

vietnam

• on the rise

The southeast Asian nation is now making its mark as a events destination. **Kenny Coyle** looks at its range of options

Rather like her people, Vietnam is a little shy at first, modest and unassuming, industrious and determined, but ultimately warm and welcoming. In little more than half a decade, it has become one of the most popular events destinations in Asia.

Vietnam's unique culture, sense of identity and developing economy have fuelled meeting and incentive interest. For some time, the problem was that the country did not have enough hotels to meet demand, now the focus is on rates and availability.

A late developer compared to her sister, Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi can today offer a



programme with culture and history that are an event organiser's dream.

Many visitors see the capital as more authentically Vietnamese than Ho Chi Minh City, while Vietnamese often say that Hanoi retains more of a French style, with Ho Chi Minh City reflecting the more recent American influence. Whatever the theory, both cities now have the venues, five-star accommodation, air access and events expertise to compete regionally.

HANOI

Mark Deere, general manager of the Hilton Hanoi Opera, offers his perspective. "While Hanoi is a growing city, it still maintains the original Asian charm now absent from many cities in the region. The scenery, landscape and people are fabulous. The central location of the Hilton Hanoi Opera means that corporate groups can enjoy all of these whilst being close to the action.

"In addition, we have one floor dedicated solely to meetings and all meeting rooms have natural daylight. Our ballroom is housed on the lobby level, providing easy access to all guests.

"Without doubt the fantastic location of the hotel means that events organised should also consider the possibility of holding activities in the adjacent historical Opera House—we have assisted in arranging many successful events there," Deere says.

Built in the early 20th century, the imposing Hanoi Opera House building is within easy reach of both the Hilton Hanoi Opera and the Sofitel Metropole Hanoi, which is only a few minutes walk away. Groups can enjoy pre-show cocktails at one property, take in a specially arranged early evening performance at the opera house and then move on to one of the neighbouring hotels for supper.

Madame Thuy, public relations manager of the Sofitel Metropole, says: "Groups which come here can try their hand at Vietnamese cuisine. We run a very popular cookery class that involves a morning trip to the markets to choose fresh produce and then the rest of the day in the kitchen cooking.

"Hanoi is very rich in culture with a lot to see and do in terms of art and handicrafts. You can take your group to water puppet shows or simply wander the streets

browsing galleries."

James Reeves, general manager of Vivents, says: "It's true that Hanoi lacks the nightlife elements of Bangkok or even Ho Chi Minh City, but that's not always a bad thing for business meetings. You won't end up missing half of your participants for the early morning session because they had a late night on the town."

The city offers a number of unique venues that groups will find appealing. He believes Hanoi should be considered for groups between 30 and 200. More than that and organisers run into issues of limitations in terms of meeting venues and restaurants.

"You can book the Historical and Ethnological museums and the Opera House can be hired for about US\$6,500 an hour with an orchestra.

"The high-profile APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation) summit last year showed what the city is capable of. The government can make things happen overnight. The new Hanoi Convention Centre is state of the art, although I would advise those looking at larger conferences to book a professional organiser."

The flexibility companies find in using unusual venues is seconded by Rene Vertonghen, chief executive officer of Golden Tortoise destination management company, who has brought a number of small and medium-sized incentive groups to the country.

"Perhaps surprisingly, it's not so difficult to get permission to use public buildings here. You can have events at the Temple of Literature, for example," he says.

The Hanoi Press Club (www.hanoi-pressclub.com) is a seven-storey building with serviced offices for corporate use, eating areas, and even a library and cigar room. Groups can use the open-air terrace and arrange fine dining in the restaurant (up to 200 for cocktails and 100 for a full dinner).

HALONG BAY

General manager Kurt Walter not only looks after the Press Club but also the Emeraude cruiser at Halong Bay.

Long regarded as one of the most beautiful spots in Vietnam and named a UNESCO World Heritage site, Halong Bay is on the verge of infrastructure developments

FAST FACTS

ACCESS

Several regional carriers operate daily routes to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Danang has some international flights. Additionally, a number of long-haul destinations are served.

CLIMATE

Northern Vietnam has a cool, wet winter from Nov to April. In summer, May thru Oct, the temperature rarely exceeds 30°C. Central Vietnam is rainy between Dec and Feb, while the dry season lasts from June to Oct. In the upland region the dry season lasts from Dec to March with temperatures hovering around 23°C. In Souther Vietnam temperatures dip to a low of around 20°C. The dry season (November to April) is the best time to visit. March and April are the hottest months of the year in Ho Chi Minh City and temperatures can reach 35°C. The rainy season runs from May to Oct.

