say, "no more", we found ourselves situated in a multi-storey house in Hanoi.

Almost upon arrival, I questioned my parental wisdom in relocating my family. I discovered that exploring a foreign country with two toddlers in tow was not as easy as I had foolishly anticipated. Wherever I go, Yin must walk, and I am forced to carry Yang in the baby carrier out of fear he's going to be run over by a motorbike. The children, who used to love meandering around their neighbourhood every evening to run through grass, search for pine cones, or pick up flowers and sticks, now hug the walls of buildings whenever they hear a honk behind them. And instead of exploring ethnic craft villages, my adventures involve taking baby steps further away from my front door: first week to the corner grocery store, second week to Fivimart at the mall and the third week, finding the courage to cross Au Co to get to the open market.

Even something as simple as a haircut is an experiment. Do we brave the barber next to the

tree on the street, the salon for local Vietnamese or the expat spa? The answer is the one that understands that your son needs to sit on your lap during his haircut because otherwise he won't sit still.

## On the Bright Side

Yet living in Hanoi is not all bad. We're not experiencing the cultural exchange with locals that we had envisioned because it seems everyone in the Tay Ho area is an expat, too. Nevertheless, my children have charmed their neighbours.

They sing simple Vietnamese nursery songs with the cab driver who frequently parks at the corner. Thanks to their international friends, they have learned to count from one to 10 in English, Vietnamese, Japanese, Mandarin, Korean and Spanish, and they welcome an extra pat on the back from the local restaurant's security guard, who they pass on their way to preschool.

Although we're not feasting on street food out of fear the little ones will get food poisoning, the children have learned to cherish familiar flavours: weekend brunch at the corner café, a free tomato from the open market vendor whom I shop from every week and a near weekly bag of star fruit from our landlord.

Making Hanoi as comfortable as possible for the kids has helped our family refocus on the basics of spending time with friends and family, too. We relish quiet times to read with the kids in a city where the clang of construction seems to start at 5am. And we look forward to regular dinners with our newfound *aunties* and *uncles*.

Most of the time, it seems our children have become accustomed to their new environment faster than we — the adults — have. They have developed a daily routine of what time they'll sleep, what time they'll eat, who they'll encounter and what activities they'll do — even in a place as foreign as Hanoi.

So although I sometimes am envious when I hear about single friends' journeys as they flit from one Asian destination to the next — Sapa one weekend, Singapore the following — at a pace at which four little toddler legs simply can't keep up. My children have proven that having a good time abroad is shaped by your attitude.

It's true, children might make it more difficult for an expat to explore, but they can quickly help you to put down roots and to establish a routine — all of which helps make a foreign country feel like a familiar home. 