

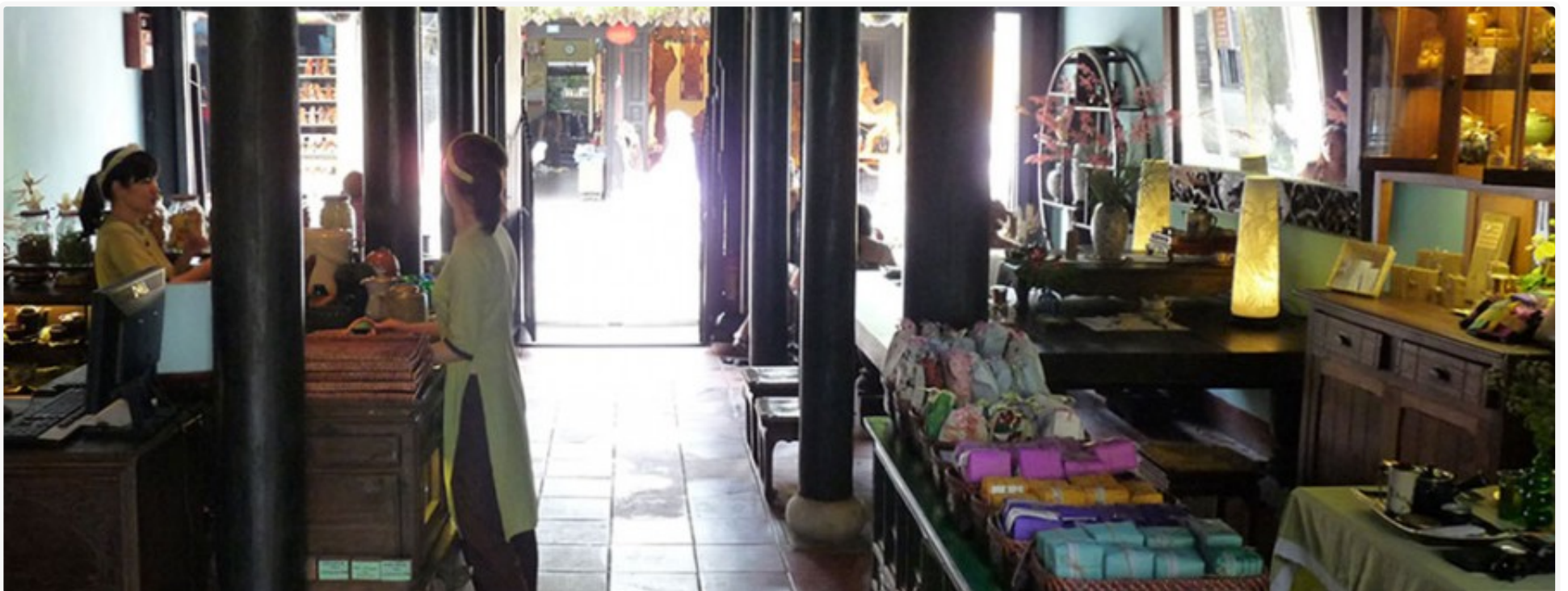


...in a strange land

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Ethical Handcrafted Gifts & Products

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Posted on September 21, 2014 by Joe in Craft, General

# Reaching Out – Handmade in Hoi An

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## Introducing Reaching Out

On 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2014, we visited Binh Le, the founder of Reaching Out. We were a week into a sourcing trip and very happy to arrive in Hoi An for the first time in 10 years. We had been in touch with Binh and his wife Quyen in the weeks leading up to our meeting and were very much looking forward to meeting them at their home in An Bang, a short 3km motorbike ride from

## Hoi An's main town.

View the Reaching out range [here](#) or visit our [shop](#).



Reaching Out is an organisation which provides employment for local differently able people. The organisation comprises of a shop, café and workshop in Hoi An's historic old town. The shop is housed in a beautiful converted wooden Japanese merchant's house, built when the town was a vitally important trading settlement before the mouth of the Thu Bon river silted up in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Before that, Hoi An had been a major port on Vietnam's central coast and important trading post for the Japanese and Chinese. Today it is a Unesco world heritage site and remains a beautiful and charming place to spend a few days.

The produce available in the shop is all hand made, either completely manufactured in the workshop to the rear of the building or from communities all over the country. Everything is ethically sourced and made by differently able people and the quality of the craftsmanship is outstanding.