LANGUAGES

Vietnamese is the national language. English is widely understood in tourist and business areas, French less so these days. Chinese is also spoken by ethnic Chinese traders.

VISAS

Vietnam has a visa-exemption scheme in place for selected Asian countries. Visas on arrival for citizens of some other countries can be arranged by DMCs with sufficient notice. Contact your nearest Vietnamese Embassy or consulate.

ENQUIRIES

The Vietnam MICE Club is headed by Vietnam Airlines and brings together key venues, hotels and operators. www.meetingvietnam.com

THE PROFESSIONALS

VIETNAM MICE CENTRE, DINH ANH INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

E-mail: dinhanhtravel@gmail.com
www.vietnam-mice.com

INBOUND ASIA

Email: matt@inboundasia.com
www.inboundasia.com

VIVENTS, CREATIVE EVENT SOLUTIONS

Email: info@vivents.com
www.vivents.com

GOLDEN TORTOISE TRADE AND TRAVEL

Email: info@goldentortoise.com
www.goldentortoise.com

EXOTISSIMO TRAVEL VIETNAM

E-mail: go.vietnam@exotissimo.com
www.exotissimo.com

LUXURY TRAVEL VIETNAM

E-mail: sales@luxurytravelvietnam.com
www.luxurytravelvietnam.com

VIET CIRCLE TRAVEL

Email: vietcircledn@vnn.vn
www.viet-circle.com



that will assist its development as a destination for corporate groups.

Two Starwood hotels are to be built between 2008 and 2010, a 160-room Four Points by Sheraton and a 300-room Sheraton Halong Bay Resort. This project will include modern meeting facilities, and will transform the area's ability to cater to larger incentive groups.

However, no visit to the bay would be complete without the chance to sail around this majestic backdrop dotted with thousands of limestone islands and grottoes.

The cruiser *Emeraude*, an exact replica of a 1910 colonial-era original, provides an obvious choice of transport. The vessel holds a maximum of 76 passengers and can be wholly or partially booked by groups using its 36 cabins and two suites.

Walter says: "We have a shuttle bus that runs between Hanoi and Halong Bay and there are plans to increase the facilities at the Halong Bay pier area.

"Each evening on board the *Emeraude* we show the film *Indochine*, starring Catherine Deneuve, on a sun-deck cinema. The film is actually set in Halong Bay and the guests can see the same view on the screen as in the background."

CENTRAL VIETNAM

While Danang is the main entry point to central Vietnam, the big attractions lie outside this port city. Located on China Beach is the Furama, Vietnam's pioneer deluxe resort. The hotel has recently expanded its conference centre and can host sizeable events indoors and out.

The former imperial capital Hue, scene of dramatic fighting during the American War, is a must-see, especially with the chance for your group to dine on board one of the floating restaurants in the Perfume River. You can also arrange an imperial-style banquet, complete with traditional robes, and visit the Citadel.

Not too far away is the town of Hoi An. A trading centre for 2,000 years, it remains a centre of silk and other handicrafts. Groups can lose themselves for hours shopping here and visit working silk factories, seeing the process from silkworm to final product.

HO CHI MINH CITY

Ho Chi Minh City is a sprawling municipal region that encompasses the old South Vietnamese capital of Saigon as well as surrounding areas.

John Gardner, general manager of the city icon Caravelle Hotel says the hotel will improve its meeting offerings.

"We're currently experimenting with different themed coffee breaks, making it

more attractive to the market through better presentation. Now that the new airport terminal is coming into operation and a new exhibition centre is planned, competition will become fiercer.

"Vietnam is safe and secure, with so much going for it. There are great venues in Saigon too, the Opera House and the Reunification Palace close by to the Caravelle, are two stunning examples."

As Vietnam's economy grows, a number of overseas companies are using meetings and incentive programmes to introduce staff to the country in preparation for setting operations there. Matt Millard, marketing and sales director of destination management company Inbound Asia, has seen a number of examples of this. He also has no doubts about why Vietnam has become so popular.

"The unique selling point of Vietnam is its heritage and culture. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have retained an obvious Asian character. They're not the glass-and-steel cities you find elsewhere."

He also praises the country's flag carrier.

