

A cruise on a replica paddlewheeler evokes French-colonial indolence amid the country's karst islands

Joie de vivre in Vietnam's famous bay

BY JAMES SULLIVAN
HALONG BAY, VIETNAM

After the Filipino torch singer finished her set, the tomtom beat of Benny Goodman's 1935 classic *Sing, Sing Sing* started bounding out of the speakers in the Emeraude's dining room. The horns and the reeds volleyed back and forth, and then Goodman burst in with that first brief clarinet solo, crystallizing something I'd been feeling since I stepped aboard the ship that afternoon: that perhaps I'd also stepped back in time.

The Emeraude does this to you. Outfitted with planked decks, high-backed wicker chairs, varnished rails and brass fittings, this immaculate replica of an early 20th-century paddlewheeler is as emblematic of French-colonial indolence as anything in Vietnam. Way out on Halong Bay now, among the silhouettes of limestone karsts, my disorientation was deepening.

My interest in this ship was sparked last year while touring this corner of Vietnam's Gulf of Tonkin aboard a wooden junk. At the time, I had climbed the stone steps to the observation pavilion atop Titov Island. It was near dusk, and the gloaming was preternatural, with the rays of the setting sun banked off the underbellies of the clouds. I was looking at hundreds of limestone islands, buoyed up on darkening-jade-green waters — the work of a wand, I thought, not geology.

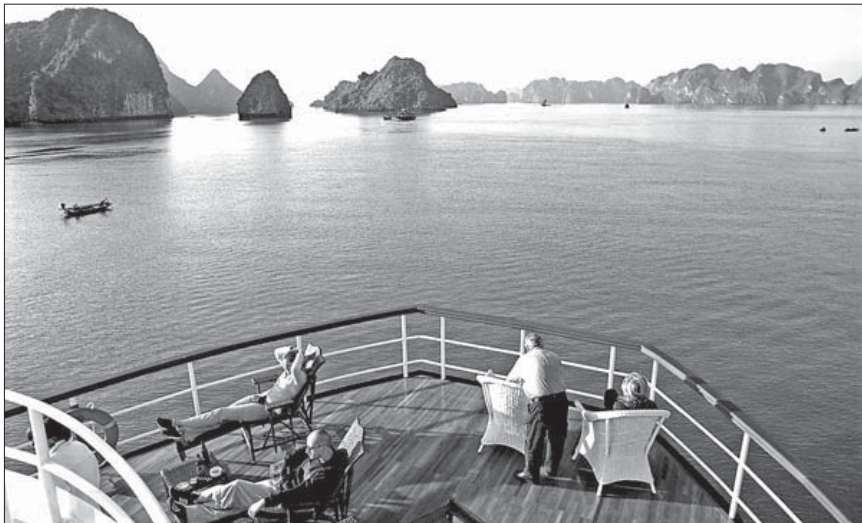
Hooked to the northwest, I saw the Emeraude, with its wheel housing dipped off the stern, the two lower decks strung with cabins, seersucker-clad passengers sipping cocktails on the sun deck.

When I came down off Titov and paddled back out to my junk, the Emeraude was gone. But I was determined to find out where it had come from, and to cruise Halong Bay with my feet on that sun deck, a *citron pressé* in my hand.



"I went to a flea market in a suburb of Paris," the Emeraude's owner, Eric Merlin, told me in Hanoi six months later, as I prepared for my return to Halong Bay. "This was in 1999 or 2000. I was looking for old stuff, about Indochine, and I found this postcard of a tourist boat on Halong Bay around 1910. My first thought was, 'Where are these boats now?' My dream was to come back and find one."

Merlin had first come to Vietnam as a backpacker in 1990 and returned in 1993 to flex some new-found entrepreneurial muscles.



JAMES SULLIVAN FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

After failing to find the boat he'd seen on that old postcard, he commissioned the construction of a replica for \$2.8-million.

While shipbuilders in Haiphong were riveting the hull, Merlin was puzzling together the Emeraude's history. He discovered that the company that built the original boat was owned by Paul Roque, the son of one of three enterprising brothers who embarked for the Far East from Bordeaux in 1858, the same year that France established a colonial realm in Vietnam that would last nearly 100 years.

In 1905, Roque ordered the construction of four nearly identical paddlewheelers: Rubis, Perle, Saphir and Emeraude. They equipped the boats with electric lights, ventilation and refrigeration. For decades, the Emeraude hauled cargo and delighted passengers, until it struck a rock one day in 1937 and sank.