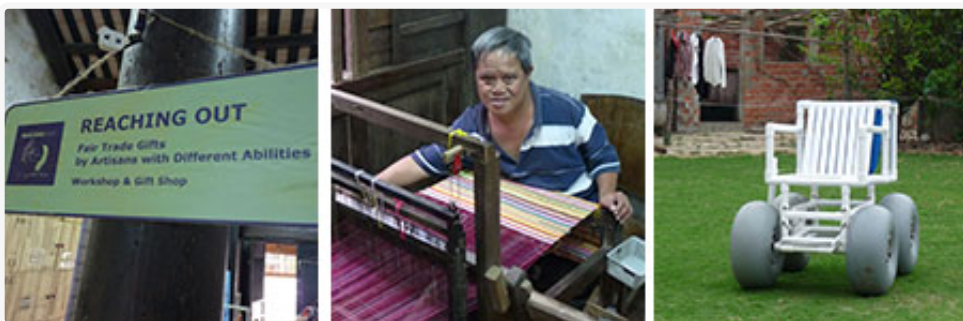
The café is entirely staffed by deaf people and is wonderfully serene and peaceful, a refuge from the heat of the Vietnamese sun and a good place to sample organic, fair trade tea and coffee served in Reaching Out's own handmade wares.



# How it all started

On arrival at An Bang, we are met by Quyen, the marketing brains behind the business and Binh's wife and business partner. A short walk from the car park at the beach led us to a quiet residential street full of fishermen's houses. Binh and Quyen's house is a one storey building with a beautiful garden backing onto the beach. We are immediately welcomed with a cup of excellent coffee and homemade bread and butter and are struck by the welcoming, friendly atmosphere of this family home. An attractive couple, Binh is confined to a wheelchair for most of the time while Quyen is able bodied. As we settle down to our coffee we start to talk about Reaching Out.

It all started with a dream of Binh Le's. Born in the North of Vietnam before the American war, Binh and his family moved to Hoi An in 1976 when he was 13 years old. After losing the use of his legs at 15 after an accident in hospital he was immediately aware of how difficult it was to get around. Vietnam is not a country with a great track record of providing services for the disabled and Binh was concerned he would not be able to live his life to its full potential and was determined to make a difference. Not only was there a physical barrier, impairing his ability to live his life like most other people but a lack of public awareness about the needs of differently able people. He says that for him, the lack of public awareness was a far greater obstacle to overcome than the physical barrier.



The majority of people in Vietnam do not believe that disabled people are able to lead a normal life or contribute much to society as a whole and so there is a greater reliance on charity than investment in infrastructure for the future. As a result the perception is that there's little point in training differently able people and helping them to develop skills which they can use to help themselves. Unfortunately this often means that they are marginalised within their communities, often staying indoors at all times and being unable to take part in life as others might. They are given little hope.



Unlike here in the UK, the government does not have the resources to invest in special schools, nor the infrastructure necessary to allow differently able people to live and work as functional members of society. The emphasis is very much on big industry, mass production and industrialised agriculture with a tendency to think that the disabled are unable to contribute to society.

## Tourism

One sector of industry which is really making a difference to this philosophy is tourism. When we first visited Hoi An in 2004, for example, it was impossible to enjoy the tranquility of the place with the sheer volume of street children hounding you to buy something. Now, Binh tells me, these children are all in school and it is certainly true that they're no longer thronging the streets of the old town. One can't help but think this must be as a result to some extent of the ideas wealthy foreign tourists bring with them to Vietnam. Similarly, with the increase in popularity of Vietnam as a holiday destination and the clear fact that there are many disabled people in the country as a result of many issues (the proliferation of Agent Orange in the American War for example) it must follow that global awareness of the issues here is spreading.

We have met many homegrown organisations like Reaching Out who rely on funding from and purchases made by just these tourists. Also with the influx of Western sensibilities and trends and the history of great craftsmanship in Vietnam, it is no surprise that the products being made by these organisations are becoming increasingly suited to Western tastes and the quality is truly exceptional.

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### About Joe

Joe is the owner and founder of ...in a strange land. He has travelled the world, meeting people and eating stuff since his late teens. He's passionate about finding the best craft and handmade products and sharing the stories of the people who make them.



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