"Vietnam Airlines has been very supportive of the MICE sector. There are also opportunities to arrange private charter flights within the country cutting out land transfers. Not so long ago, a Citibank group did this and went to VinPearl for jet-boating and watersports activities."

Restructuring at the Sheraton Saigon Hotel and Towers will soon add a new tower and more guestrooms giving it even greater capacity for larger groups.

General manager Dietmar Kielhofer emphasises that, in any case, provided events are well timed room availability and rates should not be an issue.

"If you avoid the peak leisure season, you will have little problem in finding enough rooms, we certainly have capacity to welcome more groups in low season."

Cost concerns aside, what organisers get from the country is an authenticity of experience that is sadly becoming rarer in south-east Asia. Vietnam provides the visitor with the sights, smells and sounds that sit in the memory.

Set alongside this is a determination to preserve its history and unique culture despite all the pressures of modernisation. n



Sofitel Metropole



Hilton Hanoi Opera



Caravelle



Sheraton Hanoi

hotel highlights

HO CHI MINH CITY

PILLARLESS STRENGTH SHERATON HOTEL AND TOWERS SAIGON

www.sheraton.com/saigonhotel

Set along the busy Dong Khoi Street, the Sheraton Hotel and Towers Saigon has the largest pillarless ballroom in the city, just one of the hotel's designated 17 event spaces. The hotel has earned a reputation for imaginative theme parties. Its large number of bars and restaurants (eight) and the move to add over 100 new rooms by early next year, which will bring its guestroom count up to around 480, making it an attractive option for those organising larger meetings.

SLEEK SAIGON PARK HYATT

www.saigon.park.hyatt.com

Overlooking Saigon's opera house, the Park Hyatt on Lam Son Square in District One can't be faulted for location. Its dining

outlets feature the Italian, Opera and the Western/Vietnamese Square One restaurants. For high-end incentives with experienced travellers, the Park Hyatt offers a great location for those wishing to explore the city on foot as well as those who simply want to wallow in the elegance of the hotel itself.

CARAVELLE

www.caravellehotel.com

One of Ho Chi Minh City's iconic properties, the Caravelle's location in the heart of District One is ideal. The property has been extensively modernised and expanded but it still drips with history, accumulated since it opened in 1959. The hotel's Saigon Saigon bar is open air and highly popular because of its panoramic views of the city. While groups can make full use of it during the quiet periods in the afternoon, those wanting more privacy can book the smaller terrace area as Saigon Saigon quickly fills up in the evening, with guests, expats and tourists.

FRENCH CONNECTIONS SOFITEL PLAZA SAIGON

www.sofitel.com

Situated close to the Reunification Palace and Notre Dame cathedral, the Sofitel Plaza Saigon has eight meeting rooms with a capacity for 400 people. The hotel has a strong European feel, with both a French-style bar, L'Elysee and restaurant L'Olivier.

HANOI

TRIPLE WHAMMY HILTON HANOI OPERA

www.hanoi.hilton.com

Conveniently positioned close to the Hanoi Opera house, the city's Hilton has earned a reputation for excellence in food and beverage. Its signature Vietnamese restaurant, Ba Mien, means "Three Regions", and offers contemporary versions of traditional Vietnamese cuisine from the country's north, south and centre.

LADY OF THE LAKE SHERATON HANOI

www.sheraton.com/hanoi

Sitting on the tranquil West Lake in the Tay Ho district of the capital, the Sheraton Hanoi's location provides easy access to the city centre and the airport. Aside from its standard ballroom and meeting spaces, the hotel's Lake Side Terrace offers great views and can hold around 120 for cocktail receptions.

COLONIAL STYLE SOFITEL METROPOLE

www.sofitel.com

The grande dame of Hanoi hotels, the Sofitel Metropole has managed to preserve old world charm from when it was built in 1901, the height of what the French termed *La Belle Epoque* (The Beautiful Era). But aside from its colonial chic, the hotel has added all manner of modern amenities and is currently building a new conference centre. Delegates can take advantage of the hotel's own vintage Citroen to go on shopping tours of Hanoi.

COMING SOON INTERCONTINENTAL HANOI WEST LAKE

www.hanoi.intercontinental.com

Due to open before the end of the year, this new property has been eagerly awaited by retail and incentives guests alike. The 369-room property is next to the 800-year-old Golden Lotus Pagoda and is built over the waters of the West Lake. Why not arrange a dawn visit to the nearby Flower Market, and take in the plethora of colours and fragrances?