My two-day cruise on the reborn Emeraude began at noon, when we pulled away from the wharf at Bai Chay (Halong City) and headed south at nine knots toward the heart of Halong Bay. Compared with accommodation on a tourist junk, my

cabin was spacious, with freshly painted wainscoting and reed mats on the walls. A brass reading lamp swung over my twin-sized mattress and there was polished hardwood underfoot. As in each of the boat's 39 cabins, I had my own bathroom, air conditioning and mobile-phone reception. The Emeraude evokes a colonial ambience, but eschews absolute fidelity for modern conveniences. The 55-metre-long vessel is powered by diesel, not steam, and driven by a propeller. The stern wheel casing holds no wheel, but brackets a convenient deck from which to launch kayaks or to swim.

On a tour of the wheelhouse, I followed the index finger of Captain Jacques LeFur as he pointed out various islands and their resemblances to a turtle, a toad, a swan, a human head and so on. I discovered one shape myself that evening — of Titov Island as a breaching blue whale.

Nearly 2,000 islands rise from the 1,553-square-kilometre bay, about a third of which — an area our cruise looped through — is a World Heritage Site. Halong's craggy outcrops are inhospitable and largely uninhabited, but for the odd troop of gibbons and the birds of prey that nest in cliff-top crevices.

After lunch, the Emeraude dropped anchor off the island of Dao Bo, where no fewer than six limestone grottoes are celebrated on local tourist maps. The tender ferried us to a cave the Vietnamese call Sung Sot, which translates neatly as "the cave of marvels."

Awesome, it is. The cave is a series of three chambers, each exponentially larger than the last, that sprawls over more than a hectare. Stalactites hang from the ceiling and a cast of characters commonly attributed to rock formations in Vietnam can be imagined frozen in stone: turtles, dragons, a happy Buddha, the Goddess of Mercy.

Later that afternoon, I kayaked with the Emeraude's purser into an amphitheatre of limestone on the other side of Dao Bo. The stillness was exquisite, and for some time we just sat there, alone, invigorated by the hush. I had visited Hang Luon Cave before, when the lagoon teemed with powerboats filled to the gunnels with tourists from China and South Korea. But this was March, and the traffic was light.

After dinner one night, I stood at the ship's rail, scanning the lights of the junks in the distance and the brooding silhouettes of the karst looming nearby. Edith Piaf was

playing now from the dining-room speakers, and I looked for ghosts on the vacant top deck — for a woman in a cloche with a Gauloise dangling from her lips, regretting nothing as the world fell to ruins around her. The music inspired this nostalgia, as did the ship, and I wondered whether Eric Merlin had been smitten by the same temptation, to be out here, among these karsts, on these waters, in a ship that enabled such potent reverie.

"It was just a little string I pulled," Merlin had told me. "A postcard I found, and then a string I pulled. It fascinated me, like the work of an historian, and I kept pulling one string after another, and soon, the Emeraude was out on Halong Bay — again, you might say."

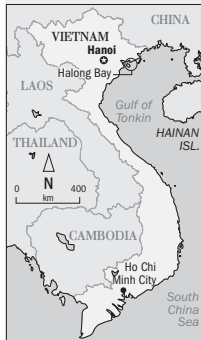
And what about the original Emeraude's sister ships, I had asked then. He had seen their pictures too. Would they be resurrected one day? Merlin was non-committal, but as my view swept across the bay again, it wasn't all that difficult to picture the rest of the Roques' fleet of paddlewheelers — the Saphir, the Rubis and the Perle — sailing up out of the past, their lights twinkling on the water as the band played on.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Nearly 2,000 islands rise from Halong Bay. Most are inhabited only by the odd band of gibbons and birds of prey nesting in cliffs.

A karst kingdom

Filled with brooding islands, much of Halong Bay is a World Heritage Site.



RICHARD JOHNSON / THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Pack your bags

GETTING THERE

United Airlines (www.united.com) remains the only branded North American carrier flying into Vietnam. There are daily flights from Toronto to Chicago with connections in Hong Kong for Ho Chi Minh City.

Domestically, **Vietnam Airlines** (www.vietnamairlines.com) flies one of the newest domestic fleets in the world.

CRUISING

Emeraude Classic Cruises: 59 Ly Thai To St., Suite 214, Hanoi; 84-(4) 934-0888, ext. 3011; www.emeraude-cruises.com. Rates from about \$245.

WHERE TO STAY

Caravelle Hotel: 19 Lam Son Square, Ho Chi Minh City; 84 (8) 823-4999; www.caravellehotel.com. A completely refurbished, 1950s-era Saigon classic with a rooftop bar that was a favourite among news correspondents during the Vietnam War. Room rates from \$170 a night.

MORE INFORMATION

Vietnam National Administration of Tourism: www.vietnamtourism.com.